Surjit Patar: A 'Sufi' of Our Times

Rana Nayar
Panjab University, Chandigarh

In this paper, I examine the poetry of Surjit Patar within the broader framework of the existing streams of Punjabi poetic tradition(s). My contention is that predominantly, we may identify or recognise two distinct, though interrelated streams of Punjabi poetry; one of the Sufi poetry that may be traced back to Baba Farid, and the other, that of protest and social criticism, which may trace its beginnings to Guru Nanak Dev. These two streams have continued to flow, uninterruptedly, through the literary and cultural landscape of Punjab, nurturing it. I further argue that in the 1960s or around that time, both streams of Punjabi poetry found their proponents in the gentle radicalism and romanticism of Shiv Batalvi and the revolutionary radicalism of Pash. It is my contention that Surjit Patar can only be made to occupy a middle ground here, as he is neither a totally liberated Sufi nor a vociferous social critic. The special quality of Patar's poetry is that it has the power to transform the human heart by reconfiguring an external, social or political event into an interiorised, personal image. The contraries don't necessarily create tension in his poetry, instead they cohabit and harmonize easily. It is Patar's tendency for self-dialogue and self-reflexivity that brings him in league with the Sufi poets. He is a modern Sufi, who may not have the appearance of a sufi, but who thinks, feels, acts, and writes like one. It is Patar's deep sense of ethical concerns, his aesthetic preoccupations, his involvement in the cultural life of Punjab, his unshakeable faith in the power of the spoken word as well as his indigenous brand of humanism that bring him very close, in essence and substance, to the Sufi strain of poetry. We, therefore, have valid reasons for describing him as a Sufi of our times.

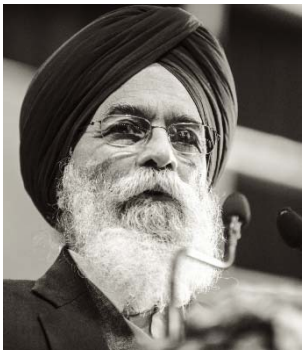

Photo: Courtesy of Amarjit Chandan (UK)

In the recent times, no other Punjabi poet has enjoyed the kind of prominence and popularity that Surjit Patar has. His popularity can be gauged from the fact that if people had prior information about his plan to grace a *mushaira* or a *mehfil*, they would travel long distances or wait for hours on end just to be able to listen to him,

recite. And he would recite poetry in his own inimitable, self-absorbed manner, poring over the resonance of each spoken word, almost half singing his poems in his soft, lilting and melodious voice. His sudden and unexpected death (as he had returned from a *mushaira* only the previous night) on May 24 this year has silenced this 'voice' that resonated on the soil of Punjab, even elsewhere, for well over five decades, and, has now left a huge void in the realm of Punjabi poetry. This void may never be filled, ever, for the likes of him are rarely ever born, and even if they do, they rarely ever attain the kind of stature Surjit Patar did.

Much before we start looking at Surjit Patar's life, times or his poetry, it is important that we place him within the tradition of Punjabi poetry, where he, undoubtedly, occupies a pre-eminent, even an enviable position. It is a well-known fact that Punjabi poetry started with Baba Farid in the 13th century, and has, in its long march over nearly eight centuries, traversed many terrains, witnessed many upheavals, and yet has continued to flow ceaselessly, even uninterruptedly, through history. If one has to identify two significant 'streams of poetry' (I must clarify that my focus here is only on secular poetry, and not on *Bani* or sacred poetry) that have, over the centuries, run through the poetic landscape of Punjab, then one may broadly classify them as the stream of 'Sufi' poetry, and the stream of 'social criticism' and/or 'protest'. These two streams, either singly, or together, could be said to constitute or construct the two main traditions within the realm of Punjabi secular poetry.[1]

The tradition of Sufi poetry, which started with Baba Farid (1173-1266), did find many worthy and competent successors, over the ages, such as Shah Hussein (1538-1599), Sultan Bahu (1628-1691), Bullen Shah (1680-1757), Waris Shah (1722-1798), Hashim Shah (1753-1823), et al. Though it might appear that this particular stream had practically run aground in the middle of the 19th century, it is not quite true. It again surfaced in the poetry of Pooran Singh, Mohan Singh and later, Shiv Kumar Batalvi. Since most of the conventional literary historians and critics of Punjabi are likely to have serious difference of opinion over this issue, it is important to offer some clarification on Sufi poetry, and if possible, mention, at least, some of its identifiable features, too.

Popular understanding of Sufi poetry is that it is a form of poetry written only by a practising Sufi, who doesn't recognise the authority of the *ulema* or the *maulvi*. Though he may be a practising Muslim, otherwise, he wears a '*suf*' (long, woollen coat, preferably black in colour), and evolves his own set of practices, rituals and meditation. He leads a

fearless, uninhibited life of a mendicant or a nomad, often dancing or singing in the streets (the activities which are completely forbidden in Islam), for his goal is not to seek worldly acceptance, but to live in a trance-like state, where he can constantly meditate over his 'creator', for his longing is to united with Him, ultimately. Though most of the Sufi poets we have cited here were, undoubtedly, practising Sufis, over the years, this notion of a Sufi has undergone a dramatic change. Now, the term Sufi is not used so much for someone who either dresses up as a Sufi or dons the appearance of one, but rather someone who subscribes to Sufi philosophy.[2]

Much before we dwell upon the Sufi philosophy or the Sufi poet-persona, it is important to mention that in the context of Punjabi poetry, Sufism is understood very differently from the way it is in Islam. No doubt, Punjabi Sufism derived its main content, vocabulary and grammar from Islam, while rejecting the Islamic orthodoxy, it definitely did imbibe a certain openness and flexibility through its historical contact and interaction with Sikhism, Punjabi language, people and culture, and also, to some extent, with the Vedantic thought. No wonder, the Sufism that flourished on the soil of Punjab was far more eclectic in character as compared to Sufism that emerged in other parts of South East Asia or the world.[3] It is for this reason that Sufi philosophy, as understood in the context of Punjab, must necessarily be seen as a way of life, or rather a vision, which is the crystallization of all the ideas that the Sufi saints/poets, over the centuries, had either believed in, practised, embodied or popularised through their words and/or deeds.

Today, a Sufi poet-persona doesn't live in his *khanqah,* but rather mingles freely with all shades of people, without being intimidated or overawed by anyone, for he fears no authority, howsoever highly placed. In other words, Sufi is the one who believes that he is *in* the world, and yet not *of* it; the one who performs his worldly duties diligently, and yet remains somewhat detached and distant; the one whose faith in otherworldliness and transcendence is genuine, and who doesn't look upon this world as an object of consumption, rather as a subject of eternal curiosity and meditation. It is in this philosophical sense (where the term Sufi is used in its broadest sense possible) that we can talk about the continuation of the Sufi strain of poetry in Punjabi in the 20th century.

Apart from *Bani* (sacred poetry), which is often attributed to Guru Nanak and other Sikh Gurus, another stream of poetry, which may be traced back to Guru Nanak, is that of social criticism or protest. Though

Guru Nanak's poetry was largely about his metaphysical reflections on life, death, nature, time and God, it was equally about man's relationship to other human beings. Guru Nanak was not completely oblivious of the social reality that surrounded him. On the contrary, wherever he saw the worn-out, decadent social practices flourishing in his society, he raised his voice against them. He was extremely vocal in his criticism of the Mughal Emperor, Babar, too, especially when the latter had unleashed a reign of terror on his arrival in India.[4] Every time, his social situation so demanded, Guru Nanak was only too eager to step out of his P role as a mendicant, and become an activist, even a social reformer. He could easily be described as one of the first radical, activist poets, who raised his voice for the poor and the subjugated, in the process raising consciousness and awareness of his people about the pressing social issues.

Another point that needs to be emphasized here is that though these two streams; that of 'Sufi' poetry and that of 'social criticism', may theoretically appear to be mutually exclusive, even contradictory, in actual practise, they aren't quite so. No doubt, these two 'streams' do constitute two distinct, even discrete traditions, a certain overlap can't be ruled out completely. It would be safe to suggest that though they are different, they are interconnected as well. If the idiom or the imagery of the Sufi poetry is drawn from the raw earthiness of everyday life; the poetry of 'social criticism' draws its main content from the social reality that surrounds a poet, at a particular moment or time in history. However, what really sets them apart is not the language, idiom or the imagery, but the fact that social reality is refracted or reflected through each in a very distinctive manner.

In the 20th century, what we witness is the complete divergence of these two streams, almost as though they had begun to flow in two separate channels. Each of these two streams had found its own adherents, who could easily be located within two separate, ideological grids. The period of 1960s and 1970s was quite an exciting phase in the history of Punjab and Punjabi poetry. This is the time when two discernible trends could be said to have dominated the poetic scene; the lyrical romanticism of Shiv K. Batalvi (1936-1973), and the revolutionary radicalism (spawned by the Naxalite ideology), of Pash (1950-1978). Though Shiv Batalvi had already been canonized by the late 1960s, as he had won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1967 for his epic verse drama *Loona*; Avtar Singh Sandhu alias Pash, with the publication of his first ever radical, revolutionary collection, *Loh Katha* (1970) was not just making his debut,

but also causing a major disruption in Punjabi poetry. It has rightly been said that after Paash, Punjabi poetry could not remain what it was before his appearance on the scene.[5]

In the 1960s and early 70s, Punjab was going through a process of great churning, on account of Green Revolution, and the consequent mechanization of agriculture, even that of personal, social and economic life.[6] Though it did turn India from a food-deficit to a food-surplus state, its impact on the economy of the villages or the state was not a very positive one. Almost imperceptibly, Green Revolution eroded the stability of feudal relationships, based on the principle of mutual interdependence; the relationships that had existed for centuries, among several classes, castes and social groups, and replaced them with a new ethos or code driven by money-economy and money-orientation. This led to major disruptions in the village economy, resulting in the impoverishment and alienation of the socially marginalized groups such as farm labourers -- a fact that Gurdial Singh has bemoaned in several of his novels.[7]

This was also the time when Punjab witnessed a state-wide agitation for the creation of Punjabi *suba* (a Sikh majority state with Punjabi as its state language). In 1966, a much greater Punjab, which was also geographically and linguistically diverse, was split into Punjab and Haryana (under the Reorganization Act of 1966), with some areas going to Himachal Pradesh, too, then a Union Territory. It was as though in 1966, Punjab suffered the 'second' Partition, though it was certainly not as traumatic as the first one of 1947 had been. No doubt, the pride of the language and the people was restored, but we had ended up as a much smaller, truncated version of pre-1947 Punjab, something that eventually did cause incalculable harm to us, psychologically as well as culturally.

Though the Naxalite movement had originally started in the state of West Bengal, it came to Punjab in the late 1960s, led by the educated elite, university teachers/students, poets, writers, activists and a cross-section of labour union leaders, who had already been active in the region for a decade or more. Lal Singh Dil, Harbhajan Halwarvi, Amarjit Chandan and Pash were some of the poets, leading from the front. They sought to radicalise the masses by actively working for an 'armed revolt' against the state, which only landed most of them in jails. Oppressive measures of the state coupled with the misdirected efforts of the movement leaders (who focussed on the small peasants, rather than the dispossessed farm labourers), ultimately led to the slow collapse of Naxalism in Punjab. In 1980s, how some of the 'disillusioned' cadres among the former Naxalites

had joined hands with the Sikh militants is, of course, part of another story. Ironically, it was at the hands of one such militant group that Pash was killed in 1988.

Though Surjit Patar had never been active in the Naxalite movement, nor did he openly subscribe to its radical philosophy, he shared a very ambivalent relationship with Paash. As pointed out by Shamsher S. Sandhu, though outwardly, Patar and Pash appeared to have a warm and cordial relationship (so much so they both openly admired each other's talent also), but somewhere deep inside, both knew that they had no meeting point, as they were positioned on the two extreme ends of the ideological spectrum.[8] Though Pash had once written a poem '*Mei te Patar sagge bhraa'* (*Patar and I are real brothers'*),[9] which, on the face of it, may appear to be adulatory, but on a close reading, shows strong undercurrents of sarcasm and irony running through it. The following lines of the poem bring out this fact very suggestively:

It was amidst the sand dunes
That we both were born….
He longed for the letters
And I, for the rejoinders
He nursed sparrows' wounds
And I, swooned over hawks' flight
I did a degree in language foul
He did one in the language of music….
In our long, arduous journey
There came a strange milestone
When we both fell into ruins, ever so slowly
I and Patar, the real brothers. (Translation is mine)

What Pash is suggesting is that apart from the fact they both were born in Jalandhar District, in two different villages (only 30 kilometres apart), Patar in Pattar Kalan and Pash in Talwandi Salem, they probably had very little in common with each other. Right from the beginning, they followed two very different trajectories. Although Patar was almost five years senior to Pash (as the former was born in 1945), he published his first collection of poems *Hawa Wich Likhe Harf* in 1979, nine years after Pash had published his first collection. Despite the fact that Patar had started writing poetry right from his college days in the early 1960s, and was also a known 'voice' in the Punjabi literary circles, none of the established

publishers were somehow willing to put their weight behind him. Another interesting facet of Patar-Pash relationship is that Patar, too, on his part, had written a poem on Pash, in which he described him as *Larazada Neer (Tremulous Waters)*[10] this particular poem, Patar has not only voiced his personal sorrow over the death of Pash (saying that *the news of Pash's death had turned him into a stone*), but has also bemoaned the fact that the Naxalite movement took a huge toll on the Punjabi youth, as he felt that the movement didn't have a very strong foundation (it was on *shaky waters*) to build on. Though Patar was anguished by the endless sacrifice youth had made for the ideology they subscribed to, he, being a pacifist at heart, could never reconcile himself to the idea of a violent struggle or an armed rebellion as an instrument of social or political change.

Like a true Sufi, Patar believed that it's the heart of a man that must become the site of real struggle and conflict, and that social and/or political transformation must be preceded by the inner revolution or the transformation of the self. Time and time again, Patar returns to this idea of self-transformation, reflected in a large corpus of his poems such as: '*Ujjale Sheeshe Sanmukh Mainu Chir Tak Naa Khalihaar*' ('*Don't Let Me Stand in Front of a Bright Mirror for Long'*),[11] *'Sahi Hai Maliko Raahan Di Tilkan'(Yes it's true, Maliko, there are these Slippery Paths')*,[12] '*Uh Mainu Raag ton Vairag Tikkar Janda Hai' ('He Knows Me, from Attachment to Detachment')*,[13] and *'Lahu Luhaan Haan Mainu Sambhalana Shabdo' (I'm Bleeding Profusely, O Words, Get Hold of Me')*.[14] Most of these poems are in the nature of self-dialogue, where Patar is communicating more with himself than with the world outside. Commenting on this process of self-conversation in one of his poems, *Mere Andar Wi Chaldi Hai Ik Gufatagu* (*A Conversation Goes on Endlessly, Inside Me, too*),[15] he says:

A conversation goes on endlessly, inside me, too
Where my blood seeps into my words, and moulds them, too
Where I must debate with none other than myself
Where Waris and ancestors stand, face to face. (Translation is mine)

It's through this process of self-reflexivity that he often manages to externalize several of his dreams and desires, his conflicts and predicaments, his moments of self-doubt even self-debate. The questions of existence, life, death, time, attachment and detachment always fascinated him. Though he never subscribed to the philosophy of existentialism in the Kierkegaardian or Sartrean sense, the existentialist strain, as it is found in the Sufi poetry, is perhaps the strongest on his poetry, too.

It's important to point out here that Patar's 'self' was not the 'alienated self' of the existentialists, but the 'cultural self', rooted in the soil and substance of the syncretic Punjabi tradition and identity. Often, in his poetry, he comes across as a mute spectator of the changing rhythms of time, especially when he reflects on the question of language and its role in shaping the cultural identity of the Punjabis. The issue of language was, indeed, a major issue in Punjab, especially when Patar was growing up through the decades of 1950s and 1960s. Although, after the Reorganisation of Punjab state in 1966, this issue had more or less been settled, officially, at least, the situation on the ground was markedly different. One could see how the newly urbanised, middle-class or affluent Punjabis in 1970s or even later, in their effort to appear 'modern', were practically alienating themselves from their own language Punjabi, and gravitating towards English. Surjit Patar has, in several of his poems, not only presented instances of this kind of self-alienation, but also bemoaned the gradual disappearance of our cultural self. In one of his famous poems, '*Mar Rahi Hai Meri Bhasha*' (*My Language is Dying*),[16] Patar says:

My language is dying word by word
My language is dying sentence by sentence ….

My language is dying
Because the people of my language want to be alive ….

My language will die
Only after we all die
It's also quite possible
That trapped in this cycle of death and dying

And fighting the forces inimical to it
My language may become
More active, agile and alive than it currently is. (Translation is mine)

Of course, the poem runs through a whole gamut of emotions, all occasioned by the struggle of the mother-tongue to stay alive, before it ultimately ends on a relatively optimistic note. Transcending the particular, the poet moves to the universal, realizing in the process that the language always outlives the people, and it's never the other way around.

In another poem, *Mereyo Lafzo* (*Words of Mine*)[17] he ponders over his troubled relationship with words, the kind of expectations he once had of them and how, finally, the words have proved themselves to be utterly meaningless, even futile. He says:

O words of mine
It's time for you to take leave, and go home.

Hey, why don't you return to the dictionaries

In the slogans
In the speeches
Or mingle with the statements
And go, and be a slave to some leader

If still, some moisture is left in you
Then be a part of the sorrowing hearts
Of mothers, daughters and sisters
Mingle with their grieving wails
Or sink into the pool of their eyes
Go, and commit suicide. (Translation is mine)

In this poem, which has been written in a characteristic self-conscious style, Patar problematizes his own relationship with language, and how he has reached a 'linguistic statis' where he feels the need to recharge or reorient words, if his creativity is to remain serviceable to him. The same words that once served him as 'an unending army of lamps, returning to

the night' and had enabled him to weave beautiful songs and lullabies with which he could connect with the world outside, now seem to have become barren, even lost their intrinsic meaning and signification. Reflecting over this kind of debasement and devaluation of his language, he realizes, that it is the result of the commercialization and commodification to which all languages are constantly subjected in our times. By thus putting a big question mark over the very role and function of language, without which poetic expression is well-nigh impossible, Patar succeeds in making two very important observations here. One, he is able to externalize his own conflictual relationship with language, and two, by raising philosophical questions about the language, he also manages to underline that in a commodified culture such as ours, a poet must use language with a degree of self-reflexivity, and even re-invent it, if necessary. Often, Patar's seemingly simple poetic expression masks a density that, at once, surprises and unsettles a reader; revealing symbolic richness, even complexity in his multi-layered, nuanced and textured poems.

So intense was Patar's pre-occupation with this question of language or the 'mother-tongue' that he chose to devote three of his collections to this subject; and these are; *Hava Vich Likhay Harf;* (*Words Inscribed on the Wind,* 2000), *Hanere Wich Sulagadi Varanhmala* (*Punjabi Alphabets Smouldering in the Dark,* 1992), and *Lafzaan Di Dargah* (*The Shrine of Words,* 1999). These collections offer Patar's uninterrupted and prolonged meditations over this question of native language, its serious neglect in our everyday lives, and its deleterious impact on our cultural life. He believed that, more than a mere instrument of communication, language plays a very significant role in shaping the social and cultural life of our community.

To say that Patar confined or restricted himself only to the cultural aspects of Punjabi life would be a complete misreading of his poetic intent or thematic thrust. He created his poetic universe on a massive, macro scale, and there is nothing that falls beyond the pale of its ever-shifting boundaries. The ecology of Punjab interested him as much as did its cultural ethos. He has written poems on 'trees' and their intimate relationship with human existence. In his poetry, when trees converse with each other, they want human beings to overhear their conversation. Sometimes, it's the symbol of a 'burning tree' that surprises a reader and singes his/her consciousness as well. Incidentally, he has an entire collection called *Birkh Arz Kare* (*Thus Pleads the Tree*); (though all the poems

here don't use 'tree' as the central motif), in which a 'smoked out jungle' does become a pretext for dwelling upon the slow destruction of ecology, and its corrosive impact on human life. The 'birds' don't simply 'twitter through' his poems, instead become witnesses to a curse that the poet may have to live through. Patar uses conventional images, but often invests them with his own distinctive, unconventional meanings.

Besides, there is hardly any shade of human emotion and/or feeling, ranging from love to longing, separation to union, joy to grief that doesn't find its objective correlative in his *nazms* and *ghazals*. Though Patar may have worked on a wide range of themes and ideas, but his canvas always bears his unmistakable stamp as a miniaturist. Within his sprawling poetic landscape, he moves around with the self-assured ease of a miniature artist, applying tiny brush strokes, here and there, creating finely-chiselled, poetic images. In Patar's poetry, the macro and the micro not only come together and cohabit, but also supplement and enrich each other.

Incidentally, this kind of reading of Patar also allows us to interrogate a particular criticism of his that some of his critics have put forward, to my mind, for all the wrong reasons. His critics opine that he was so completely lost in his world of sloppy sentimentalism and/or romantic solipsism that he found no time for a meaningful and productive engagement with social or ethical issues.[18]

This view is generally held by the readers/critics who have somehow convinced themselves that he was neither a vocal supporter of Naxalite movement (on this, we have already understood his rationale for a difference of opinion with Paash), nor very candid and forthright in his condemnation and denunciation of militancy/terrorism in Punjab. Some critics have even gone to the extent of saying that he chose to be evasive, if not elusive, on the major political developments in Punjab, which he not only saw and witnessed, but also lived through, experientially. Ludhiana, which falls in the Malwa region, and where Patar taught Punjabi literature at the Punjab Agricultural University for the better part of his academic career, has not only been an important literary and cultural centre, but also an epicentre for both the Naxalite movement and the militancy/terrorism.

Undoubtedly, Patar had seen and observed, from very close quarters, both these phases of tumultuous upheaval in the contemporary history of Punjab. It's not that he refrained either from taking a clear position on these developments, or steered clear of them altogether, as if his poetic

sensibility hadn't registered them at all. On the contrary, Patar's poetry shows a deep sense of awareness of 'everydayness' in the life of an average Punjabi, something we do expect of him – an extremely sensitive soul that he was. When the Punjab went through a process of churning, Patar's heart didn't just throb in unison with the ordinary Punjabis, but he suffered the pangs of anguish, despair and tragedy, as much, if not more, as the people did, and used his poetic voice to articulate their multiple traumas, as well. It's another matter that his expression is not direct, rather richly layered. In one of the poems, reflecting on the tragic moments of Punjab, he says:

I keep tracking sadness all the time,
Each time the track gets close to my mind,
I go where the trail of blood-drops takes me
And it ends up in the same dungeon
Which exists in the darkness of my mind,
Many a time, I get hold of the culprit's hand
And each time, I see it as my own hand.[19]

If we go along with his suggestion that he is someone who is 'tracking sadness all the time', Patar could easily be described as a cartographer of Punjab's 'sad history'. Only someone with a very special kind of sensitivity and synesthetic imagination could have possibly felt both an inexplicable 'sadness' and an 'overwhelming sense of guilt' on seeing the blood stains of the young political rebels (be they Naxalites or the militants) on his own hands. Patar did possess this rare sense of empathy and compassion, which enables him to transfer the feelings of the shared 'collective memory' to an intensely personal, and inwardly-turned image of deep reflection, even complicity. Very often, what we don't realize is that apart from internalizing or interiorizing a social or a political event, Patar also transforms it into a haunting image of aesthetic contemplation. Patar's poems create a 'liminal space', where the reader is often invited to enter into the experiential space, though on the terms, the poet spells out himself. The extent to which the reader agrees to go along with the poet, s/he is likely to be rewarded with the richness of meaning, which, I dare say, is both gratifying and unsettling, at the same time. It is gratifying because of our ability to decode the meaning(s), but 'unsettling' because Patar has this immense capacity to constantly shock us into an awareness of 'who we are' or 'what we might have become'. Moreover, Patar draws

rather heavily, as can be seen in this poem cited above, upon the 'dungeons' of Punjab's cultural memory/history. This does demonstrate, in no uncertain terms, that Patar's commitment to the land, its language, its people and history, was unflinching, and so was his social engagement.

What really set Patar apart from his other contemporaries, and perhaps took him closer to the long lineage of Punjabi Sufi poets, was the fact that he enjoyed a rare felicity in both modes of poetic expression, the printed word, and its orality as an utterance. Not only did he relish the act of writing (which he always did in a self-conscious and self-reflexive manner), but he always loved reciting his own poetry too. No wonder, during his life-time, he, in the manner of the ancient bards and minstrels, would always be eager to go from city to city, region to region, country to country, reciting his poetry to packed houses and mesmerised audiences. He was, indeed, a great 'performance poet'[20] who sought to popularise poetry through his public performances.

Almost with the finesse of a well-trained musician, Patar understood the power of the spoken word, its nuanced cadences and undulating rhythms, just as he had a strong, intuitive feel for the musical tonalities of the language. Much before Patar actually turned to poetry, he had a strong desire to learn music and become a singer. No wonder, his poetry, even when it tends to border on the prosaic, is delicately flavoured and textured with a strong, almost irrepressible lyricism and musicality. It's the tonal quality of his poetry, coupled with his own mellifluous, soft and gentle voice, that often made it possible for him to establish an instant rapport with his listeners. Somewhere, if he believed in the permanence of the 'written word', he was equally aware of the evanescent, even obsolescent nature of the spoken word. For him, words could either become 'a shrine' or just remain 'inscribed on the wind'.

Undoubtedly, Patar's poetic voice was highly individualistic, and so was his use of poetic language, idiom and forms. Not only did he experiment with all the known, pre-existing forms of poetic expression, already available to him in Punjabi, but he also ventured out into the realm of Urdu literature in search of newer poetic forms. To Patar must belong the credit for not only adapting two of the most popular poetic forms from Urdu, viz., *nazm* and *ghazal,* but also indigenizing and popularising them, by bending them suitably to achieve his own poetic purposes in Punjabi. On the one hand, if he was willing to stretch back and connect with the tradition, on the other, he was equally eager to move

forward, and whenever he could, even innovate and experiment with new poetic forms and/or ethical possibilities.

In his poetry, Patar always sought to achieve this delicate balance between the written and the spoken, permanence and impermanence, feelings and thoughts, individual self and cultural self, ethical commitment and aesthetic contemplation. As a matter of fact, he was someone who could best be described, after Eliot, as a poet of 'unified sensibility'. All his life, he sought to fuse together all possible types of contraries or binaries, creating through his poetry a harmonious symphony of sorts. Now these notions of harmony, balance and reconciliation may well be seen as the possible starting points, if Patar's worldview or *Weltanschauung* is to be either accessed or understood.

Surjit Patar was someone who believed that though the generic 'man' occupies a pre-eminent position in the world, he can possibly understand himself only in relation to the other creatures and objects, both animate and inanimate. His view of life was not segmented or fragmented, but rather holistic and inclusive, as would be the case with any Sufi thinker or a poet. He may have placed 'man' at the heart of his poetic universe, but clouds and mountains, rivers and valleys, flora and fauna, animals and birds are as much an integral part of his cosmos as are the weak, vulnerable human beings. To put it differently, he was an integrationist at heart, for whom the fruit, the branch, the leaf and the roots were not separate, discrete entities, but part of a single, composite whole. Though he firmly believed in the power of his poetry, he was realistic enough to know that it can't transform the world; at best, it may only assist 'man' recover and reclaim the vestigial elements of his 'lost humanity'.

To conclude, one may say that Patar's rarefied poetic sensibility is a rare combination of ethical, humanistic concerns, and a highly evolved sense of self-reflexivity and/or aesthetics. His existentialism is not entirely devoid of ethics, nor is his aesthetics totally divorced from his humanism. Precisely for this reason, Patar's philosophy or worldview often reminds us of a purely indigenous form of humanism that has flourished on the soil of Punjab for centuries now. It has been nurtured by the likes of Baba Farid, Bullen Shah, Shah Hussein, Waris Shah, Pooran Singh, Shiv Batalvi, and many others. All of them sang of Punjab and Punjabiyat, celebrating the land and its people in all their diversity, almost blurring the distinction between *ishq-e-majazi* and *ishq-e-haqiqi*. In our own times, when man is not only ranged against another man/woman, but also against the world, the nature and the environment, Patar's humanism may have modified itself

ever so slightly, but it continues to exemplify a strong filial connection with the Sufi brand of humanism that has survived until now, and hopefully, shall continue to live on in future, as well.

Notes and References

1. Most of the literary historians of Punjabi have made this distinction in terms of different genres and suggested that the emergence of these genres can easily be linked to different historical phases/periods. such as the medieval, the pre-modern and the modern. This is a conventional, chronological view of history. In such a schema, Sufi stream of poetry is identified with the medieval period, while the poetry of 'social criticism' is said to emerge only in the modern age. This conventional view of literary historiography indicates that the historical evolution of Punjabi poetry shows more dis-continuities than continuities and doesn't make any allowances for the continuity of certain trends and/or poetic forms. For this viewpoint, see, the works of Dr. Mohan Singh, *A History of Panjabi Literature*: *1100-1932* (Patiala: Publication Bureau Punjabi University, 2014), Surinder Singh Kohli, *History of Punjabi Literature* (New Delhi: National Book Shop, 1993), Sant S. Sekhon & Karat Singh Duggal, *A History of Punjabi Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1991) et al. Most of these literary historians/critics are of the view that only two types of poetic forms were popular in the medieval period, viz., Gurmat Sahit and Sufi Sahit. Most of these literary historians refuse to recognise that the Sufi strain, in its mutated form, continues to manifest itself through the modern poetry, just as they refuse to read Guru Nanak as a social activist or a reformer, associating him exclusively with the Gurmat Sahit. Contrary to this view, my reading of the Punjabi literary history suggests that Sufi strain is very much present in the modern Punjabi poetry, too, and that Guru Nanak, apart from being a progenitor of Gurmat Sahit, could also be perceived as a strong proponent of protest poetry. Those who fail to see this element in Guru Nanak's poetry fail to emphasize his role as a social reformer and an activist, which is as much a part of his poetry as Gurmat Sahit is. In this paper, I have offered a kind of revisionism of the conventional view of literary historiography and suggested that history is a continuum and rather than emphasise closure and discontinuity, we need to reinforce openness and continuity, both of which enable us to substantiate this

exercise in revisionism. Though the social, political and economic conditions tend to change, as we move from one historical epoch to another, the trends continue, though their form and/or philosophy gets modified, depending on the socio-cultural conditions of the times.

2. For exposition of Sufi doctrine and philosophy, see, Idries Shah, *The Sufis* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1969), Titus Burckhardt, *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine,* (London: Aquarian Press, 1976), Llewellyn Vaughan Lee, *Sufism: The Transformation of the Heart* (California: The Golden Sufi Centre, 1995).
3. For detailed discussion on this, see, Haribhajan Singh's 'Critical Reflections on Punjabi Sufi Poetry' in *Critical Discourse in Punjabi,* Ed., Rana Nayar, Alpna Saini, and Tania Bansal (London & New York, 2024), pp. 163-172.
4. There are number of instances of how Guru Nanak's poetry, which always remained steeped in its own times, offers scathing criticism of the socio-political conditions existing in those times. This fact has been recognised by a number of Punjabi scholars as well. See, for instance, his semi-ironic denunciation of Babar's ruthlessness and savagery, when he says: '*Paap ki janj le kabolon dhaya, Jori mange Daan ve Lalo' ('O Lalo, this Babar has descended from Kabul, with an entire contingent of 'sinful baraat' in tow/And now he is forcing us to gift away our daughters to him.').* Using the metaphor of bride and bridegroom, quite popular in the Sufi poetry, Nanak warns his contemporaries against the nefarious designs of Babar. In another context, he says: '*Jeha rat laghe kaprejo maho ye paleet, Jo rat peeve maansa tin keho nirmal cheet' (If a deep stain doesn't leave the cloth ever, how can those who drink human blood keep their hearts pure').* These quotes and the connections between Nanak's poetry and Sufism are found in an essay by Gurdial Singh, 'Sufism, Guru Nanak and Heroism: Hallmarks of Punjabi Literature' in Rana Nayar, *Gurdial Singh: A Reader* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2012), pp. 333-337.
5. A number of Punjabi and Hindi critics of Pash have emphasized this point, including Tejwant S. Gill, Kulwinder, Chaman Lal and several others. For detailed discussion, see, Tejwant Singh Gill, *Pash* (Makers of Indian Literature Series) (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2017), Kulwinder Ed., *Sab to Khatarnaak,* 2nd Ed., (Ludhiana: Dastak Parkashan, 2021), Chaman Lal, Ed., *Vartmaan Ke Ru-Ba-Ru: Pash* (New Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 2000).
6. On the issue of Green Revolution in Punjab and its spirited defence, see, M:S. Randhawa, *Green Revolution: A Case Study of Punjab* (New

Delhi: Vikas Publishers, 1974), and for a well-reasoned counterpoint, see, Vandana Shiva, *The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics (*Penang: Third World Network, 1991).

7. In one of his interviews with Vinod Shahi (included in the *Reader* edited by this author), Gurdial Singh had once acknowledged that though the Green Revolution had brought economic and material prosperity to Punjab, it had also dealt a serious blow to the feudal relationships between the landowners and the farm labourers, in more ways than one. Apart from creating social dissensions within a rural economy that was becoming progressively fragile, it had virtually caused the end of patron-client relationship, which had constituted the very core of this economy for centuries. This, along with the new emphasis on 'development' and 'money orientation' had led to the slow, imperceptible erosion of human relations in the rural hinterland. It is this kind of loss and the subsequent vacuum created by this loss that Gurdial Singh often bemoans in his novels. No wonder, the dialectics that operate between tradition and modernity and the social, economic and political tensions resulting from this, often constitute the main ideological fulcrum of his novels. See, Section-II: 'Author: Face to Face with Vinod Shahi' in Rana Nayar, Ed., *Gurdial Singh: A Reader* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2012), pp. 47-65.
8. Shamsher S. Sandhu, *Ik Paash Eh Wi* (Ludhiana: Chetan Prakashan, 2024). In this book, Sandhu has discussed the love-hate relationship Paash and Patar shared with each other. Despite their mutual respect and admiration for each other's poetic genius, they looked at each other rather sceptically, because their ideological positions were markedly different.
9. Paash, *Sab to Khatarnaak*, Ed., Kulwinder, 2nd revised edition (Ludhiana: Dastak Parkashan, 2021), pp. 320-321.
10. Surjit Patar, *Birkh Arz Kare* (Chandigarh: Lokgeet Parkashan, 2023), p. 11.
11. ……., *Hava Vich Likhay Haraf* (Chandigarh: Lokgeet Parkashan, 2022), p. 17.
12. ……., *Patjharh Di Paajeb* (Chandigarh: Lokgeet Parkashan, 2023), p. 73.
13. ……., *Surzameen* (Chandigarh: Lokgeet Parkashan, 2021), p. 58.
14. ……., *Patjharh Di Paajeb* (Chandigarh: Lokgeet Parkashan, 2023), p. 77.

15. ……, *Surzameen* (Chandigarh: Lokgeet Parkashan, 2021), p. 13-14.
16. Patar's poem '*Mar rahi hai meri bhasha…*' accessed on punjabireel.com on October 10, 2024.
17. Surjit Patar, *Birkh Arz Kare* (Chandigarh: Lokgeet Parkashan, 2023), p. 97-98.
18. Some of the critics of Patar have commented on this particular aspect of his poetry. For detailed discussion, see, Tejwant S. Gill, *Surjit Patar: Jivan Te Rachna* (Amritsar: Waris Shah Foundation, 1995), Amarjit Grewal, *Mohabat Di Rajniti* (Ludhiana: Chetan Parkashan, 1999), Jaswinder Singh, *Navin Punjabi Kavita de Pachhan Chinn* (Ludhiana: Chetan Parkashan, 2000).
19. As quoted in an obituary of Patar by Harsh Thakor, 'High on Aesthetics - This pro-Naxal Punjabi poet Shunned Sloganeering' in *Counterview*, News Blog, accessed on counterview.net/2024/6/.
20. The tradition of 'Performance poetry' is usually traced back to the times when poetry was meant to be recited orally and was not as yet part of the written tradition. This kind of poetry saw resurgence in the US in the 1950s and 60s, thanks to the 'beat generation' poets such as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. Later, Pablo Neruda and several others popularised this form in the Latin American countries and elsewhere. In 1960s and 70s, this trend became popular in the Punjabi poetry, too. Amrita Pritam, Shiv Batalvi and Surjit Patar would not simply read their poems but recite and/or sing them in a manner as though these were meant for stage performance. In the 1990s, 'performance poetry' mutated into yet another form that came to be associated with the 'movement of the spoken word.'