

Punjabi Autobiographies

Amarjit Chandan

Punjabi poet, writer and commentator

This article looks into the autobiographical accounts of Punjabis written mainly in the Punjabi language in the 19th and 20th centuries¹. It begins with a brief history of the known accounts prior to the 19th century, leading into the discussion of major factors that shaped the mindset of the people of the region in the 19th and 20th centuries and the genres of autobiographical accounts that resulted. The works of various authors are then loosely categorized and summarized under the headings: Education, Identity, Women writers, The Impact of 1947 and 1984, and Political Activists. The article concludes with the work of the five most influential writers from the period, whose contributions are considered institutional in terms of scope and magnitude.

Biographical references in Punjabi literature can be traced back to very early times. The life story of Pūraṇ Bhagat, the legendary Pūraṇ Bhagat, son of Rājā Śālivāhana who ruled Sialkot, which was handed down in the form of folk ballads, is probably the earliest example of the genre under discussion. It has been variously dated to the 1st century BCE (in the time of King Vikramāditya; see Meyer *et al.*, 1908, 335) or to the 4th/5th century CE (Serebryakov, 1968, 11-14).

Bābā Farīd (1173-1266), whose poetry is included in the *Gurū Granth*, was the first to write down details of his own life, though further information can be gleaned from the stories about him that circulated after

¹In the modern history of Punjab, socio-political and literary movements were multi-religious, multi-lingual and multi-scriptural. Even Sikhs chose to write in Urdu, English, Braj and Hindi besides Punjabi. Academic studies so far have discussed the concept of Punjabi identity at length without reaching at its logical end – the question of nationhood not based on religion. Mulk Raj Anand, Punjabi-English writer and Igor Serebryakov, Russian Indologist, in the interviews conducted by me in London and Moscow in 1982 and 1989 respectively, agreed that the literature produced by a Punjabi in any language ought to be categorised as Punjabi literature. In that context I have attempted an inclusive bibliography.

his death. Biographical accounts, particularly of Bābā (later Gurū) Nānak (1469-1539), began to be composed some 50 years after his death in the form of the *janamsākhīs* (lit. birth stories), which provide a hagiographic outlook on Gurū Nānak's life and the early days of Sikhism. The first person narrative of a spiritual mission by Gurū Gobind Singh (the tenth *gurū*) appears under the title of *Apṇī Kathā* (My Story) in the hagiographic text that is now known as the *Dasam Granth* (Book of the Tenth [Gurū]); believed to have been compiled by Bhāi Manī Singh after the death of Gurū Gobind Singh). These elements continue to appear in Kesar Singh Chibbar's *Bansāvalīnāmā* (Family Trees [of the Ten Gurūs], completed in 1769), who also documented the compilation history of the *Dasam Granth*. Ratan Singh Bhaṅgu, arguably the first Sikh historian, included brief autobiographical accounts in his book *Srī Gurpanth Prakāś* (c. 1810).

Detailed autobiographical accounts began to flourish in the early 20th century, when Western literary genres such as fiction, one-act plays, essays, and autobiographies began to be published by the new generation of English-educated Punjabis. A plethora of autobiographies by Sikh writers, theologians, political activists, civil servants, administrators, academics, educators, lawyers, and performing artists were written in the latter half of the century. The confessional accounts came later.

Notable autobiographies by Sikh authors that sum up and help us understand the social and cultural history of 20th-century Punjab include: Sahib Singh (1892-1977) and Teja Singh (1894-1958), both *gurbāṇī* (utterances of the gurūs) exegetes; the political activists Sohan Singh Bhakna (1870-1968) and Sohan Singh Josh (1898-1982); the educators and writers Gurbakhsh Singh (1895-1977), Sant Singh Sekhon (1908-1997), and Harbhajan Singh (1920-2002); the historian, journalist, and translator Khushwant Singh (1915-2014); and the administrator, writer, and architect of post-1947 East Punjab, Mohinder Singh Randhawa (1909-1988).

A writer or a journalist taking up activism was an entirely new phenomenon that became characteristic of modern Punjab. During the first half of the 20th century, most of the Sikh authors were leading players in the national political struggle of Punjab. Their autobiographies are the primary source of this historical narrative.

Punjabi literature in the latter half of the century was predominantly under the influence of the progressive political movement that had been initiated in 1936 by Gurbakhsh Singh, Sohan Singh Josh, Sant Singh Sekhon et al. Prior to this date, the progressives had been writers and

poets who wrote on patriotic and social reform topics in traditional forms. All such autobiographies by Punjabi writers of Sikh background, including avowed Marxists, owe their basic world outlook to traditional Sikh values.

Sohan Singh Josh wrote specifically on Sikh culture as his main source of inspiration, although he later became an atheist. Ajit Singh, Sohan Singh Bhakna, and Sohan Singh Josh, among others, were the founders of the anticolonial movement that arose in the early decades of the 20th century, and thus influenced all the successive movements led by the Ghadar movement, the Akali movement (or Gurdwara Reform Movement), Kirti Kisan Sabha, and the Congress-Socialist parties, including those of post-1947 East Punjab.

Six autobiographies that appeared in Punjabi during the pre-1947 period were products of the peasants' agitation (1907) and the Ghadar movement (1913). Their political affiliation ranged from Bharat Mata Society and Akali Dal to Congress-Socialist and communist parties.

Most of these are intimate memoirs written in prisons under the harshest conditions. Sohan Singh Bhakna dictated his autobiography *Merī Rām Kahānī* (My Life Story, 1930) to his fellow prisoner Arjan Singh Gargaj while he was on hunger strike in solidarity with Bhagat Singh (a renowned revolutionary of the Indian independence movement). Both Teja Singh (1952) and Harbhajan Singh (1994) start their accounts by praying to God to guide them to remain truthful but at the same time not to be hurtful to others, and to help them avoid ego and jealousy in their writings. Hira Singh Dard sees the purpose of writing his memoirs *Merīān Kujh Itihāsik Yādān* (Some of My Historical Reminiscences, 1955), upon the insistence of his friends, in the refutation of the theory of natural leaders. Dara Singh, a wrestler turned actor and the first sportsman to be nominated to the Rajya Sabha (upper house of the Indian parliament), wrote his *Merī Atam Kathā* (My Autobiography, 1990) as an "inspirational story" for young people.

New Perspective on Western Thought

Sikhs studying at the universities of Oxford, Cambridge, London, and California in the 1920s came into contact with Western thought and learned to interact with it. Sher Singh Giani (1939), Gurbakhsh Singh (1947, 1959), Lal Singh Kamla Akali (no date), Narain Singh (Bar at Law; 1966), Mohinder Singh Randhawa (1985), and Khushwant Singh (2002)

also wrote the first travelogues of Europe and North America, creating a new genre by Sikh authors.

Sikh Education

Authors of Punjabi autobiographies such as Teja Singh, Sahib Singh, Niranjan Singh, Sant Singh Sekhon, Giani Lal Singh, Piar Singh, and Pritam Singh were pioneers in the promotion of education for the region.

Khalsa College in Amritsar, established in 1892, was seen as the nursery of loyal and educated young Sikh men to serve the British Empire. Its functioning was always fraught with antagonism between the pro-British management (especially after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919 in which more than thousand peaceful protestors were killed by the British Army) and the pro-Akali faculty led by Niranjan Singh (1892-1979). The rift culminated in the founding of the Sikh National College in Lahore by the latter in 1938.

Niranjan Singh was the younger brother of Master Tara Singh, the Sikh leader, but their politics differed widely. Being a *khādī* (homespun cotton)-clad member of the Gandhian Congress, Niranjan Singh described his short-lived experience as principal of the Sikh National College as one of emerging like a bubble and ending as such in 1947. In its brief existence of ten years, the college attracted the very best faculty, including professors such as Victor Gordon Kiernan (1913-2009), Kishan Singh (1911-1993), Randhir Singh (1922-2016), and Pritam Singh (1918-2008).

Teja Singh gives a first-person account of Max Arthur Macauliffe, the *Gurū Granth's* English translator. Sahib Singh is known for his work on *Gurbānī Viākaraṇ* (Gurbani Grammar, 1932), *Tīkā* (an exegesis of the *Gurū Granth* in ten volumes), *Srī Gurū Granth Darpaṇ* (The *Gurū Granth* Mirror), and his biographies of Sikh *gurūs*. In *Merī Jīvan Kahānī* (My Life Story, 1977), he narrates how the idea of working on the grammar (*Gurbānī Viākaraṇ*) and the interpretation of the *Gurū Granth* (*Srī Gurū Granth Darpaṇ*) came upon him while he was doing the *kathā* (exegesis) of the *Gurū Granth* in 1920.

Women Writers

Despite the avowed equality of women in the Sikh religion, the issue of their participation in higher education was not adequately addressed until the first half of the 20th century, and the groundwork for this was

not laid until the late 19th century. Takhat Singh (1870-1937) of Firozpur (with the partnership of his wife Harnam Kaur and later of Agya Kaur) was a pioneer in women's education in the 19th century. He established the first school for girls in Punjab in the year 1892 at Firozpur. The school, which had started as an open-air school, was gradually expanded into a boarding school, high school, and college that was completed in 1904 and came to be known as the Sikh Kanya Mahavidalya (Sikh Girls College).

Despite several small initiatives to educate women, even in the 20th century, higher education for women remained largely restricted to well-off, educated families, especially in the rural areas of Punjab. But notwithstanding their limited exposure to education, quite a few women writers did in fact emerge in the 20th century. Born in the pre-1947 era, they published their autobiographies in the last quarter of the century.

Amrita Pritam (1919-2005) was the first female poet to make a name for herself in the field of literature. Her autobiography *Rasīdi Tiket* (The Revenue Stamp, 1976) caused some sensation through its revelation of her one-sided love affairs with Muslim men and her rebellious life style.

Kailash Puri (1925-2017) wrote books that were mainly concerned with sex. The Punjabi language is generally inhibited in this field and the task of writing on a subject that was so dominated by men in conversation and writing proved to be a challenge for her. Her autobiography *Bār Jāo Lakh Berīā* (I Offer Myself a Thousand Times, 1996) as well as the English-language publication *Pool of Life: The Autobiography of a Punjabi Agony Aunt* (with Eleanor Nesbitt, 2013) give a glimpse of her own life and of that of other working Punjabi women in the diaspora.

Prabhjot Kaur (1924-2016), in her autobiography *Jīnā vī ikk Adā hai* (Life as an Art, 1996), details her long, dysfunctional marriage with a novelist and military attaché, and her successful career as an author.

Ajit Caur (b. 1934) made her mark as a writer of short stories, winning the Sahitya Akademi award for her autobiography *Khānābadoś* (The Nomad, 1982; ET: *Pebbles in a Tin Drum*, 1995). Its sequel, *Kūr Kabār* (A Load of Rubbish), was published in 1997.

Dalip Kaur Tiwana (1935-2020), with a prolific output in fiction, also published her autobiography *Nañge Pairān dā Safar* (A Barefoot Journey, 1980).

Kana Singh (b. 1937), known for her sensuous, erotic, and lyrical poetry, shows prudence in her memoirs *Cit Cetā* (I Remember, 2013), which are written with a tinge of Pothohari dialect.

Sikh Identity

Both **Khushwant Singh** (1915-2014), who stood close to Master Tara Singh, and **Jaswant Singh Neki** (1925-2015), a psychiatrist and poet, toyed with the idea of a Sikh homeland in the early 1950s, but both evade their past by failing to conduct a self-analysis in their autobiographies. Their work shows how the assertion of Sikh identity manifested itself in the Gurdwara Reform Movement (1920s), and later on in the prisons, as the right to wear turbans and Sikh articles of faith – a struggle that continued up to the early 1940s. Sikh sovereignty became a part of a limited political discourse in the latter half of the 20th century.

The Impact of Partition and 1984

All Sikh autobiographies that cover 1947 share the pain of the catastrophe associated with the Partition of India, which the authors found beyond comprehension. Likewise, Harbhajan Singh, in his autobiography *Colā Tākiānvālā* (The Patched Robe, 1994), includes his journal entries and poems written on the storming of the Darbār Sāhib at Amritsar and the anti-Sikh pogroms that took place throughout India following Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984. Jaswant Singh Neki, in his book of poetry entitled *Koī Naun Nān Jāñe Merā* (No Body Knows My Name, 2000), chronicles the anguish of a tormented soul witnessing the tragedy of 1984.

Political Activists

Gurdit Singh

Zulmī Kāthā (The Story of Tyranny, 1921) was the first “life story” published in Punjabi. Gurdit Singh (1860-1954), the author, was an entrepreneur turned political activist. Its English translation, *Voyage of Komagatamaru or India's Slavery Abroad*, appeared five years later. Written

as “a duty to point out how the authorities had insulted peaceful Indian immigrants of *SS Komagatamaru*,” the book was a rebuttal of the Government of India’s *Report of the Komagata Maru Committee of Inquiry* (January 1915).

Jawala Singh

Jawala Singh (1866-1938) was the first vice president of the Ghadar Party (1913) and the founding president of the Kirti Kisan Sabha, a peasants union in Punjab (1937). He was tried in the First Lahore Conspiracy Case, in which he was sentenced to lifelong deportation and forfeiture of all property. A special tribunal described him as one of the party’s “brains”. His book *Ghadar dī Lalkār* (Ghadar’s Challenge, 1995) details the harsh treatment meted out to the Punjabi political prisoners at the hands of the state authorities, from the governor down to the jailers.

Sohan Singh Bhakna

Sohan Singh Bhakna (1870-1968) was the founding President of the Ghadar Party, which was established in 1913 in California. He was sentenced to death in the First Lahore Conspiracy Case in 1915. Later, the sentence was commuted to lifelong deportation to the Andaman Islands, where he spent seven years; he was subsequently released from Lahore jail in 1930, having been imprisoned for a total of 26 years. Sohan Singh wrote more than four successive autobiographical accounts, mainly in Urdu. Punjabi versions of three accounts were published with twenty-year gaps between them. *Merī Rām Kahānī* (My Life Story) reads like a good literary piece with several poignant details such as his love affair with a Muslim female dancer from Amritsar in his youth and seeing his mother for the first time in years while he was in Multan jail as a condemned prisoner. *Is Jagat Yātrā Mein Ankhoṅ Dekhī aur Āp Bītī* (Eyewitness Account of My Journey in This World) was written in Urdu after his release from prison in 1951 and published in Punjabi as *Merī Āp Bītī* (ed. and trans. by Amarjit Chandan, 2014). The third instalment, *Jīvan Saṅgrām* (Life Struggle), was published in 1965 (ed. and trans. by Malwinderjit Singh).

Wasakha Singh

Sant Wasakha Singh (1877-1957), one of the founders of the Ghadar Party, finished writing his full-length autobiography around 1921, although it did not appear until 2001, when the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak

Committee published it under the title *Atam Kathā* (Autobiography). In the autobiographical genre, it was the first ever work in Punjabi. It was also unique in the sense that it was written in the form of poetry. Around the same time and in the same poetic genre Sadhu Daya Singh Arif (1894-1946) published his autobiography *Zindagi Bilās* (Joy of Life). Thanks to Wasakha Singh's efforts in the Khalsa Diwan Society (founded 1906 in British Columbia, Canada), the first Sikh *gurdvārā* (place of worship) in the United States was built in Stockton, California, in October 1912.

Bhai Randhir Singh

Bhai Randhir Singh (1878-1961), a revolutionary and a Sikh mystic scholar, was the only leader of the Ghadar Party to reside in Punjab. He was sentenced to lifelong imprisonment in the Second Lahore Conspiracy Case. His Punjabi-written autobiography *Jail Cithiāṇ* (Letters from Prison, 1936), a collection of 26 letters written from prison during his 16 years of imprisonment, reveals his personal spiritual experiences and contains accounts of his suffering.

Ajit Singh

Ajit Singh (1881-1947), paternal uncle of Bhagat Singh, rose to a legendary status in 1907 when he led the Pagrī Sambhāl Jātā ("Take Care of [Thy] Turban") peasant agitation. In 1909, Ajit Singh escaped to Iran and spent most of his remaining life in self-imposed exile in Europe and South America. He returned home in 1946, only to die at the very midnight when India gained freedom on August 15, 1947. He wrote his autobiography, *Buried Alive*, in English in May 1947. It was published in Punjabi translation in 2001.

Hira Singh Dard

Hira Singh Dard (1889-1965), a journalist and writer, launched a monthly literary journal named *Phulvārī* (Flower Garden) in 1924, which became a landmark in Punjabi literary journalism. He was also the secretary of the Sikh League and a member of the SGPC, the central organization responsible for the upkeep of Sikh places of worship (the *gurdvārās*). He published books of didactic poetry, fiction, and prose.

Harjap Singh

Harjap Singh (1892-1982) took the helm of the Ghadar Party in 1919 in San Francisco. Then in its second phase, the party was in disarray after all the

top leaders had been imprisoned in Punjab following the failed February 1915 uprising (the Ghadar Mutiny). In early 1926, he headed a five-member delegation sent by the Ghadar Party to study at the Communist University of Toilers of the East, run by the Third (Communist) International in Moscow. His memoirs *Jail Diary ate Hor Likhtān* (Jail Diary & Other Writings, 1999) chart his life journey from 1909, when he went to the United States, to his time in prison. More than 90 activists of the Ghadar Party or Kirti Kisan Sabha – the majority of them Sikhs – received their political and military training in Moscow during 1924 and 1940. Harjap Singh is exceptional on two counts: firstly, because he writes in detail about the specifics of their training there, and secondly because he brands Stalin as a “traitor to the cause of the international working class” for disbanding the Third International.

Sohan Singh Josh

Sohan Singh Josh (1898-1982) was elected the General Secretary of the Shriomani Akali Dal and a member of the SGPC at the very young age of 20. He was the first general secretary of the Kirti Kisan Sabha (KKS – Workers and Peasants Party), which was established in April 1928. He was arrested in March 1929 in connection with the Meerut Conspiracy Case and served five years in jail. He was the first communist to be elected to the Punjab Legislative Assembly in 1937. He edited *Kirti* (1926-28) organ of the KKS and *Parbhat* (The Morning) a literary magazine in Punjabi from Amritsar. He was the editor of a weekly communist paper *Jang-i-Azadi* (War of Freedom) started in 1940 in Lahore and after partition daily *Nawan Zamana* (New Age) published in Jalandhar. As a translator of Marxist texts, he had a knack for linguistics and coined many new terms in Punjabi.

Josh wrote both in Punjabi and in English. His notable books on contemporary history, in which he himself played an important part, are *Akālī Morciān da Itihās* (A History of Akali Agitations, 1972), *Kāmāgātā Māru dā Dukhānt* (The Tragic Story of the Komagata Maru, 1976), *Bhagat Singh nāl Meriān Mulākātān* (My Meetings with Bhagat Singh, 1977), and *A History of the Hindustan Ghadar Party* (2 vols.), which was published in English in 1977/1978. His equally English-written autobiography, *My Tryst with Secularism* (1991), was published posthumously.

Gurmukh Singh Musafir

Gurmukh Singh Musafir (1899-1976), a writer and statesman, was appointed head of the Akāl Takhat (the central seat of religious authority for the Sikhs) from 1930 to 1931. He also served for a time as secretary of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) as well as general secretary of the Shiromani Akali Dal (Sikh centrist political party). In 1966, he was appointed chief minister of the reorganized state of East Punjab. His published works include nine collections of poems and eight of short stories. His autobiography *Dhūr Dhūr Paindā* (Along Dusty Roads), written in 1963, was published posthumously.

Naina Singh Dhoot

The memoirs of Naina Singh Dhoot (1904-1989) are the only recorded published personal testimony that is available in English translation. He remained a grassroots activist of the Punjabi communist movement for more than five decades (1936-1989), organising small Jat (the landowning caste) farmers and industrial workers. He studied at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East in Moscow from 1933 to 1936, having been sent there by the Ghadar Party of Argentina.

Arjan Singh Gargaj

Arjan Singh Gargaj (1908-1963) was a political activist and journalist. His memoirs *Do Payr Ghat Turnā* (Walking with Grace, 1961) and *Shahid de Bol* (Martyr's Words, 1962) read like a Who's Who of the freedom struggle. Kulwant Singh Virk, a master of Punjabi short fiction who wrote the preface to the last book, praised Arjan Singh Gargaj for "opening the door to the events from 1919 to 1947".

Writers as Institutions

Teja Singh

Teja Singh (1894-1958), essayist, literary critic, translator, teacher, educationist, scholar, publicist, and activist, dominated the Punjabi literary scene for a whole generation. Sikh history and theology were his special fields. His autobiography *Ārsī* (Handheld Mirror) was published in 1952.

Gurbakhsh Singh

Gurbakhsh Singh (1895-1977), the author of more than 50 books, is considered the father of modern Punjabi prose. He was the initiator of an entire movement in the social and cultural life of (mainly Sikh) Punjabis, the so-called Preet Lehar ("Movement of Love"). His monthly magazine *Prīt Laṛī* (The Love Link) started in 1933 and influenced two generations of Punjabi writers. His autobiographical accounts appeared under the titles *Meriān Abhull Yādān* (Unforgettable, 1947) and *Meri Jivan Kahani* (My Life Story, I, II, & III, 1959-64-66).

Nanak Singh

The most popular Punjabi novelist Nanak Singh (1897-1971), with more than 65 novels to his credit, began his literary career by publishing eight collections of poems – the first being *Sadgurū Maehima* (In the Praise of the True Gurū, 1918), a set of hymns that sold over a hundred thousand times. He wrote his autobiography *Meri Dunīyā* (My World) in 1949, followed by the short sequel *Meri Jivan Patāri Coṇ* (From the Basket of My Life) in 1956.

Sant Singh Sekhon

Sant Singh Sekhon (1908-1997), writer, literary critic, and historian, charts the entire cultural and literary history of 20th-century Punjab in his autobiography *Umar dā Pandh* (Journey of My Life, 1989).

Mohinder Singh Randhawa

Mohinder Singh Randhawa (1909-1988), an administrator and writer, joined the Indian Civil Service (also known as the Imperial Civil Service) in 1934 in London. He was appointed as the Deputy Commissioner of Delhi when India was on the eve of independence. He is known for realizing the Herculean task of rebuilding partition-ravaged East Punjab by helping the half a million displaced farmers to resettle (in his capacity as the Director General of Rehabilitation), for adorning the newly built city of Chandigarh with its museum and rose garden (designed by Le Corbusier), and for creating India's first agricultural university – the Punjab Agricultural University in Ludhiana. He is acknowledged as the father of the Green Revolution in East Punjab. His autobiography *Ap Bītī* (It Happened with Me, 1985) is written in simple, idiomatic, and lucid Punjabi. Its chapters on Punjab's partition, Punjabi political leadership,

independence, the displacement of Punjabis, and their rehabilitation make up the body of the book.

Conclusion

The 19th and 20th centuries were crucial periods in Sikh history, setting the stage for their globalization. The most notable events that defined the Sikh psyche during these periods were the loss of the Sikh Empire to the British in 1849, the Sikh involvement in both World Wars, the Ghadar movement to free the Indian subcontinent from colonialism, the genocide and mass exodus during the partition of Punjab in 1947, and the Indian state-sponsored pogroms of June and November 1984.

While dealing with such external factors, Sikhs derived their individual strength from the essence of their lives, the *Gurū Granth* and the Khālsā ("The Collective"), continually keeping their focus on the inward journey as reflected in their autobiographical accounts. These accounts are a testimony to how they dealt with war and adversities, while rebuilding their torn lives and keeping the needs of society – such as education and justice – in the focus of their attention.

Women were the backbone of the families that kept them going and their spirit alive, and although their education took a backseat during the grief-stricken centuries, they made the best of what was availed to them. They wrote about personal relationships, subjugation and liberation, failures and triumphs, and their inward journeys that helped them cope.

Collectively the autobiographies attest to the Sikhs' resilience and to the fact that they steadily gave the common good priority over all other causes. Driven by the love of their *gurū*, or the love of their people, or both, they simply marched on.

Even though this text attempts to document the available autobiographical accounts, the environment of their actors, and their genres; it also leads to a reflection on what is missing. For a people who have gone through historical events of such magnitude, not much has been written, for instance about their accounts of World War I and II, in which over 100,000 Punjabi soldiers perished. Accounts in humanities, to which Punjabis have contributed so heavily (e.g. in the fields of architecture, art, cinema, literature, music and science) are equally scant.

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