

# Remembering Bhai Vir Singh®

**PRITPAL SINGH BINDRA\***

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@ Dec. 05 marks the birth anniversary of the saint poet.

BHAI VIR SINGH WAS BORN in Amritsar on December 5, 1872. His ancestral lineage is connected with Dewan Kaura Mal who was a Minister at the time of governorship of Mir Manu of Punjab in the mid-eighteenth century. In spite of Mir Manu's hostilities towards the Sikhs, Dewan Kaura Mal was very sympathetic to the faith of Guru Nanak. He was known as Mitha (sweet) Mal among the Sikhs. This *mithaas* (sweetness) ran through Bhai Vir Singh's forefathers, and made both his father and grandfather apostles of polite and melodious articulation.

Bhai Vir Singh's grandfather, Bhai Kahan Singh renounced the world at a young age, and took refuge in the wilderness of the world of ascetics. During this period he acquired the art of Ayurvedic medicine and healing through the faith in Almighty God. His mother's persuasion brought him back to the world of the living. The practice of medicine, and his belief in faith-healing exalted his position in the society. His son, Dr. Charan Singh – Bhai Vir Singh's father, attained even a higher reputation in the practice of Ayurveda, but his debut in the literary field really enhanced his respectability. His books, especially 'Bani Beora', are invaluable gifts to the Sikh Panth, and Punjab as a whole.

Bhai Vir Singh's paternal lineage bestowed upon him the modesty, soft-and-persuasive eloquence, and sweetness-of-tongue. But he received grounding in Sikh literature, along with the early education, at the feet of his maternal grandfather Bhai Hazara Singh. 'Bhai Hazara Singh was an eminent scholar of Sikh theology and a close associate of M.A. Macaullife.'

Bhai Vir Singh's father visualized an economic service career for him, and with this in mind, he sent him to Mission High School in Amritsar. Bhai Vir Singh studied there for nine years. His brilliant performance in the Matriculation Examination earned him a Gold medal, and brought him unprecedented acclaim from his headmaster. Consequently he was offered a job of a Naib Tehsildar. It would have been a travesty of Punjabi literature and Sikh history had he been unable to persuade his father not to force his job upon him. His grandfather had seen a great potential in him, and had asked his father not to impose any restrictions on this boy contrary to his wishes. His father acquiesced to his desire, and the result was the establishment of Wazir Hind Press at Amritsar. The credit for promulgating Punjabi language with Gurmukhi characters, and in-depth study of Sikh history goes to Bhai Vir Singh. He pioneered the era of renaissance.

Before the appearance of Bhai Vir Singh in the theological domain, the neglect of the Punjabi language was not only prevalent among the Hindus and Muslims, it was also not given due recognition by the Sikh scholars. The use of Braj-bhasha, or a language other than Punjabi, by Bhai Santokh Singh, Bhai Koir Singh, Bhai Ratan Singh Bhangu, etc., are typical examples of this omission. Mahant Gajja Singh, the Head Priest of Patna Sahib was an eminent poet of Braj-bhasha. When he learned that young Bhai Vir Singh was reveling in writing in Punjabi, he told his father that

the boy was wasting his time. He desired to see the boy to convince him that Brajbhasha was the only medium appropriate for writing.

Bhai Vir Singh, full of confidence, presented the Priest his Rana Surat Singh, and himself recited a few pages. Bhai Vir Singh's 'work was mature and polished. Its vocabulary was vast, placement of words was absolutely correct and style was masterly.' The Priest was impressed so much that he pronounced spontaneously, "I wish I could write in Punjabi too," and recommended Bhai Vir Singh to stick to his literary creations in Punjabi. It goes 'to the credit of Bhai Vir Singh to have elevated the so-called rustic language (dialect) to the coveted position of a stable and well recognized provincial language.'

In the field of prose, Bhai Vir Singh is more a historian than a fiction writer. If all the historical events are picked up from his fictions and placed in chronological order, it could give an authentic history of the Sikh religion and Punjab. Dr. H.R. Gupta and Dr. Gopal Singh have highly depended upon the episodes narrated by Bhai Sahib in the novels such as Sundri, Bijay Singh and Satwant Kaur. 'English and Muslim authors have erred in their accounts either deliberately or due to ignorance.' Through these Bhai Vir Singh dispelled the misconceptions. 'His epic Rana Surat Singh is not only a historical treatise, but also a key to the Sikh principles and doctrines.' Like eminent English novelist Sir Walter Scott, Bhai Vir Singh gave lead in writing historical novels in Punjab.

Bhai Vir Singh was not just a writer, he was a great critic and annotator too. His magnanimous analytical study of *Suraj Prakash*, comprising of seven volumes (6,662 pages), contains a fair amount of literary and factual appraisal. He was advised by some scholars to delete the objectionable material associated with the lives of the Gurus. 'But he did not agree. Instead he preferred to refute them (the anomalies) in the foot-notes in the light of Gursikh ideals.' He wanted to deal with the fallacies in their right perspective rather than camouflaging them.

'Punjabi poetry for a long time had been greatly influenced by the Persian way of expression.' Bhai Vir Singh took it out of passion-ridden extravagant imagery, and verbal felicity' and has been written with a 'romantic and spiritual appeal.' One of the greatest passions of Bhai Sahib was nature. For him nature is the 'source of God's Bliss, source of all Arts, source of Love, and source of Beauty'; for which he is called the "Sixth River of Punjab" flowing towards piety, peace and progress. "As light comes down from above and reflects in glass, Beauty descends from heaven and shines through the beautiful. (Eng. Tr. Parkash Singh)

As mentioned in the beginning of the essay, Bhai Vir Singh was born and grew up when the forces of Christianity, Arya Samaj, Ahmadiyahs and the Mahants controlling the Sikh Shrines, were infiltrating to obliterate Sikh identity. The print media was acutely needed to combat the derogatory influence. Bhai Vir Singh's Wazir Hind Press, The Khalsa Samachar, and The Khalsa Tract Society invigorated the spirit of identity in Sikh masses.

Bhai Vir Singh loved nature but he loved the people and agonised for them. He was 'chief protagonist of Singh Sabha Movement'. Foundation of Chief Khalsa Dewan and other organizations owe a lot to his innovation. He was a great humanitarian. Establishment of the Asylum for the Blind, Homeopathic Hospital, and Home for the Old and Aged are his generous endowment to the nation. 'False

arrogance and false pride had no place in his life.' He always shunned publicity and self-promotion; none of his articles and writings had his name in by-lines”.

How I wish to conceal my fragrance,  
To end the journey all obscure;  
Alas! my wish remains unfulfilled.

(Eng. Tr. Harbans Singh)

I had the opportunity of having Bhai Vir Singh's 'Darshan' during my University days. I was young and naive at the time. Being inclined towards a leftist viewpoint my mind was imbued with Marxists and materialistic values. I just stood at the end of the room.

Most of his devotees touched his feet. Some, in spite of Bhai Jee's defiance, bent down and bowed their head touching the ground. 'A human being bowing before another human being,' the false conviction enveloping my mind made me to feel offended and I left the place. But now, with the sense of maturity, his poetry has glittered my mind, and he has enlightened me with my heritage. I feel guilty. I should have not only bowed my head but also licked his fingers that have written as much as an ordinary man talks in his whole life. My misfortune:

In a dream you came to me,  
I kept to hold you in my embrace.  
It was but fantasy I could not hold  
And arms ached with longing.  
Than I rushed to clasp your feet  
To lay my head thereon.  
Even these I could not reach  
For you were high and I was low.

(Eng. Tr. Khushwant Singh)

With great persuasion Dr. Bhai Sahib Vir Singh, ex-Member Punjab Legislative Council, Nominee of National Academy of Letters, very kindly consented, and came to the reception arranged to present him 'Bhai Vir Singh Abhindandan Granth':

“The Sublime body moves forward resplendent and lustrous face, folded hands, mind in unison with Supreme Lord, eyes slowly close, beautiful and pleasant mouth opens, lips vibrate, and the verse springs out from his sweet throat:

*Ham Rulte Phirte Koi Bat Baat Nah Poochhta  
Guru Satgur Sang Keere Ham Thaape.*

I was rolling about in dust and no one cared for me.  
Through the association of the great True Guru.  
I, a worm, am installed on an exalted position.”  
Rag Gauri M.4 Siri Guru Granth Sahib

(Tr. Manmohan Singh)

## References

- *Bhai Vir Singh Abhinandan Granth*
- *Bhai Vir Singh Birth-Centenary Volume* – essays by 35 eminent scholars
- *Continuous influence of Bhai Vir Singh* by Parkash Singh

- The Punjab, Past and present, October 1972
- *A History of the Sikh People* by Dr. Gopal Singh