

## In Remembrance

### Gurbhagat Singh (1938-2014)



In Dr Gurbhagat Singh's death on April 3, the world of English literature, Punjab and Sikh studies have lost an innovative thinker and interpreter. The severest blow is that his lifelong project of translating Shri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS) into English remains incomplete. His translation of 1208 pages will remain a hugely rich and valued contribution that will need to be carried forward.

His family came from a village near Kotkapura in the present Faridkot district. Gurbhagat always fondly remembered his father Giani Hari Singh Jaachak who was an early formative influence on him. Gianiji, a poet and man of religion, moved to Ambala where he managed a small printing press and a gurdwara. The literary inclinations influenced by his father, led Gurbhagat to pursue an MA in Punjabi followed by an MA in English. He started his teaching career at Khalsa College in Patiala, a city which has a long tradition of dialectical and contradictory mixing of subservience to feudal monarchy and a rebellious disobeying of authority and convention. Gurbhagat belonged to an unconventional group living together which self-described itself as *Bhootwara* (the den of demons). This *Bhootwara* group, which included Lali (Hardiljeet Sidhu), Harinder Mehboob, Kulwant Garewal, Harbans Brar and many others including his brother Satinder Noor who later became a well-known literary figure, celebrated its anarchic life style by living in poor rented accommodations but rich in the world of ideas and night long discussions on literature, philosophy,

arts and culture. Proud of their bohemianism, they once walked all the way, to save transport costs, from Patiala to Chandigarh to see a movie of their interest! Dalip Kaur Tiwana's articles in the Punjabi monthly *Arsee* on the *Bhootwara* have left a valuable record of this phase in the life of Patiala city and Gurbhagat. In many ways, this unconventional way of living remained a part of Gurbhagat's radical intellectual orientation and an ascetic day to day life style.

He later on moved to Delhi University to teach at Khalsa College, and from there went to the United States where he completed his PhD on William Blake at the world famous department of History of Consciousness at the beautifully located University of California, Santa Cruz. Working for his PhD, as it often happens in the life of many scholars, was a critical period in shaping his approach to the study of ideas and paradigms. Gurbhagat was deeply influenced by the French philosophers of the post-modernist, post-structural and post-colonial schools of thought. Many of these post-modernists, post-structuralists and post-colonialists were admirers of Maoist thought that valued peasantry in the country side as a revolutionary class as opposed to classical Marxism that looked upon the urban industrial working class as an agent of revolutionary change. Having himself been influenced by Maoism, Gurbhagat found himself a good fit in the theoretical company of these French thinkers. Something which attracted Gurbhagat most towards post-modernism was that this school of thought celebrated diversity and pluralism against hegemonic and totalising thought structures. This opened the way for defence of minorities and marginalised people. The post-colonial school of thought highlighted the colonial shaping of not only economy and politics but also the ideas of the colonised and hegemonised people, and viewed its paradigm as central to the liberation of the post-colonial subjects from the colonial yoke. Gurbhagat employed these insights into studying the Sikh condition in India, and further refined his concepts of external colonialism and internal colonialism. His most important books *Poetry as Metaconsciousness*, *Western Poetics and Eastern Thought*, *Literature and Folklore after Poststructuralism*, *Sikhism and Postmodern Thought*, and *The Sikh Memory: Its Distinction and Contribution to Mankind* represent a good sample of his intellectual interests and outputs.

After teaching for a brief while at Santa Cruz, Gurbhagat came back to India and joined Punjabi University, Patiala in 1976-77 where he eventually became a Professor and Chair of the Department of English, and Dean of the Languages before retiring in 1998. He inspired and guided a whole generation of younger scholars, and encouraged them to engage critically with the global discourses of post-modernism and post-colonialism, and through that to interpret their own location in the world of internal and external colonialism. His contribution to the interpretation of Sikhism was original and challenging. He viewed the Sikh world view as articulated in SGGS in a global context as an indigenous and original (*maulik*) paradigm free from any colonial subjugation. The Operation Bluestar in 1984 shook him to the core. It seemed to confirm Gurbhagat's worst fears about the hegemonic threat to minority cultures and identities. He did not view this as merely an armed invasion of a holy shrine but a far more serious attack-ideologically and culturally- on a world view asserting its autonomy and

sovereignty. As an intellectual response, he took the initiative to play a leading role in setting up a study group at Patiala on the challenges facing minorities and smaller nationalities in India and invited leading social scientists of Patiala and Chandigarh including Bhupinder Singh, B.S. Mangat, Gobinder Singh, Harkishen Singh Mehta, Harjinder Shergill, Mehar Singh Gill, Nirmal Azad, Pritam Singh and Sucha Singh Gill to be a part of the study group. The study group's readings and discussions stimulated many streams of thought that led to important intellectual outputs by members of the group.

Finally, Gurbhagat zeroed on to the project of translating SGGS into English. In spite of great respect for the labour of earlier translators, he viewed the existing translations as contaminated by colonial distortions of the original message of SGGS. As a literary critic, he was acutely aware of the fact that the act of translation is not merely one of translating words from one language to another; it was also an act of transmission of a cultural universe embedded in the vocabulary of a particular language. For example, he viewed the translation of Waheguru as God as a highly Christianised cultural transmission. He translated that as 'the Wondrous Guru' or as 'the Guru of Wonder' where 'wonder' ('wahe') in his view signified the multifarious and the joyous universe celebrated by Guru Nanak. He looked upon his project as an act of retrieval of the original message of SGGS. For him, SGGS symbolised the wisdom of the East that by incorporating the teachings of the Sufis and the Bhagats, embodied the rich tradition of pluralism and diversity in the Indian/Eastern civilisation. An authentic translation of SGGS, for him, was a project of contributing to decolonising the colonised mind.

Gurbhagat Singh was, at one level, one of the most Westernised scholars in Punjab in terms of his rich knowledge of Western thought, and, another level, the most non-Westernised in terms of his emphasis on indigenous sources of knowledge. In many ways, he was like an old style Indian/Eastern guru totally devoted to knowledge and meditation. He visited us many times in Oxford. His day would consist of leaving home soon after breakfast and going to the famous Blackwell bookshop where he would spend his whole day enquiring about and browsing books. In the evenings, he a literary critic, me a political economist and my wife Dr Meena Dhanda, a philosopher, would spend long hours eating, drinking and discussing post-modernism, the production of knowledge in the Third World, Indian intellectuals and the latest in Punjab/ Sikh studies and Indian/Punjab politics. Meena, while appreciating some insights of post-modernism, would critique post-modernism for privileging relativism and abandoning the search for truth. I would emphasise the critical importance of understanding the 'laws' and tendencies of economic and technological changes taking place in contemporary capitalism to grasp the current historical reality. Gurbhagat would welcome this 'genuine' confrontation of ideas and paradigms, and would ask us to recommend some key readings and to give him copies of our written papers. We would discuss the relevance of our discussions for Punjab until we were tired and would, then, say good night. And next morning, he would be again ready for the book shop journey. Perhaps the best bookshop in the world, the staff at Blackwell are trained to track any book published anywhere in the

world to meet the demand of a customer. Gurbhagat took full advantage of the facility and by the time he left Oxford, his suitcase will be filled mainly with the books- he was not interested in any other material object.

Scholars like him do not belong to any single institution. They belong to the whole nation and humanity. I take this opportunity to make request to Punjabi University for three things: one, the task of translating the over two hundred pages of SGGS that Gurbhagat left untranslated should be entrusted to a carefully selected scholar or a group of scholars who are fully conversant with the aims that he had; two, all his published and unpublished papers should be collected and placed in a separate Gurbhagat Singh section of the university library; and third, a post-doctoral fellowship be awarded to a young scholar familiar both with the Western discourses and Gurbani to write a monograph on critical evaluation of the whole work of Gurbhagat Singh. This would contribute to paying a true homage to this great scholar of our land.

(The assistance of Prof Bhupinder Singh in providing key biographical details is thankfully acknowledged).

**Pritam Singh,**  
Oxford Brookes University