

Dr. Jaswant Singh Neki: Conversation with a Polymath

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A MAN OF MANY DIMENSIONS and diverse accomplishments, Dr Jaswant Singh Neki is a veritable polymath and a Renaissance man in our midst. At 84 years young, he remains a visible and active presence in Sikh affairs - one of the few public intellectuals that the Sikhs can claim.

Trained as a physician, most of us know him in his avatar as a man of medicine – psychiatrist, public health policy expert, Department Head at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Delhi, and Director of the Post Graduate Institute (PGI), Chandigarh. He also found time to serve in East Africa as advisor to the World Health Organization.

But we don't always connect Dr J.S. Neki, the medical man, with Neki, the award winning poet. Few of us know that his first published poem - in praise of Guru Gobind Singh Ji written in *Braj Basha* – appeared in the *Khalsa Samachar* way back in 1937, when he was barely twelve years old. Awarded the Sahitya Akademi award in 1978 for his work: '*Karuna Di Chhuh Ton Magron*,' he has over a dozen published collections of poetry, beginning with: "*Asle to Ohle Tak*" in 1955 through the ground breaking autobiographical: '*Koi Naon Na Jane Mera*' in 2000.

Gurbani Exegesis:

He is also a distinguished scholar of Sikhi with a prolific output – in English and Punjabi. His works include the classic "*Ardaas: Darshan Roop Te Abhiyas*," an exposition of Sikh congregational prayer; *Sada Vigas*, a profoundly original interpretation of Gurbani; *Achetan di Leela*, a psychological perspective on Gurmata; *Divine Intimations*, an English translation of Nitnem in verse; *Prophet of Devotion*, the life of Guru Angad; *Pilgrimage to Hemkunt*, a coffee table travelogue, *Punjabi Haas Vilas*, a book on Punjabi humour - and other works.

Dr. Neki is also an invaluable original source for anyone interested in Sikh history. Since his days as the President of the All India Sikh Students Federation, in 1949, to his present role as advisor to the Dharam Prachar Committee, SGPC, and General Secretary of the Bhai Vir Singh Sadan, New Delhi, he has been an active witness and participant in contemporary Sikh affairs, with a first-hand knowledge and acquaintance with the Who's Who of the Sikh world.

Although I have known him over the years, our meetings have been intermittent and far between, usually in social settings that are not always conducive to the kind of systematic exploration of his thought and outlook that I wished to record.

His recent presence in Columbus, Ohio, (USA) gave me that opportunity. Over a couple of extended private conversations and a *Sikhi* workshop organized by the local Sangat, we explored the entire range of Sikh experience, covering the gamut from the implication of being a Sikh, Sikh belief and practice, the current state of Sikh Institutions and the challenge of moral and ethical issues stemming from technology. In the process, I also got a glimpse of the defining events in his life.

Dr Neki would rank high on my list of individuals that I would want to invite home for an evening of scintillating conversation. He has a certain *gravitas* about him (not surprising in one devoted to literary and scholarly pursuits), but wears it lightly. He can expound on abstruse philosophical concepts, but always with a touch of humour and with an open mind. He is a raconteur extraordinaire, and can hold you spell-bound with stories and anecdotes; or have you in peals of laughter with jokes – all used with great effect to put his point across.

Porous Boundaries:

Jaswant Singh Neki became the first “born Sikh” in his family in 1925. Religious boundaries between Hindu and Sikh were rather porous then, unlike the hardened walls that we witness today. It was not uncommon for Punjabi families to straddle what can be termed “mixed identities.” So it was with Dr Neki’s family.

“Expect the Unexpected” would be an apt header for any narration of Dr Neki’s life. Hearing him recount the sheer number of coincidences – or synchronicities, if you will – that have shaped the course of his life is nothing short of miraculous. I share a few of them, not so much to chronicle his life but to view these events from a Sikh perspective.

The partition of India in 1947 found the young Jaswant Singh - then a medical student in Lahore – down and out in Amritsar where he had made his way. Cut off from family, homeless and penniless, he faced an uncertain future.

A series of baffling synchronicities saw him through.

First, a generous landlord, moved by his plight, offers him a room - rent to be paid when able. Just then, he chances upon the old canteen manager from Lahore, now a food stall owner in Amritsar. Free meals become available.

But most remarkably, a windfall from the most unexpected – and unknown – source solves Jaswant Singh’s money problem, at least temporarily, enabling him to complete his medical education.

Wandering aimlessly around town one evening, concerned about money, he heard a voice summon him – out of the blue. It was an old Sikh, a total stranger, who approached him with a proposition: “I have two thousand rupees on me. Can I entrust them to you for safekeeping?” he asked. “No,” Jaswant Singh responded, adding, “I am in desperate need and will be tempted to use the money.”

The old Sikh insisted, “and isn’t that what money is for – to spend?”

Overcome by the moment, an immensely relieved Jaswant Singh took the money, but failed to ask about the old man’s identity or whereabouts, or where he could return it.

Now fast-forward to about a year later. Dr Neki, now a junior house physician, finds himself the beneficiary of a retroactive pay raise, with the arrears to be paid in a lump sum. His share: a princely two thousand and ten rupees!

Happy at the windfall, he plans to dine out. No sooner does he step outside, that the same voice – the one that had summoned him a year ago – rang in his ears. It was the old Sikh again, back to claim his money.

Sometime later, Dr Neki found himself in a similar predicament – yet, again. Now a Demonstrator at Christian Medical College, Ludhiana, he had a run in with the Principal

over a day's personal leave that he needed to attend to an ailing grandmother. The Principal's intransigence led him to resign in a fit of anger.

A Mystical Encounter:

Jobless again, he found himself wandering aimlessly – on the streets of Ludhiana this time - regretting his hasty decision. Sure enough, he had another inexplicable encounter.

As he walked, an old man, a Sikh, who was selling his wares on the street, waved to him, saying, "Don't worry about your job; you have three offers coming." Dr Neki, needless to say, was incredulous.

No sooner did he arrive home than he found two job offers waiting for him. One was from an old class mate, an industrialist, looking for a medical officer to run a Clinic for his workers. The other was from S. Hukam Singh, the erstwhile Speaker of Parliament, offering him an editorial position on his newly founded Weekly: '**The Spokesman**'.

What, I asked Dr Neki, was his reaction? He turned to me with a smile and said, "The old man had made three offers; where is the third, I thought?" The third offer arrived the same night, via a telegram from the Medical College, Amritsar.

His marriage to the daughter of his Professor at Medical School, his appointment as PGI Director and assignment as Consultant to the WHO – all followed a similar fortuitous pattern.

Dr Neki shared these - and other – events from his life to illustrate the point we happened to be discussing from Malcolm Gladwell's book, *The Outliers*, that successful and accomplished individuals are not propelled by genius and talent alone; they also rise on a tide of advantages, "some deserved, some not, some earned, some just plain lucky."

Dr Neki described the "lucky breaks" in his life - in Gurmat parlance - as *Nadar*, or God's Grace. "*Rabb aap aaya si*" he said.

Grace Abounding:

Ascribing success and accomplishment to *Nadar* may be the humility of a Sikh, but surely, *Nadar* shines randomly on all of us. Why, then, do some of us appear to connect better with the flow of *Nadar*? Why do these coincidences – synchronicities – appear more pronounced in some lives than others?

While I don't have the answer, I can offer a tentative explanation. The title of Dr Neki's translation of the Nitnem (Divine Intimations) offers a clue. These are sure signs of the Divine working in our everyday, mundane lives.

While *Nadar* may open doors, and talent may provide the raw material, it takes hard work, discipline, persistence and perseverance to run leading medical institutions with distinction, stay actively engaged in Sikh affairs, and turn out literary and scholarly output of a high order over a long period of time.

There is no room for idlers in *Sikhi*. Honest effort (*udyam*) is foundational to a Sikh's life and I got a glimpse of this in observing Dr Neki's punishing schedule in Columbus, OH, even when on a holiday – he was up at 2 AM, did his Nitnem and then settled down to writing for the rest of the day, yet greeting intrusions like mine with cheer.

It was obvious that the discipline and structure had been cultivated and honed over a lifetime.

Dr Neki's eclectic and holistic approach to Sikh scholarship was shaped early on by the influence of his grandfather, a man of learning with an abiding interest in Holy Gurbani, and later, in Amritsar, by iconic figures of Sikh scholarship - Professor Sahib Singh, Bhai Jodh Singh and Principal Teja Singh, with whom he had regular contact.

An incident Dr Neki narrated that involved these three stalwarts is worth narrating because it highlights the mutual respect and camaraderie that they shared, but also because they left a lasting impression on Dr Neki that influences his thinking ever since.

Professor Sahib Singh had been invited to preside over an event organized by the AISSF. Sahib Singh demurred, explaining that he was pressed for time. He was then completing his seminal work on Gurbani *Vyakaran* (grammar) "A lot of what he said about *Vyakaran* went right over my head," Dr Neki told me with a laugh.

But Sahib Singh suggested Bhai Jodh Singh as an alternative, "*Bhai Jodh Singh noon kyon nahin puchda?*" Bhai Jodh Singh, it turned out, had a prior commitment and suggested Sahib Singh instead, "*Sahib Singh hora noon kyon nahin puchda?*"

When told that Sahib Singh could not make it, he solicited Bhai Jodh Singh view about the importance of grammar in understanding Gurbani. Bhai Jodh Singh responded with a 'chicken and egg' question of his own, "*kaka, mainu eh das, grammar pehlon aayi see keh language?*"

Experiencing The Divinity:

Professor Teja Singh agreed to preside over the event. His response to the grammar and language question is a gem - in my opinion. Conceding that both Sahib Singh and Jodh Singh were more learned than he, Teja Singh agreed that both grammar and meaning (language) were important, but the true import of Gurbani rested on personal experience as well. "*Mere NaloN siyaneh neh, par anubhav zaruri hai.*" That alone will lead to the Transcendent.

In speaking of a Sikh's engagement with the Guru Granth Sahib, Dr Neki sounded a similar note of caution. There are multiple senses in Gurbani, and we can get caught up in the literal or allegorical but miss the anagogical. The mode of communication that the Guru's have employed, Poetry, is not meant to be informational only - but transformational as well. Poetry is letting the WORD be heard beyond the literal meaning of the textual words. Gurbani must not just be read and understood but "ingested", which involves assimilation and absorption.

It is this natural amalgamation of science and poetry, of combining metaphor and analogy – of multiple senses and ways of looking at Reality – that is so visible in Dr Neki's work, and gives it a beauty and transcendence that can be transporting. An example from *Sada Vigas* comes to mind.

Link with the Spirit:

In an essay on the different dimensions of transcendence (*Paramatma Da Deedar*), Dr Neki uses the reproductive process as an illustration of transcending oneself (*Haumai*) in an exquisitely poetic way: the metaphor of a delirious lover used for the male sperm; its wiggling tail as a sign of its delight in finding the beloved female egg, and in the ultimate loss of a separate sense of self that results from the union.

While such a fruitful combination of the scientific and poetic outlook within an individual - like Dr Neki - may be deemed *Nadar*, it is nonetheless, an attitude that one needs to consciously cultivate.

This fusion of science and poetry is a necessary framework to understand Sikhi in our current context. The two are not quite as apart as we have been led to believe. I found the following quote from the Scientific Activist very apt: "A scientist is an empirical poet and a poet is a scientist of more imaginative and creative hypotheses." A Sikh's life must be at once musical, mathematically precise and poetic.

My purpose in capturing and recording these conversations goes beyond a personal desire to share vignettes from the life of a multi faceted personality and a much admired role model.

Dr Neki is an important literary figure in his own right and a living link to many iconic figures in our recent history as well as an active participant in shaping our community.

There is a compelling need to maintain that link to our past by cultivating the habit of recording, documenting and archiving – of not neglecting – individuals like Dr Jaswant Singh Neki while they are still in our midst.

I have attempted to capture a bit of oral history which I believe is just as significant as the written tradition in keeping our past alive. These recordings are bits and bytes of our larger history.

