The Two *Bhai Sahibs*: Vir Singh and Kahn Singh in Comparative Perspective

Tejwant Singh Gill

Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar (Rtd.)

The paper seeks to critically analyse the monumental contributions of Vir Singh and Kahn Singh to Punjabi culture, thought and literature. Almost contemporaries, they ended up as the most revered Sikhs of the first half of the 20th century. Poet, novelist, essayist, prose writer and editor, Vir Singh became the founder of modern literature in Punjabi. As polemicist, grammarian, explicator and compiler of *Mahan Kosh*, Kahn Singh proved to be the most authoritative voice on Sikh theology, tradition and scripture. However, they were always content to revel in their respective comfort zones. No wonder, for their life-long concerns did not undergo any crisis of conviction despite major changes ushered in by colonialism and modernism. In a world dark and terrible on the one hand and inventive and innovative on the other, they chose to become the guardians of what was sanctified by Sikh tradition, theology and scripture. Rather than explorers, they ended up as explicators, their oeuvres proving original only in the metaphorical sense of being monumentally distinct. They are not original in the etymological sense of going to the origins or roots of the issues dealt by them.

Vir Singh and Kahn Singh Nabha were the two most revered Sikhs of the first half of the 20th century. The former, in the first instance, was a creative writer. In Punjabi, modern poetry began with him. He also brought into being the writing of fiction that was so far anecdotal. At the same time, he initiated the writing of reflective prose in Punjabi. Not only in poetry, in fictional and non-fictional prose also, he carved a prominent place for himself. In contrast, Kahn Singh Nabha was primarily a writer of prose. He started as a polemicist, but his polemics were couched in scholarship. The booklet he brought out to establish the identity of the Sikh community earned him credit that no other writing of this type has managed

to gather during the last one hundred years. His epistolary prose, marked by serene observation and perception, further added to his prestige. His magnum opus was his encyclopedia *Mahan Kosh,* which even eight decades after its publication has no parallel in Punjabi.

The honorific *Bhai* became an integral part of their revered names. In the *matt*[1] (commonsense) of the Punjabi people, particularly within the Sikh community, this honorific is often given to a person who distinguishes himself with perceptiveness when put in the service of the community. Such a person seems endowed with *sumatt* (good sense): someone who not only articulates the life experience of his community but also directs it towards wider and deeper horizons. Bhai Gurdas[2] was such a person in the 17th century. Bhai Mani Singh[3] acquired this status in the 18th century. For them, the dilemmas facing the Sikh community were their own. In their respective fields, they endeavored to lead the community ahead, the former bringing the metaphysical-cum-mystical vision of Gurbani close to the secular world and the latter laying down his life to help the community survive the horrendous odds posed by the social-cum-political oppression of the time. From that time on, the practice of attributing the *Bhai* honorific continued without any dilution or dissimulation even during the colonial era. The two persons under consideration were bestowed this honorific well before the colonial era came to an end.

In the era after that, another honorific, *Sahib*,[4] was also attached to their names. Rather than wisdom, in the commonsense of the Punjabi people, particularly the Sikh community, it denotes pretension. Conjunction between the two tends to award regality to sagacity. A person endowed with sagacity but charmed by regality tends to present tradition as the eternal reality of life. To his mind, any change regarded as feasible should not disturb the equilibrium of tradition. That it makes life burdensome does not bother him, for he chooses not a historical view of life as changing, but a traditional one of continuity over time. Rather than sagacity, it is ostentation that becomes the signifier of such a thinker. This honorific arose rather from *kumatt* (bad sense), which happens to be the negative mirror-image of *sumatt*. If this conjunction happened in the life time of Vir Singh and Kahn Singh, did they look down upon it? Was there any demur from Kahn Singh when these two honorifics together figured with his name? Did Vir Singh award assent when he found his votaries exalting him with the conjoint use of these honorifics? These are questions of critical importance for understanding their philosophical outlooks, cultural affiliations, ideological inclinations and socio-political activities.

Rather than deriding it, neither of the two took this attribution with even a sense of irony. Its derision would have led them to decline this artificially conjoined honorific. If open decline was not to their taste, they could have disapproved of it ironically at least. Once signifying recognition and reverence for persons of great and deep good sense, *Bhai*, by its attachment to *Sahib*, suffered dilution through overuse during the period of colonial rule.

In the post-independence era, *Bhai* as honorific title has further lost its earlier sobriety. With life turning mundane and moreover mendacious, it has acquired a pejorative sense and has come to denote a naïve, simple-minded person, unaware of the affairs of life. *Sahib* as an honorific title has turned into an informal mode of address for revering a person, often more polite than genuine. Now each person wants to be addressed as *Sahib* for formality's sake. Deterioration in the former title and vulgarization of the latter has reached its lowest ebb.[5] But this did not happen during the times the two persons under consideration lived and attained laurels. Their respective dispositions were not pristine either. Through considered aloofness, Vir Singh stayed on the right side of the colonial rule, as did Kahn Singh by cultivating discreet familiarity with its agents. This is reason enough to study the creative potential of one of them and the scholarly engagement of the other whilst the conjoined honorific titles were still regarded as significant, before their deterioration and vulgarization took place, rendering them altogether vaporous and vacuous.

Born on December 5, 1872, Vir Singh died on June 10, 1957, in the eighty-fifth year of his life. Kahn Singh was born more than nine years earlier on August 30, 1861. Almost two decades before his illustrious contemporary, he passed away on November 24, 1938, in the seventy-seventh year of his life. Kahn Singh's magnum opus, *Mahan Kosh*, known in English as the *Encyclopedia of Sikh Literatures*, was published seven years before his death. During those seven years he brought out several scholarly monographs of great substance and style, all owing a lot to his magnum opus. It can be surmised that he devoted himself to academic work till almost the end of his life. That his intellectual acumen synchronized with his physical survival was largely true though the later work was an extension of the earlier in some ways. In this respect, Vir Singh provides a distinct variation, if not a full contrast. His last poetic work, creative in the real sense, appeared in 1927-28. However, a year before his demise he brought out another collection, *Mere Sayian Jio* ("My Loving Master"). Sentimental to the core, this collection brought him hardly any acclaim. During those three decades, he penned certain ephemeral writings as well, but his creative potential seemed to decline a lot

although it did not completely vanish. In this way, both were contemporaries in the essential sense of the word.

Given that they were both contemporaries, peremptory basis for comparative study of the two is definitely there, though its kernel needs be separated from the chaff. The chaff is the Singh Sabha movement, the branches of which had grown at various places in the central part of Punjab, particularly at Amritsar and Lahore. Their locus was a segment of Punjab under colonial rule. These branches sought to safeguard Sikhism from the spread of Christianity on the one hand and the revival of Hindu orthodoxy on the other. At the head of the Singh Sabha movement were elements that owed allegiance to religious orthodoxy and feudal aristocracy who were then occupying leadership roles in the Sikh community's life and faith. Both branches were concerned with the interpretation of Sikh doctrine and the need to organize the Sikh community per the values advocated by the feudal lords and preached by the clergy, who were partly obliged to them. They assumed this role believing that the future of the Sikh community lay in vigorously sticking to tradition. By advancing an evolutionary idea of progress as the basis for their own present and the community's future, they sought to ensure continuity. They did open vistas of reformation and renaissance within the parameters of their own conservatism and of colonial rule. Their union in the formal sense lacked the energy and potential which were essential for the community to feel that its presence had a great past, but its formal acceptance was not good enough for ensuring its creative future. This is what Vir Singh and Kahn Singh, as the preeminent minds of the community, should have hit upon as the kernel of their respective endeavors. Whether they pondered over them in conjunction or in disjunction remains to be unraveled. If it occurred to them in conjunction, then the question of a reformation of the Sikh community as anti-proselyte and renaissance as pro-proselyte did not arise. If they took them in disjunction, then there could emerge issues likely to render their aspirations and endeavors paradoxical. Was their advance meant to take on issues of renaissance and reformation head-on? Or was it for them a march marked by the proverbial 'one step forward and two steps back'? Regarding these issues, an unambiguous view has to be formed, irrespective of the formidable hurdles posed by the content of their writings and their linguistic and stylistic oddities**.** Only then will it be clear whether their achievement sought to confine the Sikh doctrine and the community in a state of superficial contentment or urge it along the historical path of perilous presence.

What their heritage was, how they encountered it, into what sort of capital, creative and cognitive, they transformed it, are the issues to unravel for understanding and evaluating their contribution. However, before doing so a retrospective glance has to be cast upon their ancestral families, the intellectual and cultural inheritance with which they were provided, and the departures they made on the basis of their own initiative and will. Only then will it be possible to grasp the range of their engagements with their own religion and culture and the horizon of their encounter with the past, present and future.

Vir Singh's Family Background

On the paternal side, Vir Singh's forefathers owned a landed estate even before Maharaja Ranjit Singh established Sikh rule in Punjab. This was located in the Jhang district, an area where the Sikh struggle against Mughal rule had not figured much. They had no trouble from the Mughal authorities, although no evidence is available that there were cordial relations between them either. Nevertheless Vir Singh's forefathers had claim to a well-deserved good reputation due to Dewan Kaura Mal,[6] who defended the welfare of Punjab in the face of the Delhi Sultanate and foreign invaders. He was instrumental in unifying the Sikhs and the Lahore ruler of his time against the repeated invasions launched by Ahmad Shah Abdali. In a clash that took place on the bank of the river Ravi, he met with death, and the closeness he had so earnestly sought and realized at that juncture came to a bitter end. Strangely enough, the sacrifice of Kaura Mal went unrewarded during the Sikh rule and Vir Singh's great-grandfather had to shift to a *dera*, perhaps due to neglect by the ruling authorities. However, his wife had the courage to bring her son back to worldliness by taking him away from the closed and confined surroundings of the *dera* and settling him in the urban context of Amritsar. In his new abode, he prospered as a physician, as a scholar of Sanskrit and Braj, and as a poet to some extent. His son Charan Singh, Vir Singh's father, earned his reputation not only as a physician but also as writer, particularly as a translator of Kalidasa's masterpiece, *Shakuntala*, into Punjabi.

For a family valuing religion and tradition, this lucky reversal of fortunes seemed a result of divine dispensation. Nurtured in such domestic surroundings, Vir Singh was impelled to believe that the Divine willed him to work for a nobler and higher purpose in life. As an adolescent he set up a printing press even though the prospect of higher education, made attractive by the new school system, was also before him. The printing press was named Wazir Hind Press

after Wazir Singh, who must have invested much if not all of the money for the project. Associating the word Hind after Wazir may have been a conscious effort to remain on the right side of the colonial administration. Was not the Viceroy called *wazir-e-hind* in the common parlance? His engrossment in business did not mean that Vir Singh chose to remain uneducated. Instead of formal education, it was informal education, acquired under the guidance of his father and through his own study of mysticism, metaphysics, speculation and theology. In due course of time he created the Khalsa Tract Society for disseminating his views to the Sikh community. His reformist zeal endeared him to the Singh Sabha Amritsar, which adopted him as its mentor. Eager to reform the community by motivating the youth to renounce irreligious aptitudes and immoral habits, the Singh Sabha was also careful not to earn the ire of the colonial administration in Punjab.

At this juncture Vir Singh faced a double challenge, one relating to the language in which to do his writing and the second concerning the range of his reformist zeal: what horizon should it achieve to direct the community to overcome the hurdles posed by a new turn in the life of the Punjabi people? So great was his eagerness and commitment to write in Punjabi, that it turned into an even more deeply felt resolve against advice received from various quarters to write in Braj. Ever since the beginning of 17th century, Sikh writers had taken to writing in Braj, though the script they employed was Gurmukhi. Even before Vir Singh, a few *kissakars* had published their narrative compositions in Gurmukhi script, but this hardly brought any credit to the Punjabi language. Theses narratives expressed uncouth feelings and emotions about love, coitus, social restrictions and traditional prescriptions in a very superficial way. Vir Singh chose instead to deal with highly religious and deeply spiritual issues, drawing sustenance primarily from 17th century writings, particularly those of Bhai Gurdas.

However, his lexicon could not be as wide-ranging as was of Bhai Gurdas who had sought to subsume as much worldliness as he could in the range of religious and spiritual concerns. From metaphysical issues adumbrated in the ancient Indian scriptures to dynastic confrontations available in legends and tales, Bhai Gurdas could weave from earlier literatures into his narration and description. This could not be the approach of Vir Singh, who embraced reformist zeal as the core of his writing. To uphold the glory the Sikhs had won in the past without hankering after prestige or power became his first priority. For Vir Singh nature, luminous and mysterious, was the inspiration for leading a life of poise in

the present. Further, whereas in Gurbani productive nature attuned to human labor exercised charm upon the human mind, for Vir Singh it was luxuriant nature, aesthetically charming but spiritually elusive, that mattered the most.

What was his attitude towards the West? It was neither one of outright rejection nor one of complete acceptance. His poetic works shows that in thematic, formal and stylistic terms, he imbibed the alien influence, though in a veiled way. By doing so, he did not seek to establish the superiority of what he got from the West over what he strove to achieve in his own language. In an enigmatic way, he began to believe that Punjabi literature could be supreme by imbibing elements of theme, form and style from the English literature of the West. About the impact of colonial rule, his attitude was marked by ambiguity of another sort. He was in favor of English rule because of the progress, particularly in education, that the colonial administration had brought about. He believed that it was only by advancing further and achieving greater heights in education that the Sikhs could realize their aspirations. The realization of their aspirations meant that liberation from colonial rule was not a categorical imperative. Political struggle by itself did not matter to him. No wonder, then, that he did not utter a single word about the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, even though it occurred only a few miles from his residence.

Kahn Singh's Family Background

Kahn Singh's patrimony, as well as his achievement in transforming it into his own cognitive and theological capital, was parallel to that of Vir Singh but also distinctively his own. He was born in a village of the native state of Patiala, formally free because it had a ruling Maharaja of its own but actually under colonial rule. The colonial rulers found their political interests best served if the Maharaja managed to keep the people confined to their own needs and obligations. No wonder, then, that feudal aristocracy and religious priesthood held more sway over the minds of the people here than was the case in Punjab directly ruled by the British. The British rulers had ensured that the Sikh states lying to the south of the Satluj survived as entities when Maharaja Ranjit Singh floated the idea of merging them into the independent Sikh kingdom. The Maharaja of Patiala was therefore indebted to the colonial rule for the survival of his state. The feudal aristocracy and religious priesthood also lent him active support, not only for his own wellbeing but also for the continuation of his dynasty.

Such was the milieu in which Kahn Singh was born. His grandfather was the head *granthi* of a *dera* in Nabha, the capital of an adjoining state that always begrudged encroachment from the ruler of Patiala State. This *dera* came to be known by the name of Baba Ajaypal Singh Gurdwara.[7] It was believed that Ajaypal Singh was the name Guru Gobind Singh had assumed after his return from the Deccan. The Sikh community believed that the Guru had breathed his last there, far away from Punjab. Before his demise, the Guru had commanded the Sikh community to regard the sacred *Bani* he had finalized in the *Granth* as their Guru. They were not to follow any corporeal Guru, for that would go against the teachings couched in the sacred scripture. This gurdwara was the center for disseminating a heterodox view that the Guru had issued no such command. Moreover, they believed he had not breathed his last in the Deccan but had returned to Punjab to live for another one hundred years under an assumed name. Before breathing his last, he had conferred Guruship upon Baba Balak Singh whom the Namdharis take as the founder of their sect.[8]

After the death of the founding head, who was Baba Balak Singh's son, Kahn Singh's father became the head *granthi* of this *dera*, which was by then transformed into a gurdwara. Kahn Singh was then brought from his native village to flourish under the care of his father. In those times, the *granthis* of the chief gurdwaras, including those that disseminated heterodox views, were invariably of scholarly temperament. They could recite the scripture finalized by Guru Gobind Singh, now known as the *Guru Granth*, in its entirety from memory. Some of them could even recite from memory the *Dasam Granth*, believed to comprise compositions attributed to Guru Gobind Singh himself but, for reasons best known to the tenth Guru, not included in the *Guru Granth*. Kahn Singh's father was the repository of such acumen, which he disseminated to his son with all the earnestness at his command.

Since the gurdwara was situated on the outskirts of the state's capital, the reputation of Kahn Singh did not take much time to reach the court. By the mid-eighties, when he was still in his twenties, he came to be known as a polyglot who knew Sanskrit, Braj, Hindi, Urdu and Persian. His ability to read and write in English was an additional qualification. The ruler of the Nabha state had the reputation of being a noble Sikh who always kept the tradition-bound interests of the community in mind. This position was to some degree a reaction to the ruler of the adjoining state of Patiala, who was notorious for his profligacy and was minimally concerned with what legislative measures could stand the community in good stead. In such a situation, Kahn Singh's choice as the tutor of Ripudaman

Singh, the only son of the Nabha ruler and destined to succeed him to the throne, was a foregone conclusion. In 1887, he was given this appointment, which he, although still in his twenties, so creditably deserved.

Under his tutorship, Ripudaman Singh grew into an ardent advocate of the interests of the Sikh community. Being the only one in the line of succession, he was co-opted by the colonial government to be a member of the Imperial Legislative Council. As its member, to which only rulers of the states or their successors could be appointed, he sponsored the Anand Marriage Act and steered legislation for responsible management of the Sikh gurdwaras. He did all this while under the tutorship and mentorship of Kahn Singh. After the death of his father in 1911, Ripudaman Singh succeeded to the Nabha throne, but was forced to relinquish it after twelve years. The reason was that he had no hesitation in pleading the cause of his community and faith, which not only embarrassed the ruler of the neighboring state but also put the imperial government into an awkward situation. He did so under the influence of the teaching imparted by Kahn Singh, by then a celebrated scholar of Sikh religion, doctrine and ethics. Equally celebrated were his attributes of serenity, equipoise and sobriety.[9]

All this spoke to his *sumatt*, which in his eventual return to Patiala and subsequent ingratiation with the ruler there proved to be infected by its mirror-image. The deposition of Ripudaman Singh was widely resented by the people of the Nabha State and more so by the Sikhs in the wider Punjab. *Jaito da Morcha*[10] was launched to which Sikh *jathas* began to flock to offer themselves for peaceful arrest. Their conduct was so persistent and peaceful that even Jawaharlal Nehru came to witness the spectacle. Interestingly enough, Kahn Singh's first internment happened at the place where this *morcha* was going on. No doubt, the *matt* of the Sikhs presented the best example of dignity and fraternity, but the colonial administration took the political wind out of it by portraying it as religious and conceding it in the bargain. By conceding, the colonial administration managed to end the *morcha* by confining it under the religious ambience. The protest against the deposition of the ruler vanished with barely a whimper.

From the outset, in Kahn Singh's view it was revivalism of Hinduism that posed the greatest danger to the identity and integrity of Sikhism. To offset this danger, he brought out his most polemical writing, *Hum Hindu Nahin*[11] ("We Are Not Hindus"), of which the title was somewhat offensive. Rather than deny visibility to Hinduism in a large part of India, he strove to award presence to Sikhism in Punjab, a region in which Hinduism had survived the Muslim onslaught simply because the Sikh Gurus had advocated freedom of faith,

struggled against forced conversion and in the event of refusal to do so, resisted persecution by the authorities of the times. He distinguished between nation and community, with the plea that the religion of the former was not entitled to obliterate that of the latter. Most of his arguments drew sustenance from the *Guru Granth*, wherein concepts drawn from the ancient Hindu scriptures had been awarded new orientation and elaboration. Through a hypothetical dialogue between a Hindu and a Sikh, he sought to show how, from metaphysical concepts to views relating to everyday life, customs, ceremonies and rituals, Sikhism advocated its distinctive pattern. Complaints against the book were lodged by interested parties alleging that its circulation was likely to add to communal tension. However, the person authorized by the colonial administration to examine the contents of the book – made available to him in English translation – held that there was nothing objectionable in it.

Kahn Singh was more than content at the favorable opinion given by the colonial administration, and his reputation as the greatest authority on Sikh religion, theology and doctrine became even more widespread. If the colonial administration thought so highly of him, what did he think of British rule? A preliminary answer to this question can be found in the zeal with which he supported Max Arthur Macauliffe[12] in his historic task. Clarendon Press had agreed to undertake a project to bring out a huge manuscript entitled *The Sikh Religion: Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors* in six volumes. In the course of preparing his manuscript, Macauliffe sought the help of Kahn Singh. It was Macauliffe's deep desire that Kahn Singh should supervise the publication of his manuscript. It was all the more essential because Ernest Trumpp, who had undertaken this sort of task in the 19th century on the recommendation of the British administration in Punjab, had in the opinion of the Sikhs made a mess of it by holding native scholars in utter disdain and preparing his manuscript all by himself. Kahn Singh had also believed the same. Otherwise how could he not have taken notice of the work of a scholar knowing several languages of Europe, of the Muslim world and of the Indian subcontinent! Howsoever offensive it might have been, it was his duty to bring it under critical gaze and to help Macaullife, who had openly condemned his predecessor.

Kahn Singh's Travels to England

Kahn Singh readily agreed to supervise the publication of Macaullife's extensive manuscript. For this purpose, he went to England twice in 1907. On both the

occasions, he kept on writing letters[13] to his younger brother. Taken together, these letters provide the first travelogue in Punjabi. Comprising one hundred and fifty three pages of Punjabi text, they laid the foundation for this genre in the Punjabi language, which over the century has acquired more variety but without in any way imbibing the sobriety that was the forte of this writing. There is no denying the fact that the letters written in the course of the first sojourn are more detailed, deal more with men than matters, and provide more scope to elaborate his ideology. It was with great excitement and curiosity that he embarked upon this journey. The idea that crossing the ocean was sinful, such a distinctive mark of the Hindu ethos till the end of the 19th century, did not bother him at all, due to his profound faith in Sikhism, which he believed was not an extension of Hinduism. After giving formal information about the facilities available on the ship, his first letters went on to provide a description of the vastness of the ocean, its grandeur, impenetrability, immeasurable extent and depth, and the countless creatures breathing underneath the surface of the water. The images he employed resounded with the echo of his faith in Gurbani.

As the ship entered the Mediterranean, the ocean became turbulent. Sailing seemed risky because the powerful waves appeared intent upon wrecking the ship. Unlike any ordinary person, who is likely to get frightened and feel death staring them in the face, Kahn Singh kept up the equanimity of his mind. The credit for this went to his profound faith in Gurbani, its metaphysical-cum-theological message in particular. It convinced him that whatever happened would have divine sanction. No wonder that scenes of the ocean and the landscape captivated his attention. Mount Etna, flaming with its top covered with snow, imparted to him a very important spiritual lesson to the effect that sitting in the congregation, some persons so inflame their lust that its fire remains under control only by their hearing and reciting the *shabad*.

As the ship passed by the island of Corsica, he remembered Napoleon Bonaparte who had astonished the whole world with his adventures. Kahn Singh felt beholden to the Almighty that enabled such heroes to take birth and perform incredible tasks so as to set examples for ordinary persons. Here, it was Carlyle's metaphysical concept of the Hero that led him to laud Napoleon in superlative terms. The historical fact that the British had deftly opposed Napoleon and were squarely responsible for his downfall, exile and ultimate death under extremely piteous circumstances, did not occur to him at all. When the ship reached Marseilles, he found enough time to wander about the city. He was all admiration for the civic sense of the French people, their architecture and courteous behavior,

in spite of the fact they were neither punctual nor steadfast in fulfilling their promise. He gauged their agnostic sense without approving or disproving it. Having reached London, he felt no reluctance in reciprocating Macaullife's feeling: "Now we are in our own country?"

After reaching London, he rented a room, not far from Macaullife's house. Had the host wished, he could have accommodated the guest in his house but for this he was required to ask his brother-in-law to move out which he did not deem a proper thing to do. Separate living in fact suited Kahn Singh because then he had all his time at his own disposal. He minutely observed London life and found the city free of beggars. Of course, street-singers were around but they were a source of entertainment only. What especially delighted him was the fact that many people cast admiring looks on those wearing turbans and loose garments. They found the Indian dress unusual though several Indians dispensed with their native dress. As news of his arrival in London spread, he received invitations from English gentlemen who had retired from administrative posts in India. He paid them courtesy-calls and impressed them with his dignity and poise. Except for exchanging of courtesies, sharing of memories of the time passed in India and visits paid to the Nabha State to which the guest belonged, nothing significant marked these visits.

His solo excursions to public places, libraries, etc., yielded him fruitful insights. In this regard, his sojourn in Hyde Park showed him things that in India, especially in a state under a native ruler, were beyond imagination. In Hyde Park he saw lectures being delivered on religious, political, social and economic issues without any restriction. In India Library he came across persons professing radical views. He listened to them all without providing commensurate response. Whenever the talk revolved round amelioration, literacy and progress, he became a keen listener, exchanging views with experts about their implementation in his state. He found time to visit Scotland and observe its climate, landscape and social behavior. The celebration of Guru Nanak's birthday at his residence afforded him profound joy. The Punjabis, particularly the Sikhs, came to this function in large numbers and listened intently to his discourse on *Gurmat* and *Gurbani*.

During his second visit the following year, he went only to fulfill the task he had taken upon himself. The excitement and curiosity marking his first journey and stay were missing. Now, he spent more of his time in supervising the publication of Macaullife's volumes. He acknowledged the work as onerous and burdensome but still he did not feel inclined to cast even a cursory glance at

Trumpp's work. This time he stayed in Macaullife's house, where he felt slightly uncomfortable. Momentary differences arose between the two over very minor issues. His courtesy-calls to persons resettled after retiring from administrative posts in India continued. This time he was required to engage with members of the British Parliament so that the case for the restoration of villages filed by the Nabha State could go in its favor. If he went one step forward in hailing, though mutely, the women agitating for voting rights, then he moved two steps back regarding the British monarch no less a ruler of India. He was not bothered by the fact that India was a colony of the British. Being the resident of the Nabha state, nominally independent of the British rule but essentially dependent upon it, he felt no urge to cultivate national awareness. His involvement in the metaphysical-cum-theological side of *Gurbani* did not let its social-cum-political side assert itself.

The contents of these letters provide insight into Kahn Singh's perception of the West. The civility and courtesy the elite showed in day-to-day behavior soothed him greatly. Not for a moment did he feel that he was from a country under colonial rule. The observance of his own religious practice was so kindly looked upon that he had no compunction in feeling that England was like his own country. An anti-colonial feeling did not occur to him even for a second, although he would have seen restlessness among young men from India studying in institutions there. In fact a Punjabi youth named Madanlal Dhingra, hailing from Amritsar, a place so sacred for the Sikhs, was to go the gallows for committing a political murder. However the urge to get rid of the colonial rule that had begun to simmer in the minds of the Indian people did not bother Kahn Singh at all. Homeliness was what he felt for the West. Civility and courtesy meted out to him at the formal level generated this feeling in such a way and to such an extent that homelessness could not find an occasion to haunt his mind.[14] It was this attitude that provided him the incentive to prepare the *Mahan Kosh,* inspired by the *British Encyclopedia*, which he happened to witness during his sojourn.

Vir Singh as a Scholar

Seeking answers to corresponding questions about Vir Singh's life are crucial. Was he in contact with some well-meaning English scholars who thought highly of Sikhism? What was his attitude towards the colonial administration in Punjab? What did he think of English poetry, particularly of Wordsworth, who articulated a pantheism and celebration of nature akin to his own? Was any other form of

poetry in translation from another European language of interest to him? In fact, he probably had no formal contact with any English scholar who had a high opinion of Sikhism and of the Sikh community abiding by its scripture. Due to his ardent belief in divine dispensation, he was aloof from such contacts as those Kahn Singh had found useful for fulfilling his public engagements. However, a close study of Vir Singh's epic, *Rana Surat Singh*, or of the lyrical poems from his three subsequent collections, demonstrates that he was not aloof to Western influences, like the poets of many other Indian languages who ushered in modern literary trends in their respective fields.

Of crucial importance is his epic, *Rana Surat Singh*,[15] published by Vir Singh when he was in his early thirties. The story relates to the time when the Sikhs were involved in internecine warfare against the Mughal rule in Delhi, the first quarter of the 18th century, when Guru Gobind Singh had expired leaving the Sikhs to face horrendous odds against survival. The hero of the epic is the ruler of a hill-state. Tumultuous warfare occurs in the plains of Punjab and Rana Surat Singh is called by his brethren to come to their aid. He is a Rajput by birth but has turned a Sikh after getting baptized, and has married Raj Kaur, the only daughter of the former king. As the poet describes it so well in the preface, 'Raj Kaur, daughter of a Sikh ruler, darling of her mother who is a Sikh by faith, reared in the company of Sikh *sangat*, wife of a Sikh husband, is well-versed in the norms of Sikhism.' She regularly performs all the rituals her faith enjoins upon her, but her longing for her husband becomes so acute that she loses sight of her spiritual core. Her husband urges her to return to it but is not successful, and the poignancy of her longing becomes even more intense.

Rana Surat Singh is bent upon continuing his effort when the Almighty charts a different course for him. He receives an urgent call from his brethren to come to the plains and take part in the warfare waged to defend their faith. Being an ardent Sikh, he does so, laying down his life as a martyr to his faith. Raj Kaur, who every night prayed for the safe return of her husband, is struck dumb with sorrow on hearing the news. For several nights, she lies prostrate pining for her husband. One day, without even telling her mother, she disappears like a sleepwalker to reach a gurdwara where she hears the recitation of *Gurbani*. She then realizes the need to ascend to the domains of belief, knowledge, duty, noble deed and truth. But the peace of mind she seeks is not hers yet. After becoming unconscious at the top of a hill, she finds herself in a cave. Distraught as before, she has a dream in which she finds her husband serving medicine to her. When the dream ends, she hears the recitation of *Gurbani*, and finally a saintly person

reveals to her the essence of *Gurbani* and the need to act upon its dictates. She ceases to be distraught and decides to lead a normal life. The affairs of the kingdom, previously held by her in disdain, begin to claim her attention. Attending to them becomes her spiritual vocation but only in the derivative sense. The advice tendered by her late husband proves a norm for her to follow. Her spiritual vocation and worldly engagement turn into two sides of the same coin, though it is the spiritual side that remains primary.

For working out this change in the heroine's destiny, the poet adopts an allegorical pattern. The realization that dawns upon her is what Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, expounds in the final *pauris* of *Japu*, his quintessential composition. The experience she has follows an allegorical pattern taken probably from Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. The text is also beholden to *Gurbani*, not only for conceptual terms but also for quotations and extracts that enrich it. The meter used is *sirkhandi chhand,* thoroughly traditional but rendered novel by inserting into it the syllabic system of blank verse. The result contrasts with Dante's masterpiece, which having delved into theology, religion and spirituality, history and politics, affirms the validity of the secular world. Here, the secular world only provides the occasion to perform religious duty, affirm theological views, and wish for spiritual transcendence.

A couple of decades later Vir Singh brought out three collections of lyrical poetry in quick succession. He named them *Matak Hulare* ("Coquettish Swings"), *Bijlian de Haar* ("Garlands of Flashes") and *Lehran de Haar* ("Garlands of Riffles"). These poems had appeared from time to time and earned him great appreciation. The three volumes have some common lyrics, yet their reading does not cause any monotony. Their poignancy remains rewarding enough. They celebrate objects of nature, flowers, trees, springs, waterfalls, streams, and birds. Through their celebration the poet expresses his metaphysical view of life, which is as follows. Behind manifest reality, so responsive to our sense of seeing, hearing, touching and smelling, there is a latent, invisible reality. Living in manifest reality, the human soul is always attracted to latent reality, howsoever brief this attraction may be. The joy of living lies in experiencing this attraction and enjoying its bliss, even if momentarily. There is no harm if this joy, essentially aesthetic, acquires sensuous and sensual proportions. For Vir Singh the whole mystery lies in this attraction being aesthetic, bringing joy, causing pain on departing, and leaving behind longing.

This motif is present in *Gurbani* to a significant extent. However, it appears as a two-fold process: bodily and social, as a vehicle for bringing mystical and

metaphysical enlightenment. If this two-fold process does not consummate itself, the result becomes an occasion for sinfulness. In *Gurbani*, it is productive nature, lived through watering, harvesting, reaping and sowing, that is the ambience of human and animal life as well as its essence manifest in work and labor. In Bhai Vir Singh's lyrics, nature turns luxuriant as a source of aesthetic pleasure. In *Gurbani* luxuriance for its own sake is a source of sinfulness. In these lyrics, longing caused by pain is an end in itself. This is so overwhelmingly emphasized that it becomes its own reward. Here we see the pantheistic influence of 19th century English Romantic poetry, particularly of William Wordsworth.

In departing from tradition without emphasizing contemporary issues, Vir Singh was keeping pace with what was happening in other Indian languages. Rabindranath Tagore's example was before all to observe and emulate. In Tagore's later poetry he also interrogated Western influence as well as Indian tradition. Vir Singh avoided doing this and was given to preaching, which hindered him from realizing his full potential.

Kahn Singh as Scholar

The epic and the three collections of lyric poetry signify the zenith of Vir Singh's poetic achievement. Its counterpoint in the oeuvre of Kahn Singh is *Mahan Kosh*,[16] also known as *The Encyclopedia of Sikh Literatures*. The idea of composing such a magnum opus must have come to him from looking at the *British Encyclopedia* during one of his sojourns to England. During his stay in London, he found time to visit the library where its volumes could have attracted his attention. He was in England twice in the first decade and stayed for several months altogether. However, it was only in 1911, more than three years later, that he declared his intention to launch this project. During the three preceding years he must have pondered over the range of entries to be incorporated, the detail to be awarded to the respective entries, the scope to be reserved for interpretation and illustration, and the horizon to be covered by the whole project.

Having begun to prepare it in 1911, he completed it in 1926, making fifteen years before the manuscript was ready for publication. The total number of entries that were finally incorporated rose to 64,263. At the end, he gave a list of several hundred terms yet to be developed into entries. It was possible that his intention was to incorporate them into some future edition. About 90% of the terms were drawn from Sanskrit, Braj, Hindi and Punjabi sources. The remaining 10% came from sources available in Arabic and Persian. The chief branches of

knowledge covered were religion-cum-theology, philology-cum-linguistics, prosody-cum-musicology, myth-cum-legend, society-cum-history, medicine-cum-therapy and pilgrimage centers-cum-gurdwaras. Entries drawn from these various branches were arranged in accordance with the alphabets of the Punjabi script.

The first four branches had vital contact with his scholarship, which he acquired informally under the guidance of his father and other savants. Entries pertaining to these branches reflect authority and syntactical unity. Usually his interpretation begins by indicating the grammatical form of the term. Then, he comes to its etymology, wherein his approach is largely guided by Indo-Aryan philology, detailing the changes to have occurred in the spelling and pronunciation of a word over time and across languages. It ignores the semantic variations the word may have undergone across cultural and historical phases. However, what political upheavals might have resulted in semantic variations do not figure in their determination. Several times, he has recourse to hypotheses that sound convincing at the surface but are not true to the permutation and combination of Indo-Aryan philology. Then follows the elucidation of meaning, not so much by analysis as by illustration. Sometimes this illustration becomes extensive, giving the impression of inessential padding.

While explicating a standard term, he generally does not detail its variations in colloquial speech, since Indo-Aryan philology tends to regard such variations as departures from the standard norm. For example, in *Gurbani* there is a wealth of such variations. One of the several terms expressive of ontology is *bramand* with its variation *varbhand*. Likewise, terms carrying many metaphorical meanings, like *andhkar*, have many variants, such as *andhiar* and *andhar*. He mentions such variations without drawing attention to their specificity. These terms, imported from Sanskrit, undergo change in phonetics, spelling and lexicon. However he does not elucidate how, by undergoing change in these respects, the new coinages have enriched the Punjabi language. Likewise, terms such as *khasam* and *sultan*, coming from Arabic, do not change in phonetics and spelling but their semantics acquire startling originality. That also remains outside the ken of his elucidation.

The terms drawn from the field of prosody-cum-musicology employ technical vocabulary from these fields to lend authority to explication. This renders the explication correct but only for the practitioners. Sometimes, in a single sentence, several of them figure in a consecutive way. Obviously their content comes to him from standard classics in Sanskrit. Unfortunately he seems to provide their

verbatim translations, which do not convey their sense and sensibility in Punjabi. His style is very much colored by the Braj idiom, diction and lexicon. While explicating these terms, he gets so loaded with alien vocabulary that the very purpose of including these terms in this corpus for enriching Punjabi vocabulary gets diluted. He seems to fall into the grip of sheer systemization,[17] an undertaking that leads a scholar to feel master of ready-made knowledge acquired without subjecting it to deep reflection. In spite of the correct explication of such terms, the impression given is of a scholar only translating existing scholarship into Punjabi.

The same impression emerges from his explication of terms drawn from the field of myth-cum-legend. For him, myth and legend are synonymous and he does not go into distinctions that differentiate them. In defining myth as reflection of the Divine in terms of the autochthonous, he is on valid ground. How birth, coitus and death form their essential triad is explained in a succinct way in vocabulary owing a lot to Sanskrit and Braj. His summarizing skill succeeds in taking the kernel from the chaff that gathers around the mythical and legendary tales. In their narration, he treads a well-trodden path, but gives no insight into historical stages or more detailed narration. His systematic undertaking shows through his summarizing skill, as this is the impression left on the mind when reading these entries. There is no doubt that he has labored creditably enough in executing this task.

However, this cannot be said with certainty about his explication of terms drawn from the field of history-cum-society. The terms relating to history are confined to personalities drawn from Sikh history. But there are exceptions here as well, because he also deals with personalities not only from other religions but also from other countries. This is particularly so when he takes up Muslim personalities, who inhabited areas and regions far away from Punjab. Into this category he also puts certain contemporary figures, such as the rulers of Sikh States, including one that provided him habitation, employment, distinction and honor. While dealing with personalities of the past, he does refer to their genealogy, capability, prestige and excellence. The acme of this is reached in his portraiture of the Sikh Gurus, martyrs and heroes. Herein, he gives enough proof of his systemizing undertaking and summarizing skills. Although no new insights or perceptions emerge, even then his endeavor is worthy of note, although to call it commendable may sound a bit exaggerated. The descriptions he awards to the rulers of the states of Patiala, Nabha, Jind, etc., could be considered offensive to the *sumatt* of the intelligentsia and even the *matt* of the

Sikhs in general. It is remarkable to see the extent to which he could have recourse to sycophancy. In glorifying the Gurus, martyrs and heroes he has historical documents to refer to, but in flattering the rulers of states he dispenses with all sobriety and sagacity.

All the detail he awards to entries relating to the above mentioned fields seem to have emerged from the study of the sources and documents which Kahn Singh himself pondered over with commendable zeal. However such a claim cannot be made about the details awarded to entries drawn from the rest of the remaining fields. Entries pertaining to medicine-cum-therapy deal with various diseases and the indigenous medicines used to treat them. That they were effective is beyond doubt though their efficacy was limited to the molecular level. Discussion of what proportion of various herbs are mixed, how the resultant mixture proves curative, and when its potion is to be taken could be articulated only by eliciting help from a celebrated expert. Guidance from a proficient physician was essential, and such guidance was probably offered so generously by Mohan Singh Vaid. Vaid was not only a renowned physician but also a famous writer, journalist and social reformer. It seems that he might have been the actual author of these entries. Kahn Singh might have brushed up his language to make the entries sound more sophisticated, even at the expense of rendering it obtuse at places. There is an oddity that still confounds readers: the cause of every disease can is traced in these entries to sexual indulgence, and each potion is described as proving efficacious only if sexual indulgence is avoided. What is the source of this prohibition - Nabha's sagacity or Vaid's proficiency? It is impossible to know for sure.

A similar impression is also given from reading the exposition of terms drawn from the field of pilgrimage centers-cum-gurdwaras. Their purpose is to draw attention to villages where gurdwaras of historical importance are situated. After naming each village, indicating the approach to it and explaining the historical importance of the gurdwara, the entry usually goes on to mention the *granthi,* his identity, and whether he is from the *Udasi* and the *Nirmala* sects or is a baptized Sikh. This provides a glimpse, howsoever small, into the religious demeanor of rural Punjab in the first quarter of the 20th century. The impression left behind is that someone who may not have had a lot of knowledge about the Sikhs but rather was brimming with profuse respect for Kahn Singh must have prepared this portion. Kahn Singh's scrutiny only pruned it for inclusion in his magnum opus.

However in two respects Kahn Singh does depart from his overall preoccupation with systemizing information and summarizing it for inclusion in this work of great magnitude. First, he sometimes has recourse to hypothesis, which reads felicitously and provides new insight. For example, there is an entry on 'Shiv Ram' wherein he is mentioned as the paternal grandfather of Guru Nanak. Although he was a great scholar of the old texts, no source is quoted to substantiate the information. On the surface, the entry reads as autobiographical, meant to project his own pedagogic training onto the life of Guru Nanak. To the discerning mind, however, it is likely to provide an indirect conjecture about Guru Nanak's informal education. In the common sense of people, Guru Nanak was believed to have been educated by the Divine. The mention of a *maulvi* or a *pandit* hired to teach him was only meant to show how futile this measure was. Studious historians of the modern times have thought it prudent to stick to this view. The hermeneutics of Professor Hew MacLeod and the academic studies by Professor J.S. Grewal do not go beyond this presumption.[18] Howsoever, this very brief, even molecular, description of Guru Nanak's grandfather seems to put forth a more credible explanation. With all the fondness Guru Nanak's grandfather must have had for his only grandson, particularly when his father was always finding fault with him, he must have revealed to him all the metaphysical-cum-mystical mysteries of the ancient scriptures. The credit for bringing them under a critical gaze of the metaphorical-cum-etymological sort went to the grandson's genius that was so acute and astute even in the formative stage.[19]

Secondly, a stylistic oddity, difficult to ignore in Kahn Singh's systemizing and summarizing skill, cannot be ignored. When providing quotations from poetic compositions, he terms them as collections of sentences and not accumulations of utterances. The basic distinction of words in sentences employed to convey singular meanings, as opposed to utterances to communicate multiple themes, is lost to him. Thus, the overall impression *Mahan Kosh* gives is of great magnitude. It has amplitude as well but of a flawed sort. For all the convergence between magnitude and amplitude and no less so the divergence between them, it was the most authoritative work of its kind in Punjabi, and so it remains, even more than eight decades after its publication.

Vir Singh's Prose

As the first great prose writer of Punjabi in the 20th century, Vir Singh published three major works in the field of general prose: *Guru Nanak Chamatkar* ("The

Apocalypse of Guru Nanak"), *Kalgidhar Chamatkar* ("The Apocalypse of Guru Gobind Singh") and *Ashta Guru Chamatkar* ("The Apocalypse of the Eight Gurus"). These had in large part appeared earlier as tracts.[20] The author believed them to be the life stories of the Gurus, the ideal aim of which was to show how the Gurus appeared before the eyes as actually engaged in manifold activities, experiencing pain and pleasure, rising and slipping and rising again, making endeavors, trembling and thrilling. His principal aim was to display the Guru's grace to the reader, to remove the scars and create a longing in him to search for a higher way of living and devise a method to achieve that aim. In other words, the life of the Guru should set before the reader a model of the goodness, piety and nobility so heavily professed in *Gurbani*.

Taken this way, these are not actual historical life stories but are evocations of miraculous events associated with the Gurus. The disregard of actuality and history makes them miraculous in the literal sense that has no need to project itself as metaphorical. The starting point of these miraculous events is also mysterious, beyond space and time. It is believed that there are regions beyond regions, which cannot be described in words. Whatever is said or believed, beyond that there is something ineffable and incomprehensible. Deriving information about events which happened in Guru Nanak's life, Vir Singh expands it into the kind of detail for which no evidence is required, for only imagination can serve this purpose. This is the elusive reward that the exercise of imagination brings to the reader or the listener.

He envisions that divine music of the Word came from the high heavens to descend upon truthful and spotless hearts. The time is early morning, the ambrosial time, when on all the four sides there is silence and peace in nature. This divine music exercises a marvelous effect, for listening to it makes one forget space and time, enabling the mind to rise above and become absorbed in a trance state. A wondrous thrill rises from the tongue and runs through the mind and the whole body. The mind is drawn, filled to the brim and transcends the brain. There is no knowing what has happened, but color and delectation are there. This is indeed a marvelous vision.

The above is the gist of passages overwhelmingly available in the articles comprising this collection. They strive to magnify the visions poeticized in certain stanzas of the compositions of Guru Nanak. Alongside this, Vir Singh is aware of the fact that Guru Nanak has refuted miracles. However, he does not concede this, but only half-heartedly contends that the effect of this vision is momentary. Accordingly, the scene changes and there appears a disciple. From what he says it

is clear that this is Sheikh Farid. The scene further changes and the whole cluster of the universe comes into view. On a personal note, attention then shifts to Hindustan of which he is the inhabitant.

Going back into time, the narrator traverses the history of India. From the present, he casts his glance at the times of the Sikh Gurus, prior and subsequent, when the entire population of India was of the Hindus. But in this homogenous population, fissures appeared when tension and strife arose between the Hindus and the Buddhists. Shiploads of the latter were sunk into the sea. Then came the time when Ashoka ruled over the whole of India. Further back was the Vedic period, with *rishis* and *munis*, the age of liberty and chivalry, truth and religion, pastoral life of the pure people, a historical period when there was no king and no subject, the head being simultaneously of the religious and the secular domains.

Further back was the time when hordes of aliens entered India from other lands. Prior to that was the period of the savage state when the people did not live in villages and had no houses in which to dwell. They fed themselves upon the flesh of the wild animals they hunted. Still further back in time was the stage when the evolution of the universe took place in thirty-two *yugas* as the Almighty has indicated for our crude understanding of the phenomenon. Even this stage is preceded by the state of *Nirankar* (Formlessness), a state of delectable brilliance, a marvelous luminosity. This luminosity has no color or form and can be felt only as a wave, a thought, a wish or a will. This is the state of *Eknarankar* (Singular Form). Before this comes the Word, which cannot be described through any symbol or metaphor.

Beyond this prevails the melodious Word and coexistent with it is the exceedingly brilliant throne which can eclipse the resplendent light of all the shining substances of the universe. Millions of times more luminous, the One, embodiment of light and love, sits on this resplendent throne. Beside this is a form, again an embodiment of light, standing in devotion and love, like a son before the father, a replica of the father yet distinct. This son is Guru Nanak. All this description is reminiscent of *paradise* in Dante's *The Divine Comedy***.** One finds no trace here of what is described in the last stanzas of Guru Nanak's *Japu*.

Even at the cost of his own peace of mind and physical comfort, Guru Nanak resolves to take birth in the mundane world. It is to award the people a happy life by destroying all that leads them to indulge in strife and conflict over material gains and subjects them to hell. Finding the merciful Lord in a mood of grace, he expresses his desire to be born on the earth. His request is duly accepted and

permission is granted to him to take birth in the mundane world. Then a flowery chariot, *parupkar* (charity) appears and an angel going by the name of *birha* (separation) lifts Guru Nanak from the sacred lap of the Lord and puts him in that vehicle. It lands in the house of Mehta Kalu, a *patwari* living in the town of Talwandi Rai Bhoi. He is wealthy and his wife lies there in a spacious hall attended by two maids. The chandelier emits brightness when, suddenly, dazzling light appears before the globe. Extremely sweet melody is heard synchronizing with the appearance of some phantom shapes. At first, the women present have fear but the next moment, they are joyful. The spiritual shapes of saints and ascetics fill the hall, though with the doors shut it cannot be known how they have gotten in. After singing the praises of Guru Nanak, all of the heavenly beings, the saints and the ascetics depart to their respective regions.

This event is presented in a different way as well. It is the time of night, the residents of the town lie asleep and no sound comes from anywhere. The night passes peacefully when, in the last quarter, a *pandit* is seen looking intently at the stars. One moment he looks at the almanac, another moment he gazes at the stars. All the time, he is lost in thinking and making guesses. When his wife asks him what he is judging by looking at the stars, he tells her about Guru Nanak's birth, which is a mighty incarnation. This is a rational rendition of the event Vir Singh takes largely from the *Janam Sakhis***.** Likewise, there is the other anecdote in which Mardana turns into a ram, due to the charms worked upon him by a female charmer. In Vir Singh's description and narration, it is her music that charms him into a trance.

In a moment like this, the rational element in Vir Singh, howsoever insignificant, as compared with the miraculous, demurs from veracity. At the same time, the devotional element prevents him from rejecting it altogether. Here his aesthetic sense gets into the foreground that impels him to exercise suspension of disbelief and take the miraculous element into regions, beyond those covered by the *Janam Sakhis*. No wonder, then, that all details of Guru Nanak's birth, marriage, sojourns, abode at Kartarpur, the later part of his life and lastly his demise, have an imaginative aura, and to accept them the suspension of disbelief is absolutely essential. The extent of detail explains why the volume of *Guru Nanak Chamatkar* is twenty times as large as the one comprising tales about Guru Nanak**.** This detail is the creation of his imagination, for he holds that it pertains to a country or sphere beyond the frontiers of knowledge. Only in a state of bliss can they be imagined. To show them as veritable, he brings in the description of realistic aspects in a very minimal way.

In this spirit Vir Singh takes upon himself the great task of comparing Guru Nanak's tenets with those of other religious mentors of ancient India and the world in general. He embarks upon this comparison first by going over to Buddhism. Basing his argument on the gospel of Gautama Buddha, he avers that its basic principles rest upon the observance of moral purity and the control of the senses. According to Vir Singh, Guru Nanak does not differ from this. He clarifies and improves upon the earlier gospel by holding that from this alone peace and contentment cannot flow. They come from communion with the Divine, for which the recitation of His Name is so very essential. In the second place, he critiques the Buddha's silence about the Almighty, whereas Guru Nanak sings of his glory in divine tunes. No wonder, then, that the former had to resort to strenuous austerities to get enlightened, whereas Guru Nanak was the dispenser of the Lord's light from the moment of his birth.

Vir Singh regards Guru Nanak's doctrine as superior to that of Hinduism, which he represents with the teachings contained in the commands of Krishna and the precepts of Rama. He extends his argument further by holding that medieval saints and ascetics were wrong in claiming themselves as their worshippers and advocating their worship as essential for salvation. Guru Nanak's doctrine is far superior because it lays stress upon the recitation of the glory of the Lord whose dictum runs through the whole universe. He is transcendent and immanent, universal and eternal.

Vir Singh makes dismissive observations about Christianity and Islam as well. He believes that Christianity is misguided in holding that the human world came into being due to the sin committed by Adam and Eve. Likewise Jesus Christ was wrong to contend that he ascended the cross to salvage humanity from the original sin. According to him, Guru Nanak thinks that the universe, of which this world is a part, came into existence through the Will of the Divine. It involves no sin and none, howsoever pious, can be the gateway to heaven. No particular day is sacred and all the days are alike. So far as Islam goes, he holds that the qualities attributed to Allah fall short of those which the Divine assumes in the compositions of Guru Nanak.

Vir Singh brings under consideration the philosophy and science of the West and finds them wanting in comparison with the doctrine of Guru Nanak. Going over to the idealistic philosophy, he takes up Kant's theory of beauty and holds that for Kant, the glimpse of beauty impels the human mind to suspend all the three functions of thinking, perceiving and knowing. Only then it attains a state of bliss, to have a glimpse of the transcendent reality. According to Vir Singh, Guru

Nanak believes that human consciousness, as it is concerned with the Divine, is not fractured or split. Above the moment of ecstasy is the state of contemplation, the mode meant to realize the Divine. The split between the immanent and the transcendent that Kant postulates is not there in Guru Nanak's doctrine. So Nanak's is superior to Kant's postulate.

Then he takes up Bergson's theory of time, in which intellect and intuition are counter posed. According to him, intellect can give a glimpse of mundane time. Only intuition, through momentary action, reveals the eternal time. How to activate intuition does not come into the purview of Bergson's theory. For Guru Nanak, however, intuition is pristine, to be activated through contemplation, which awards awareness of the whole universe. It could be argued that it is a formulaic refutation of Bergson's distinction between intuitive and chronological time that has played a significant role in forwarding categories of voluntarism versus deliberation for philosophy, psychology and even for political theory.

In the chapter on "Guru Nanak and Science," Vir Singh claims that Guru Nanak teaches us the science of that living energy that inspires all the sciences to embark upon investigation and research. There is not space enough, he feels, for a detailed account, but investigation shows that Guru Nanak reveals marvelous facts about the inner working of the particles, the understanding of which charts a path to the pious and peaceful life. This seems nothing but an illusory way to find fault with Einstein's theory of time-space continuum. Common to the three volumes is the description of nature and of the movements of the Gurus in accordance with its mystery and ineffability.

In short, whether Vir Singh is narrating some event from the lives of the Gurus or describing their movements, actions and discourses, he creates around them an aura that is rendered resplendent with images drawn from nature and human beings living in its lap. Thus his language marks an extraordinary distance from that of the people who are occupied with socio-economic and politico-historical engagements. It is extremely sophisticated and civilized, characteristic of sermons overflowing with erudition, drawing upon mythological references on the one hand and scriptural meanings on the other. At the same time, it is sensuous in a style that rarely becomes sensual. An aesthetic glow is there to make it appealing to those who swear by the aristocracy of culture, civilization and spirituality. It is bereft of all engagements with events, experiences, feelings and thoughts of the actual world. In place of the world saturated with labor, work, hardship and struggle, it is suffused with mystery, ineffability and rarefied flight of fancy.

Vir Singh and Kahn Singh: Concluding Evaluation

The mysterious, ineffable and rarefied flight of fancy, regarded by Vir Singh as of the ultimate vision, fascinated him so much that he chose to stay engulfed in its range. This was his comfort zone, one that he never felt like transgressing. Parallel was the case of Kahn Singh, whose stupendous skill at systemizing and summarizing various branches of knowledge claimed all his energy, divesting him of original reflection and self-reflection. Had their dispositions not been so, some horrendous event posing a risk to their creative and cognitive selves could have impelled them to transgress their comfort zone. In the case of Vir Singh, this horrendous event could have been the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in which hundreds of Punjabis, the majority of them Sikhs, were gunned to death. Not a horrendous event but an 'alien' challenge had been posed earlier that could have stimulated Kahn Singh to undertake the risk of leaving his comfort zone. This was Ernest Trumpp's translation of the Sikh scripture, along with the preface that sought to put question marks of the most crucial sort on the doctrine, style, language and composition of the *Guru Granth*.

In 1919, the Jallianwala massacre took place in Amritsar at a public place in the vicinity of the Darbar Sahib, a center of reverence and devotion for the Sikhs in particular and the Punjabis in general. This place was hardly two miles away from Vir Singh's residence. The sound of incessant firing to which the people gathered were subjected could have been audible to Vir Singh. The people had gathered there to express their grievance at the restrictions the colonial administration had imposed through laws prohibiting the holding of public meetings. Instead of letting the people's grievance enter their ears, the colonial administration poured bullets into the bodies of innocent persons gathered there on the occasion of Baisakhi, a day signifying the end of winter and the ripening of the crops for harvesting.

Afterwards, several measures were taken to suppress the news of this ghastly massacre. Misinformation was put forth alleging that the violence was in retaliation for the outrage to which English women were subjected. The claim was that the administration had no choice but to resort to the shooting in which some people lost their lives. Further, strict laws against the press were already being enforced. It is hard to fathom, all the same, that Vir Singh would have remained oblivious to the news of these events and the outrage perpetrated upon the citizens of Amritsar and neighboring villages. If he chose to remain oblivious, it

was because the horror did not suit his poetic vocation of glorifying the past and celebrating the beauty of luxuriant nature.

In contrast to this was the mental turbulence that Rabindranath Tagore experienced when this news reached him in Bengal, two thousand miles away from Amritsar. Even before any celebrated Indian writer, thinker or even leader, including Mahatma Gandhi, criticized the colonial administration, he gave vent to his sense of outrage. He organized a protest meeting over which none of the notable leaders had the courage to preside. As a mark of protest, he returned the title of Sir, which had been bestowed upon him in honor of being a Nobel laureate. He felt that this outrage was committed not only against the people but also against his creative self, and no overt threat or covert interest could muffle him from expressing his anguish.[21]

This sort of human engagement was precisely the reason that as a poet, Tagore did not stay as an aesthete engrossed in the celebration of luxuriant nature. He engaged with social, political, historical and cultural issues inviting his attention, not just from Bengal and India but also from Asia and Europe. Essentially a writer of Bengali, his mother tongue, through translation he rose to become the voice of humanity, in each age that called upon the present to engage the past and envisage the future. Sadly, for himself and to the misfortune of his language, Vir Singh did not do so.

As for Kahn Singh, an engagement with Ernest Trumpp's translation of the *Adi Granth* and the view he held about its doctrine, style, language and composition could have provided him the occasion to transgress the boundaries of his comfort zone.[22] To get some measure of the extent to which he was biased and to unravel the reasons that caused him to be so, we need to consider what might have disposed him to undertake this task. When Trumpp's translation, along with the preface appeared in book form, the Sikh community, particularly its priestly class, raised a huge hue and cry. It was alleged that Trumpp had committed an offence of the most outrageous sort. They attributed it to his Christian bias, evident from his smoking a cigar while working on the translation. Though the allegations were factually true, no effort was made to judge their theoretical bases. In fact, it was impossible for them to do so. They did not have the requisite competence to take up this task. After all, those who raised a hue and cry were the priests, adept only in omens and auspices, restrictions and prescriptions, beliefs and observances. To explicate the lexicon from the perspective of historical philology was beyond their memorizing and illustrating skill.

For historical philology, it was essential to underline the fact that the *Adi Granth* did not owe its originality to isolation from the scriptural writings of the ancient and medieval times. It emerged from its engagement with the Upanishads of the ancient times and the *sant*-cum-*bhakti kavya* of the medieval age, particularly that of Kabir, many of whose compositions were incorporated into the *Guru Granth*. Guru Nanak, whose compositions form the quintessence of this magnum opus, shared his syntax partly with his predecessors, from which Trumpp got the impression that he borrowed a lot in terms of ideas, impressions and values. As far as social critique was concerned, this borrowing was there. However, in three areas, Guru Nanak surpassed Kabir by covering an unchartered path. First, the type of political critique Guru Nanak mounted upon the ruling classes, both secular and religious, was nowhere to be found in Kabir. Second, Kabir did not say a word to confirm the identity of womankind, whereas Guru Nanak wrote about it in very poignant terms. Third, Guru Nanak professed a cosmic perspective, marked by the universality of space. Interestingly enough, this quality of Guru Nanak endeared him the most to Tagore, who composed several lyrics in emulation of Guru Nanak's celebrated *Arti.* Ardent admirers of Tagore admit that none of his lyrics written to celebrate the cosmos equaled the excellence of Guru Nanak's composition.

If such was Guru Nanak's commitment to writing, he must have striven to award identity to the language from which he derived his syntax. He did strive for that by borrowing words not only from languages of the past but also from dialects of his time. This borrowing was marked by a mode that acccepted changes of spelling, punctuation and meaning. As a result, his language created a paradigm that originated from Sanskrit and via dialects tended to emerge as a Punjabi of multiple accents and intonations. Only by forgoing historical philology and by relaxing his dependence upon its Indo-Aryan version could Kahn Singh have grasped this point and made an issue of it with Ernest Trumpp. Had he done so, he would have decoded the inadequacies, so glaringly obvious from the translation Trumpp did of selective portions of the *Adi Granth.* In his obsession to see his translation as just literal, how he ended up as archaic would have become overwhelmingly clear to him.

Trumpp's view about the lexicon being repetitive required not only a philological but an aesthetic look as well. Having been a missionary in the formative stage of his life, he had formed the view of thinking that the model for scriptural writing could only be the Bible. The Bible is in the narrative mode, modeled upon the continuity of narration. To ward off retardation, such a mode

cannot afford to use a lexicon of the repetitive type. The *Adi Granth* is composed in the poetic mode that regards recurrence in lexicon as not only desirable but rather essential. This is particularly true of Guru Nanak's oeuvre. This recurrence awards poignancy to the message that, by cancelling out all distraction, holds the listener in its grasp. Even the reader, not receiving it through recitation, but responding to it through reading, is moved by its message. To what extent recurrence fails to remain on its own, when it changes into repetition, needed to be judged from the angle of composition as well as reception.

In this regard the role played by music, not only in reiterating the message but also in conveying the varying resonance of the lexicon, could not be ignored. The different ragas are drawn from classical sources but they have the flexibility of folk music. The musical resonance liberates the metrical order, and the *matra* system from rigidity of the sort. Rather than correctness organized by rigidity, it is effectiveness, determined by flexibility, that defines the compositional principle of *Gurbani*. In certain portions, this compositional principle may have suffered in forwarding the requisite effect. Where, how and why it happened could have been revealed by Kahn Singh by adding the pleasure folk music provides to the erudition he professed about the intricacies of classical music.

Thus, the issues raised by Trumpp were of crucial importance, even though he raised them in an imperious way. Engagement with them was so very essential. Kahn Singh was in an eminent position to analyze and evaluate them. For him to do this, a distance from Macaullife's work was required, which he chose not to create because he was disinclined to transgress his comfort zone. This preference for the comfort zone has been advocated in a more enhanced form by modern scholars and historians.[23] Professor Hew MacLeod's hermeneutics and Professor J.S. Grewal's academism are its glaring examples.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Professor Gurinder Singh Mann for urging me to write this paper. For elucidating several issues taken up in the paper, I never felt him getting weary of long talks we used to have on telephone. If I continue this series and come up with more papers of this sort on the later Sikh thinkers, the credit for that will largely go to him.

Notes

[1] In Punjabi, *matt* is widely used for common sense. It is believed to mark understanding ranging from the autochthonous to the social aspects of life. It does not favor ritual or replace the real with the ideal. Guru Nanak used *kumatt* and *sumatt* to signify either descent into ritualism or ascent into noble understanding. His triad is reminiscent of Antonio Gramsci's use of common sense, good sense and its distortion as false ideology. In my book, *Antonio Gramsci* (2012), I have translated those terms as *lokbodh, subodh* and *kubodh*. Here, I am disposed to replace the earlier triad, with appropriate meaning, with one drawn from Guru Nanak. To my mind, this has more thematic appeal. The historical philology, operative in this paper, derives a lot from Guru Nanak's creative sensibility and Antonio Gramsci's philosophical sagacity.

[2] In Guru Nanak, *sahib*, taken from its Arabic original, stands for the Almighty when used in the mystical and metaphysical sense. There, it evokes the semantic range of ascent. When used in the secular sense, it underlines descent with all the ostentation accompanying it. Unmindful of this distinction, this term figures in the common sense only to denote ostentation. I dare use it to assert that a person marked by great sagacity and profound wisdom, but tied to tradition, tends to negate what may be emergent and innovative in his achievement.

[3] It is thought that Bhai Gurdas's oeuvre in Punjabi is key to the grasp of *Gurbani*. Sant Singh Sekhon, so far the greatest critic of Punjabi language and literature, has termed it as "substantially true." To support his view further, in *The History of Punjabi Literature, Vol. 1*, he has underlined Bhai Gurdas's great endeavor to convey the good sense of the Gurus in the idiom of common sense through a "very concrete and illustrative manner." What Sekhon finds most positive is his language "comparatively free from the *Sadhavi* idiom, its prepositions and conjunctions" so common in the compositions of the Gurus. If his verses did not find a place in the *Adi Granth*, it was "because of his great humility that he chose to deny himself this great honor." No greater proof of his good sense could be there. For further detail, see Sant Singh Sekhon's book, *Bhai Gurdas*, published in Punjabi.

[4] The proof of Bhai Mani Singh's good sense arises from his profound perception of the cataclysmic situation in which his community got entangled in the first quarter of the 18th century. The following translated version of a letter believed to have been written by him bears ample testimony to this fact:

> Let me convey that after coming here, my body has been afflicted with gas in the stomach. My health has been destroyed. I have twice listened to the recitation of the divine spell's version. I have not neglected to perform my duty as servant of the Temple. The power of the Khalsa has been decimated in the land. The Singhs have taken shelter in the hills and the woods. The fear of the barbarians has become widespread. None, child, youth or woman, is safe here. They are cut to pieces and quartered. Those who betrayed the Guru have gone to their side…All have deserted

> their households... As yet, I am safe under the protection of the Almighty but there is no assurance about the future. The Will of the Almighty cannot be evaded…Rumor is afloat that Banda has escaped from prison. The Almighty will help…Reply may be sent in a bamboo stick.

In his book, *Bhai Mani Singh*, Dr. Rattan Singh Jaggi holds that this was not his letter. Even if it was written by some unknown person, it poignantly expresses the dilemma he faced at that historical juncture. Believing it genuine, Sant Singh Sekhon, in his play *Banda Bahadur* portrays him as the greatest existential Sikh of the 18th century. An English translation of this play is available in *Sant Singh Sekhon*: *Seven Plays on Sikh History*, translated by Tejwant Singh Gill.

[5] In *The Language of the Third Reich*, Victor Klemperer, forced to live in utter deprivation during the Nazi era, has shown how the meanings of German words suffered perversion and deterioration under the Fascist regime. To my mind, this happens, though not with that intensity, in societies acclimatized to authoritarianism, corruption and exploitation. The Sikh community was a victim earlier of the feudal and the priestly and now of its own feudal-cum-corporate class. Perversion and deterioration in the meanings of these two words is a typical example of this ethical-cum-linguistic decline pervasive in the Punjabi lexicon.

[6] Per the earlier Sikh historians, including Rattan Singh Bhangu, Kaura Mal was a *sahajdhari* Sikh. Whether he was so by conviction is not certain. It is also debatable whether his goodwill for the Sikhs was contextual, born of larger sympathy or situational, arisen from his confrontation with Lakhpat Rai, the dewan of Lahore. Favorable mention of Kaura Mal is found in as recent a book as Rajmohan Gandhi's *Punjab: From Aurangzeb to Mountbatten.* Though favorable, it is a bare mention because the writer's focus is more on the absence of national feeling among the Muslims of Punjab in the 18th century. He limits his explanation to Kaura Mal's personal intention. That there was a political dimension to it, however vague, is not brought out. In his play, *Waris*, overtly based on the life of Waris Shah, the most popular poet of the Punjabi language, and covertly hinting at Sikhs as the inheritors of Punjabi sovereignty then, Sant Singh Sekhon dilates upon his political intention. At the same time, he stresses that it did not meet the aspiration of the Sikhs of the time who were fighting for full-fledged sovereignty vis-à-vis both the Delhi Sultanate and Ahmad Shah Abdali.

[7] Earlier it was a *dera* headed by Baba Sarup Singh, grandfather of Kahn Singh. In 1861, when he expired, his son, Baba Narain Singh succeeded him. It was believed that he could recite the whole of the *Guru Granth* from memory. Kahn Singh was his son and he grew up under his religious and academic guidance.

[8] Such heterodox views prove helpful to priests and fake mentors who wish to mystify the *matt* of the people and project superstition as a higher form of spiritual perception. From the beginning of the 18th century, ambiguity has persisted in the perception of the Sikhs at

large about the demise of Guru Gobind Singh. Rather than resolve the ambiguity, this view, which Kahn Singh also was disposed to sponsor in his article, *Ithas de Unfole Virke* ("History's Closed Leaves") sought to mystify it into impenetrable obscurity. Only Sant Singh Sekhon, in his play *Banda Bahadur*, dares raise it to the level of historical probability. He holds that in the garb of Banda Bahadur, Guru Gobind Singh himself returned to Punjab to realize his political project. Its English translation is available in *Seven Plays on Sikh History*.

[9] As tutored by Kahn Singh, Ripudaman Singh cultivated a deep concern for the religious well being of the Sikh community. The massacre of the Sikh *jatha* in the gurdwara at Nankana Sahib, the birth-place of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, completely alienated him from the colonial dispensation. After he was deposed, his deposition sent a wave of consternation and culminated in *Jaito da Morcha*. Kahn Singh observed complete silence over the issue. In *Mahan Kosh* he implied that some sort of a conspiracy hatched in the palace occasioned it. Without breaking his silence, he shifted his residence to Patiala.

[10] The level of excitement *Jaito da Morcha* aroused may be gauged from the fact that in his novel *Blood and Soil*, written in English in the late thirties, Sant Singh Sekhon holds that even in the colonies located in the western part of Punjab, Sikhs raised *jathas* to reach the place of protest. The Punjabi version of this novel, *Lahu Mitti*, appeared in the late forties and was acclaimed as the first realistic novel in the language. The English version, previously available only in manuscript form, has now been published by the National Book Trust New Delhi. Likewise, in *Khere Sukh Vehre Sukh* ("Happy Hamlet, Happy Home") Avtar Singh Billing has certified that this *morcha* caused excitement even in Powadh, a region of Punjab where the influence of Sikhism has been secondary if not tertiary as compared with its influence in the Majha, Doab and Malwa regions.

[11] Kahn Singh, *Hum Hindu Nahin* ("We are not Hindus") (Amritsar: Wazir Hind Press, 1897). Though its reprints have been numerous, no critically edited edition has appeared for more than a century.

[12] Max Arthur Macaullife came to India and then to Punjab as an administrator. The doctrine of Sikhism and its devotional appeal impressed him so much that he resigned from service to devote himself to the translation of the *Guru Granth* into English. He undertook this task to undo the offence that Ernest Trumpp's translation had caused to the Sikh community. His intention to ingratiate himself with the Sikh preachers was evident enough. As against the unfamiliar rigor flaunted by his predecessor, he observed leniency, which quite often resulted in prolixity of the inexcusable sort.

[13] Kahn Singh Nabha, *Vilayat da Safarnama*, Ed. Rachpal Kaur (Nabha: Virjesh Prakashan, 1983). In connection with the publication of Macaullife's volumes, the author stayed in England in 1907 from May to the end of December and in 1908 from August to November. Strangely enough, he felt less at home during his second visit, the reason being temperamental and personal and not political and national.

[14] Nothing national and political interested him. It is evident from the fact that no sensational incident found mention in the letters. For example, Lala Har Dayal, regarded as a young genius then, returned the money he received from his double scholarship for undertaking higher studies in Oxford and came back to India. The incident happened when Kahn Singh was in England and he could not have missed hearing of it. More details on this incident are provided in my paper, "Lala Har Dayal, His Rise and Fall," published in *Punjab: Past and Present*, v. 15, April 2013. Further insight into Kahn Singh's mind may be gathered from my article, "Earliest Two Punjabi Travelogues," included in *Indian Travelogues* (Shantinaketan University 2009).

[15] Bhai Vir Singh, *Rana Surat Singh* (Amritsar: Wazir Hind Press, 1905). Then the impression had gone that the protagonist of the epic was based upon Raja Surata Singh Majithia. During the Anglo-Sikh battles, he had fought against the English. As a result, he was arrested and his estate was confiscated. On the eve of 1857 revolt, he opted to support the English and did a lot to enlist the Punjabis against the rebels. The English not only restored his estate but also honored him with the title of Raja. His younger son, Sunder Singh Majithia, was the undisputed leader of the Singh Sabha Amritsar. His elder son, Umrao Singh Shergil, was non-political but erudite by nature. He will ever be known for being the father of Amrita Shergil, the legendary painter and the founder of modern painting in India. For further detail, reference may be made to my book, *Amrita Shergil: Jeevan te Kala* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 2005).

[16] Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha, *Mahan Kosh* ("Encyclopedia of Sikh Literatures") (Amritsar: Wazir Hind Press, 1932). This edition of the magnum opus comprised four volumes. On each page entries were spread into two columns. Later on, Language Department Punjab, situated in Patiala, brought it out in a single volume, with three columns on each page. The print was so small and the volume so *bulky* that handling it was extremely ponderous. Now Punjabi University Patiala has brought it out in four volumes on the pattern of its first publication. Punjabi University Patiala has also brought out its English version in four volumes. Professor Tejwant Singh Gill and Professor Gurkirpal Singh Sekhon are its editors and translators.

[17] This concept may be traced to V.N. Volosinov, who in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* holds that systematization is the distinguishing mark of any kind of thinking focused on ready-made material. Extending it into the field of language-study, he elaborates that its full scope is realized in a language that has lost its "sacrosanct and authoritative character." With respect to a living language, he adopts a conservative position, interpreting it as an already perfect and ready-made event even though no record or evidence may be available.

[18] References are to Professors Hew McLeod and J.S. Grewal, because of their concern with records or evidences as archival, and because they do not shy away from having recourse to tactics of this sort. In his path-breaking book, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, the former doubts whether *pandits* and *maulavis* had the acumen to teach Guru Nanak. By

limiting himself to skepticism, he does not realize the potentiality of the hermeneutics that he seeks to forge beyond the orientalist scholarship of Ernest Trumpp. At the same time, he avers that, in the absence of any other pedagogic mode, it should be believed that only this way Guru Nanak acquired education. In his book, *Sikh Ideology, Polity and Social Order*, Grewal has the following explanation to offer:

> The fact that Guru Nanak was regarded as competent for service must be seen in relation to his early education. In spite of the conventional image of Nanak as a young man who refused to learn anything from either a pandit or a mulla, it may be suggested that his teachers had performed their task well and Guru Nanak improved upon their instruction through his own genius. It may be safely assumed that before he came to Sultanpur, he was an educated young man according to the ideas of the time.

[19] Such informal education is rare but its illustrious precedence is provided by Benedetto Croce, regarded by Antonio Gramsci as the greatest traditional intellectual of the 20th century. Left an orphan due to earthquake in which all other members of his parental family got killed, he was educated only at home by his maternal uncle. He did not go to any university for higher learning though his writings had a profound effect upon academicians of almost all branches of knowledge, ranging from history to philosophy and aesthetics to linguistics.

[20] During Bhai Vir Singh's lifetime these miraculous tales, later collected in these volumes, were published by Wazir Hind Press, Amritsar. Presently Bhai Vir Singh Sadan, New Delhi, has re-published them in glossy editions. Their English translations have also been brought out.

[21] This fact does not remain hidden in the letters that Tagore wrote to his English friend. The documentary that the eminent film-maker Satyajit Ray made on him also brings it out in a poignant way. In my article, "Tagore and Punjab: Dialectics of Interaction," published in www.museindia (March-April 2015), I have sought to put this fact into a broader perspective.

[22] For further detail, reference may be made to my paper "Ernest Trumpp: His Critique and Translation of the *Adi Granth*" in *Khalsa: A Thematic Perspective* (Punjabi University Patiala, 2001). A German by birth, Ernest Trumpp was a polyglot, expert in fourteen languages. Besides Greek, Latin, German and English, he knew several languages of the Muslim world and of India, particularly the north-west part of the subcontinent. Anti-monarchist during his youth, he reversed many of his views as he grew older and in fact became an advocate of monarchy in politics, a fanatic in religious belief, a votary of the *Bible* and an expert in Oriental Studies. However, those who mattered in the field of Oriental Studies then, like Max Mueller, had little regard for him because they stuck to ancient languages while he was in favor of studying the living languages. Instead of settling in Germany, he had shifted to England to earn his livelihood.

It was in England that he attracted the attention of the Foreign Office searching for a polyglot who could translate the sacred texts of the Sikhs into English. In the battles fought against the forces of the East India Company, the Sikhs had fared valiantly and the colonial administration later wished to grasp the ethos of these people for the good of the imperial rule. For this purpose, nothing could be more useful than a study of the *Adi Granth* in English translation. Ernest Trumpp was assigned this task and several times he came to stay in Punjab for this purpose. Haughty by temperament, he worked on his own without seeking support from native scholars, for whose parochialism he had nothing but disdain. At the same time, he diverted his energy to the study of Sindhi and Pashto, to which he became more attuned. So far went his translation of the *Adi Granth* that he could do only one-quarter of it after his return to Munich. He found a teaching job in the university there, later became a professor and ultimately died a deranged scholar, rendered blind by overwork. In the preface, which spread over more than one hundred pages, he made the following observations about the doctrine, style, language and composition of the *Adi Granth*:

(a) Its doctrine has no originality of the philosophical sort. Guru Nanak, its fountainhead, is distinctly indebted to Kabir.
(b) Its language is only a mixture of the dialects of the time. Its chief merit lies in presenting them in an obscure way.
(c) Its style observes no metrical norms.
(d) Music is so intrusive in the composition of the hymns that serious study brings no reward.
(e) Indiscriminate mixture of immanence and transcendence proves a source of perplexity for philosophical reflection.

[23] In his book, *A Study of Guru Granth Sahib: Doctrine, Social Content, History, Structure and Status*, acclaimed by Prof. J.S. Grewal as "comprehensive in scope," he holds that "The *Adi Granth* of Ernest Trumpp offended Sikh sensibilities both because of its contemptuous tone and wrong interpretation of the *Granth Sahib*…apart from the repugnance of the German missionary for a non-Christian faith." If not demonization, it amounts to total rejection of Trumpp's philological labor. If a critical gaze is exercised upon the philological labor he put into translating and evaluating the *Adi Granth*, it can be both helpful and meaningful. At least, I have found it so while translating Guru Nanak's *Arti*:

> In the sky's salver, sun and moon are lamps and stars the pearls.
> Fragrance wafted from *chandan* hill is incense and wind the fan.
> Verdure provides flowers for your worship, o Lord.
> Wondrous is the worship you get, for ending life and death.
> Un-struck melody like clarion resounds in souls of all beings.
> Countless eyes form your gaze, who has no eyes apart,
> Countless forms inhabit you on your own having no form.
> There pervades the same light in beings that illumines them all,

Radiant with the Lord's kindness, this light turns into worship.
Like a bee my mind is lured to fragrance of the Lord's lotus-feet,
Grant me this gift who aspires for it as cuckoo thirsting for rain.

Exercise of critical gaze does not mean to accept what the protagonist says or reject what the antagonist contends. It means to invoke and imbibe the serendipity Guru Nanak showed in his oeuvre, particularly in *Siddha Gosht* and *Omkar* for analyzing and evaluating the contentions of his adversaries. Rather than enrich this serendipity in the light of later advances in human awareness, the Sikhs have reduced its domain and horizon. This attitude needs be rectified and brought into accord with the serendipity adopted by Guru Nanak five centuries back.

This is for several reasons. First, Guru Nanak never posed as a god or a prophet. He regarded himself as one identical with the suffering of humanity. Second, he wished to be distinctive as a poet to voice his people's dreams and desires, distractions and aspirations in a conscious-cum-conscientious way. Third, this required him to gather awareness of various spheres of life. Only this could enable union with the Divine. But this union could not be to negate the secular world. If such was the end, bafflement was in store so as to enable the human to align with the secular world's essential norms of honesty, integrity and fraternity.