

Punjabi & Malayali Literatures: A Comparative Study

Bhai Vir Singh and Kumaran Asanan

SREE KUMAR *

** Sree Kumar, did Post Graduate Diploma in Sikhism and Comparative Religion from Guru Nanak Devji Chair, Madurai Kamaraj University. The present work is an abridged version of his Diploma project. He is presently doing his Ph.D in Comparative Literature.*

Advent of Bhai Vir Singh:

As Punjab is the gateway to India, adventurers from central and western Asia invaded India frequently through the northwest. At the dawn of this millennium, the first stage of the Muslim conquest of Hindustan coincided with the onset of the Bhakti movement, which grew from strength to strength in response to the religious and social challenge of Islam. **At this juncture, Guru Nanak founded Sikhism. From his era to Guru Gobind Singh is known as the Golden age in Punjabi literature.** The literary tradition was continued, and the period of Modern Punjabi literature may be fixed from 1850 to 1975. Furthermore, the pre-independence period may be divided into two parts: the initial British period from 1850 to 1900 and the later British period from 1900 to 1947. Most of the literature in those days was traditional in theme and style. However, there was a great change due to the English education and the impact of the Christian missionaries. Consequently, the young students in schools and colleges were imbued with new ideas, themes and styles. Bhai Vir Singh was one among them.

Born on December 5, 1872 at Katra Garbha Singh, Amritsar, in a notable Sikh family of Jhang whose ancestor Divan Kaura Mal played an important role in shaping the history of Punjab during the first half of the eighteenth century, Bhai Vir Singh's father Dr. Charan Singh and grandfather Gyani Hazara Singh were great scholars in literature as well of Sanskrit and Persian. Thus Bhai Vir Singh inherited the literary tradition from his birth. He did formal education up to Matriculation at the Church Mission High School in Amritsar where he had a chance to learn the doctrine of Christianity, western science and literature. He passed Matriculation Examination in 1891 with the District Board's Gold Medal.

With the establishment of the British government, the Christian missionaries propagated their religion that caused a great threat to the existing religions like Sikhism, Hinduism and Islam. As a result, several new religions and social movements, like Nirankari, Namdhari, Singh Sabha Movement, Arya Samaj Movement and so on, started in order to project their faiths. Bhai Vir Singh's father was one of the founders of the Singh Sabha Movement. In 1892, Bhai Vir Singh led the Singh Sabha Movement which gained momentum in the conduct of his mundane as well as his spiritual affairs. At the same time, he published children's book of introductory primers, physical geography and Urdu *Lughat*; undertook translation of Sheikh Saadi's *Gulistan* and *Bostan*; established Wazir-e-Hind Press, the first printing press in Amritsar that inaugurated a new era for the Punjabi language, literature and culture; and co-founded Khalsa College at Amritsar which became the premier educational institution in Punjab.

With the co-operation of Bhai Kaur Singh Dhupia, he set up the Khalsa Tract Society in 1894. Under their patronage, 1300 issues of '*Nirguniara*' were devoted to the discussion of serious topics relating to religion, philosophy, the life and teaching of the Gurus and the interpretation of the text of Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

In 1898, he wrote *Sundari*, the first novel in the Punjabi literature. In the following year, he started a weekly paper *Khalsa Samachar* that dealt with problems of everyday living and corporate life of the Sikh community and the development of their social and educational institutions. He published two novels, *Bijay Singh* [Parts I and II] during the period of 1899-1900.

He played an important role in the founding of the organization of the Chief Khalsa Diwan in 1902 for the propagation of social and political reforms; to reorganize the management of the Khalsa College at Amritsar; to hold annual conferences and give financial and other assistance to Sikh educational institutions all over Punjab; and to open a network of school and colleges in the country. He had throughout been the chief guide and spiritual leader of the Diwan. For uplifting the untouchables, he established a Central Sikh Orphanage at Amritsar in 1904. In the next year, he completed the great epic, *Rana Surat Singh* that gave important landmark in his literary career. *Lehran De Har* and *Baba Naudh Singh* were written by him during the period of 1907-1921.

In 1908, he instituted Sikh Educational Committee for extending primary and secondary education among the masses. In the same year, he helped establish Central Khalsa Parcharak Vidyalaya at Tarn Taran, and Punjab and Singh Bank Limited at Amritsar. **Because of his sustained efforts, Anand Marriage Act was passed by the Indian Imperial Legislative Council during the period of 1908-1909.**

In 1910, he wrote a play *Raja Lakhdatta Singh*. He established an institution for widows, Vidhya Ashram at Amritsar, and Khalsa Hospital at Tarn Taran in 1912 and 1915, respectively. On the basis of the life story and ethics of Bharthari Hari, he wrote '*Bharthari Hari Jiwan te Niti Shatak*' in 1916. He initiated movements for uplift of untouchables and the Sikh Gurudwara Reforms in 1920. *Matak Hulare*, a collection of short poems on Kashmir and *Kalghidhar Chamatkar*, a biography of Guru Gobind Singh, were written in 1922 and 1925, respectively. He annotated *Gur Partap Suraj Granth*, popularly known as *Suraj Granth*, a history of the Sikh Gurus, in fourteen volumes, by Bhai Santhokh Singh during the period of 1926-1935.

Bijlian De Har, a collection of short poems; *Guru Granth Kosh*, a dictionary of Guru Granth Sahib; and *Satwant Kaur* (Part III) a novel, were written in 1927. One year later, he wrote *Sri Guru Nanak Chamatkar*, a biography of Guru Nanak Dev. *Preet Veena*, longer poem, and *Kambdi Kalai*, a collection of poems, were written in 1929 and 1933 respectively. In 1935, he started a Asylum for the blind at Amritsar. He wrote *Sant Gatha* (Part I) and *Kibit Bhai Gurudas* in 1938 and 1940, respectively. He founded a free Homeopathic Hospital at Amritsar in 1943. In 1949, he was honoured with the degree of Doctor of Oriental Learning by Punjab University for his rich contribution to the Punjabi language and literature. In 1951, biographies of eight Gurus were written as *Asht Gur Chamatkar* (Part I). Next year, he was nominated as a member of the First Punjab Legislative Council.

In 1953, he wrote *Mere Saiyan Jio*, a collection of poems, and engaged in writing *Santhiya Pothis*, a commentary on Granth Sahib, in seven volumes, that was published posthumously. In 1954, an *Abhinandan Granth* was prepared by his admirers and well-wishers. He got the Sahitya Academy Award for his book, '*Merey Saiyan Jio*' in 1955 and was nominated to the National Academy of Letters. Two years later, the Government of India awarded him Padma Bhushan. On June 10, 1957 the poet passed away at age 85. His wife died on 28th April 1966 at Delhi. In 1973, *Sikkan Sadhran* and *Sahitak Kalian*, a collection of poems, were published posthumously.

Kumaran Asan

Kerala's Arabian Sea Coast is inspirational. Malayalam language and literature have been influenced from across the sea, even as its literary history extends a thousand years. The Portuguese, the Dutch and the French invasions do not seem to have had a major impact on the Malayalam literature of the time. During the British regime, there were far reaching changes in Malayalam literature. These changes constitute a veritable renaissance. The first quarter of the twentieth century brought in the full span of the renaissance in Malayalam literature. **The poets adopted new poetic forms like the subjective lyric, the elegy, the dramatic monologue, the description of the beauty of nature, and so on, from the English poetry that had been established by Kumaran Asan. Asan's works belong to one of the golden ages of Malayalam poetry.**

Kumaran Asan was born on April 23, 1873 at Kayikara, a Coastal Village, 40 km north of Thiruvananthapuram, in an (untouchable) Ezhava Community of a cultured Hindu by name Narayan Perukuti and Kaliaamma. "Narayan Perukuti was a great scholar in Malayalam and Tamil literature as well as the local classical music, Sopana Sangeetham", says C.O. Kesavan.¹ Because of this, Kumaran Asan had more chance to enjoy Kathakali and music right from his birth.

He started his education at the age of seven under the local scholar, Thundatil Asan. In the following year, he started to learn Sanskrit under Guru Vdayamkudi Kochuraman Vidyan. He did the 'Sidharupa to Magham' under him. After the age of eleven he joined in second standard at Government School, Kayikara, and passed the fourth standard in 1887. He continued his Sanskrit Studies under Manamboor Govindan Asan for four years. At that time, he used to practice the knowledge of the Mahakavyas, Dramas, Champus, Alankara Satras, etc. Afterwards, he started his career as an accountant, teacher and a priest in a small temple named Velayudan Nada Temple nearby his home

Sri Narayana Guru was a great revolutionary and social reformer of that time. Kumaran Asan has been influenced by his thoughts and reforms. In 1891, he joined with him at Aruvipuram Ashramam where he learned *Bhakti Marga* and Tamil. In 1895, Sri Narayana Guru sent him to Bangalore for higher education in Sanskrit. He enrolled in Sri Chama Rajendra Sanskrit College for Naya Vidyan in *Thaka Satra*. He studied for three years there. But he could not attend the final examination because some students complained to government **that he belonged to a lower caste community. In those days non-brahmins were not allowed to study in the college.** He left for Madras and studied Sanskrit for a few months. In 1898, he left for Calcutta, and was attracted towards the Indian Renaissance Movement led by

Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda. In 1900 he returned to Kerala and associated himself with the formation of the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) Yogam in 1903. **SNDP Yogam awakened the Ezhava Community to fight against the caste system and social evils and to secure political and educational rights for the backward castes. The Ezhava Movement is similar to Akali Movement in the Punjab, the Brahma Samaj in Bengal and the non-Brahmin Movement in Tamil Nadu.**

In 1904, the Yogam started a Monthly Magazine: *Vivekodayam*, popularly known as 'Ezhava Gazette' to ventilate the grievances of the backward classes. Kumaran Asan was the Editor of the Journal. In 1913, he was elected to Legislative Assembly as member of 'Sri Moolam' as a representative of SNDP Yogam. He married Bhanumathi in 1918. In 1920 he resigned the post of the Secretary of SNIP Yogam and joined as a Legislative Member of Travancore Government. The British King, honoured him and gifted the ring and silk shawl in 1922. On January 16, 1924, he was killed in a Boat accident on Pallana River, at the age of fiftyone.

Following are the literary works of Kumaran in order of chronology:

- 1901 *Sivastotramala*
- 1907 *Veenapoov*, a poem
- 1909 *Oru Singha Prasavam*, a poem
- 1911 *Nalini*
- 1914 *Leela*
- 1915 *Sri Budha Charitham*
- 1916 *Balaramayam*
- 1918 *Grama Vrikhathilay Kuyil*
- 1919 *Prarodhanam* and *Chinthavishtayaya Sita*
- 1922 a collection of short poems, *Pushpavadi*, two long poems, *Dhuravastha* and *Chandalabhishuki*
- 1923 Published *Karuna*
- 1924-25 *Manimala*, and *Vanamala*, collections of short poems.

A Comparative Study of the two Legendary Poets: Bhai Vir Singh and Kumaran Asan lived through the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. Most of their works belong to Romantic category. Therefore, one can see so many similarities in their works. A comparative study of the two throws light into similarities or otherwise of their poetic perceptions.

In Romantic era, poets across the entire world were inspired by the English poets. The impact of English poetry on the works of Bhai Vir Singh and Kumaran Asan is most visible in the adoption of new poetic forms, like the subjective lyric, the elegy and the dramatic monologue, description of the beauty of nature- forests, rivers, birds and animals, the seasons, sunrise and sunset, moonlit nights, trees and flowers - point to the influence of Wordsworth, Shelly, Keats and Tennyson.

Bhai Vir Singh lyrically narrates the beauty of nature in *Rana Surat Singh*, an epic poem, in which he emotionally narrates the Platonic love, separation, sufferings, beauty of nature, and the like:

There was an even space amidst mountains
Small yet brilliant, clean and beautiful inside the Himalayan range,
At some distance from a spot of worship

* * * * *

A hill stream with crystal clear water
Coming down the hill with cold fluid
Passing through this domain going down
In some places with soft flow but in some making noise
A beautiful monuments on its bank
Constructed upright with white lime
With a decorated dome and miniatures around it
Covered with golden plate at the top
The walls inside made of white marble
Intersections of different colours running through it, an egg-shaped grave under
the dome, made of subtle design
On the grave beautiful flowers abound: placed by loving hands!

Through these rhythmical arrangements, Bhai Vir Singh describes the scenic beauty of the environment concerned with the various events. Kumaran Asan also narrates the same aesthetically in 'Oru Vina Puvu.'

Ah flower, how exalted was your state
When once you show in splendour like a queen!
Inconstant are the fortunes of the earth;
What a glorious past and now how low you lie!
The mother-plant with loving care
Enfolded your infant charm in calyx soft;
The gentle breeze came rocking you to sleep
To the lullaby of the murmuring leaves
Bathing oft in milk-white moonlight
And frolicking in warm sunlight,
With companion buds you spent your childhood
In care-free ways of endless glee.

Mahakavi Kumaran Asan imaginatively describes a flower that has just fallen and speculates on the nature of the life and love. Lyrical lament on the transitoriness of beauty and an assertion of human kinship with nature are reflected in his poems.

Bhai Vir Singh and Kumaran Asan obtained the literary tradition, culture and heritage from their ancestors. They were educated in English and Sanskrit, so that they could go through all classical works of English and Sanskrit as well as their own literature. Bhai Vir Singh's first poetic contribution was the translation of a popular English poem into Punjabi verse in 1893. Kumaran Asan's *Sri Buddha Charitham* also was begun as a translation - of Sir Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia* - but it is as good as the original in view of the spontaneity and individuality of the verse. Because of this, both of them were inspired by English romantic works.

Bhai Vir Singh and Kumaran Asan worked as journalists in *Khalsa Samachar* and *Vivekodayam*, respectively. They edited and served them as the vehicle for publishing the ideologies of their organisation and for their self

expression as the poets. They started a new era in their languages. They published so many articles, poems, speeches and so forth regarding their Gurus in the journals.

In those days backward classes and widows were oppressed and humiliated in Kerala. In Punjab, Sikhs were tortured by the British. Because of the humanitarian hearts of Bhai Vir Singh and Kumaran Asan, they developed social reforms and disseminated their emotion through their works and social activities. For this purpose, Bhai Vir Singh and Kumaran Asan led the Singh Sabha movement in 1892 and Sree Narayan Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) Yogam in 1903, respectively.

Kumaran Asan vehemently opposed the caste system. It can be seen in his poem, *Duravastha (A Tragic State)*:

The same indeed the Hand that cast
The Brahmin and the Harijan;
and what a range of glorious deeds
of valour, love and intellect,
hast thou thwarted from fruition
O Hindu faith, because of caste
And how many the finest men -
the Sankaras, the Perumals -
and bards - the Tunenans and Kunchans -
who - in thy womb, aborted lie,
alas, my mother Kerala,
because of caste's blood thirsty ways!
And there do lie, Mother Bharat
six to seven crores gems in thee,
which, burnished, would priceless be,
and lustrous - but now cast away!

Bhai Vir Singh was deeply affected by the massacre of Jallianwala Bagh in his native town. He fought against the British rule and he expressed his intense love of freedom as in his poem, *Ganga Ram*:

Never shall I be a servant
Never lose my freedom
Freedom is my birth-right
This is the divine gift
The gracious Lord may ever foster,
My precious spirit of freedom

Great spiritual leaders like Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, Sri Narayana Guru, and Guru Nanak have repeatedly taught us that all men are brothers and have preached the same fundamental values of goodness, charity, tolerance and love. Bhai Vir Singh propagated the duties of Sikhs in accordance with the Gurus through his literary works. He defines Sikhism through the life of Rana Surat Singh and his wife, Raj Kaur:

Sikhism is to keep one's consciousness divinely
Strengthened and inspired
And to live a practical life of positive
And hopeful optimism.

Kumaran Asan also did the same in *Sri Buddha Charitham* which highlighted the thoughts and teachings of Buddha.

Their poems show that both of them were inspired by the philosophy of their respective religion. Religion widely expanded their minds so that they could see and understand the happiness, love, life, sorrows, and separation of all the living things. Because of this, both of them always wrote about human emotions and they drew vivid picture of life in their canvas of mind. We can see the truthful picture of life in one of Bhai Vir Singh's poems:

The world's a bubble; and the life of man
Less than a span;
In his conception wretched, from the womb
So to the tomb;
Curst from the cradle, and brought upto years
With cares and fears;
Who then to frail mortality shall trust,
But limns the water or but writes in dust
Yet since with sorrow here we live opprest,
What of life is best?
Courts are but only superficial schools
To dandle fools,
The rural parts are turned into a den
of savage men:
And where's a city from all vice so free?
* * * * *

To cross the sea to any foreign soil,
Perils and toil;
Wars with their noise off right us when they cease,
We are worse in peace:
What is that remain, but that we still should try
Not to be born, or - being born to die?

In the following lines, he regards the world as a play of God as we are all in His hands:

I play on the lotus-leaf today;
Tomorrow I shall be with Him!
He drops me, and He draws me up –
A dew-drop on the lotus-leaf!

Kumaran Asan has the same view on life. He describes the life in his first poem, *Vina Puvu*:

Turn back, my eyes, this flower will wither fast
And mingle soon with dry forgotten dust
Beware! This is the lost of all, how can tear help?
This earthly life, alas, is but a dream

Both of them said that nothing was permanent and change was the law of life. They write the truth, beauty and goodness though their poems reflect the philosophy of a holistic life.

Conclusion

Bhai Vir Singh led the Singh Sabha Movement for religious revivalism as well as to counteract the activities of the Christian Missionaries. But Kumaran Asan led the Ezhava Movement for their upliftment from religious castrophicism. For this purpose, Bhai Vir Singh propogated the teaching of Guru Nanak through his works and Kumaran Asan propogated the ideology of Sri Narayana Guru and Buddha. Both of them were inspired by Romantic poetic ideals and Indian renaissance because they lived in the same period and got literary tradition, heritage and culture from childhood onwards. **Both the poets widely used female characters in their works. They wanted to encourage the women folk because, in those days, women were humiliated and tortured. Kumaran Asan used only the poetic genre. But Bhai Vir Singh handled all literary genres. Kumaran Asan and Bhai Vir Singh have so far no equal in their own literatures. Both of them were revolutionaries on the social and literary fronts.** Their major poems are all works of transfiguration and inspiration. They move from the unreal to the less unreal, from the less unreal to the real, and from the real to the more real. Because of this they could narrate the multifarious layers of human existence: the profound and the sublime in life. Thus their works became immortal.



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