

Mohan Singh (b.1905-d.1978), poet, short-story writer and journalist burst on the Punjabi poetic scene in the mid-thirties and continued to dominate till the early sixties by bringing out 18 collections of verse and his famous epic *Nanakanyan*.

He brought not only a refreshing candour into Punjabi verse but also a rich, flexible idiom, drawn from a variety of sources, that appealed to the common readers and connoisseurs alike. His short stories reveal his love both for romance and realism.

During his long career as a journalist, Mohan Singh wrote extensively on current problems. He also edited the Punjabi monthly *Punj Dariya*.

Narenderpal Singh (b.1924), the author of this monograph, is himself an eminent poet and novelist. Among the honours received by him are the Grande Madailla d'or de la Ville de Paris of 1967, Distinguished Order from Poetry Society Inter-continental, USA of 1960, and the Sahitya Akademi Award of 1976.

This monograph evaluates the life and works of Mohan Singh for the general reader.

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Mohan Singh

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The sculpture reproduced on the end paper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Śuddhodana the dream of Queen Māyā, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.

Courtesy : National Museum, Delhi.

MAKERS OF INDIAN LITERATURE

Mohan Singh

Narenderpal Singh



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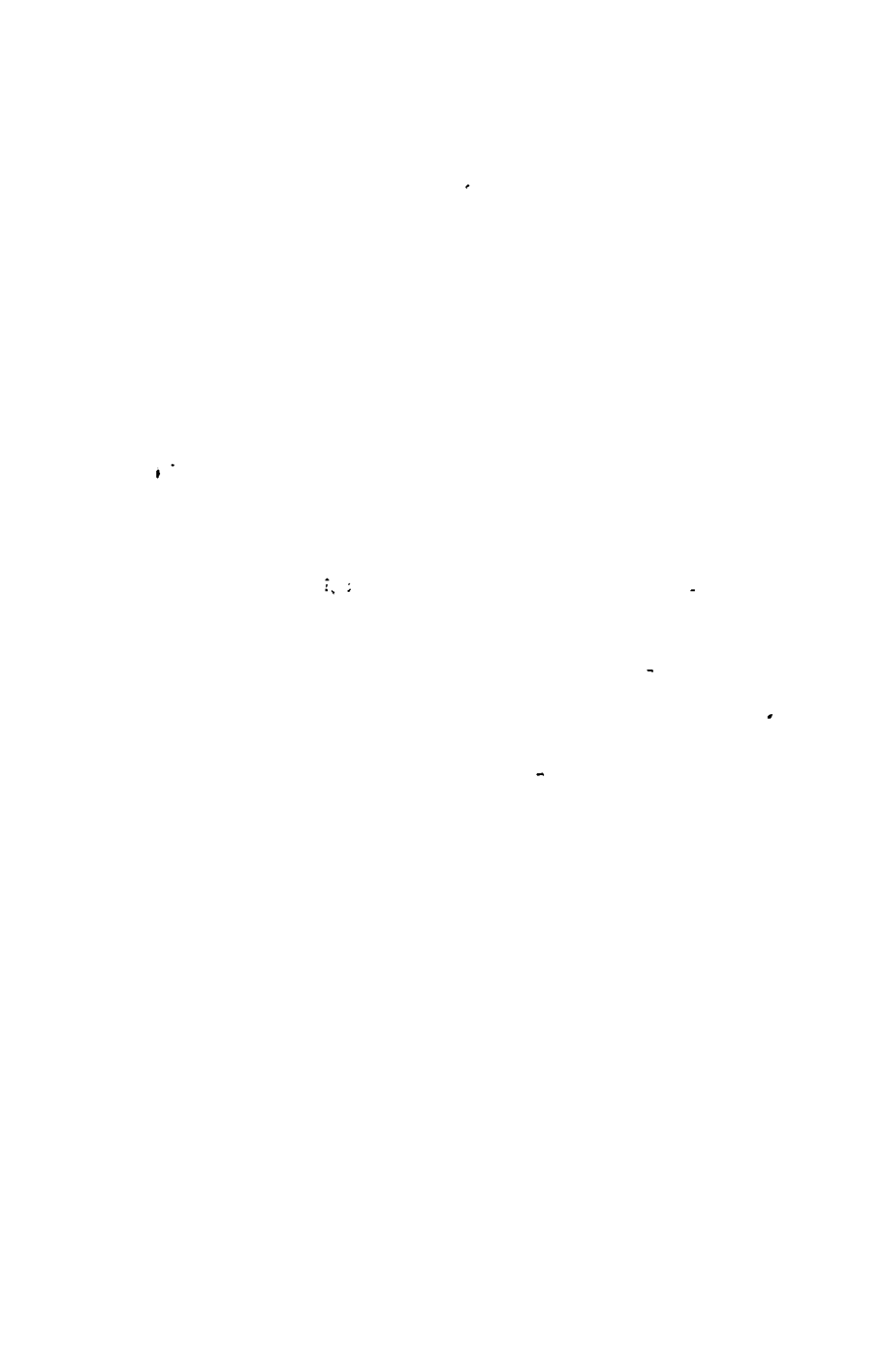
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1

Punjabi Poetry before Mohan Singh

Punjabi poetry has a rich tradition and heritage going back to the third century A.D. Without going into a detailed account of this ancient past, we could take Sheikh Baba Farid (1173-1265), as a pioneer of Punjabi poetry and a renaissance figure.

Hazarat Baba Sheikh Farid-ud-din Mas'ud Ganje-Shakar used an idiom and vocabulary, which even today, is appreciated equally by intellectuals, scholars, the elite on the one hand and on the other, the masses, who are uneducated in the literal sense of the term. Here lies the strength, the vitality and the intrinsic worth of Punjabi poetry and indeed of the entire Punjabi language and literature.

Continuing this broad sweep, we next come to the poetry of the Sikh Gurus, starting with Guru Nanak Dev (1469-1539) and ending with Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708).

Their poetry is rich, no doubt, in religious emotiveness, but it is perhaps richer in its mirroring of the social, economic and political life of the contemporary period. Its other extraordinary feature is its literary quality, which can stand the test and norms of the best literary criticism, past or present.

The next phase of interest in our field is the poetry of the great Sufis, the Qissakars (the ballad singers) and epic poets of the period before, during and after the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839). There are several outstanding names which come to the fore, but Waris Shah, Hashim Shah, Najabat, Piloo, Shah Hussain and Bulleh Shah, may be mentioned in particular.

It would be interesting to note that although the Punjab had been the battleground of various dynasties throughout this period of some six hundred years since Baba Farid, the poetic

expression of its people—whether they were Muslim, Hindu or Sikh—continued uninterrupted. In fact, every political upheaval acted as an impetus for the poets to produce poignant verses dealing with and describing the plight of the masses. It was as much a poetic period of personal love and romance being expressed in verse, as of anguish and travail at the existing state of tyranny and oppression of the rulers.

This phase is followed by the advent of what is generally considered the modern epoch, in the western sense. It covers the period from the end of the nineteenth century to the first quarter of the twentieth. It produced outstanding poets like Bhai Vir Singh, Prof. Puran Singh, Dhani Ram Chatrik, Charan Singh Shahid and Hira Singh Dard.

They, at once, gave a new turn to Punjabi poetry in its rhythmic content as well as in its down-to-earth trait. Bhai Vir Singh's main concern might be religious, but to brand him a religious poet, would be a gross injustice to him. He wrote on a vast variety of themes, which included patriotism, nature and social awareness.

Puran Singh was like a storm whose exuberance carried in its sweep the noble and the ignoble, the great and the small, God and devil, good and evil. Without doubt, he shines like a star representing the best in the Punjabi character and ethos evolved through the ages.

Dhani Ram Chatrik was another pioneer who gave a distinct character to Punjabi poetry and enhanced its mass appeal, which had been eclipsed with the onset of the British rule.

It is against this background that Mohan Singh burst like a meteor over the Punjabi poetic scene in the mid-thirties. From then on till the early sixties, it was he who dominated the stage and occupied a conspicuous place in its shelves of public, school, college and private libraries. Even those who had no access to books recited his poems and remembered several of them by heart.

Mohan Singh did start his poetic career with poems appealing to the religious sentiment but he soon switched over to love and romance. At that point in our social history love and romance were secret hankerings. Our students in the universities, colleges and schools were at the time being continually fed on English literature and those whom they particularly admired

or were made to admire, were the romantic poets. There was a keen desire in them, therefore, to find their equivalents in their own Indian milieu.

Society, in general, was also becoming more open, co-education was getting popular and the cinema had given rise to a new current of excitement and expectancy.

Mohan Singh wrote of personal love and disappointments, and it found an echo in every heart.

It is not often that a poet dominates the poetic scene in a language for almost a generation, but it did happen in the case of Mohan Singh and, in this, lies his greatness.

2

Life

Mohan Singh was born on 20 October, 1905 in Moti Mardan, now in Pakistan. His father, Dr. Jodh Singh, was a veterinary surgeon in the Government. He was thus frequently transferred from one place to another. He was a devout Sikh and took considerable interest in local religious and social affairs, wherever he happened to be posted.

Mohan Singh had his early schooling in Dhamial and later, lived for a longer period in Kartarpur, a city founded by Guru Nanak and an important centre of pilgrimage. Mohan Singh, therefore, developed a religious bent of mind when young and came in close touch with savants, scholars and poets, well versed in this field.

Mohan Singh says in *The Journey of my Pen* :

This journey started in 1921-22, when the anti-English agitation was in full swing. The incidents at Jallianwala Bagh and at Nankana Sahib had brought Akali and Congress movements together. Religious and patriotic sentiments overlapped : Feelings ran high, not only in the cities and towns, but even in remote villages.

I had just then passed my Matriculation examination. A conference was to be held in Adhwal and a poetic symposium was a part of this conference. The refrain given was "Sada Guru te Guru da Bagh Sada" (Guru is ours and so is Guru da Bagh). I wrote my first poem at that time. It took me just two hours. When I recited it at the conference I was astounded by the applause I received. My poem was adjudged the best and I got the first prize.

From then onwards, of course, there was no going back.

Thereafter, Mohan Singh attended several poetic symposia at different places and always won considerable acclaim. They started calling him 'Mahir' (the Perfect) which stuck to him as a *nom de plume* for a long time.

In 1930, he passed the examination of Munshi Fazal from the Government Oriental College, Lahore and took his Masters Degree in Persian from the same Institution in 1933.

During this period an important event took place in his life, which had a great bearing on his poetic career. His first wife, Basant, a beautiful woman from Nakrali died in 1929. Marriages, in those days, were contracted early in life.

Although he remarried in 1930, the memory of his first wife kept astir in his mind for a long time. His poem 'Basant', poignant and marked by pathos, is a tribute to her. It brought him a lot of popularity among the masses. Like the poem on Guru da Bagh, this poem too was on everyone's lips. The oft-repeated couplets were :

Met as I did Basant in my dream
I recounted to her the tale of my desperate woe
My tears flowed unceasingly
as they scanned the old familiar face.
Wiping away my tears, she said ;
"Whatever He does, is for the best.
How would you have become a poet, O, Mohan
Had I not died ?"

Mohan Singh started his academic career as a teacher in Khalsa High School, Amritsar and in 1934 shifted to Khalsa College in the same city as a Professor of Persian.

He spent five years there, up to 1939, and during this period, he emerged as the leading poet of the Punjab. Younger poets and writers flocked to meet him. Though they did not get the necessary help in writing poetry or getting their compositions corrected in the old traditional way, they were, no doubt, sufficiently inspired by him. Mohan Singh was always communicative. Visitors from far and wide carried the stories of their meetings with him.

Soon the poet found the atmosphere in Khalsa College a little depressing. His mind, perhaps, longed for the congenial

atmosphere of Lahore, the capital of the Punjab and one of the most attractive cities of India at that time. "Lahore, the city of colleges, life and literature", went the saying.

In 1939 he shifted to Lahore and started a literary magazine called *Panj Darya* (Five Rivers). As it was not a profitable venture, he joined in 1940 Sikh National College, Lahore, to make his living and served that institution till 1943.

The atmosphere in the Sikh National College was more propitious than that in Khalsa College, Amritsar. The institution had come into existence by the efforts of a remarkable personage, Principal Niranjn Singh, the younger brother of the famous Akali leader, Master Tara Singh. Niranjn Singh was a staunch patriot and worked for the realisation of his vision of a free India. He had a completely secular outlook.

While teaching in the Sikh National College, Mohan Singh found that he could not do justice to the journal he was publishing. He remained unhappy and could not decide which profession to choose. Niranjn Singh was a great judge of men and moods. He watched Mohan Singh's mental state with concern. One day he made up his mind to give him a piece of advice. Said he, "Mohan, it is your fortune or misfortune to remain unhappy with the existing circumstances and surroundings, for you are a born poet. I have been watching you for the last three to four years. Go ahead and devote yourself fully to literature and try to make *Panj Darya* a success. My best wishes are with you".

Niranjn Singh had rightly felt the pulse of Mohan Singh. There was so much of the poet in him that he could never be content with anything he was doing. This state of inherent unease, alas, lasted till his death.

After quitting the Sikh National College, Mohan Singh energised *Panj Darya*.

As was bound to happen, Mohan Singh soon found the income from the journal insufficient to meet his normal household expenditure. So, in 1946, he started a publishing house, Hindi Publishers.

The partition of the country in August 1947 hit Mohan Singh as it certainly did several millions of other people. He shifted to Amritsar and set up his business in a rented apartment on Court Road.

It might be interesting to note that both in Lahore and in Amritsar, Mohan Singh tried, for short periods, his hand at running a restaurant, but failed miserably on both the occasions. Perhaps Mohan Singh made this experiment as he was fond of good food and drink and it was a valid excuse for indulging in this luxury—free of cost, so to say. After all, what is the good of running a restaurant, if the proprietor cannot help himself to a good meal and drinks every now and then ?

Fate continued to play havoc with this sensitive poet so far as his financial life was concerned and within a few years, finding himself unsuccessful at Amritsar, he shifted to Jalandhar. Here, for a few years he saw a semblance of prosperity as the book trade flourished with the opening of libraries in the villages and in panchayat headquarters. Several of his publications were prescribed as text books in the universities and money came in plenty.

Mohan Singh was like a flower. With the onset of the first ray of dawn, he would open up and exude a rare fragrance. But if someone hurt him even a little or if there was a setback to his business or if he was disappointed in some other field, he would suddenly close up and become dejected.

Anger and laughter alternated quite frequently in him. It was lucky for him to have Surjit Kaur as a life companion, an admirable lady. She cheerfully bore his tantrums and moods.

But alas, Mohan Singh's few years of good fortune were soon over. He had to marry his daughters still and his sons were not self-supporting as yet. From about the early sixties till he died on 3 May, 1978, Mohan Singh, in spite of having been appointed Professor Emeritus in the Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana, was never fully free of financial worries.

But this is not to say that he did not lead a full life. He certainly did. His house was always open to friends, visitors and admirers. He was more often in good mood than bad and had a fund of stories and jokes to narrate. His assessment of his contemporaries was often devastating, but without malice. He loved to talk scandal, but again without an iota of malice. He enjoyed the company of his friends and was always ready to be of help to anyone in any way at any time.

Mohan Singh was an adept player of chess and was quite fond of it. He indulged in it with ferocity when he was depres-

sed or when someone hurt him by word or deed. Chess soothed his taut nerves and soon his face beamed again.

No poet or writer can ever escape from the influence of his personal surroundings. Yet a great artist is he who can manage to rise above petty considerations. Mohan Singh, in this respect, was a true artist.

Except for the death of his first wife, Basant, whom he had loved deeply, he did not let his poetry fall prey to his personal financial problems and predicaments. He did, of course, sing of love and despair on a personal and emotional level, but there was considerable objectivity in his treatment of the subject.

During these decades of turbulence and turmoil in business and teaching, Mohan Singh's poetry passed through different phases, which shall be discussed in the subsequent chapters.

3

From Romance to the Crossroads

Mohan Singh's first collection of poems was a slim volume, entitled *Char Hanju* (Four Tear Drops). It included only four poems : 'Rabb' (God), 'Basant', 'Anarkali' and 'Noorjehan'. It was published in 1935 and was an instant success.

God has been written and talked about ever since the beginning of mankind and Mohan Singh's voice is one out of a million but in 1935 it made an impact on the readers of Punjabi more than what it intended to or was hoped for.

Says he :

God is a complicated puzzle
an intricate web :
to understand and evaluate Him
makes man an infidel.

But to live in fear of being an infidel
is no life.

Search and knowledge must not
be in vain,
Better to be a seeking infidel
than a believer blind.

Now, it is not that such a sentiment had not been expressed before by people, poets, savants and philosophers in human history. But the way Mohan Singh put it in the Punjabi language in the last two lines of the above quote, made people stand back and ponder.

This couplet in the context of the contemporary climate lashed at differences in the Punjab based on religion. We must not forget that encouraged by British imperialism, the Hindus

and Muslims had already, by 1935, started considering themselves as two separate peoples in spite of their being Indians. Mohan Singh borrowed the traditional Muslim imagery to strike at the schism existing in the social set up and at once brought the Hindus and the Muslims together in an ingenious way.

Like 'Basant' these two lines of the couplet were loved, admired and sung by the Hindus, the Muslims and the Sikhs alike.

'Anarkali' too had memorable passages which were on every one's lips. The oft-repeated lines were :

Men were deceivers ever
 their foibles are not new.
 Like a bee
 they never cling for long to a flower:
 till the light of beauty shines
 they keep on paying it their court;
 and
 once it's extinguished
 off they fly to the nearest light.

You will find in it the unmistakable imprint of the old Qis-sakars of the Punjab and indeed of the world poetry of the nine-teenth and the early twentieth centuries, even an echo of Shakaspeare.

'Noorjehan', too, made the people of the Punjab feel one with the poet. Noorjehan, as they said was the light of the world for Emperor Jehangir and exerted tremendous influence upon him. In spite of all the glory she was crowned with in life, her tomb lies in the outskirts of Lahore, beyond the river Ravi, in a most dilapidated condition. It reminds one of a couplet by Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Moghul emperor and a fine poet, who wrote with extreme poignancy :

Upon the tomb of our poor
 neither is there any light
 nor any flower :
 Neither appears there a moth
 to burn itself on the lamp
 nor is there the doleful warbling of the nightingale.

And Mohan Singh wrote :

Lo, what do I see ?
The spiders and lizards
crawl all over.
Spiders have spun their webs
ready to trap the flies
Bats hang from the ceilings
as if it were a moonless night.
Maybe
afraid of the queen's beauty
the sun dared not enter inside
Seeing the tomb of the once
Pearl-laden beauty
who would not cry in bitterness ?
By God ;
even a poor one's cottage
is better looked after.

Like a melon shell
the thresholds are torn asunder
and the walls bear cracks,
The fires they light in the courtyard
have covered the ceiling with black soot.

Yesterday,
in her royal presence
incense used to be burnt
but in this degraded grave,
today,
not even an earthen lamp is alive.
Dear Lord !
either do not create
such beautiful forms
else
let them not
rot in the dust like this.

These verses found an echo in the hearts of the Punjabi people as had never been experienced before.

Earlier, it was Bhai Vir Singh, with his accent on the Sikh ethos, Prof. Puran Singh with his universalism, and Dhani Ram Chatrik, with his mass appeal but today this poet called Mohan Singh was talking what the people—Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims—of the Punjab had been yearning to hear since 1849—when the British had finally annexed the Punjab to their Indian Empire.

In 1936, that is to say, within a year of the appearance of this slim volume, Mohan Singh published his first full length collection of poetry, called *Sawe Pattar* (Green Leaves). It contained all the above-mentioned four poems as well as several others.

Like *Char Hanju*, it also created a storm in the literary world of the Punjab. The literary quality of the poems, one would still question, as we would *Char Hanju*, but the mad adulation which it evoked had just no parallel.

It was *Sawe Pattar*, which made Mohan Singh immortal ; the rest was all a follow-up, a sequence, a trail.

Throughout *Sawe Pattar* the lyrical touch continues irrespective of whether the poems are long or short. The other most popular poems in this collection are 'Sikhi' (Sikhism), 'Guleli' (The Gypsy Girl), and 'Ambi de Bootay Thallay' (Under the Mango Tree). The latter was filmed in the mid-fifties and remains popular till today.

A few lines from 'Guleli' (The Gypsy Girl) are as under :

Her beauty—how can I describe it,
A glance of hers
Strikes a hundred lashes on my body.
Her neckline is so enticing
Even the passers-by are short of breath.
White-complexioned cheeks and neckline
with red beads around
as if
fire and water subsist side by side.
The damsels' eyes
tell you stories enticing
intoxicating oceans swell—
or, as if
she has encaged in a small earthen pot
the flowing rivers of rare beauty.

The next collection of poems by Mohan Singh was *Kasumbhra* (The Bud) published in 1939, followed by *Adhwate* (Half-way) in 1943. These collections are a journey from purely emotive expression to intellectual reflection. As a corollary Mohan Singh, to a certain extent, discarded old metaphors and similes and tried to grapple with situations and incidents intellectually. This is not to say that he discarded basic romanticism or the element of romance. It definitely continued side by side, though on a subdued note.

At this stage, Mohan Singh also started writing *geet* or songs, a form that he perfected later.

In the longer poems, he seems to be swinging away from the tight rhyming, perhaps under the influence of Puran Singh, who had innovated with *vers libre*, in the tradition of Walt Whitman. Nevertheless, Mohan Singh's poetry never loses its intrinsic rhythmic quality. Imagery becomes richer and terse. There are pauses in the stormy passages. And above all, the social content begins to appear. The satirical aspect is also emerging. The Persian influence continues but to a lesser extent.

Here is a short quote from "Koi Tore ve Koi Tore" (Let Someone Break the Shackles) in *Kasumbhra*, which depicts Mohan Singh's expanding mental horizon and the bold treatment of the theme he chooses :

Come someone shake me, break me,
Come someone twist my wrist.
How shall I conceal my youth ?
This upsurge is impossible to camouflage
I'm turning mad perhaps.

Yes, let me be shaken and broken
I'm a goblet brimming with wine
and about to overflow.
My lips are athirst
they yearn for him.

And here is an example of a very evocative and moving song :

I'm not I any more

I'm someone different
 my gait changes
 a memory swells
 and life becomes delicious.

However much I may seal my lips
 It's impossible to conceal
 the heart's ache
 eyes wish to cry unendingly
 and wash someone's breasts ;
 a strange huc overtakes me
 the world seems strait and small
 my mind wishes to swim
 through the oceans
 or keep on climbing and surmounting
 high mountains
 or fly through galaxies
 and converse with stars and moons.

Inside there's music infinite
 do not curb me, my wisdom !
 Let me dance naked
 truth needs no covering.

The Second World War had broken out in 1939 and India too was drawn into it at the behest of the British. The freedom movement got a fresh impetus. The national leaders who, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, had earlier compromised with the British Government were soon disillusioned. The disillusionment gave way to despair and frustration which culminated in the Quit India Movement. It shook the country and indeed the whole world. Most of the national leaders were put behind bars by the British Government, but it still did not dampen the spirit of patriotism. People on their own gave a fight to the British rulers at every step.

Mohan Singh was deeply moved by these events and quite a few poems of *Adhwate* express this sentiment. One of the more important and popular one was 'Pashu' (Animal), in which, comparing British imperialism to a monkey, he depicts realistically the contemporary scenario :

Sitting atop the tree
Converses the monkey with the stars
the bread and butter of three fourth
of the world
lies ensconced in his two hands.

Among the branches of the tree
he has nurtured
countless blood-sucking animals
whose eyes glow like fire.

At the foot of the tree, however,
some lions lie powerless
their paws are enmeshed
and they're half dead with hunger.

Some foolish asses and camels, nevertheless
extol the monkey with open arms
they gather the best they can from all over
and present it unto him.

Thinks the ape
"my tree shall ever converse with the skies
neither the lions can climb it
nor shall I ever get down".

Alas !
he's unaware
that an eagle from the skies
can sweep down
and catch him by the neck
or a white bear from a snow-laden clime
can climb the tree.

During this period, Mohan Singh read the works of some English and European poets and had a deeper look at western philosophy. In France, from Rousseau to Comte and in Germany, from Emmanuel Kant to Schopenhauer, the philosophers put forward varying and differing points of view. However, their contributions, great as they are, were confined to philosophical theories, while it was left to Karl Marx to

really sift, sieve and reconstruct a social pattern which had far reaching effects on the world, as we have witnessed in the past decades.

How far Mohan Singh was influenced directly by Marxism is debatable but at this stage he certainly showed an awareness of the basic economic element in the body politic of our country.

He says in 'Adhwate' :

In the month of March
at the time of sunrise
thousands and thousands of flowers
twinkle like stars
hanging by soft green twigs
one mistakes it for Indra's durbar,

But there they also trudge,
with loads heavy over their heads,
like donkeys with heavy haystacks.
Being squeezed by hunger and poverty
they find no rest, no peace
only now and then,
they glance at the abundance of beauty
and colour around.

Only once in a while
they are aware of this fragrance intense,
These farmers !

O, my Lord
you provide such a feast of
flowers and fragrance ;
grant your poor some leisure and comfort too.

Between *Adhwate* and his next collection, there was a gap of full seven years and hence *Adhwate* as the name suggests, was truly a watershed in his career.

4

New Vistas

With *Kach Sach* (1950) (Truth and Untruth), Mohan Singh starts on a new phase in his journey of the pen. The dichotomy, the doubting mind, the questioning spirit and a yearning for arriving at the truth are still there, as it was in his earlier collections, but it now seems to take a little more definitive and marked undertones.

At the beginning of treading the new path after the cross-roads, he seems to be much more aware of social problems facing the people of India as well as the peoples of the world and highlights the fact that without adequate justice, in terms of economic uplift of the masses, there can be no lasting peace on this planet.

In the famous poem from *Kach Sach* entitled, 'Loha' (Iron), he says :

Iron is our father
and we, the sons of iron;
iron is our mother
and we are born of iron.

Iron is our God,
We worship it
Iron is our honour
we're wedded to it, forever.

We befriend iron
enemies we're of gold
Our likes and dislikes
are that of iron.

With iron we win this earth
and with its inspiration

we spread our wings
across the heavens.

Sickle in one hand
hammer in the other
products of iron
we are spread all over the globe.

It is true that India, during that period (after 1947) was going through a phase of reconstruction and under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru had taken a proud place in the comity of nations, yet the aftermath of war had left the world divided into power blocs. Every major step in any field or direction in the global context was tinged with power politics, even if it was not a direct by-product of this rivalry. More unfortunate was the fact that day after day, rivalry was becoming more pronounced and was developing into, what came to be known as, the state of cold war.

Mohan Singh realised that this atmosphere of cold war was bound to affect and compromise India's position both politically and economically. Politically we would be drawn into a position of near hostility with our neighbours and economically, our efforts to build up our industrial base would be thwarted.

All this presaged that there would be little, if any, change in the lot of the poor and as such, the social problems facing them would continue without any hope of solution.

This was the truth for him. At the same time, Mohan Singh clung to love, aesthetics, beauty and romance and this he seems to refer to as the untruth though he asserts that love, aesthetics, beauty and romance too hold an important place in the life of the people.

He says in another famous poem called 'Jhana' (The Chenab)* :

The whole wide world has some charm, of course,
Yet the most beautiful

*River Chenab was one of the five rivers of the undivided Punjab. Most of the romantic love tales in Punjabi literature are woven around it, including the classic love story of Heer Ranjha.

is the land of the Chenab.
The waves of this river
are full and fruitful
There's no end
to the grass and the cattle feed.
Here, you've the woods and jungles
and smiling fields over there.

In fact, so thick is the foliage
that even a snake finds it
difficult to crawl through.

or

Grant me a drop from your goblet
so intoxicant
that my being might
illumine as the starry heavens.
It's true that I'm low and lowly
since ages past.
Yet forgetting our past
we shall touch
the heights unknown.

This collection contains some quatrains also, and they are generally tinged with Sufi thought and philosophy, which Mohan Singh seems to consider an amalgam of truth and untruth. Here is one, as an example :

Whatever you want to bestow
bestow it today
do not postpone it.
Once having missed the chance
we may meet again or not.
Bestow your bounty today,
no, just now
if once the bowl breaks asunder
how will it ever hold the wine ?

5

The Final Phase

The final phase in Mohan Singh's poetry is spread over two decades and includes : *Awazan* (I Call) (1954), *Wudda Vela* (The Morning) (1958), *Jandre* (The Locks) (1964), *Jai Mir* (Victory to Peace) (1968) and the last of his collection, *Buhe* (The Doors) (1977).

It is not much of a crop for two decades in so far as the number of books is concerned, but in its value and its impact on Punjabi literature, even this small output is outstanding. We must not forget that, by now, Mohan Singh was a craftsman of high order. He laboured a lot over his poems and did not publish one, till he had perfected it in every way. No other modern Punjabi poet can vie with Mohan Singh in this respect. He was never satisfied with the second best; he aspired for only the best.

The outstanding feature of these two decades of creativity is the fact that most of his poems are concerned with social awareness. There is a yearning for peace on the planet earth.

When, in 1950, the First All India Peace Conference took place in Amritsar, Mohan Singh wrote many songs on this theme. They do not at all sound propagandist, as do most of the writings of other poets and writers of the period. One of them, 'Aman da Kafa' (Caravan of Peace) was then on the lips of almost everybody whether a progressive or not. Here are a few lines from it :

Caravan of peace
is on the move
the whole world walks along,
we swear by art, music and poetry
we swear by the wonderful
blossoming of love and beauty

has often been read at poetical symposia all over the state and each time it seems fresh and new, as if one were listening to it for the first time.

After Gajjan Singh is arrested and his crops are appropriated by the landlord, Mohan Singh pathetically describes the condition of his house when he is away :

Gajjan Singh's work place is empty
the young pups are streaming there.

Gajjan Singh's hut is dimly lit
His wife lies awake.
Gajjan Singh's bullocks sit unhappy
they do not even glance at the fodder.

The language of most of the poems *Awazan* (I Call) is simple and unambiguous. The message goes straight to the heart and there is no occasion for intellectual musing.

One cannot but quote from this collection a few more lines, which became as popular as the folk songs :

Friends,
now starts the struggle between
the people and the exploiters,
Today
we shall choose between the palaces and the hamlets.
Truth and untruth
have entered the arena
arise you, the exploited ones
you may not get another chance.

Awazan (I Call) was followed by *Wadda Vela* (The Morning), which has the same thematic perception. The outstanding poem of this collection, 'Trishul' (The Trident) is, in a way, its core. A few stanzas have it :

Unbridled imperialists
daily threaten war ; my friend,
cruelty and aggressiveness blows blood
fire becomes an inferno, my friend,
Beauty's forehead is singed
and love's trammels burn, my friend.

Awake you worker and the farmer
off with your burden of listlessness, my friend,
Arise you blacksmith, and light
the oven in full swing, my friend,
Let truthful labour lie victorious and
aggression and cruelty fall down flat.

While talking of *Wadda Vela*, one cannot omit to write a little in detail about one of the important genre of poetry called the Ghazal.

In order to understand the difference between Mohan Singh's and other writers of Punjabi Ghazal, one must discuss the nature of this form of poetry. The word Ghazal, in Arabic means "talking to women" or "talking of love". In a Ghazal, the lover complains of his beloved's cruelty and generally a Ghazal comprises stray thoughts of a lover, of separation from the beloved, longing for reunion, giving expression to sensations of pain and pleasure. The opening stanza of a Ghazal is called the Matla, containing two lines, the last but one word of the first line known as the Qafia rhymes with the last but one word in the second line. The ghazal closes with the stanza called the Makta, in which the traditional Ghazal writers introduced their name or the *nom de plume*. All the stanzas, from the Matla to the Makta, are written in the same metre and the ending of the second line of each stanza known as Radif must have the same rhyme.

This verse form has many limitations but it is not altogether without advantages. In its ordinary form it can be practised by all and sundry. One has just to think of a number of words which rhyme together and then to string ideas which suit the rhyming words. In this artificial manner of versification thought follows words, instead of words following thoughts and it is this characteristic of the Ghazal which is the bane of much of contemporary Punjabi poetry.

Mohan Singh's Ghazals belong to a separate category. In his case, words follow thoughts. He never makes a deliberate show of his power of versification. There is no padding and he seldom or never attempts several lines for one Qafia. There are very few long Ghazals by him, which are in the same Qafia or Radif.

The ordinary Ghazal writers in Punjabi—and there are quite a few of them—make strenuous efforts at rhyming and then polish it to the best of their ability and hence cannot lay claim to much literary merit. Mohan Singh was no slavish imitator of any verse form and he has left behind some Ghazals which are without any *Matla* or *Makta*, probably because more verses of sufficiently good quality in that strain did not occur to him, as for example in some Ghazals in *Meri Chonwi Kavita* (My Selected Poems).

Mohan Singh expresses his thoughts in a strikingly original manner. He does not describe an emotional experience at length as some others would do and this sometimes leads to a poetic paradox, but the remarkable facility of expression drives the poet's point home.

Ghazal number four in *Wadda Vela* (The Morning) has it :

Many a wave have sprung up
in the ocean of humanity
and have ebbed ;
but in the magnificence
of this storm
I see a new life.

Or in Ghazal number six :

How long you'll waste your talent
painting upon the
old ceiling of these skies ;
come, and let's beautify
the tresses of this
 earth
and talk of things near.

Jandre (The Locks) is perhaps the climax of Mohan Singh's poetry. There is symbolism of high order and every poem is as if illuminised.

Once again the genre of Ghazal has been used with an effective and powerful impact. He employs folk adages and sayings in these verses which fuse the ancient and the modern; the intellectual and the romantic ; the imaginary and the real :

The workers have found
fourteen gems from the oceans deep
and will discover another fourteen
by zooming in space.

And here are some other memorable lines from a poem entitled *Birchh* (The Tree) :

In my courtyard
grows a tree strange,
Its leaves throng with thorns
and its trunk is hollow.
Like wild cactus
It keeps on spreading.
It grows by day and by night
and knows no stopping.
It needs not a drop of water
but drinks basketful of blood.
I wonder if it really is a tree
or the ghost of one.

In 'Jai Mir' (Victory to Peace), Mohan Singh continues to widen the horizons of his earlier achievements. It is yet a further flight from self to the universal. Of this period of his life, he himself writes in the *Journey of the Pen* : "Now I find no contradiction between the individual love and love for the people. In fact, I find them complementing each other".

He further asserts : "My journey from the self to the universal had started right back in 1936, when at the instance of Sajjad Zahir, the Progressive Writers Union came to be formed". It might be so, but his intervening poetry does not bear out his assertion. In 'Jai Mir' he has, perhaps for the first time, devoted his poetic genius to express this latent sentiment, Says he now :

The first stage in love
revolves around the tresses.

The next one is to free
The poor and down-trodden from bondage.

The first stage is to
 be a friend of a friend
 The next one is to
 make friend of an enemy.

Now he does not subscribe to the view that art is purely for art's sake. To sing and dance away is not the end of poetry. Besides, Punjabi poetry had, by now, become more all-embracing than it was at the beginning of modern era, the most important figure of which was Bhai Vir Singh.

In fact, it is a queer act of history that the modern era of Punjabi literature should be a by-product of religious revival. Till the period of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Punjabi was universally accepted and patronised by the Sikhs, the Hindus and the Muslims. Hashim Shah, we all know, was the major poet at the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. We also all know about the *Qissa* of Shah Muhammed, who held a mirror to that very important period of our history. He painted a charming portrait of the blessings of the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and how all religions existed in perfect peace and harmony in the Punjab. At the same time, he wrote a harrowing and heart-rendering tale of the Anglo-Sikh Wars. Neither any Hindu nor any Sikh has been able to bring out the pain and suffering of the people, when the British ultimately gained a victory, as this Muslim bard has done.

Similar had been the tradition of Punjabi literature before Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Baba Farid, a Muslim, is the most important name in our poetry and literature as far back as the thirteenth century. As has been referred to earlier, his telling and effective verses are comparable to the best which was being written at the time in the world.

This tradition was eclipsed for a brief period of a few decades. The blame must squarely be placed on the shoulders of the British rulers, who soon after consolidating their sway in India deliberately tried to sow the seeds of discord amongst various communities and religions. This was a policy, which aptly and appropriately, came to be called the policy of divide and rule. This policy also saw its worst manifestations in the Punjab. First, there are three communities in the State and secondly, Punjabis are full-blooded people who take to

love or hate in a big way. The imperialists had played their cards well indeed.

Nevertheless, religious revival under the banners of Arya Samaj, Singh Sabha Movement or Muslim League, when it came in direct conflict with communal harmony and independence movement the poets, writers and intellectuals resisted it. They were fully aware of the machinations of the foreign rulers and a strong sentiment prevailed in the writings of the period.

To be honest, even the poets and writers belonging to the revival or renaissance religious movements were neither fanatics nor bigoted. They were all fully and staunchly patriotic and, at the same time, had a universal approach. In fact, all religions as nurtured, practised and observed in India have a universal aspect.

Mohan Singh too, as a poet, was a product of Sikh revivalist movement and one of his famous poem of the earlier era is 'Sikhi' (Sikhism). And as if the circle was to be completed fully, his major epic is also the life story of Guru Nanak Dev.

Yet, credit must be given to Mohan Singh for resurrecting Punjabi poetry from the grip of religious fervour and making it more romantic and ultimately, intellectual. But for him, the romantic phase in Punjabi poetry would never have come about with a vengeance, as it did. He unleashed a flood of love and romance. Coupled with the spread of education in English language in the Punjab and the study of British romantic poets, this gave a new dimension to our poetry and Mohan Singh, as if, became its father figure.

After playing such a significant role in treading a new path in the Punjabi Poetry, Mohan Singh, as we were discussing, came to 'Jai Mir' (Victory to Peace). And this role too was significant as had been the earlier one of ushering in the romantic era.

He stood here making a self-analysis of what he had written and tried to express thus far and what was to become of his art henceforward. He is afraid of losing or missing his destination. In *Kach Sach* (Truth and Untruth), he is also afraid that his analysis of these two aspects might not be only a manifestation of his unending inner contradictions.

In *Jai Mir* (Victory to Peace), he is on surer ground. He

is certain that he can clearly see his destination and there will now be no cause or occasion to swerve.

He has now resolved both the spiritual and the intellectual conflict and there is equanimity and harmony in reaching the goal.

It is strange but fascinating that Mohan Singh's last collection of poetry, *Buhe* (The Doors), should give a discerning reader an impression as if, it were really, his last one. Was he aware of his approaching end? Or did he call it a day consciously? Enough is enough, he seems to say.

After an artist's demise, readers and critics often wish to know about his future writings, had he lived longer. One can pose such a question about Mohan Singh, I, for one, have no hesitation in saying that he would not have written any more poetry. He would have turned to prose and would certainly have enriched it, as he had done in the case of Punjabi poetry.

As I have said earlier, Mohan Singh laboured a lot over his poems till he brought them to near perfection. In *Buhe* (The Doors), there is not a single instance of any half-baked poem, but Mohan Singh does seem to feel a bit fatigued. That age takes its toll, one cannot gainsay.

This collection adds a new dimension to Mohan Singh's poetry. It impresses the reader with Mohan Singh's wide knowledge of the current events as well as his very personal and yet universal analysis of the problems facing mankind. Mohan Singh is deeply concerned with the future of humanity and although he consciously tries to be optimistic, there is an undercurrent of pathos and despair. This facet, of course, is closer to reality. The world is still facing the same crisis of survival and no peaceful solution of our material, spiritual and political problems is in sight.

Most of the poems of *Buhe* (The Doors) can be called contemporary and yet Mohan Singh focuses himself on eternal values and deals with the day to day problems of the world against the backdrop of entire human civilization, as it evolved itself from the ice age.

These poems contain the best examples of 'understatement' in Punjabi literature. They are subtle and yet telling. A reader seems to be carried away with the flow of poetry and his animal instincts seem to be pacified.

The total of effect of *Buhe* (The Doors) is soothing : one would sleep well after reading them and would not feel either excited or unnerved. That is why I say that it would have been his last collection of poems, even if he had lived much longer.

This collection of Mohan Singh brings him closer to the father of Punjabi poetry, Baba Farid and other poets like Waris Shah and Hashim Shah. It is true that these earlier poets wrote in their own historical milieu and Mohan Singh in his own, yet somehow the treatment, attitude and overall effect seem to coincide and therein lies the greatness of Mohan Singh.

To enjoy Mohan Singh at his best means not only to cultivate a literary taste by assiduous practice but also to delve deep into one's own individual psyche. Mohan Singh's last collection, *Buhe* (The Doors), has such themes as have recurred over again in the poetry of our age and that of every age but what is distinctive about such poems as *Ankhi* (The Assertive One), *Jazbian di Bhatti* (The Oven of Emotions), *Annha Pathar* (The Blind Stone) and *Nagan Sach* (The Naked Truth), is the fact that common themes of human life have been given their most intense and memorable expression by him. When a reader goes through these poems, he not only enjoys life in a better way but also is bound to endure it with greater fortitude.

6

Nanakayan

Nanakayan is an epic by Mohan Singh on the life, teachings and philosophy of Guru Nanak Dev (1469-1537), the first Sikh Guru.

Mohan Singh had been commissioned to do this work by the Punjabi University, Patiala, to commemorate the fifth centenary of Guru Nanak Dev.

That Mohan Singh worked hard on this epic and tapped all the available sources goes without saying, though this task was not an easy one. A lot has been written about Guru Nanak in these last five hundred years. For one, Guru Nanak was the founder of a powerful religion on the world scene and secondly, his was a life and personality unique in more than one way.

He was an inveterate traveller, the like of which this world has rarely seen. Five hundred years ago, the means of communication and transport were difficult and arduous. Political conditions in Asia and indeed in most parts of the world were unsafe and one ventured farther away from his surroundings only at considerable personal risk. Guru Nanak dared to face both these hazards and not only visited the nooks and corners of India, but also went as far as Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia. He travelled mostly on foot but historical evidence has it that he returned from Saudi Arabia by sea.

Another outstanding aspect of the life of Guru Nanak was his versatile pen. He wrote an enormous lot of poetry of high literary merit and propounded a new philosophy. This presupposes that he was well versed in both the Hindu and Islamic lore. He made a clear-cut analysis of the philosophies of these great religions and showed that the essence of both of them was the search for the path of wisdom, truth and God.

No wonder, he founded a new religion.

Yet another aspect of Guru Nanak's life is his interest in the social, economic and political life of the country. Religion was one important aspect of human existence, but the social, economic and political aspects were no less important. So, he wrote and preached about an integrated human life, which was new and different from the one preached by the Hindu or Islamic faiths.

No poet, philosopher and religious teacher, till then, had come in direct confrontation with the mighty Mughal rulers and dared to compose, for example, verses like these :

Lalo (meaning the people), whatever He reveals to me
I sing :
He (Meaning Emperor Babur) descends from Kabul with an
unholy

bridal party
and extorts charity from the people.

Dharma and truth lie low
and falsehood reigns supreme. . .

The Brahmins or Sheikhs have no say.

The functions of everyday life, including the marriage ceremonies,
are performed by the devil. . .

Let us sing songs of blood, O Lalo
mixing it with gory saffron.

or :

The rajas are like ferocious lions
and the functionaries like dogs—
who pounce upon unaware peaceful citizens.

As noted above, the reference is to Emperor Babur, who invaded India after having occupied Afghanistan. It is a terse comment on the state of affairs then existing in India.

No other poetic voice of mediæval India was as forceful, vocal and loud against the then rulers as that of Guru Nanak.

Naturally a lot was bound to be written about such a man, ranging from sheer idolatory to some seemingly honest and just assessments.

Mohan Singh delved deep into all this before writing *Nanakayan*.

There is no doubt that as far as the literary qualities and the poetic merit of this epic are concerned, it is unique in the annals of Punjabi literature. However, it is doubtful if Mohan Singh carefully sifted the material and produced a life story based on his own observations and assessment

Out of the available sources, one would, of course, count a host of *Puratan Janam Sakhis* and other writings, particularly by Sodhi Meharban, Bala, Bhai Gurdas, Bhai Mani Singh, Gian Singh, Santokh Singh, Dr Karuna, Bhai Vir Singh, Rattan, Khan Mohammed, Professor Sahib Singh and Avtar Singh Azad.

Now, Mohan Singh has often lifted the incidents from these books in prose or poetry and just put them across in his own words. Two examples will suffice :

One day while at study
 Nanak kept silent for a while.
 The teacher asked :
 'Why don't you proceed, Nanak
 Knowledge is supreme
 Fire can't burn it,
 nor it can be stolen.'
 Nanak replied :
 'What have you, yourself learned, my teacher.
 You, who want to teach me in such hurry ?'
 'Of course, I've read it all,' answered the teacher,
 'Philosophy, sacred books, the Vedas
 and I have understood their inner meanings.
 Besides, I've delved
 at profit and loss account
 and their import. . .'
 'But this is all so worthless'
 Answered the child. . .

Or

As ordained by Supreme Being
 The Baba
 wended his way to Bein for his bath.
 He took off his clothes
 and gave them to his companion.
 But

Once he dived in the stream
 he disappeared
 He was, in fact, carried in His presence.
 'Here is Nanak,'
 As you desired.
 Nanak was in His immediate presence
 and blessed He himself Nanak Shah.

Both these quotations almost coincide with the old *Janam Sakhi* as written in prose.

One can dare say that this takes away from the intrinsic worth of the epic, especially when one notices several examples of this nature.

As narrative passages are also an integral part of an epic, Mohan Singh has shown his poetic skill in this field by describing scenes, places and countries like Sri Lanka, Kutch, Mathura and Vrindavan. However, at the end of long passages he has added a few lines about Guru Nanak so as to connect and link them together.

Yet, as said earlier, one cannot but pay a homage to the poetic quality of this epic.

Nanakayan is divided into six chapters. The first one deals with Guru Nanak's birth, his parents, education and meeting with his would-be constant companion, Mardana. The second chapter is devoted to Guru Nanak's stay in Sultanpur and his attaining the vision. Subsequent chapters dwell upon his sojourns and travels in India and abroad including Lahore, Hardawar, Ayodhya, Prayag, Gaya, Kamrup (modern Assam and Manipur), Mecca, Kanchipuram and Mahabalipuram, Sri Lanka, Gujrat, Jammu, Kashmir, Baghdad, and Medina.

The last chapter, and the most beautiful one, portrays the life of Guru Nanak as a graceful old master settling down in Kartarpur, near modern Jalandhar, after his long and tiring voyages in the wide world. In a way, these were the most productive and effective years of Guru Nanak's life. He had the experience and knowledge that no Indian of that period could claim. People from far and near revered this great man and teacher of their age and he spoke to them in their own language—simple yet telling. Mohan Singh too is at his best in its exposition.

Mohan Singh as a Prose Writer and Translator

Mohan Singh's major translation works include Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia*, entitled *Asia da Chanan*; *Dharati Pasa Partia* (Virgin Soil Upturned); *Nirmala* and *Godan*, both by Munshi Prem Chand and the wartime speeches of Winston Churchill.

He also compiled three books, on behalf of the Punjabi University, containing selections of Nandlal's poetry, obviously and alas, for pecuniary benefit. His only collection of short stories, *Nikki Nikki Vashna* (Soft Permeating Fragrance) was published in 1944.

Besides, he wrote considerable prose as the editor of his monthly magazine *Panj Darya* which, he published from 1939 to 1965 with brief interruption during the time of the partition (1947) of the country.

The above and some other prose works and translations establish Mohan Singh as a major prose writer.

Nikki Nikki Vashna (Soft Permeating Fragrance) contains eleven stories. As the year of its publication indicates, it comes just a little later than his collection of poetry, *Adhwate* (Halfway Through). These stories are, therefore, halfway at the journey of his pen and show both his love for romance and a lurking attraction for what I call realism, though some critics prefer to dub it as progressivism.

As one would have noticed from the life story of Mohan Singh, he had shifted to the city life in 1933 and, for almost a decade was not yet fully adapted to it nor accepted it with an open mind. His heart and soul still yearned for the surroundings and atmosphere of his village in Pothohar.

Same was the case with his acceptance of progressive or rea-

list ideas about literature, in contrast to the thesis of art for art's sake, to which he had subscribed earlier in his youth.

It would also be pertinent to remark that Mohan Singh had made a conscious and deliberate study of English literature. In fact, in this context, English literature, should be taken in a much wider sense to include the entire Western literature as most of it was available to us only through the English language.

Although Mohan Singh was not the first to be directly influenced by the Western literature in so far as the modern phase of Punjabi letters is concerned, he certainly belonged to the first generation in this regard. His short stories in general, like his poetry in particular, also suggest this influence.

Most of Mohan Singh's short stories deal with family life as it was being led in those days in the Punjab. Maybe, it was as a result of his losing his first wife, Basant, to which references have been made earlier in this volume. His mind seems to be engrossed with the petty as well as serious problems of everyday life of the characters he has chosen.

Mohan Singh's contribution to Punjabi journalism also needs special mention. He was decidedly the first to start a monthly journal *Punj Darya* (Five Rivers) in Punjabi in 1939, which could be called 'literary' in the true sense of the word and which set for itself a high standard right from its first issue.

It should be noted that Mohan Singh undertook this venture after resigning his service at Khalsa College, Amritsar and later, at Sikh National College, Lahore.

The publication of *Panj Darya* clearly indicates two important aspects of Mohan Singh's life. First, he was certainly not the type of a person who would ever be bound by routine even if it were the best. Secondly, Mohan Singh was determined to make his living, of whatever standard it might be, from writing.

That is why Mohan Singh took to journalism seriously and gave it his life and soul. To be published in *Panj Darya* (Five Rivers) became a hallmark of literary merit in the Punjab or wherever Punjabi writers were living outside the state.

During his long career as a journalist, he published hundreds of editorials and miscellaneous articles dealing with the current social and political problems. These too reveal him as an adept

prose writer and these writings have a creditable literary colouring.

We still owe a debt to Mohan Singh to do a judicious selection of such writings and publish them in a book form for posterity.

His translations of various fiction and non-fiction English and Hindi works in Punjabi are marked by his command over the Punjabi idiom as well as for his ambition to do the best. He is never slipshod or in a hurry—the curse of most translators, particularly those who work for money. Often, Mohan Singh too worked for money, yet he never stooped to trickery and juggling. He was always honest, hard-working and devoted to the task in hand.

His translation of *The Light of Asia* is a work of considerable merit. Mohan Singh himself writes about it: "While translating this work, I felt a peculiar peace of mind, which I do not even get while doing creative work".

No wonder the text of *Asia da Chanan* (The Light of Asia) reads like an original work.

Mohan Singh found in Edwin Arnold's Gautama Buddha overtones of the teachings of Sikhism. Apparently, there does not seem much in common between Buddhism and Sikhism, yet Mohan Singh, according to him, found it so and it was his personal outlook. This outlook and faith added a new dimension to the translation of *Asia da Chanan* (The Light of Asia) in making it more authentic and poetic.

Mohan Singh opines that as Buddhism was a reaction to Brahminism, the same was the case with Sikhism. Both of them decried formalism, ritualism, bigotry and sham. Well, to that extent, of course, the similarity is there.

Whatever might be the background, there is no denying the fact that *Asia da Chanan* is as much a translation as an original epic about the life of that eternal prince of men, Gautama Buddha.

Love, Religion and Marxism

Mohan Singh was a devout Sikh as is clear from his early poem, 'Sikhi' (Sikhism), and his last epic, *Nanakayan*, but this religious belief did not affect his bold philosophical spirit, and so, he also accepted Marxism with its progressive approach.

His commitment to Marxism was never bigoted and, as a matter of fact, he was more of a humanist than a Marxist. His poetry was often criticised by diehard Marxists, who insisted that he had never accepted Marxism unreservedly. Similarly, some other critics accused him of ignoring the aesthetics of literature and writing merely poster poetry out of misguided enthusiasm.

The truth, however, is different. Mohan Singh is the one modern Punjabi poet who always made an earnest effort to get to the essence of things by deep thinking and a close study of an individual or a social problem. Punjabi poetry, despite the intellectual slant that it got in the sixties of the present century, continues to be an affair of the Open Forum and even the most eminent Punjabi poet is obliged to participate in *kavi darbars* (poetical symposia) and his participation in such functions often obliges him to play to the gallery. Mohan Singh was no exception in this respect, and one can account for his poster poetry in this context. Nevertheless, except for a few lapses, Mohan Singh was never carried off his feet by an emotional frenzy or socio-political enthusiasm.

Quite early in his poetical career Mohan Singh came in contact with progressive thought, which was making a headway in India during the late thirties of the present century. He was already a popular and successful poet when he came under the impact of progressive ideas. Having been brought up academically on the romantic tradition of Persian and Urdu poetry, he developed a melancholic hunger for unfulfilled longings and

thus his early poetry is merely a yearning for emotional and aesthetical catharsis.

His contacts with progressive writers like Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Sajjad Zahir made him universalise his personal feelings, which is essential for striking a balance between objective reality and its subjective appraisal. In all, of his great poems, whether belonging to the early or late period of his poetic career, his emotional and aesthetical catharsis had been a dominant note and this was largely the secret of his popularity even in the late sixties of the present century, when all the guns of the experimentalist poets and neo-critics were aimed at him.

It was asserted that when his range became narrow and his poetic vision was blurred by the fog of political prejudice, he lost the wide affinity essential for good poetry; as such he touched the bottom of the rock. Even if one were to grant such an assertion on the part of some of his critics, it should be remembered that such a pedestrian period had been there in the poetical career of such eminent poets as Wordsworth.

A poet should always be judged by the best poetry written by him. Some critics have compared Sahir Ludhianvi's poem on Taj Mahal with Mohan Singh's poem on a similar theme and have suggested that the propagandistic character of Mohan Singh's poem makes it banal and that towards the concluding part, he destroys the aesthetical feeling created by him earlier. They condemn the hue and cry raised by the poet when the egg-like dome of the Taj was crushed and it lay in shambles. The labourers cried themselves hoarse—their pleas, wails and loud lamentations touched the sky. The poet, by bringing forth a train of working women carrying shovels etc., created a rowdy noise destroying the calm and quietness of the heavenly bliss. It being the traditional view of the Taj makes the poet deny the experience of beauty.

Such a criticism ignores the practice of acknowledged poets who heighten the effect of a particular theme by the use of contrast, a poetic device which has been so popular with poets since the dawn of poetry. Whenever a poet refuses to seek refuge in romance and wishes to face life as it is, he can safeguard his poetic sensibility by searching for a new meaning in life.

The pursuit of beauty for its own sake is a human weakness and a writer can overcome this weakness by developing his

social sensibility along with his aesthetic sensibility; otherwise, he is likely to develop a sense of guilt which may make his social professions sound hollow. Generally, Mohan Singh has successfully combined the two sensibilities but when he turns a propagandist, he is harping on one tune and fails to evoke the orchestral harmony which is otherwise characteristic of his poetry.

His poem on Guru Nanak, written after the partition, and his songs about peace suffer from this weakness. Such bold assertions as are to be found in these poems make him indulge in platform poetic oration. These are the protestations of an ideology-ridden person.

Mohan Singh possessed a very sensitive soul and he wanted all aspects of life to look beautiful and whenever he observed lack of beauty around him, he suffered great mental pangs. Such poems as 'Wadde Vele de Taria' (Oh, Morning Star), 'Oh Din vi San' (Those were the Days), 'Addha Hanera Addha Sawera' (Half in Light, Half in Darkness), all deplore the absence of beauty in the poet's surroundings.

While deploring the lack of beauty around him, Mohan Singh's aesthetic sensibility views the whole thing in a totally detached manner and he hesitates to involve himself in any social action to achieve his cherished ideals. As a result, there is evidence in some of his poems of the desire to follow the lonely trail for reaching the realm of beauty all by himself. He fails to understand that no individual effort is meaningful in a world where poverty cannot exist for long with prosperity. The two must sooner or later clash. The experiences of a sensitive poet differ from the experiences of a common man for the simple reason that he tries to resolve the contradictions of his experiences in terms of imagined reality and not in terms of reality as it exists. This is as Gorky says: "Our art must arise above reason and raise man above it without detaching him from it."

Mohan Singh makes the readers see things through his eyes and in a new light so as to make him better able to grapple with the problems of life. No one but an imaginative person can capture another person's experience. Particularly a poet can think of another's experience in terms of his own with the help of imagination. If a writer or an artist fails to do so, he is cut

off from the mainstream of life. His creative urge is hampered and at the most, he can create things which are of a purely subjective nature and smack of eccentricity.

Mohan Singh was very much aware of the fact that a society torn by class conflicts is bound to go adrift on the sea of time. It becomes a sinking ship and the passengers standing on the deck and agonising over the imminent tragedy cannot think of the beauty of the seascape in a moonlit night.

It is for this reason that in "Ishq ne Kitna Kamina kar Ditta" (How Love has Made me Turn Mean), he talks of his state of mind in which he feels as if all human virtues are lost. His guilty conscience is no longer the still small voice within but the whisperings of humanity which is down and out.

What is the way out ? Since Mohan Singh had no mass contact and his acquaintance with the workers and peasants was merely a nodding acquaintance, he tried to resolve the crisis of his life in terms of his personal aesthetical experience. He imagined a beautiful carefree world in which he could share beauty with others. His 'Sohn Surahi' (The Golden Goblet) and his ghazals are an ample testimony to it.

From the beginning of his poetic career, Mohan Singh had an alignment with progressive ideas, but this alignment remained strictly personal right up to the end of his poetic career. He never arrived at that clarity of vision which could make him search for the means whereby to resolve his personal problems in terms of the social reality because he looked at that in terms of his personal experience.

As a result, despite his mentor, Sant Singh Sekhon's warnings, Mohan Singh continued to be torn between the enjoyment of Beauty as a personal treat and the call to duty, enjoining upon him the need for participation in active movements for social emancipation. If it were not so, scores of his Ghazals and songs would not have relegated some of the cardinal truths of life to the background of the poet's mind.

Mohan Singh was always eager to solve the riddle of life. To achieve this, he would stay off the cruel hands of death so that he could realise the full meaning of life. He was always eager to be an enquiring unbeliever rather than one who fails to reason. This should be understood that his rationalism was neither academic nor dogmatic. It was just going off the tan-

gent for the sheer adventure of not being enclosed within a circle. Such poems as 'Rabb' (God), 'Maut Nun' (To Death) and even 'Ambi de Boote Thallay' (Under the Mango Tree) quite early in his poetic career reveal that spirit of romantic adventurism which is indicative of non-conformity but does not show a really rational and enquiring mind. Mohan Singh merely indulges in romantic theorising and throws off a few sparkling aphorisms. Life, for him, is a constantly changing prism, exposing variegated colours of the surroundings. Such an attitude was mainly illusory and its spell, however powerful, could not last long.

In his poem 'Main Nahin Rehna Tere Gavan' (I Shall Quit Your Village), he complains of betrayal on the part of brothers, where cuffs and chains bind one's body and soul, where there are miles of prison walls and where the tyrant wields the bloody bludgeon to force one not to love one's country. He imagines a world where everyone bears his own cross and where there is no fellow feeling. Here, we do not find any clear co-relationship between social injustice and individual suffering but this early poem indicates the poet's future learning towards fight for social justice, even at the cost of individual annihilation.

Even in his other earlier poems, when Mohan Singh sings of his beloved in a romantic way, we have an awareness that the poet believes that freedom, human love, beauty and ancestral heritage—all the good things of life can be preserved only if social justice prevails. If he fails to drive this point home to the readers, it is due to the fact that he invariably tries to explain the social phenomena in terms of man-woman relationship. This de-socialises the theme and very often his poem turns out to be a beautiful quiz in which the use of symbols, imagery and rhythm more often than not merely bewilders the readers, but they do ride upon the aesthetic hobby-horse feeling a strange thrill.

Punjabi poets since the very beginning of Punjabi poetry have talked of man's love for woman in terms of riddles but it was with Mohan Singh that body urge, shorn of its sentimentality, became the subject of poetry. I refer to his poems like 'Jaedad' (Property) and 'Ishak ne Kitna Kamina kar Ditta' (How Love has Made me Turn Mean).

Such a viewpoint is born out of the poet's awareness of man's

cruelty to woman. In his poem on Anarkali, the poet becomes indignant about the fact that Jehangir, being a man, could not but be callous and cruel. The poet is very sensitive to the beauty and worth of the human experience of love; otherwise, he could not have written a masterly poem like 'Jandre' (Locks). Any experience of love in a strife-ridden world is bound to be incomplete, evanescent and even full of frustration. A poet who has a definite commitment to an ideal would overcome the feeling of dejection and despair in the hope of the inevitability of the triumph of the down-trodden, otherwise he would seek refuge in philosophical disenchantment with the world or transcend the world of reality by romantic escapism or by creating higher motives as props for living. Another way can be an existentialist recognition of the stern realities of life.

Many poems and Ghazals written by Mohan Singh in the course of his poetic career indicate that he is very sensitive to the beauty of women and the worth of earthly existence with its variegated splendours and pleasures but like the worm in the rose, there lurked in his heart an awareness of the social injustice which prevails in society. He often contrasts the hard lot of man with the romantic abandonment which is inherent in his mind. Many such poems, born out of the travail of mental suffering, sometimes express in an assertive manner the poet's desire to enjoy life in a fanciful way but the knowledge of the imperfection and ugliness which prevail in the world haunts the poet's mind like the dead of the ghost-ship mentioned in Coleridge's poem, "The Ancient Mariner".

In the whole of Mohan Singh's poetry there is a yawning gap between realisation and aspiration, between fulfilment and negation. The reasons for this dichotomy are not far to seek. Being a bourgeois, he had developed an individualistic concept of freedom and wanted to break the shackles which social obligations had placed upon him. He, however, did not realise that his individual hunger for freedom merely made him sink in the quagmire of stagnated social life. Philosophically, as capitalism develops into monopoly capitalism, the crisis of bourgeoisie freedom deepens and unless the bourgeoisie choose to align themselves wholly and solely with the proletariat, the bourgeoisie is bound to suffer on the rack of mental torture, resulting in such a literature as makes a virtue of alienation by ignoring the

inevitability of the socio-political and economic change and this initiates the quarrel of the poet with himself. This is evident from such poems as 'Sungri Witch Kalave' (Squeezed in the Embrace), 'Do Jiwan Main Jiwan' (I Live Two Lives), and 'Akhda San' (I Said). Very rarely, he sounded the clarion call for an all out fight and wrote poems like "Loha" (Steel) and 'Trishul' (The Trident), in which one feels the intensity of the poet's longing for struggle, but even these poems are merely monologues in the theatre of the poet's mind.

Mohan Singh—An Appraisal

A critic, if he happens to be a lover of poetry, must make his reading an exploration which constantly reveals new insights to the reader not only about the poet as a person and as a poet but about himself as a critic also. If the critic's object is not merely to indulge in intellectual gimmicks, he must provide an opportunity to the reader to look, to listen, to linger in the presence of the literary work brought to his notice by him and to feel the magic spell created by the author.

A critic should say to the reader : "Come hither and read this book." Each individual reader has a peculiar taste which is fashioned both by the current literary temperament and sometimes by the critical standard of the day. Sometimes, the reader goes wrong because he forgets that he should have the same sympathies and antipathies towards a poet as he has towards other human beings of society. When it does not happen the reader is likely to be prejudiced by the current critical opinion which sometimes being purely academic ceases to be aesthetic or human. It becomes merely the echo of a slogan which has lost its immediate appeal. The spirit of the age becomes merely the enthusiasm of an auctioneer who would praise everything that comes under the critical hammer.

When Mohan Singh wrote his poem 'Sikhi' (Sikhism) in his early poetical career, he had deliberately given up the old conventional form of narrative poetry which had been current in Punjabi since the days of heroic poetry or the metrical pattern of the Punjabi Qissas. He very boldly tried to express his feelings about his own religion in a personal subjective manner. He could retain the lyrical intensity of his feelings without being pedantic or fanatical about it. He could do so because he never allowed his thought to be divorced from his emotions. He does not go off at a tangent in an attempt to escape from his

emotions, but presents his case for reviving the glories of Sikhism without sermonising about it.

There is something in this poem which appeals to the inner consciousness of his readers, Sikhs or non-Sikhs. It is due to the fact that he talks about the secular character of the Sikhs as a community and they transcend narrow sectarian consideration. He also emphasises the universal aspects of religion common to all faiths. Some advocates of Sikhism, in their eagerness to preserve the distinctive character of Sikhism, have insisted upon observing certain rituals which symbolise Sikhism but they do not represent the spirit of Sikhism. The fundamentals of Sikhism have not lost their validity even today. They are to be practised in everyday life. Prof. Mohan Singh's poem on Sikhism emphasises this eternal aspect of Sikh religion.

Of all the forms of literature, poetry is something about which it is possible for one to have a subjective view. It is for this reason that Mohan Singh has ardent admirers as well as militant detractors. It is quite common for average readers to talk of Mohan Singh's poetic faculties in the later period of his life. Of all the modern Punjabi writers, Mohan Singh was most fastidious in the matter of poetic diction but he was not a slave of any particular poetic diction. He always made an honest effort to make his poetic diction suit the theme chosen by him.

In his first-collection of poems, *Sawe Pattar* (Green Leaves), when he wrote of the land of his birth, Pothohar, he used rhythmical patterns of verse, which were a combination of conventional metrical forms with an interesting play over a combination of Punjabi vowels and consonants so as to suggest new musical connotations. 'Kuri Pothohar Di' (A Girl from Pothohar) is a poem which can be sung either solo or in a group but it loses much of its charm if it is read in cold print by an individual. However high an estimate one puts on the uniquely personal element in literature, it cannot be gainsaid that the work of even the most original writer has a special relevance for the area and the people amongst whom he was born and brought up.

The social life of the area, where Mohan Singh was born, centred around agriculture and cattle-raising. It allowed

mobility of labour and greater social equality than was to be found in the developed towns of Lahore and Amritsar, where Mohan Singh spent his time, after completing his formal education.

In his sub-conscious mind, during the days of his struggle for livelihood, Mohan Singh invariably felt nostalgic for the carefree days of his childhood and early youth. Apart from the impressions which Western romantic poetry had on him during his formative years, the romantic tales of the valley of the Chenab had an eternal appeal for him. Quite early in his poetical career, he wrote of Heer Ranjha, Sohni Mahiwal and other legendary figures of the Chenab area.

Early in his life, Mohan Singh wrote such great poems as 'Ambi de Bootay Thallay' (Under the Mango Tree) and Anarkali, wherein he talks of things romantic, in a way, which instead of being escapist take into consideration the existential situation. The element of tragedy which is invariably present in all his romantic poems and songs is undoubtedly due to his early awareness of the fact that the human situation calls for a serious view of life.

Mohan Singh's tragic view of life did not change till he wrote his collection of poems *Adhwate* (Halfway). This collection of poems was published in 1943 and its publication had preceded the days of the Quit India Movement.

The year 1942 was a baffling year for many Indian intellectuals. Soviet Union's entry into the Second World War on the side of the Allies had considerably changed the world political situation and it was clear to most of the Indian intellectuals that the very survival of civilization depended upon the defeat of Nazism but the nationalistic aspirations of the Indian people would not allow them to support the British unconditionally. Hence, the mental reservations of the Indian writers and the schism which took place in the Progressive Writers' Movement and which, later, led to its decline in the post-independence era.

Instead of toeing any pre-determined line, Mohan Singh expressed his doubts about the human situation and raised many a question in a number his poems included in *Adhwate* (Halfway). Mohan Singh's contribution in bringing home to his readers the gist, the spirit of the age that he lived

in has been somewhat ignored. The reasons are not far to seek. Most of his Punjabi readers have been so enamoured of the eternal religious values in life that they have tended to ignore the widely seething power which, writhing with obscure passions, has tried to challenge the Fates.

Punjabi literature is still, to some extent, tied to the old feudal ethos and as such whenever a modern Punjabi writer states that the modern man is but a fondling in the cosmos abandoned by the forces that created him, his existentialist approach is decried and he is dubbed as a plagiarist of modern thought as it prevails in the West. This is, of course, unfair to those writers who have developed a modern sensibility and who believe that man must fend for himself and with the aid of his own limited intelligence he should find his way about in an indifferent world. The reader's experience of life is generally the same as that of the author. He is often affected by the same political events and is concerned about the same social changes. Under the circumstances it is often assumed that the author and the reader share the same concerns, they laugh at the same jokes, use the same clichés and observe the same taboos.

If it were really true that writing can become as unforced and unpremeditated as conversation among intimate friends, silence causes no embarrassment and reticences are respected. But such an assumption is not based upon reality. An average reader allows his imagination to lapse and he becomes a slave to the daily routine and sometimes he becomes so inert that he fails to understand the real motive which actuated the author to write a particular literary piece. Thus a hiatus is created between what the author actually said and what the reader imagines him to have said.

There are many narrow pre-occupations and prejudices which divide men today and these are quite frequently aired in everyday journalism. The comparative neglect of the poet in our times is largely due to the fact referred to last. Among Mohan Singh's early contemporaries, there were poets who followed the easier method of playing to the gallery. They earned both fame and money. All the *Kavi Darbari* poets who gave popular recitals won bigger audiences than these of Mohan Singh and even in his case his first collection of poems *Sawe*

Pattar (Green Leaves) held sway for long because the poems of this collection appealed to romantic sentimentalism which lies dormant in the mind of each Punjabi, having been fed on romantic tales for endless generations.

When Mohan Singh broke loose from the apron strings of the past and gained maturity, he was very conscious of the fact that any genuine innovation, whether of form or theme, must precede a serious consideration as to whether or not the new can be expressed in the old current form. If it could be done so, it would greatly help the writer to convey his message to the reader, who by origin, tradition and genius is in tune with the old forms of expression. Mohan Singh, therefore, chose to use traditional and folk forms simultaneously with the numerous experiments made by him in the verse patterns. His innate understanding of a particular verse pattern or for a particular theme made him choose the right pattern. His well known poem 'Kuri Pothohar Di' (A Girl from Pothohar) can be taken as an example. In this poem, we find that the form itself has no function apart from the theme. The two are indivisible. The poet puts the Pothohar dialect of the Punjabi language to special use and through it successfully transmits his perception of reality to his readers.

Mohan Singh is very much alive to the ingenuities and varieties, the strength and subtlety of his own craft and is very much conscious of the fact that he has made the Pothohar girl come alive and real for his readers. There is no irregular combination of fanciful invention but there is that stability of truth which leaves a lasting impression on our minds. Even though Mohan Singh's perception, which he wanted to convey to his readers is airy and fanciful, and experience, on the surface, seems merely a graceful trifle, it is the intimate personal portrait of the Pothohar girl which amazes the reader. Critics have praised the masterly versification of the poem and the inventive genius of Mohan Singh but it is surely true that no serious interest and pleasure in a poem ends merely at the study of its verse form only. Even though the poem has no apparent moral purpose, since its stimuli of seeing, of thinking about, and feeling the presence of the Pothohar girl evoke no such thoughts as are moral and serious, yet the poem makes us conscious and it extends and intensifies our faculties. It is in this that the greatness

of the poem lies.

An examination of Mohan Singh's love poems, which are scattered in all his collections right from his *Sawe Pattar* (Green Leaves) to his last one *Buhe* (The Doors), would make an interesting study. In his early love poems, he follows the traditional view of love, that is to say: love is unearthly, it is everlasting and that it is a union of two hearts. Having read the great Persian mystics, such an approach in his early poems is not surprising. On the other hand, when his genius flowered with the passage of time, his romantic poems came to possess convincing intellectual framework.

The impulse behind these later romantic poems seems to be to give a personal touch to some part of the raw material presented by life. The artist does not want to lose all the rawness of life for it intensifies the experience of life. A mere symmetry of outline does not suffice as it did in the case of traditional romantic poetry. A dead body, however perfectly well-formed, is still a dead body. Many romantic poets of our times like Sharaf, Tir, Ustad Hamdam, Nandlal Nurpuri and Sabar have written poems which relate true experiences of life and have a material scheme which is technically perfect and yet there may sometimes be no vibration in such poems. No one can question the sincerity of the feelings behind the poems but the modern reader is left cold while reading the romantic poems written by the poets mentioned above. True romantic poetry is nothing but an urge for self-creation in an art form. Life, to a majority of people, is nasty, brutish and brief but man is capable of creating things of beauty out of the material of his own experiences. It is instinctively so in the case of man as is evident from primitive cave-paintings or from jewellery and metal work of the so-called uncivilized African tribesmen.

When a religious devotee dances and chants rhythmical incantations, he is trying to sublimate his experience on a romantic plane. Mohan Singh's romantic poetry is not merely an instantaneous song, it is a storehouse of images which are not his individualistic creation but a reflection of the present and of such images as lie scattered in dreams, myths and in our legends and, as a matter of fact, in all the imaginative arts of our people.

Since poetry is an art expressed through language, art and craft

are indivisible. A study of the basic verbal techniques practised by Mohan Singh would be quite rewarding. Even in his first collection of poems, Mohan Singh realised that sound patterns, imagery, word texture, structure and poetic design were merely the means to an end. Its motive being revelation through poetry of the breadth and finer spirit of all knowledge. Whether Mohan Singh writes of personal pain or public sorrow he chooses the theme and the form very carefully and each one of his poems possesses a transcendental quality.

A poem in the last analysis is a performance in words and it is Mohan Singh's instinctive sense of the word which facilitates the presentation of his ideas about such vital matters as Time in 'Be Vaddi' (Grandmother), death in 'Taj Mahal' and 'Yodha' (The Warrior), loneliness in 'Ishaq ne Kitna Nikamma Kar Ditta' (How Love Has Made me Turn Mean), social satire in 'Pashu' (The Animal) and "Jaedad" (Property), nature in 'Lidhri Noon' (To The River Lidhar), love in 'Ungli Koi Rangin' (A Colour-Tipped Finger), humanism in 'Aao Nachie' (Let's Dance) and 'Wadde Vele de Taraia' (Oh, Morning Star), religion in 'Sikhi' (Sikhism) and finally the epical poem, *Nanakayan*.

Poetry is a medium of human communication. With this end in view the poet makes something out of what he perceives either in the external world of sense or in the internal world of feeling and to transmit all this as a single whole. Language is the medium to do so. Mohan Singh, of all Punjabi poets, is the most competent one in this respect. He is the master of ingenuities and subtleties of his mother tongue. This enables him to receive a powerful response from his readers. Mohan Singh's songs for peace, his love lyrics, his political ballads, all have been widely acclaimed.

Poetry has a transcendental quality and it is difficult to define this quality in adequate terms. When we read a poem like 'Satwan Rang' (The Seventh [Colour]), it brings the whole of our soul into activity and the poet's longing to transcend earthly limitations makes us realise that Mohan Singh is using a form of expression in which a large number of resources of language have been coagulated into a patterned organic unit of significant experience. A great poet is undoubtedly a person who has something very significant to say but he can say it only if he

likes hanging around words, listening to what they say and signify. Mohan Singh, all his life, was drenched in words of different languages and he could use an Urdu, a Persian or a Hindi word so well that he could carve proper verbal patterns at the right moment. He was very conscious of the duty he owed to his mother tongue or to the language acquired by him and throughout his life he worked hard to enrich his mother tongue with the catalytic substances of classical Persian—a language assiduously acquired by him.

This mastery of language gained with so much labour would not have helped Mohan Singh to write his great poetry if, along with it, he had not perfected his view of life by a wide range of his study and his intimate contact with writers like Sohan Singh Josh and Sajjad Zahir. Both these men are now dead but had always been a source of inspiration for hundreds of men to strive hard for higher ideals. Soon after writing *Sawe Pattar* (Green Leaves), Mohan Singh shifted to Lahore, where he was the central figure in a group of upcoming intellectuals. Faiz Ahmad Faiz was then winning laurels as an Urdu poet, and revising traditional values of Urdu poetry and expressing his modern view about the problems of the day. Mohan Singh had watched Faiz Ahmed Faiz gain his reputation and thought a lot as to why Faiz was the talk of the literary coteries and, at the same time, very popular at the well-attended poetical symposia.

Like Faiz, Mohan Singh rejected mechanistic traditional values which suggested that the world was a circular movement of social forces. Perhaps a Freudian could justify this view, which combined energy and intuition. This was also in line with the theological oriental projection which enunciates that man's dark instincts are constantly at war with the good ones. However, this view had been modernised by the Freudians who consider all human actions as the product of "the basement floors of conscience". All this led to an overall pessimistic view of life which postulates that man is essentially evil and that when the base ingredients of man come to the surface, the beast in him prevails.

Mohan Singh, no sooner reached his years of artistic maturity (which was as early as the publication of his third collection of poems, *Kasumbhra* (The Bud) in 1939, than he proclaimed his own artistic credo, his own concept of artistic truth and the

system of artistic means which in his view would best reveal the truth to his readers.

In such poems as 'Koi Tore Ve Koi Tore' (Let Someone Break the Shackles); 'Do Titlian' (Two Butterflies) and particularly in 'Be Vaddi' (Grandmother) and in 'Taj Mahal', he unmistakably showed his awareness of the fact that due to the freedom struggle in his country, social life was changing swiftly, contradictions were deepening and human life was becoming more complete and it would be sheer dishonesty on the part of the poet to be merely subjective.

He struck a balance between objective truth and its subjective appraisal and thereby discovered the principles of conveying the complex situations of our times in their dialectical interaction with the complex circumstances of contemporary time.

Soon after the publication of *Adhwate* (Halfway) and in such poems as 'Pashu' (The Animal), he uses the symbol of the wild animals and develops the theme in concentric circles building up its climax till he rounds it off at the end in a dramatic manner. By effectively stretching out the symbol through the various stanzas of the poem, he reveals a keener sense of the contemporary and thereby creates an artistic analogue of the reality of his times.

The reader understands fully the significance of the symbolic beast, the gore, the filth and the injustice of colonial imperialism.

It was a group of French poets of the late nineteenth century, Mallarme and Rimbaud, who brought the use of the symbol to a literary status in Europe. Symbolism could be used more effectively by the Indian poets, if, instead of merely aping the Western technique, they had looked for inspiration to their own literary tradition which clearly stated that the transient objective world is not a true reality but a reflection of the Invisible Absolute.

Mohan Singh was well read in oriental lore, particularly Indian and Persian Sufism, and could easily detect the correspondence which exists between impulses derived through different senses and, in his poetry, he refused to be merely objective and realistic. In such poems as 'Buhe' (The Doors) 'Annha Pathar' (The Blind Stone), 'Athan' (The Evening), 'Trishul' (The Trident), we see him suggesting that the inner reality can

only be hinted at and "to name is to destroy, to suggest is to create".

He achieved intensity and complexity by condensed syntax and by suggesting minor images clustered around one metaphor. In his poem 'Aarooan Kolon Langdian' (Passing by the Peach Tree), Mohan Singh translates one sense impression into another and both become symbols of the original impression into another original impression but in this poem the symbol of peach blossoms which stands for a carefree life of abandonment is contrasted with the hardworking routine of everyday life.

This poem lacks the rhythmic beat of Mohan Singh's other symbolic poems and there is no indication to fastidious craftsmanship which is so characteristic of his poem 'Jaedad' (Property), but unlike the Western imagist and symbolist poets, Mohan Singh does not reject socio-economic themes and his symbolical poems are not merely sensations of beauty. They reveal a moral and social responsibility since the moral and social problems of his day captured Mohan Singh's subtle intuitions and contributed to the total design of each one of his poems in which he uses the symbolical device. His poem 'Hamasaya' (The Neighbour), written after the Chinese invasion of India, illustrates this point.

A majority of men living in the modern age are subjected to wasteful conflicts. The only way to transcend this situation is to realise the truth of suffering because the very act of the creative effort is a form of release. It is difficult to achieve this moment of liberation in everyday life; liberation can be found only in art and literature since these alone make a man realise the fragmentariness and imperfection of human situation. It enables the writer or the artist to direct his energies towards some fulfilment outside his own disappointments.

Most of us lead lives of desperation and very few people realise how much of physical as well as mental sickness is caused from sheer self-despondency. The way out is an acceptance of the common bonds of ideology and social living which unite men all over the world.

Mohan Singh's poem 'Bhagti' (Worship), from his first collection *Sawe Pattar* (Green Leaves), shows how, from the very beginning of his career, he had imbibed the spirit of humanism. His poem addressed to Guru Nanak emphasises the humanistic

character of Guru Nanak's teachings but when he wrote an epic on the life and teachings of Guru Nanak, he followed the traditional narrative pattern as is to be found in the different *Janam Sakhis* of the great Guru. He could not therefore, bring out fully the humanistic Sikhism in its modern context.

The worlds of senses and emotions are very satisfying in poetry as in life and it is an essential part of the human condition that we can rest content in them. But thought must intervene somewhere. Mohan Singh's treatment of Guru Nanak's message in *Nanakayan* is too simplistic. It leaves out too much, particularly Guru Nanak's re-assessment of the ancient Indian heritage and the contemporary situation in the world of the followers of Islam. The poet uses language as a means to enlarge and enliven man's consciousness. A poem is, after all, a document by a particular person in a particular period on a particular theme and set in a long historical sequence. It is also an individual work of art, a thing that has a separate timeless existence from that of the poet himself, begotten and made in the union between him and his medium.

The poet, in the last analysis, is a maker and he makes the poem with words, arranging the best of them in the best order. It is Mohan Singh's fastidious choice of words which made him proud enough to know that his voice will ring when he is dead. If one were to choose Mohan Singh's poems at random from his different collections of poems, the highest common factor in all of them is his super-mastery of the medium of poetry : words which he chooses most carefully and then chisels them like a master craftsman.

One of the major trends in modern poetry is again lyrical. As a matter of fact, the lyrical element is present in every genre of modern literature, lending it features which are easily distinguishable. The lyric of our times is promoted, above all, by the modern writers desire not to be an indifferent onlooker of events but to identify himself with the feelings and thoughts which are current in modern times. This forces the modern writer to find new forms of typification to detect the main characteristic features of the people among whom he lives and thereby try to influence the readers to a better cooperation with his fellow men.

It is this urge for lyrical expression that made Mohan Singh write such a poem as 'Jiwan' (Life) in *Sawe Pattar*,

collection of poems, and when he writes his poem 'Taj Mahal', it is not merely an objective description of the historical monument but a subjective appraisal of a given historical situation which has reduced man merely to a bonded slave of the exploiting class.

Contemporary literature probes deeper into the inner world of man and the dialectic of his thoughts and feelings. Mohan Singh is very much aware of this contemporary situation. In all his poems he always searched for new means of typification and new principles of generalisation in order to give a many-sided, profound and dialectic picture of the changes, which were contemporaneous with his life.

Many of Mohan Singh's narrative poems make important generalisations, reflecting the poet's awareness of the struggle between the old and the new in the hearts of modern men and women. There is discernible a growing analytical quality in his narrative poems, which take up many sore questions of Indian life. In 'Akhda San' (I Said), 'Awazan' (Voices), and 'Gajjan Singh', the main thrust of Mohan Singh's poetry was a comprehensive and frank investigation of objective reality as it influences the human mind and its dialectical complexity. He does not merely analyse circumstances described in his narrative poems, he tries to understand them.

A work of art is, in its very nature, a synthesis, which distils the artist's view of the world. It is based upon an analysis of facts. The range of the means of analysis and the methods employed are illimitable. But art has a loftier purpose than just recording facts which are interesting in themselves. The aim of art is to give a true idea of the general by depicting the particular. Mohan Singh was very much aware of this artistic necessity and for this reason his poetic method was to combine analytical and synthetical approaches to life. This enabled him to achieve a whole perception of the general and he could take up some of the central problems of his times and raise his perception to an abstraction which was within the comprehension of his average readers.

In Mohan Singh's poetry we have a rich storehouse of images and symbolic patterns which emanate from the traditions of Punjabi poetry since the days of Baba Farid. Each one of his poems—whether a ghazal, a song or a narrative piece—is a great

venture in the collective consciousness of the Punjabi people. He has developed new insights and complexities. Even though he writes on different themes on different occasions, his fidelity to truth never wavers and this truth is not merely the objective truth of the materialist ; it is also the truth which is realised through striking a balance between objective reality and its subjective appraisal through cognition.



Appendix

MAIN EVENTS IN MOHAN SINGH'S LIFE

Birth	20 October, 1905
Ancestral Village	Dhamial, District Rawalpindi, now in Pakistan
Place of Birth	Moti Mardan
Matriculation	1923
Death of his first wife, Basant	1929
Second marriage to Surjit Kaur	1930
Munshi Fazal from Oriental College, Lahore	1930
M. A. (Persian) from Oriental College, Lahore	1933
Khalsa College, Amritsar	1934 to 1939
Sikh National College, Lahore	1940 to 1943
Professor Emeritus at the Punjab Agricultural University	1970 to 1977
Sahitya Shiromani from Language Department, Punjab	1953
Sahitya Akademi Award	1959
Soviet Land Nehru Award	1968
Death	3 May, 1978

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