

# The Contribution of Punjab to India's Cultural Mosaic

*Dr. V. Nath\**

\* Dr. V. Nath [A-5/6 Vasant Vihar, New Delhi-110057] is a development economist who worked for 13 years with the Planning Commission, and for 16 years with the U.N. After return to India he worked for Centre of Policy Research. This is his second contribution to **The Sikh Review**.

Punjab has made a unique contribution to India's cultural history, which every Punjabi, Hindu or Sikh, should know and be proud of. The Vedas assumed their present form in Punjab. Panini, the great grammarian, who gave Sanskrit its present form was born and lived in Punjab. Sanskrit is very different from the language of the Vedas. Many diacritical marks such as (*Gwang*) found in many hymns of the Vedas are not found in Sanskrit and scholars differ about their exact meaning. One of the earliest books written in Sanskrit is a collection of 100 verses each, devoted to love, conduct in daily life and leaving the world to seek union with God. They are supposed to have been written by Bhartrihari, who is considered by Sanskrit scholars to have ruled in Jalandhar.

The epic *Mahabharata* was written in Haryana. Kurukshetra, the field on which Kauravas and Pandavas fought their battle, described in such detail in the epic, is located between Hastinapur which is today a small town in Saharanpur district of western Uttar Pradesh and Indraprastha (Delhi). The three battles of Panipat, which decided the rulers of the Indo-Gangetic plain throughout the Moslem period of Indian history were fought very close to Kurukshetra. Most of the places mentioned in the *Mahabharata* are located to the west of the Yamuna. Gandhari, the wife of King Dhritrashtra, the blind father of Kauravas was a princess of *Gandhar* (modern Afghanistan). Madri, the mother of two younger Pandavas, Nakul and Sahadeva, was a princess of *Madradesa* which is also located in Afghanistan. Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas was a daughter of the ruler of Panchala (probably Punjab).

The Aryans who probably came from Central Asia had not gone much farther east than Hastinapur by the time *Mahabharata* was written. The epic is full of references to places west of the Yamuna; references to places east of the river are virtually absent. Sri Krishna was born in Mathura - located on the banks of the Yamuna and chose to make his kingdom in Dwarka on the Saurashtra coast. Saraswati, the mythical third river in the Sangam in Prayag (Allahabad) that disappeared into the earth is considered by many geologists to have been the *ghaggar*, a stream that flows in the rainy season between Haryana and Rajasthan. It is often in floods during the monsoon but 'disappears' after the rains. Saraswat Brahmins, who claim to be superior to all other Brahmins, have the banks of Saraswati as their ancestral home.

Modern Peshawar (now in Pakistan) is called Pushpapur (the town of flowers) in Sanskrit. The name is apt because the town is located in a valley which, even today, is full of trees bearing fruit and nuts and flowers that precede the ripening of the fruit. Located close to it is the ancient Buddhist university town to Taxila (Takshashila) from which Buddhist *bhikhus* (preachers) went, probably along with the caravans that carried the produce of India to central Asia and China, and converted the people of Afghanistan, Central Asia, Mangolia, northern China, Korea, and Japan

to Buddhism. Ayurveda, the ancient Indian systems of medicine and surgery took its present form in Punjab. It contains innumerable reference to herbs and animal products that are found only in the western Himalayan region or central Asia but almost none to those found in east India or peninsular India.

Thus, *Kesar* (saffron) the petals or flowers which grow only in Kashmir and *kasturi*, the medical animal-extract that are of great medicinal and religious significance, are products of Kashmir and the northern Himalayan region. Down to the partition of India in 1947, Amritsar was the great market from where the products of India, *kesar*, sugar, textiles, tea and numerous herbs were sent to Afghanistan and central Asia in exchange for fruit, nuts and medicinal herbs of these regions. It is interesting to note that the merchants of Punjab chose Amritsar, and not Lahore, as the centre of this trade so as to be free from the political intrigues of the Pathan or Moghal courts in Lahore.

Punjab is of course the birth place of Sikhism. Most of the holy places of the Sikhs are located either in west or in east Punjab. Nankana Sahib, where Adi Guru Nanak was born is located in Sheikhpura district of west Punjab; Panja Saheb, where he is supposed to have changed the course of a brook is located very close to Peshawar.

Harmandir Saheb or *Darbar Saheb*, the holiest temple of the Sikhs is located in Amritsar. It and most of the other *Gurudwaras* of the Sikhs, are located either in present east Punjab or in adjoining areas of Himachal Pradesh. The architecture of *Harmandir Saheb* reminds one of palaces of Rajasthan. The similarity is so striking ! The language of the Adi Granth compiled in the 16th century by Shri Guru *Arjun Deva* has more words of Sanskrit origin than the most Sanskritised Hindi of today. It has many words of Persian or Arabic also, but their number is remarkably small considering the fact that Punjab had, by then, been under Moslem rule for over four centuries. Punjabi in the Gurumukhi script was the only language taught to both Hindu and Sikh girls by the *Pandhas* who ran the only schools for girls in villages of west Punjab. The men folk learnt Urdu, but the women learnt only Gurumukhi.

Chandigarh, capital of Punjab (and Haryana) which was built as a modern, highly liveable city by Carbusier in the early 1950's remains, despite the damage done to it by the politicians and the slum dwellers, the most beautiful and liveable capital of any Indian state. It is also most likely to become a major centre of two 'sunrise' industries – information technology and bio-technology - because of its salubrious climate and availability of the infrastructures needed for location of these industries. It has a good university, an excellent engineering college and a world class teaching hospital. Ranbaxy, one of the Indian drug companies which have manufactured drugs effective in treatment of diseases for which western medicine has no cure, has chosen Mohali, a satellite town of Chandigarh to expand its operations. And the Punjabi scientists and managers who have become multi- millionaires in the Silicon valley in the USA, or are working in top positions in the U. S. A, would like to base their operations in their home state when they come to India.

There is a cliché that the only culture the Punjabis have is agriculture. Yet it is of interest to note that Panjab has produced two of the three Nobel prize winners during the last 50 years. The late

Abdus Salaam, the physicist–mathematician, was - and Hargobind Khurana, the biologist, is a Punjabi. Amartya Sen is the only non- Punjabi winner of the Nobel prize in this period.

Punjabis are not supposed to be good in business. But Lord Swaraj Paul, one of the wealthiest Indians in Britain, is Punjabi from Jalandhar; the Mittals, the UK steel magnates are from Haryana. Within India Punjabis have founded the Oberoi Hotel Chain, Escorts farm machinery giant, Ranbaxy the pharmaceutical drug giant founded by Bhai Mohan Singh several other companies.

The Indian food most popular in Britain, the USA and Europe, is Punjabi food. *Tandoori* chicken, chicken *tikka*, *tandoori roti* and *naan* are hot favourites in these countries.

Punjab has contributed more than its share of film stars to the film industry. In the 1930's K. L. Sehgal, the singer–actor was the top actor in the industry, then located in Kolkata. After the war, when the industry shifted to Mumbai, it has had the Kapoors, Dev Anand, Chetan Anand, Balraj Sahni, and the comedian Om Prakash as the most popular character actors. The only crooners whom young British and Indians, settled in Britain, listen to are those singing in pure Punjabi.

At the time of partition of India, the people of East Punjab could scarcely feed themselves. But by the early 1970's Punjab had become the bread basket of India. In 1997/98, the latest year for which such statistics are available, Punjab contributed 43% of the foodgrains to the central pool for distribution through the public distribution system. Production of rice has increased within a decade from 25.3 MT. in 1987/88 to 60.35 MT. by 1996/97 - or by nearly 2 ½ times, and that of wheat from 37.68 MT. to 61.46 MT. by 1997/98 - an increase by 63 percent.

(Source: *Indian Agriculture in Brief*, Ministry of Agriculture, New Delhi, Jan. 2000 pp 232.)

No other state is even remotely near Punjab in contributing foodgrains to the central pool. Such spectacular increase in foodgrain output is the result of the intelligent hard work of Punjabi farmers.

The purpose of these reflections is to give young men and women of Punjab a glimpse into their illustrious past and their bright future. What Punjabis have achieved has been due to intelligent hard work, clearly focussed on discernible and achievable goals. I am proud to be Punjabi.



## Modernity and Sikhism

*Gajindar Singh\**

\* # 2983, Phase VII, SAS Nagar (Mohali). 160062. Punjab.

Once upon a time, I read a parable in Buddhist literature which read something like this: A learner approached the master (in China) and asked regarding salvation-*Moksha*. The master

smiled and said, "Look at the setting Sun over those peaks of mountains". The novice did so and asked about salvation.

The master motioned him to the deepening sky and remarked, "How the colours of the evening evolve, changing constantly." The seeker again asked about the way to salvation. The master retorted, "Get out".

For quite a while I read, reread and contemplated on this strange episode and indeed had a pinch of sympathy for the novice - and resentment against the master. The sage in this story, instead of helping the seeker was apparently rude, harsh and mysterious.

There is another interesting incident concerning the emperor of India who once visited the *dargah* of Hazrat Nizamudin Aulia in Delhi in the 19th century. The emperor kept on fidgeting and tossing and, on being objected to, explained that he was suffering from piles. Thereupon, the chief keeper bluntly asked him to leave if he could not observe the decorum and discipline of the famous *dargah*.

The truth dawned one day, clearing the cobwebs. The novice in the ancient Buddhist tale behaved exactly like the present day youth, impatient for an easily, swallowable capsulated pill of knowledge - the ultimate truth of Guru Nanak. In his famous *chopai*, Guru Gobind Singh observes:

*Ap apni budh hai jeti, burnat bhin bhin tohe teti*

(Each one, to his level of intelligence, interprets the truth). Our youth of the modern times may spend the precious, formative years of life on acquisition of basics of a particular science, arts, humanities, and still most of them tag along mouthing the elementary, basic formulae, and only a few may attain a level of high proficiency in that subject. The Guru opened vistas to all Sikhs who would volunteer to take a deep draught of the elixir, seekers with total commitment. At the same time, the Master was fully aware of the concept of *virle kei ke* (Rare ones attain).

The story of the Mughal demonstrates that creed and discipline cannot be compromised to personal situations and peculiarities. The seeker has to subordinate, rather obliterate, and abandon the small ego lurking ominously, by merging his self with the absolute. Like the little toddler who thinks of his first steps as the conquering march of a victorious army, but he can appreciate the truth only when he develops into a towering youth. It is therefore a basic fact that the path is open to all, but you can proceed to higher echelons only by discipline, dedication, full commitment and acceptance of master's signs, directions and Will.

A person was asked what 'Amritsar' was. He replied that it was a pool of water at a Gurdwara from which the town came to be known as Amritsar. After some contemplation, he amended it to say that it was Holy Darbar Sahib in the center of a pool of water. Still, at a later stage, he said that it was the total complex including the circumbulating courtyard, the holy pool and the holy Guru Granth Sahib, and the towering gateways on the four sides. In the final analysis, he acknowledged that it was the whole region, the city and the environs which assume - and exude - a sense of holiness. Be it a father, mother, brother, sister, religion, or nation it acquires that halo

of attachment, love and fervor, the deeper one delves into the subject. Thus the mind reverberates to the very chords of sympathetic vibrations which a novice has yet to know and appreciate. Guru mentions it: *'Jithe jaye bahe mera satguru so than sohava'*. Those eyes are blessed which see my Master; those ears are blessed which hear my beloved Master; so also hands and feet. The neophyte has also been advised; *jin prem kiyo tin he prabh(u) paiyo*.

Likewise, all fine arts: music, painting, poetry, writing, etc. are manifestations of pilgrim's progress, but in the initial stages it is only harsh discipline, devotion and commitment of the learner. At that stage there is little joy or pleasure in the process. There is more of its grammar with strict rules and regulations enforced on the learner. It is on attaining proficiency that chordant notes, sympathetic colors, rhythm and flow of narration shape into ART.

It is the love of the idea, the concept and the path of enquiry along which the Sikh progresses. The youth who sits on the computer and ponders over the sea of knowledge on the websites available to him must also gauge and develop his capacity, preparedness for delving into it... the master says: *thal vich tin vastu payeo sat santokh vicharo.... Je koi khawe je koi bhunche tis ka hoi udharo*.

The sight of it, the smell of it, the feel of it, the sound of it may not be quite the ultimate experience till you have eaten of it, savored it to full appreciation. Knowledge is neither ultimate nor a static state but a constantly evolving process producing different hues to the seeker's utter relish and enjoyment. It is this growing understanding of the subject which a Sikh experiences and, till then, he feels it right to keep his evolving opinions to himself as not being the ultimate truth.

As Plato says in *The Republic*, there is a difference between intelligence and belief. No one can camouflage his opinions as the ultimate intelligence- absolute truth, unless he passes out of the state of illusion, beliefs based on these illusions, to the sure ground of reasoning and knowledge, which is Absolute Truth of Guru Nanak.

The human values and situations have not undergone any sudden change requiring, what is termed as, 'the new look' for modern times. All ages considered themselves as new and modern. For instance, prostitution is an ancient profession. Our Gurus disapproved of not only the sorry social aberration but also the erring men who indulged in it. Narcotic and drinking, laced with opium smoking was prevalent for a long time. The Gurus cautioned Sikhs against it. Homosexuality is not, likewise, a new phenomenon, but was fashionable in Mughal court where aristocrats maintained male companions. The Gurus wished to create a New Society rooted in ethical conduct.

Such questions now being increasingly raised are an attempt to bring about concordance in the high ideals of 'total surrender' to the will of Guru, which was the main planks of Guru Nanak's *hukum razai chalna*, and Guru Gobind Singh's concept of 'Guru-Panth' and selected candidates for their transformation into perfect beings – the Khalsa.

It is thus that the eastern system triumphs as you experience being in deep love with the concept of beloved even before you meet one. Then you unravel the mystery of the beau-ideal, and you

find adoration, charm, love, solace, admiration, while craving for the unfolding mystery. It is going in the wrong direction if you, first, sit on judgment of the beloved without ascertaining your own capability of a judge.

The Methodology for transformation is simple and straight forward. Just launch yourself - and the Guru will grasp your hand firmly and pull you out of the quagmire – to the cherished state of the chosen ones - the Khalsa.

