EVOLVING UTOPIAS:
AN OVERVIEW OF THREE REPRESENTATIVE PUNJABI WORKS
FROM 1890s, 1910s & 1930s

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

in

The Faculty of Graduate Studies

(Asian Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Vancouver)

August 2009

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines literary works from three critical periods in the history of colonial Panjab. The purpose of the examination is to understand the Panjabi society’s responses to the Raj and to trace the region’s social and intellectual history through these works. The first work, the 1898 ‘historical novel’ Sundari by Bhai Vir Singh, is from a time when the communities of the Panjab had begun to form collective responses to the new rulers and the Western education, religion and ideas they represented. It reflects the period of communal identity-building taking place by the three indigenous communities of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. From the 1910s, Ghadar Lahir di Kawita, the poetry of Ghadar (the political revolution contemplated by the mostly-Panjabi émigrés in the United States and Canada) just before the World War, reflects their response to the mistreatment they receive in North America. Their desire and plans to regain personal and social honour is to vanquish their enemy, the British Raj. The world-view of this semi-literate community of the Panjabi diaspora is considerably different from the faith-based identity-building ideology of Sundari. From the 1930s, two nearly concurrent anthologies, Sawe Pattar and Kasumbharha, by the modern poet Mohan Singh are examined to trace the evolution of Punjabi into a modern language and of the region’s communities towards a more secular society. The three critical periods so examined through representative literary works show the evolution of Panjabi society’s aspirations from communalism to nationalism of political revolution to the building together of a secular society on “progressive” universalist grounds. These literary works idealize the aspirations of the society at three critical periods of history in differing responses to the challenges of those particular times by creating three different, and evolving, utopias.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My supervisor and mentor for this project, Dr. Harlow, encouraged me to begin this work; and throughout the project provided her time, attention and expert guidance every step of the way.

Prof. Oberoi’s ‘diaspora’ class furthered my interest in the South Asian studies; and he has continued to encourage it with his ongoing notice of this project. Dr. Ken Bryant’s infectious love of all things Ghalib influenced me to continue the study of South Asian languages. Ustad Sadhu Binning raised my awareness of Mohan Singh’s poetry, and has provided genuine fellowship. Dr. Adheesh Sathaye’s method of asking precise and pointed questions has helped with the linking of themes. Dr. Anne Murphy let me read Sundari out loud, and pointed out some secondary material to historicize it.

To the Faculty members above, my most sincere thanks.

I am also pleased to acknowledge with thanks the superb administrative and library staff at the Asian Studies for their timely and cheerful assistance and for the welcoming atmosphere they help create at the department.

I am further thankful to the University of California, Berkeley, South/Southeast Asia Library, and especially to Dr. Vanessa Tait for her guidance and assistance during my visit to benefit from their extensive collection of Ghadar materials.
I

INTRODUCTION

Evolving Utopias

Following the 1849 British takeover, another generation passed before the communities of the Panjab began to form and voice their responses to the Raj’s social, political and legal dictates and the attendant Christian religious incursions. A little later the vernacular printing presses and publishing houses began to propagate materials in Punjabi and other native languages of the region. The key social issues which faced the Panjabi society and the manner in which those challenges were acknowledged and confronted were also reflected in the literature of the time in the colonial Panjab. Three of those critical periods are considered here – late 1890s, 1910s, and 1930s.

The 1898 novel Sundari, by Bhai Vir Singh, reflects the hardening of communal boundaries that was taking place in the Panjab due in part to the Christianity catalysed indigenous inter-faith tensions. In Ghadar Lahir di Kawita, the poetry of the 1910s Ghadar movement, by mostly anonymous writers, expresses the emergence of nationalism and political revolution. The 1930s Mohan Singh anthologies Sawe Pattar (Green Leaves) and Kasumbharha (Safflower) are evidence of exploration of the question of secular society in the modern Panjab.

This triptych of the early works by these writers from three periods is presented to show their respective attempts at creating three types of utopias. The common element

\[1\] Mohan Singh’s Kasumbharha, (Ludhiana: Lahore Book Shop, n. d.), 84.
that assembles these selections from the three periods is the need of their authors to create alternate realities. Bhai Vir Singh wants to save his version of Sikhism from oblivion, the Ghadarite writers want to reclaim lost izzat-honour, and Mohan Singh wishes for a world of universal love. In creating these utopias, the works not only reflect the society of their respective periods but also attempt to define it. The writers are using the past to make sense of and influence their present. Bhai Vir Singh looks to the eighteenth century to provide a model for his Sikh religious identity-making. The Ghadarites look to the 1857 ‘mutiny’ for drawing inspiration for their new revolution to regain honour by vanquishing the British. Mohan Singh sees the ills of the present rooted in the traditions of the feudal customs and religion, and looks to a future free of the sectarian, communal and medieval dictates. The three types of utopias thus created provide a clear sense of the changing intellectual milieu of the Panjab, as well as the capacity of Punjabi literature to reflect the evolution.

The three selections are meant to register the evolving responses to the political, social and governance conditions imposed by the Raj. After the meting out of capital punishment and exile to the first group of independence seekers who had tried to assert self-determination through peaceful protest and boycott of foreign goods and services in the 1870s, the nationalist and anti-Raj movements found their expressions in social-religious identity-building through the use of the press and rural-urban organizations. A by-product of this was the hardening of communal boundaries by the 1890s. When

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2 The British noble intent of seeking the consent of the governed was often set aside to deal with the native resistance in quick and harsh manner, “in the belief that it prevented further unrest.” This ‘Punjab Tradition’ was applied to the Kukas in the 1870s and in Jallianwala Bagh in 1919. Ian J. Kerr, “Sikhs and State”, *Sikh Identity* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1999), 155.
protest against the punitive ‘water taxes’\(^3\) and other oppressive measures were met with harsh punishments, some of these ‘freedom fighters’ went abroad to join their ex-British army compatriots in Canada, U.S. and other countries. Their undignified treatment in these countries gave them impetus to try armed rebellion as the only way to earn respect for themselves by obtaining freedom for their country. The Ghadar literature of the 1910s reflects these objectives. The institutions of higher learning in the Panjab, the region’s active press – both English and vernacular – and the Panjabis’ sojourns in other countries exposed them to non-colonial international movements, especially to non-sectarian humanism and socialism. By the 1930s, the Panjab, like the rest of the subcontinent, was ready to claim, demand and undertake freedom. Mohan Singh’s humanist, socialist and romantic poetry of this era also reflected this urgent sentiment.

It is acknowledged at the outset that the snapshots through these selective micro-studies attempted here cannot begin to do justice to the complexities of Panjabi society, literature or history. For example, the land tenure case described below is just one hue in a broad spectrum of issues which were forever colouring the Panjabi society during these years. Personal honour and land, in all possible shades of meanings, have always been at the center of the Panjabi ethos. They are present in these selections too. But a large number of religious, social and mainstream or cause-specific regional political movements are not included. Any inclusions here, therefore, are an acknowledgement of many omissions.

\(^3\) Ajit Singh and his partner Sufi Amba Parsad, publishers of a large number of ‘seditious’ literature, were typical of those who were able to exploit the discontentment caused by the Punjab Alienation Act of 1901, on account of, among other provisions, the payment of \textit{abiana}. As discussed below, it was a complex issue of strategic importance to the Raj, but it did help spark ‘anti-government’ activities: “Through meetings, pamphlets and mass contact these people started the political education of the masses.” Ganda Singh, ed., \textit{Seditious Literature in the Punjab} (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1988), xii.
The ‘painting’ of this triptych, with just enough back-fill to provide context, and avoiding religious issues where possible, is meant to show an evolution of universal humanist progression toward common secular concerns of freedom, justice and equity. The triptych is not a definitive history or even a partial history of the Panjab. Rather, the objective of the thesis is to highlight three key phases, the social and cultural turning points, of the colonial history of the Panjab using literary sources. The emphasis is on the evolution of the individual rights and freedoms during these years under British rulers who were well experienced by the middle of the nineteenth century in colonial administration.

The following section provides but an example of how British intentions for good governance invariably had unintended results for the Panjab society – where the objectives of the three literary compositions are situated.

The Governance Business

In a disarmingly straightforward autobiography from 1968, a successful Panjab-born businessman Prakash Tandon wrote what his grandfather’s generation thought of the new rulers after their takeover in 1849:

I think what impressed our elders most, and what they still spoke about when I was young, was that in the past there had been rulers who were virtuous and mindful of the rayats [subjects] welfare, but never a whole system of government that was bent to public good, with no apparent personal benefit to its officers. These and many other things at first intrigued the people, and later pleased them.4

He went on to relate how the Raj-instituted public education system was equally fair. For example, the teaching of history was divided into four parts: Hindu, Muslim and British

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periods and, as an option, the history of England. Niall Ferguson, in *Empire*, has added the other “gifts” British rulers brought with them to the colonies. These “distinctive features of their own society” included the ideas of liberty, common law, banking and English language and forms of land tenure. The British had literally created additional arable land in the Panjab with the expansion of existing and dredging of new irrigation canals in the west. They had induced eastern Panjabis to homestead the new fields to produce cotton and food crops for the globalized British Empire with offer of land tenure. Land tenure is the example chosen here to comment on the Raj governance.

This transition from the traditional monarchical to the “rational-legal” system of governance was firmly based on the new rulers’ self-interests. More experienced at governing colonies by the middle of the nineteenth century, the British correctly assessed the need to rely on “landowning groups” for political support and instituted many “social and economic changes in the Punjab, the most notable being the development of the Canal Colonies.”

Their economic changes also spurred the growth of the “urban-elite” with different interests than the landowners. “Herein lay the seeds of the development of the two contrasting political traditions – urban and rural – within the British Punjab.” To counter existing communal violence among the Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, the British encouraged kinship- and tribe-based allegiances as counterweight to the religious

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5 Tandon, 116.
7 Between 1859 and 1901, ten canal colonies were established to cultivate more than one million irrigated acres. 50,000 acres were reserved for land grants to the retiring officers and soldiers of the Raj army. Ram Singh Majitha, इलाके में किसानों की स्थिति की चुनौती हिंदुस्तान में अजमेर (Hindustan di Azadi di Larhai wich Panjab - Panjab in the Indian Freedom Struggle; Volume 1 of 2), (Amritsar: Punjab State Freedom Fighters Organization, 1988), 86-87.
9 Talbot, 14.
divisions. They expanded and rationalized the Mughal era hierarchy of officialdom to govern the populace.\textsuperscript{10} Another important consideration for the British was the geographic location of the Panjab. Having already fought wars with the Afghans who historically had frequently come to or through the Panjab, and mindful of the Russian intentions of expansion in Central Asia, the British found themselves the rulers of a border state in the field of operations of the Great Game. The Panjabi army had been an asset to them during the 1857-58 crises. Sikhs were thought to be “excellent fighters” and designated as “martial castes whose racial superiority made them natural warriors.”\textsuperscript{11} Among Muslims, the Raj recruited the clan leaders to do their recruiting; they could count on receiving a fully officered and equipped unit. They could also rely on the Sikh clergy, the \textit{mahants} with the Gurudwara endowments, to assist in obtaining recruits.\textsuperscript{12}

The increase in standard of living brought on by the higher crop yields and profits led to larger credit availability, spendthrift lifestyles and debt acquisitions.

When the British recognized that this was undermining their system of rule based on the support of the leading landowning groups, they swallowed their \textit{laissez faire} principles and acted to avert this danger. The resultant 1901 Alienation of Land Act provided an important stimulus to future inter communal political cooperation within the region.\textsuperscript{13}

In his 1966 monograph on the history and consequences of this Alienation of Land Bill,\textsuperscript{14} Norman G. Barrier traces the transition from low-value and profitless, arid “communal land” holdings to Canal-watered, lower-taxed, higher-yielding, and profitable and thus credit worthy and higher-priced holdings – which were also made easier to sell in the 1860s. The district officers’ mandate of “registering of deeds in a permanent record

\textsuperscript{10} Talbot, 15-35. 
\textsuperscript{11} Talbot, 43. 
\textsuperscript{12} Talbot, 43-45. 
\textsuperscript{13} Talbot, 54. 
\textsuperscript{14} Norman G. Barrier, \textit{The Punjab Alienation of Land Bill of 1900} (Durham: Duke University, 1966).
book” made the tenant-farmer owners of the lands “with the right and privileges of sale, mortgage and hereditary transfer.” The requirement to pay land taxes in cash, in contrast to Ranjit Singh-era in-kind remittances, made money-lending a profitable business. The unpaid mortgages on land, taken for paying taxes or spending on richer lifestyles, began to result in sales of land to the money-lenders and larger, more liquid landowners. This loss of land from the agricultural classes on whom the British depended for stable governance was of concern to the rulers. S. S. Thorburn, a revenue officer, after failing to convince his superiors in the Panjab in an 1884 study, published a book in England to state his case:

> He stressed both the role of the government in making alienation possible and the probability of political unrest arising from the loss of land. “The gradual transfer … is directly due to a system of law and administration created by ourselves, which, unless remedied in time, may eventually imperil the stability of our hold in the country.”

It took the following fifteen years to deliberate and form a legislative response to this problem. The money-lenders, a large number of whom for example were minority Hindus in the mostly Muslim western regions, were assigned some of the blame, even though prominence of this profession was abetted by the government’s requirement to collect taxes in cash payment. It was seen as a question of the protection of the Muslim cultivators from the Hindu traders. By obstructing the transfer of land to the urban trading classes, the British bought the continued support of the cultivating classes in shoring up their administration. Encouraged by this favouritism of Muslims, in 1906 Fazl-i-Husain founded the Muslim League to vie for more.

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15 Barrier, 5.
16 Barrier, 22.
17 Barrier, 89.
The League hoped to wrest from government greater benefits for the Muslim community. In 1907 the Hindus countered by forming their own organization, the Hindu Mahasabha. During the next forty years these two communal parties frequently dominated the political life of the province. … The Punjab Alienation of Land bill was not enacted to separate Hindus from Muslims, to “divide and rule.” Nevertheless, the legislation formed a link in a chain of measures interpreted by the various religious groups as indicating British favouritism. By acknowledging that it would favour one sector of the population for political reasons, the government of India relinquished its claim to strict impartiality and unleashed wide-scale communal competition.18

Any intent or pretence of earning the Weberian “rational-legal” system of authority of the Raj in the Panjab ended in calculated political survival at the expense of increased communalism.

‘Land’ has multiple connotations and implications in the works examined in this thesis. Land in Bhai Vir Singh’s Sundari is a local-regional entity. For the Khalsa, hiding in the backwoods of the central Panjab, ‘land’ may be no larger than their area of potential influence over a few villages. Their notion of ‘land’ is tied up with their purity of Sikhness. In Mohan Singh’s Des Pyar (literally, Love of/for Homeland; Patriotism), the ‘land’ in jeopardy is a fort on a hill and perhaps some rocky plots clinging to it. There is no distinction between the ‘land’ and self-perceived ethno-religious or political identity of those who live on and off it. In Sipahi da Dil (Heart of a Soldier), des-homeland is threatened by the “enemies of Panjab”, just as in Panjaban da Geet (Song of Panjabi Woman) the ‘nation’ does not extend beyond the five rivers. The lover-soldier Sipahi, a Raj ‘martial caste’ cliché, deems fighting a profession, and asks his wife that upon his death in battle to pass along his weapon to his son. Unlike the Ghadar poets, he does not seem aware that perhaps in fighting for the Panjab he fights for a foreigner’s global designs on others’ land. In Ambi de Boote Thalle (Under the Mango Tree), the soldier

18 Barrier, 90-91.
may be aware of this but accepts it as his economic lot. He proudly recounts his foreign martial adventures even as they are likely for no more than the reason that the meagre wage from the mercenary activity helps him hold on to his family’s land.

The Ghadarites’ notions of ‘land’ are grounded in even harsher reality. They have come from the stock of those Panjabi émigrés who sold or mortgaged their family plots to buy tickets to foreign lands – where they could improve their economic conditions and hope to return to buy back their holdings. Most of them work the land as farm labourers and later share-croppers and eventually a few as owner-farmers. Their idea of land is informed by their multi-national and cross-cultural experiences and diaspora world-view. Their pursuit of ‘land’ is not only for the beneficial ownership of modest plots of arable acreage, whether at home in the Panjab or abroad, but also for control of the common destiny of a free Indian homeland. They are not permitted to own plots of land abroad because they are not free in their own homeland. Only in the Ghadarites does the personal and social implications of ownership and control of land find their full expression.

_Sundari_’s Sikh soldiers fight to survive in their literal nook in the woods. Mohan Singh’s soldiers fight at home only for their feudal-era region or abroad for pieces of silver for others’ designs on some others’ land. The Ghadarite soldiers’ fight is for their own land, and the _izzat_-honour vested in it.

Another constant theme of the works discussed here is their authors’ wariness of or active engagement with modernity. The cornucopia of modernity was the bride price the British presented to the Panjab upon forcing themselves on it. Its contents ranged from script reform to secularism. Land-tenure replaced the feudal laws of pre-emption or
communal land-holdings. The individualism of modernity could be applied even to land ownership. That land that once belonged to a community of various farming tradespeople who supplied services to cultivate it could be individually owned. Western education and ideas, especially about the individual’s social and political rights, of democracy and civil liberty were being taught in the Raj schools. Young Panjabis began to read about the French Revolution and other English and European revolutionary movements of the past three centuries.

The Raj had given the Panjab a ‘modern’ government with more objective legal system, taxes, public records and central control reflecting national interests and history to abet nationalism, creating the “modern fiction of homogeneity of culture and history.” The Raj was also busy creating “divide-and-rule” identities for Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, land holders, Jat villagers, urbanite Babus, soldiers and the government employed professional classes for its own governance reasons. The communalist utopia of Bhai Vir Singh was just one of the many solitudes which flourished under the Raj.

A modern governance model instituted a legislative form of, albeit fledgling, ‘representative’ government to replace the feudal rule. Encouragement of vernacular press and proliferation of newspapers also fed the Raj subjects’ ‘militant nationalism’. New Western literature and literary forms began to influence Panjabi literature. Bhai Vir Singh wrote the first ‘historical novel’, the Ghadarites wrote the nationalist and proto-internationalist poetry, Mohan Singh started out as a fully modern writer. Under the influence of modernity, the Panjabis did not just passively absorb the new social and

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19 Barrier, 1.
political ideas brought to them by their rulers or teachers, for economic and higher education reasons they also went out to the world to confront and explore the new ideas and conditions. Those who did not need to leave the Panjab actively embraced non-native ideas. The Panjabis like Mohan Singh pored over with interest the writings of Marx and Bakunin, Tolstoy, Freud and Lawrence to form their own understanding of modernity. Perhaps the largest, and least stable, shift of modernity was from a sectarian communalism to secularism. On the one hand, the Ghadarites and later Mohan Singh accepted the absolute necessity of freeing themselves from the slavery of religious communalism. On the other hand, all their dire warnings about its danger, and exhortations to find common ground among all Panjabis (for Ghadarites, to defeat a common enemy; for Mohan Singh, through humanist endeavour), were to no avail – as the sectarian violence at the time of partition of the Panjab all too violently demonstrated.

**Overview of the Representative Selections**

Between the time of the collapse of the Sikh kingdom following Ranjit Singh’s death in 1839 and ending of the Raj in 1947, the Panjab\(^\text{23}\), always a land of confluence of cultures, religions and ideas, underwent profound changes. Unlike the earlier arrivals to the Panjab from the close-by north-western regions, the British came from far away – with the culture and traditions of the far away lands. For a century the British administration imposed their values, laws and outlook on the people of this already diverse society. It was one of the most dynamic periods in the never-dull history of the Panjab. The social, political and cultural changes that took place during this time laid the foundations for the subsequent relevance and

\(^{23}\) I have made a distinction between the words Panjab (and Panjabi, of/from the Panjab) and Punjabi (but reproduced the original authors’ English spelling for these words in quoted material). The region is spelled Panjab based on its name from the words of Farsi and other similar languages – *panj* for five and *āb* for water(s) – referring to its five main rivers.
importance of this region to the nation of India. The early works chosen here, Vir Singh’s Sundari, Ghadare poetry from Ghadar Lahir di Kawita, and Mohan Singh’s Sawe Pattar and Kasumbharha are meant to convey the zeitgeist of these three periods in the evolution of the Panjab and the Punjabi language.

**Sundari**

The novella Sundari, by the 26-year old author who had already been active in producing social-religious tracts for the previous six years as principal writer for the Singh Sabha in Amritsar, was part of the Sikh religious organization’s efforts to separate their identity from the Hindus; and of course delineate the sharp differences between them and the Muslims, who in this book are reminded of their inglorious oppressive past. The themes of nationalism and sacrifice to achieve freedom are also woven in the narrative, even though the notion of des-nation is not clarified.

Sundari is considered the first novel of modernizing Punjabi under the influence of the Raj-instituted education system that introduced Western literature to the Panjabi students. The novel is also responding to the perceived attack on Sikh religion by other faiths, especially through Arya Samaj by the “renaiscent Hinduism to claim Sikhism back into the family fold”. The utopia portrayed in this ‘historical novel’ is for the didactic purpose of exhorting the author’s contemporary Sikh community that they are different from Hindus. It is not by chance that Sundari is published the same year as a long monograph Ham Hindu Nahin Hain (We Are Not Hindus) in response to an Arya Samaj

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salvo claiming that Sikhs are merely lapsed Hindus.25 The communalism of *Sundari* claims that Sikhs are defenders of Hindus; “Hindu communalists too accepted this theory that Sikhs were the sword arm of Hinduism.”26

The utopia of *Sundari*, by necessity fictional and by intent polemical, also reflects the sectarian chasms opening up as a result of the Raj strategies of ‘divide and rule’. The author creates a utopian Sikh: spiritual and worldly, skilled, ruthless yet compassionate warrior,27 clever, fearless, and steadfast; above all, unlike the Hindu or the Muslim as they lack these qualities. Polemically, the religious delineations are being made fifty years before the redrawing of political boundaries in 1947.

The choice of ‘historical fictional’ and a female protagonist is calculated to construct this religious utopia. The eponymous Sundari’s four abductions followed by rescues by the Khalsa serve to showcase the above listed ideal qualities of the Sikhs. Her intact chastity, purity of faith and acts of *seva*-service are meant to be emulated by the Sikh females of the author’s time. This serves his didactic agenda of defining the role and place of women within the Sikh society.

At this time of the Christian missionary successes in the Panjab,28 and the threat from neo-Hinduism of Arya Samaj, *Sundari* uses and produces the maturing Sikh discourse29 that Sikhs were always the group apart, right from the time of the

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25 Khushwant Singh, “Seperatist Tendencies”, 10
27 *Sundari*’s author and his like-minded Sikh contemporaries were abetted in the Sikh identity-forming by the ruling British for their own reasons. For more on the British intent, see next chapter and Richard G. Fox, *Lions of the Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 142 -143.
establishment of the Khalsa identity of their faith.\(^{30}\) Fixing a time of the pure and ‘classical’ in the middle of the eighteenth century portrayed in the novel, the author makes a case for going back to those fundamentals, while at the same time condemning the “laxity” of diversity within Sikhism found in his own time.

The novel is an amalgam of genres and themes. Historical fiction and hagiography are used to expand on martyrdom,\(^{31}\) seva-service and a woman’s place in society.\(^{32}\) The Sikh is always oppressed by the state and shunned by society – a notion contrary to ‘utopia’ as a ‘good place.’ There is no ‘good place’, harmony, equity or justice in this utopia, because it is also populated by Others.

*Sundari* is a discourse of identity aimed at male and particularly female Sikhs that their “true Sikh” identity is under assault.\(^{33}\) It is also a discourse of Paul Ricoeurian “power” to wrest control of identity and identity-making away from others; and a discourse of Sikh nationalism, expressed through modernizing of its language, script and literature.

**Ghadar Lahir di Kawita (Poetry of the Revolution Movement)**

Ghadar was the first significant politico-revolutionary nationalist movement by the Panjabi diaspora. Driven out of the Panjab by famines, plagues and poverty under the

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\(^{31}\) The resistance to oppression, tradition maintains, started with the “martyrdom” of the 5th and 9th Gurus and the formation of Khalsa by the 10th Guru, was embodied by the Sikhs of the eighteenth century. Louis E. Fenech, *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2.


\(^{33}\) The British had continued the Ranjit Singh era endowments to the Gurudwaras and their leaders for political reasons. It did not sit well with the Christian missionaries. Evangelical officers like Robert Cust objected to the Raj’s support of Sikh religious shrines in the hope that its withdrawal might result in collapsing of temples, “the sect would vanish and Sikhism would cease to be a political threat,” Barrier, “Sikh Politics”, *Sikh History* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1990), 165.
British Raj, the retired soldiers or a mostly illiterate, proud-farmer economic refugee to North America saw the cause of his individual dishonour due to his social-pariah status the colonial subjugation of his homeland. Their collective and individual izzat-honour demanded the vanquishing of their enemy, the British. Rustic in background and lacking polish like its authors, this poetry, the medium of their rallying for and planning of their revolution, shows their awareness of the conditions of the oppressed people all over the world. Composed in traditional forms but containing modern ideas, their poetry is ahead of the writings of their contemporaries in the Panjab in advocating this setting aside of sectarian to work towards nationalist objectives. Many Ghadarites were former soldiers in the British army and had been posted in many parts of the Empire. Their experiences abroad afforded them a wide world-view and familiarity with the self-determination movements taking place elsewhere. Their sense of nationalism is thus informed by the Mexican Revolution, China’s Sun Yat Sen, the Russian proletariat and the Irish Sinn Fein, among others. The Ghadar writing reflects this broader world-view.34

Even the illiterate Ghadarites, or those who know only the vernaculars of the Panjab, had to interact with the English speaking host societies in North America. Their poetry reflects this modern influence and confluence of the Panjabi-English languages and ideas. The unconventional revolutionary poetry based on secular and nationalist ideas could have originated only in foreign lands. The visions of freedom and prosperity in the minds of the Ghadarites living in conditions of “penury of miserable slavery” resulted in passionate feelings of outrage.35 Here was an instance of the people of the Panjab not just passively receiving and accepting the foreign ideas imposed on them by their new rulers,

but of their actively going out to foreign lands to seek and embrace them just as they
were accepting hardships in return for improving their economic conditions.

There is a discord between their living conditions and their aspirations. Unwilling
to acknowledge the sense of shame in their social situation, and unable to do much about
it by lawful means, their personal loss of honour manifests as collective outrage at their
political status and in a realistic but impractical desire to declare war on an empire.

_Sawe Pattar (Green Leaves) and Kasumbharha (Safflower)_

From the 12th century-born Baba Farid to the 15th century-born Guru Nanak to the 20th
century-born Mohan Singh, the poets of the Panjab have always produced verses
poignant and heart rending enough to accurately describe the suffering of victims of the
constant upheavals in this ‘border’ region. While the _des-bhagats_ of the Ghadar
Movement were writing simple yet powerfully poignant verses, their contemporary Bhai
Vir Singh, the author of _Sundari_, wrote ‘new’ poetry on religious, nature and mystical
experience themes. His contemporary poets like Prof. Puran Singh, Dhani Ram Chatrik,
Hira Singh Shahid and Hira Singh Dard added to the new revival of Punjabi literature and
especially poetry which had suffered setbacks at the start of the British rule. But the
youngest among these, the 1905-born Mohan Singh, caught the spirit of the times with
his poetry like no one else had before.

Many factors influenced the emergence of this poetic voice. The Panjabi students
read in their Raj-curriculum text books many of the English romantic poets. The western
ideas and ideologies of modernity, including individual rights and nationalism, were also
arriving with the Western style education. The response to emergence of co-education
institutions, cinemas, travel and international press was the gradual falling away of traditional social barriers. The international upheavals wrought by the Great War in which the Panjabis participated in disproportionately large numbers made them aware of larger global issues. The Panjabis suffered violent suppression of their civil rights at the hands of the British, exemplified by the 1919 wanton act of an English army officer emptying his magazines on a peaceful assembly. Many institutions and organizations flourished in the 1920s which encouraged the social and personal expression at public forums. The Panjabi society and its literature were ready for voices which spoke of the politics of social-political equality and freedom as well as of personal love and loss.

Mohan Singh is heavily influenced by Marxism and secularism. His poetry challenges the exploiters of others’ labour or resources as it warns the religious against falling prey to the Raj’s policies of divide and rule. He speaks of love – human, and of humanity – and patriotism, equality, fairness, and a better future for all Indians. He uses his personal loss and despair to universalize a concern for human suffering. In doing so, he also influences other Punjabi writers to take up the much vaunted project of universal ‘progress’. He is a lyricist of sexual desires and suppressions in the modes of D. H. Lawrence and Sigmund Freud;36 and of the unrequited love in the long-practiced Perso-Indic poetical traditions; but his is not the traditional unrequited love of a passive aesthete, a mere talk. He indulges in the describing of a woman’s beauty; he perceives “with the interest of a sensous philosopher.”37

Like Gandhi, Mohan Singh admires Tolstoy’s version of dogma-less ethical precepts of Christianity; and Bakunin’s nineteenth century anarchist ideas inspire him

36 The sense of gratification and the unhappiness due to suppression are both expressed in his poems. M. P. Kohli, 68-69.
37 M. P. Kohli, 68
into his twentieth century cry against societies where access to personal and social freedoms is not yet available. Recalling and recounting injustices and atrocities committed under the aegis of religion, he spurns all faiths. Like Tolstoy’s, his utopia consists of “innocent love evolved out of cooperation of natural beings.”\(^{38}\) His social vision encompasses the emancipation of the impoverished masses. His contemporary influences range from his compatriot the Marxist-Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz to W. B. Yeats and the Anglo-American master of poetic technique and style W. H. Auden.\(^{39}\) His political messages are the right-to-freedom, equality and universal emancipation. Mohan Singh, acutely aware of the communalism on the eve of Freedom, is wary of the political leadership. As usual, his appeal for social, communal unity is directly to the people.

Both Bhai Vir Singh and Mohan Singh, who came from well-to-do families with social standings in Panjabi society, and the benefits of education that this status afforded, bring a privileged view to Punjabi literature. Unlike most of the Ghadarites, they were not driven out of the Panjab by economic hardships or police warrants. Without denying the genius of Mohan Singh’s poetic talent, it is fair to point out that he had the luxury of a family-subsidized higher education, benefit of a supportive academic and literary environment, and, for a writer, the good fortune of the company of scholars from various disciplines who during the 1930s mentored, championed and “closely scrutinized every word he wrote.”\(^{40}\) A lot of combined effort went into the perfectly effortless diction of Mohan Singh’s early poetry.

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\(^{38}\) M. P. Kohli, 69-70.
\(^{39}\) M. P. Kohli, 72.
\(^{40}\) Sant Singh Sekhon, Kartar Singh Duggal, \textit{A History of Punjabi Literature} (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1992), 114.
Modernity and Punjabi Language: Methodology and Theme

The methodological assumptions underlying this overview are not ideological in any overt sense. The main interest is to ‘see’ the cultural evolution and ethos of the Punjabi speaking people through three ‘snap shot’ literary representations of Panjabi society undergoing great changes during these years. Firstly, through the introduction of printing presses and encouragement of vernacular publishing; through ‘dividing’ (to facilitate efficient rule) the Panjabis in accordance with their religions in its census taking; through encouraging the separate identity-seeking efforts of the Muslim, Hindu and Sikh communities; and especially through providing access to the then prevalent notions of nationhood in Western thinking, the British Empire provided opportunities for the colonial subjects to eventually get rid of their imperial masters.

Moreover, the development of Punjabi language and literature was aided both by the activities of the incoming and the indigenous religions in the Panjab. As another unintended consequence of history, the imperative to spread Christianity in the Panjab provided the best modern opportunity for the revival of Punjabi language and its Gurumukhi script since the days of the Gurus. Even the Panjabi Sikh king Ranjit Singh, whose royal status could be traced via misals to the eighteenth century Khalsa, had pragmatically bypassed Punjabi to select Persian as his court language. It took another century before Punjabi as a language began to have any status, aided in part by the clever missionaries’ strategy to promote Christ in the Panjabi natives’ own tongue by preparing a grammar of the language as well as translating the Bible into Punjabi in the mid-nineteenth century. The ‘martial races’ identity-creating policies of the Raj, as well as

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41 V.P. Gupta, Mohina Gupta, eds., An Encyclopedia of Punjabi Culture and History (Delhi: Ambe Press, 1999), 72.
the Vernacular Press Act (1878-82)\textsuperscript{42} to support the propagation of the secondary languages also aided its transition into a modern language.

Bikram Singh Ghuman, writing about Vir Singh and his contemporaries, states: “There are in fact two movements that gave birth to the modern Punjabi literature – the Christian missionary and the Singh Sabha movement.”\textsuperscript{43} The missionaries had founded Gurumukhi type in 1846 to publish the first Punjabi translation of the Bible. Ghuman believes that the 1857 ‘mutiny’ persuaded the British that some degree of people’s consent was necessary for ruling them. Part of their change in strategy of governance was dissemination of Western education and culture, and “in the process enabled Punjabi to spread the Christian faith.” In 1873, to revive the Sikh faith that had suffered setbacks after the death of Ranjit Singh and the British takeover, and to defend against the inroads of Christianity,\textsuperscript{44} the Singh Sabha was established in Amritsar. The first lecturer in Punjabi to teach at the 1860s-established Oriental College in Lahore was appointed in 1877. The Singh Sabha also encouraged the establishment of denominational Punjabi schools attached to large Gurudwaras.\textsuperscript{45} Dr. Leitner, a polyglot scholar who had taught at the London and Freiburg universities, was made principal of Government College at Lahore in 1864. A year later he set up the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, better known as Anjuman-i-Panjab. This organization continued to play an important role

\textsuperscript{42} Robb, 155.
\textsuperscript{43} Bikram Singh Ghuman, \textit{Bhai Vir Singh ate Us de Samkali} - Bhai Vir Singh and His Contemporaries, (Amritsar: Jasjit Sahit Prakashan, 1994), 9.
\textsuperscript{44} Christian proselytising consisted of the free distribution of well produced pamphlets in the streets and to the homes of the Panjabis in their native scripts and languages. Sekhon and Duggal, 109.
\textsuperscript{45} Ghuman, 9-13.
in the acquisition and dissemination of various social, commercial and literary ideas in Punjabi. 46

The Christian missionaries also aided Punjabi language through their successful advocacy of script reform and cheaper postal rates for printed material. 47 The source of the missionaries’ influence in the Raj was their relationship with its officials. Most officials were religious and some even became “labourers for Christ” after retiring from civil or military posts. Many others, impressed by the missionaries’ broader programmes aimed at social improvement, became supporters of the Christian establishments in the Panjab. These missionaries were also instruments of the spread of Western language and culture, which was considered important for the Raj’s influence, security and smooth functioning. 48

The general theme of this thesis, thus, is that of social evolution in the history of the colonial Panjab. During the period represented by the three texts, the most obvious transition was from the imperatives of separate, sectarian identity-forming to nationalism and political revolution to common secular concerns of freedom, justice and equity. But in a complex and history-burdened system like the Panjabi society, perhaps addition is a better description of the changes than transition. The arrival of new ideas did not altogether, if at all, cause the disappearance of the old, as the events at the time of Partition so brutally demonstrated.

47 The postal rate subsidy for all printed material, likely intended by the missionaries for the distribution of Christian literature only, also helped establish publishing businesses in Punjabi. The authors discussed in this thesis, Bhai Vir Singh, the Ghadarites and Prof. Mohan Singh, all started printing-publishing houses.
48 Davis, 14-15.
Secondary Sources

The selection of secondary sources, although mainly based on considerations of access to materials in this field, is also influenced by my attempt to give at least ‘equal access’ to the relevant literature produced in the (now, Indian) Panjab and written by its scholars and other authors. It is equally important to know what its own people have written about a society, just as it is to know what others have written about it. The ‘vision from within’ is considered.

For analysis and commentary on the literary aspects of the primary sources, an extensive list of secondary sources in Punjabi is consulted, as non-Punjabi sources are by and large non-existent. Some arguments made to date by ‘other’ scholars from ‘outside’ are included in the filling-in of the background to the three literary representations. But it is the ‘native’ view of history and literature that is of particular interest here.

It can be argued that reliance on ‘native’ literature is fraught with difficulties. Therefore, while extensive use of the ‘native’ accounts and commentaries is made, they are not exclusively relied upon. A judgment might be made that the ‘historiography’ of any ‘native’ popular history books is not as refined/rigorous/developed as that of the Western academia, and more often than not contains generalized statements without attribution, or has a specific, stated, bias. This is perhaps true of most non-peer-reviewed popular, and many scholarly, books in the West also. Some of these sources have been used, with caution. For example, in summarizing the Jallianwala Bagh incident, extensive use is made of a Government of India publication. But two other independent authors are consulted to look for any facts that contradict or disagree with the state produced Jallianwala Bagh. This use is valid, if for no other reason than that it is their “power-knowledge episteme”, their history. For a long time, the history of the Panjab has been written by the foreigner Others – principally the conquering elite Persians, Central
Asians, and later the British and the Orientalists – most of whom had neglected to consult their subjects. In presuming to write about the literary-intellectual history of a society, a century in the past and on the other end of the globe, the present author is also a foreigner Other. But if approached with cultural empathy and humility, and a sincere desire to find common ground, it is hoped that a case can be made that there is no Other.
SUNDARI: NARRATIVE OF A DYSTOPIC EUTOPIA

No Sir! Do the Muslims ever help the infidels if they can help it? But these Hindus were very pleased to see the Sikhs.

Hearing this, the furious Muslim commander ordered the rounding up of the Hindus. Without enquiry or proof, he ordered their punishment. … Many Hindus died of the reckless and severe beatings. One newly married bride’s husband was executed and she was ordered to go to the Muslim commander. … A Pathan aimed such a blow on the lady’s head that it was severed with a jerk …

In 1836 the bishop of Calcutta, Daniel Wilson, claimed the Punjab for Christ. In a boat on the Sutlej River, which then divided the territory of British India from that of the Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh, Wilson rose to his feet, stretched out his hand toward the foreign soil, and intoned: “I take possession of this land in the name of my Lord and master Jesus Christ.”

Introduction

Narratives structuralize the way the world is perceived; they are often morality plays too. If narratives are essential for how a community receives its moral instruction and are basic to its self-identity, then an author with an agenda to influence others in an intended direction will need to rely on the narratives of events and acts – choosing them from a history if available and inventing when necessary. That is what is at play in Sundari.

Sundari is an early evidence of and response to the Raj-instituted education structure that had also introduced the European literary genre of the novel to the Panjabi students in the late nineteenth century. This utopian novel, with necessary fictional and polemical elements, also reflects the religious divergence taking place as a result of the British administrative strategies of ‘divide and rule’ through, for example, requiring Panjabis in the census to identify themselves with only one religion. As the first novel in

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1 Bhai Vir Singh, सुँदरी (Sundari), (New Delhi: Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan, 2005), 18. Translated by the present author.
Punjabi, and first of the three ‘historical novels’ penned between 1898 and 1900,\(^3\)

*Sundari* bears the marks of haste, youth and idealism of a Sikh writer. Bhai Vir Singh, born in 1872 in a literary Sikh family,\(^4\) claimed descent from an eighteenth century state functionary who was sympathetic to the oppressed Sikhs.\(^5\) It is the author’s personal and religious past which is lovingly and passionately embellished, idealized and imagined to serve the didactic purposes of the new Sikh self-identity-forming movements of the turn of the century. Through a mixing of fictional characters, locales and situations with historical events, places and persons the author creates a utopian Sikh: spiritual and worldly; skilled, ruthless yet compassionate warrior; protector of the weak from the oppressors; clever, fearless, steadfast, and reliable; above all, a perfect *sikh*-disciple of his Gurus and their wordly manifestation, the *Guru Granth*. This pious warrior of the Gurus and the Transcendent, who occasionally provide assistance through minor miracles, is a firm believer in his dharma and faith. Unlike this Sikh, Hindus or Muslims lack these ideal qualities. Thus the religious delineations are being acknowledged and polemically drawn fifty years before the redrawing of political boundaries in 1947.

The choice of fictional narrative interspersed with ‘history’ and a female character as ‘lead’ for this narrative is calculated to construct this religious utopia. Sundari’s travails, and her repeated deliverances from them with her own initiative and the help of the Sikhs, serve to demonstrate the ideal qualities of the Khalsa; her ‘pure’ faith and acts

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\(^3\) The lesser known two, along the similar Sikh identity-building themes and also published in Amritsar by the author’s co-owned and managed Wazir Hind Press, were *Bijay Singh* (1899) and *Satwant Kaur* (1900).\(^4\) Bhai Vir Singh convinced Doctor Charan Singh, his Brajbhasha-writer father, to switch to Punjabi. Bikram Singh Ghuman, *चरण सिंह निबंध अति छिस ने सम्भाकली (Bhai Vir Singh ate Us de Samkali - Bhai Vir Singh and His Contemporaries)*, (Amritsar: Jasjit Sahit Prakashan, 1994), 16.\(^5\) Vir Singh was the 6th generation direct descendant of Diwan Kaur Mall, a shrewd, just and politically astute Hindu official who managed to keep his sympathies for the oppressed Sikhs of the 1740s secret while serving the oppressing Mughals. Dalip Singh ‘Deep’, *चरण सिंह निबंध: निजीत अति छिस ने हिंदू (Bhai Vir Singh: Jiwan Ate Kav Chintan - Bhai Vir Singh: Life and Poetic Thought)*, (Amritsar: Raghbir Rachna Prakashan, 1974), 11-12.
of seva-service make her an exemplar to the Sikh females of the author’s own time – thus further serving his didactic agenda of defining the role and place of women.

This chapter explores the author’s reliance on fiction to imagine a past for the purpose of establishing and offering a plausible Sikh utopia for his contemporary community. This chapter also explores whether the utopia thus constructed qualifies as one.

Khalsa Utopia: Constructing a Past for a Present

The author of Sundari states that his objective for writing this book is so that, “from reading and hearing of the old accounts the Sikh folk become stronger in their faith, perform both the devotion to God and duty of their worldly obligation…[so that] their faith is increased and their own ideals are endeared to them …”\(^6\) This exhortation to renewal of ritually-distinct Sikh faith is put forth during the time when, as the editor of the present edition of Sundari explains in the 1933 “Afterword”, “our [Gurudwaras] temples had idol-worship … Sikh mothers’ devotion was like a milgobha–mish-mash; Sikh daughters sang to and worshipped other [Hindu] avataras. Sikh priests took on the hues of Hindu Puranas and of Muslim Sufis.”\(^7\)

In an atmosphere of the late 19\(^{th}\) century response to the Raj-supported Christian missionary successes in the Punjab,\(^8\) Sundari utilizes and adds to the maturing Sikh

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\(^6\) In translating from Sundari, I have tried to be fairly literal to retain the ‘flavour’ of the original idiom and syntax even where it sounds awkward in English, and have avoided translating complex words like dharma (‘faith’, ‘duty’, ‘righteous conduct’, etc.) to retain the ambiguity of the original text. Bhai Vir Singh, Sundari (New Delhi: Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan, 2005), 98.

\(^7\) Sundari, 99.

\(^8\) Numerous “literary, scientific, caste and socio-religious organisations” like Singh Sabha, the Arya Samaj and Anjuman-i-Islamia were involved in serving the socio-economic needs as well as “defining and asserting the doctrinal basis of their religions.” The controversy surrounding the eventual removal of idols from the Amritsar Temple, and the role played by Bhai Vir Singh co-started the Khalsa Tract Society and
discourse\(^9\) that Sikhs as a chosen group with special mandate of upholding dharma were always a group apart, right from the time of their tenth Guru-assigned Khalsa\(^{10}\) identity of their faith.\(^{11}\) Moreover, any current (at the time of writing of this book, circa 1898) conditions in variance from the supposed conditions of the early 18\(^{th}\) century conditions are aberrations in need of correction back to what were asserted to be fundamentals.

In his construction of a utopia with “religious boundaries”, Sundari’s author denies the reality of the Panjabi and Sikh society well argued for in Harjot Oberoi’s analyses that no single, sharply defined or understood religious identity existed in the multiple-identities-recognizing Sikhism situated in the regional or local loyalties of the society. Commenting on the general lack of division among religions in India, Oberoi writes:

Religion, as a systematized sociological unit claiming unbridled loyalty from its adherents and opposing an amorphous religious imagination, is a relatively recent development in the history of the Indian peoples.\(^{12}\)

And, regarding the Sikh religious community with its multiple traditions, he states:

What needs to be understood here is that at this stage in the evolution of the Sikh faith it was not considered mandatory for all constituents of the Sikh Panth to uphold Khalsa characteristics.\(^{13}\)

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\(^{9}\) Commenting on the 19\(^{th}\) century Bengali writer Bankimchandra’s last ‘historical’ novels Sudipta Kaviraj writes, “The purpose of such history is strictly Durkheimian – it provides for social cohesion, it gives the society of the present sometimes an entirely fictive ‘memory’.” Sudipta Kaviraj, The Unhappy Consciousness (Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 132.

\(^{10}\) From Arabic via Persian khalis-‘pure’.

\(^{11}\) Citing Surinder Singh Kohli (Panjabi Sahit da Ithas, 1943) on the novels of Bhai Vir Singh as “affected by the spirit of the times” where Urdu and Bengali writers were also producing polemical fiction, H. S. Sobti adds: “This means that the virus of communalism had already polluted the life of Indian people that found its reflection in Indian novel and which in turn adversely affected the communal harmony.” Harcharan Singh Sobti, The Sikh Psyche (Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers, 1990), 1.


\(^{13}\) Oberoi, 105.
Bhai Vir Singh’s need to construct a Sikh utopia in *Sundari* is necessary because he is unable to establish the existence of a unique and ideal Khalsa society by citing or reciting supporting historical facts from the eighteenth century Panjab. Even the ‘historical’ chapters in the novel are based on the Sikh hagiographic and martyrlogical accounts, quoted verbatim and at length in the novel, recorded principally for and by Sikhs. For example, his account of the sufferings and forbearance of the Singhs, when they were driven out towards the eastern Panjab, is reinforced by quotations from the *Panth Prakash*, an early nineteenth century Braj epic “notable for its description and high praise of the Khalsa.”

Thus sharing the sorrows among themselves for the sake of releasing from oppressions ingrates like us, bearing the hardships on their own bodies the brave but suffering-from-calamities Singhs began to cross the demonic sand dunes, as *Panth Prakash* says-

Clothes ripped from bodies to wrap their feet
Shouting, screaming the heavy-footed Singhs flee;
Beaten by hunger, thirst and the blistering sun
See, trapped Singhs’ troop on the dune in calamity.

The ‘how’ will be explored below before addressing the ‘why’ of the author’s use of fiction as didactic device. The novel is an amalgam of genres: fiction, history, chronicle and hagiography, to name the more obvious. The key themes which create this Khalsa utopia are: Sikh-formation; *Panth*, the true Path community; death and martyrdom as articles of faith; *seva*-service and woman’s place in society; non-Sikhs as Others; and, the Guru-Word community. One, but not the sole, underlying theme is that the Sikh is


15 *Sundari*, 71.
always oppressed by state and shunned by society. This notion is somewhat contrary to the commonly understood definition of utopia as a ‘good place’, as discussed later.

Thematic Structures of the Khalsa Utopia

For a ninety-six page novella, *Sundari* aspires to cover a lot of religious and socio-political ground. The storyline is quite basic and very repetitive. Muslim oppressors forcibly take beautiful Hindu females; the brave and noble Singhs rescue them. Most characters are static who say and act as the young author has laid them out at the outset. The Muslim is evil, the Hindu gutless, and the initiated Sikh noble.

How and why one becomes a Singh

To be a rituals-observing Singh, a Sikh of *Sundari*, is to be trapped in the world of ongoing persecution, ostracism and risk of extinction. *Sundari*’s cycles of getting caught and getting away with the help of her rescuers, barely by the skin of their collective teeth, is meant to be emblematic of the larger plight of the Sikhs of the mid-eighteenth century. The only mitigation of their ongoing decimation is the recruitment of new members attracted as a result of the Sikhs’ conduct in the face of this calamity. Thus, the formula for Sikh-forming, invariably a Hindu-to-Singh conversion, is followed in the following five steps. Social and personal adversity, e.g. female abduction, is brought on by the ‘foreign’ Muslim rule and its officials. Rescue is affected by a Khalsa individual or a squad. The Hindu society refuses to accept back the liberated victim due to her ‘impurity’ and danger of retribution, from the revengeful Muslims, to the larger family of the rescued. The victim admires the selfless deeds of the Sikh rescuers and desires to emulate them by joining them. Finally, the ritually-initiated newcomer is welcomed into the
Panth.\textsuperscript{16} Under all conditions, the Sikhs never lose heart or their dharma or their special identity. True followers of the true masters, they are thus portrayed as the people of a \textit{khalis}-pure faith.

**Panth, the path of a people apart**

In \textit{Sundari}, the Khalsa ideal is expressed by certain physical and mental attributes. A Sikh is charismatic, capable, caring, brave, steadfast in faith, observant of rituals, clever, hardy, fair-minded, just, and above all a skilled soldier. Basing his code of conduct on the ten Masters’ examples, the ideal Sikh is worthy of being called a disciple of the Gurus.

Our physical introduction to a Sikh is made right after the abduction of the heroine. The family and friends are bemoaning her loss when “suddenly arrived, astride a fresh horse, covered from head to toe in weapons, wearing the knee-length \textit{kachhahira}-the ritual shorts, betunic’d, begirthed, beturbaned, full-faced Sikh warrior the sater-of-appetites.”\textsuperscript{17} This is none other than the victim’s brother, who had, as the family thought, ‘gone bad’ through keeping company with the Sikhs and had left the family house – for, to become a Sikh at this time was not only to be hunted for one’s choice but also to bring calamity on the immediate family.\textsuperscript{18} This former Hindu boy is now a famed Sikh warrior. He would save Sundari time and again and will be with her during her last moments. Whereas her other Hindu brother had merely begged the \textit{hakim}, the Muslim governor, for Sundari’s release, brother Balwant Singh will force it with his and his

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\textsuperscript{16} In the details of the first abduction of Sundari, this sequence of five steps is detailed on pages 3; 6 and 15; 6; 20; and 21 respectively.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Sundari}, 5.
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Sundari}, 6.
companion Sikhs’ courage and determination. His camp sirdar, Sham Singh, with “a god’s body and apple-red visage”\textsuperscript{19} is the very ideal of a radiant commander.

The mental attitudes of the Sikhs match their physical strength and hardiness. Even their adversaries accord them begrudging praise. While spying for the whereabouts of the imprisoned brother-sister duo, a Sikh overhears a Muslim soldier rhetorically ask: “Do these Sikhs ever freely abandon their religion?” And contrasting them with Hindus, adds: “Hindus are like butter whereas Sikhs are like hard rock.”\textsuperscript{20} This image of the Sikhs is supplemented by having this skilled Sikh spy gather the required information and slip out of the enemy compound, smooth like “hair through butter” to courageously rush back to the forest hideaway through bad weather, bad trail and pitch black night, as “Guru Gobind Singh Ji’s warriors do not lose courage.”\textsuperscript{21} Even in captivity, a Sikh, though worried, has the “red eyes from which the arrows of anger emanate.”\textsuperscript{22}

Mastering martial skills is very important to this pious warrior. In addition to expert riding, sharp shooting, covert operating, strategic planning and brave combating the Sikh displays, and only rarely breaks,\textsuperscript{23} his ethical code of conduct in war. At the time of rescue of the siblings from the mosque, commander Sham Singh forwards his sharpshooters who, “first quickly identify the hakim’s canoneers, then quickly aimed and discharged their guns to pick them both off like doves.”\textsuperscript{24} Other members of the team also use arrows and swords expertly to hack through the enemy forces to escape with their rescues. Here and elsewhere, they manage to come in usually in the nick of time.

\textsuperscript{19} Sundari, 9.
\textsuperscript{20} Sundari, 11.
\textsuperscript{21} Sundari, 12.
\textsuperscript{22} Sundari, 13.
\textsuperscript{23} During one of the ghallughare-holocausts the embattled, on-the-run Sikhs are reduced to compromising their ethics to stay alive: “Here, they saw a village; the Khalsa attacked it to get some food...” Sundari, 70.
\textsuperscript{24} Sundari, 15.
Their guerrilla tactics frustrate the authorities but fail to inspire confidence in the general populace. When told by a villager that to provide aid to Sikhs is prohibited by the emperor, the Sikh commander boasts, “right now, Khalsa is the emperor!” A panch, one of the traditional five village-heads, responds: “What to make of the Khalsa? Like a cloud shade, now it’s here and now gone. Who knows where you will be tomorrow.” The commander orders a platoon to go to the village to obtain food, and nothing else, and to not harm any women or children. The Muslim women of the village ask for mercy for their men folk, and from the soldiers’ excess, and are told: “Khalsa does not kill or loot the populace. We trick, defeat and loot the emperor’s army. We are the enemies of oppression, not of the people.” They are, also, models of efficiency. Even when breaking camp, their skill and speed was worth seeing.

The most identifying marker of Khalsa is kes—facial and head hair. And loss or threat of loss of this marker is most serious to the Sikhs of Sundari. Just before the just-in-time rescue of the siblings at the beginning of the book, it is not the sister whose honour or life is in immediate danger but the hair of the tied up brother that is about to be shorn. The careless or deliberately evasive account of the rescue actually omits the sister. The Sikh riders rush in shouting his name, and “next moment, some strong hand lifted upon his horse the still-tied Balwant Singh and turned his steed around to get out like an arrow.” Sukha Singh, whose hair was directed to be surreptitiously shorn by his parents to save him from the Muslim cruelty to the rituals-observant Sikhs— is about to kill himself due to this breach of his purity. A Sikh counsels him to die as a martyr instead of

25 Sundari, 17.
26 Sundari, 17.
27 Sundari, 18.
28 Sundari, 15.
dying without purpose. Which is what he soon does, as a warrior, by falling for a dare of
the Muslims to exercise the Sikh right to bathe at Amritsar.29

The ideal of Panth, the collective path of the Guru’s disciples,30 is that of the
members of a wholesome family:

But truly they were the children of same parents, and were like real brothers. No
brother bore enmity towards another, and all hearts were filled with the love of
the Panth…their hearts contained the love for the Guru and the sacrifice for the
Panth. All were devotees of the bani-Word, and of high character.31

The passage, in contrast to the following passage where the author alludes to his
contemporary conditions of divisions, corruption and internecine strife,32 is remarkable
for not identifying the followers as Khalsa, the version of the Sikhs delineated according
to their prescribed physical appearance and distinct rituals. Thus the author appears to
have missed an opportunity to repeat the implication that only the Khalsa are real Sikhs.

Death, dying and afterlife – the ethos of a life forfeit33

To be a Sikh is to be happily prepared to die; and while waiting for death, devote one’s
life to upholding the faith. The rhetoric of happiness-in-death is introduced quite early in

29 Sundari, 56. His other novels also show “how the Sikhs suffered in defence of their unique identity …
remnants of the Mughal state are shown to be bent on destroying the external symbols of Sikhism, while
the Sikhs are ever willing to sacrifice anything in order to uphold them.” Oberoi, 332-333.
30 The 10th Guru Gobind Singh, himself of the 4th generation in the line of the hereditary Sikh gurus, before
his death in 1708 [his four sons had predeceased him] is said to have declared that after him there will be
no successor as personal Guru. “The eternal Guru would remain with his followers, mystically present in
the sacred scripture and in the gathered community. The scripture thus becomes the Guru Granth and the
assembled community becomes the Guru Panth.” W. H. McLeod, Who is a Sikh? (New York: Oxford
University Press, 1989), 52.
31 Sundari, 60.
32 Sundari, 61.
33 jau tau prem khelan kā chāū / siru dhari talī galī merī āu… If you want to play the game of love
approach me with your head on the palm of your hand… - Guru Nanak, Slok vārāṇ te vadhiṅk 20, Adi
Garanth, p. 1412. From frontispiece. Louis E. Fenech, Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition (New Delhi:
Oxford University Press, 2000). Use of the literal sense of this oft quoted couplet, as above, to buttress
the argument of an inherent nature of Sikhism as preoccupied with martyrdom, may be problematic in the light
of the pacifist life and teachings of the first guru who used this bhakti poetry trope to express his love for
the divine. The Ghadarites also used it on their paper’s masthead, as discussed later, to marshal support.
the narrative and is continued to the end. When the still-Hindu Sundari’s co-prisoner and brother, the famous Balwant Singh, is asked to convert to Islam in the mosque where Sundari is about to be wed to the hakim (“Do you happily accept the Muslim religion?”), he retorts: “I happily accept death.” When travel to the Amritsar Temple was punishable by death, a nameless Sikh woman approaching it with her only son, perhaps the widow’s most dear possession, is asked: “Do you not love life?” Conceding that to be so, she adds: “But in the end life passes away, only dharma remains as one’s companion; so, one must not forfeit dharma to save life.” She values death and subsequent heaven so much so that she will not deprive her young son of the same privilege of dying for her faith: “Why must only I go to *sachkhand* [‘heaven’], I should also take this precious part of my life with me; and lest he turn away from the Sikh faith in my absence due to his young age.”

Even before embracing the Khalsa, Sundari (given name Surasti) values dharma over life. Her brother arrives just in time to save her from the immolation pyre: “Dear sister, to take one’s own life is a great sin.” She replies: “It is not bad to die for dharma,” and to prevent bringing harm to one’s family. Towards the end also, Sundari is looking forward to dying. Mortally wounded, and “although in extreme pain, she was in bliss in anticipation of the deliverance.” Her complete confidence in the oneness with and her love of the Guru renders the life and death indisparate: “Life and death are two conditions, not two different things.” Just as a true Sikh’s earthly life is forfeit, so also

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34 *Sundari*, 13.
35 *Sundari*, 48.
36 *Sundari*, 49.
37 *Sundari*, 6.
38 *Sundari*, 92.
39 *Sundari*, 92.
for that Sikh heaven is assured: “asin sare baikunthi jiv han – we are all heaven-bound beings.”

Hindus, on the other hand, fear death as much as they love life. The Khalsa-initiation emboldened Dharam Singh, while still a despondent and nameless khatri had contemplated death after losing his wife to a Muslim and running away from his house. Arrested on the pretext of hiding the “jewels from the treasures of Akbar” he is offered release in exchange for giving up his wife to the town hakim. His immediate reaction to the prospect of losing his wife to the Muslim is to faint. He bribes his way out of jail, and steals away from his town. Unable to think of a way to save his wife and her honour, he contemplates killing himself. He finds it difficult “to somehow die, but my unmerited life is so precious to me.” Even while given shelter in the Sikh camp where Sundari brings him, this Hindu is deemed untrustworthy “lest he has come to obtain secrets for the enemies.” After rescuing this Hindu’s wife from the Muslim official’s quarters, the Sikhs ask the Hindu priests to accept her back as she has remained patibrta-faithful even during the imprisonment by the Muslim official. A Brahman replies: “Hindu dharma is like a weak thread, it breaks readily. You know, have the fallen fruit ever been re-attached to the trees?” Despite pleading and reasoning, the unreasonable, haughty, merciless Hindu priests refuse to accept her. The angered Sikh commander orders them to accept ritual-food from her hands or suffer capital punishment. Sundari, who was born into a khatri-merchant class used to dealing with its priestly counterparts, takes the rescued woman’s husband, also a khatri, aside to remind him that the priests will accept

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40 Sundari, 94.
41 Sundari, 26.
42 Sundari, 28.
43 Sundari, 34.
food if accompanied by a silver coin and ritual courtesy. The Brahmans do in fact accept this offering in exchange for their parting blessings.\textsuperscript{44} This khatri-merchant couple, expecting further Hindu recriminations and future Muslims revenge, turn away from their community and obtain permission to bring their entire wealth to the Sikh commune.\textsuperscript{45} His rebirth into brave and strong forest-roaming Sikh and of his wife’s as a \textit{bani}-reciting, \textit{seva}-performing companion to Sundari occurs only after their partaking of the death-defying \textit{amrit}, the ritual drink that makes them fearless.\textsuperscript{46}

Some Hindus see this new faith as a threat to their status. Lakhpat Rai, an influential official in the service of the State, collaborates with the Muslim rulers to attack and even attempt to annihilate the Sikhs. Other Hindus of substance, particularly Kaurha Mall, a celebrated ancestor of the author, help the Sikhs.\textsuperscript{47} Whereas Kaurha Mall serves as exemplar of service of and contribution to the formation of Sikh identity, Lakhpat Rai takes all measures to destroy them declaring: “To be a Sikh is the great sin.”\textsuperscript{48} Among the Muslim elite, the Sikhs do not find reprieve or sympathy, only hostility and oppression.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{44} Sundari, 33-34.
\textsuperscript{45} Sundari, 35.
\textsuperscript{46} Sundari, 36.
\textsuperscript{47} The author devotes a large section of this ‘novel’ to an overview of history of oppression of the Sikhs in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. The events of the ‘ghallughara chhota’ the “smaller holocaust/ethnic cleansing” and other persecutions of the new faith take up most of the latter part of Sundari. Just as a lot of the text is devoted to describing the events resulting from an intense hatred of a Hindu official Lakhpat Rai who swears to “destroy the seed of the Sikhs” (Sundari, 42) to avenge the death of his brother, a section of the book describes the helpful acts of another official Kaurha Mall, whose wisdom, commonsense, good heart and righteousness is described in folkloric details. “This servant of the Gurus provided many rewards to the Sikhs,” including restoration of the facilities at the Sikh Temple in Amritsar which had been immiserated by Lakhpat Rai and the Muslim rulers. “Maharaj Kaura (= ‘bitter’) Mall was a \textit{pakka}-solid [but not ‘true’] Sikh who always helped the Panth. The members of the Khalsa referred to him as \textit{Mittha} (‘sweet’) Mall.” (Sundari, 79).
\textsuperscript{48} Sundari, 60.
\textsuperscript{49} The sole, and personal, exception is the Sundari’s serial abductor, the nameless Muslim \textit{hakim}-governor, who through his infatuation with the steadfast heroine ends up developing at least some sympathy with her kind. During her last incarceration at his household, the hakim consults the attendant of the seriously wounded and non-recovering Sundari: “I do know that she is a Sikh and will not abandon her dharma; but
Seva: female attribute and example

Sundari performs seva-service by catering to her Khalsa community as well as by helping others irrespective of who they are. During brief respites in the forest between battles, she obtains provisions and manages the camp’s ‘household’. In the incessant battles, when her martial skills are not being employed she devotes her efforts to nursing. “Sundari was present in the battle, and was attending the wounded.” In a battle where her abductor hakim was also engaged – for the other side – he hears of and sees Sundari administering to the wounded of both the dost-dushman, friend and foe.” Her final act of seva, irrespective of who is the recipient and in spite of danger to herself, is tendered to the wounded Pathan who repays her with a sword thrust. And her final regret about seva is that she was not able to offer enough of it to her adopted community. “I had hoped to provide happiness to my brothers, instead I have caused sorrow. How would I face Guru Gobind Singh [in heaven] to say what service did I perform for the Panth after receiving initiation into it? When he asks, what good have I accomplished, what answer will my ashamed mind give?” She is, of course, reassured by the entire assembly surrounding her death-bed – by reminding her of her good deeds and acts of seva: “You are not a

if she recovers from her disease on account of my becoming a Sikh, I will become an ander-khane (‘inside the house’; inwardly) Sikh.” Sundari, 88. She dies of his sword thrust meant for her rescuers. Sundari, 91.

In the fictional world of Sundari, her ‘meritorious’ service is voluntary, unreserved and idealistic to the point of being dangerous to herself and her comrades; in the real world of its writer circa 1900, “The notion of service was polyvalent – men performed naukri, they were the naukars of the sarkar, while women were barred from undertaking such naukri – they were nevertheless expected to take on rigorous and unrelenting service inside the house.” Anshu Malhotra, Gender, Caste and Religious Identities (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 118.

Sundari, 80.

Sundari, 80-81.

Sundari, 83.

Sundari, 93.
woman but a goddess! The Panth stands upon the strength of women-of-dharma like you. Let all women succeed in amrit-initiation as you have!”\textsuperscript{55}

**Death as sermon, dying as ritual**

There is ritualistic leisureliness to Sundari’s death scene. Gracefully growing old and slowly fading away like ordinary females is not the lot for this exemplar in these exemplary times. Instead Sundari dies of her wounds, including the final and accidental sword thrust by her admirer and abductor, the Muslim hakim.\textsuperscript{56} The dying wish of this spent-bodied devotee is to hear the entire pāṭh, recitation of the Guru Granth, and at the conclusion to place her head on the ground in front of the Book. Early the following morning, after the appropriate ritual ablutions including the full-body and hair bathing by a dozen participants, the unbroken two-days-and-nights-long recitation is commenced. She sits up supported, or lies down when tired – her mind remains refreshed, “bathing in the ocean of bliss.” At the end of this long period, the whole group assembles, shabads- verses from the Book are sung by all, and still other specific rituals are performed.\textsuperscript{57}

Both the writer and the reader know the ending, yet the author needs to say still more in summing up before the book is literally closed and he loses the reader’s attention. Sundari’s life was forfeit almost at the opening scene. During the brief period between the first pyre of a hopeless suicide near the Muslim hakim’s tents and the second pyre of a heaven-bound shahid-martyr\textsuperscript{58} in the Sikh camp, she manages to cram a life time of

\textsuperscript{55} Sundari, 94.
\textsuperscript{56} Sundari, 91.
\textsuperscript{57} Sundari, 93-94.
\textsuperscript{58} The martyrdom of the 5th and 9th Gurus “fundamentally changed the nature of the community” by militarization after the former’s death in 1606 and in 1675 the execution of the latter which precipitated “creation of the Khalsa, the elite, militant order formed in 1699 by the tenth and the last guru of the
mishaps and adventures – to have fearless Khalsa members illustrate what it is like to be an ideal Sikh. This indifference to death in the path of dharma, and the firm belief in a better afterlife in the company of the Gurus, becomes another hallmark of the ideal Sikh.

There is no place or provision for Sundari in normal society to live a normal life. Just like her friend, the former Hindu wife now born-again as Dharam Kaur, she has been marked-down in the eyes and dharma of her former family and society. She is a diminished woman, and dead to normal society. Her only recourse is to become larger-than-life dharma-bhain to an entire male community of hunted outlaws, the embattled Sikhs, and await an opportunity to achieve the death of a martyr. She solicits this equality of function and purpose: “Why don’t the women fight to safeguard dharma? And, if they don’t, why can’t I be the first woman to become such warrior like my brother?” She gets her wish, and the death-bed of a martyr. Before departure, she has an opportunity to pick up the subject of women’s place in the society. With the prescience of her author’s hindsight, she tells her comrades that they will overcome all tribulations to become rulers. “My prayer is that you deem your women as your companions, and don’t make them lowly…the [Hindu] Shastras describe woman as shudr [low-caste] ... the Guru Granth praises her and accords her full rights to the Name and the Word.” And to the women, through her friend Dharam Kaur, her message is that the strength of the Panth lies in the purity of the Sikh women. “If you turn away from Guru Gobind Singh and do

Sikhs…Tradition maintains that the resistance to oppression which these two heroic deaths enshrined was embodied by the Sikhs of the eighteenth century…” Fenech, 2.

59 Sundari, 8.
60 Sundari, 95.
other rituals and worships, you will become like the [Hindu] *shudr*.” The polemics never let us forget that this is utopian literature.

**Non-Sikhs as Others – Hindus, Muslims, rulers**

In addition to the uniform of the five Ks, what sets the Sikhs apart from others is their courage and conduct. Through the induction ritual they are born again as holy warriors. They are reputed to “become immortal by partaking of *amrit* [the ritual sweetened water] and acquire enhancement of their strength by the ritual-bathing at Amritsar.” Their desire to defend the persecuted overrides their concerns regarding personal safety. Upon getting intelligence regarding the imprisonment of their mate Balwant Singh and his sister, “they would not tolerate the ensnarement of a Sikh maiden by the Turks.”

The ruler-oppressor ‘Turk’, ‘Pathan’ or ‘Afghan’ is unlike them. At a fateful moment Sundari gets down from her horse to tend to a wounded enemy (but a “human being”) soldier. First he is unwilling to believe that a *kafir*-infidel is capable of such compassion, and when she identifies herself as a Sikh, he repays her with a sword thrust. The kindness of *seva*, selfless acts of service to others, repaid by cruel treachery also helps exemplify the difference between the Sikh and the Other.

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61 *Sundari*, 95.
62 *Sundari*’s author and his like-minded Sikh contemporaries were abetted in the Sikh identity-forming by the ruling British for their own reasons. Based on a special army recruiting manual of 1896 by Capt. R. W. Falcon to ensure the “recruit’s conformity to the British cultural meanings about Sikhism as a separate religion and [‘baptised’] Singhs as a martial species of men… The British hoped to deploy the symbols of Guru Gobind Singh’s Sikhism to create a courageous, obedient, and long-suffering army corps, true to its (British) salt, loyal only to its British *ma-bap* (literally, parents; figuratively, the British officer in loco parentis) and without Hindu or Muslim sympathies.” Richard G. Fox, *Lions of the Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 142-143.
63 *Sundari*, 56.
64 *Sundari*, 12.
65 *Sundari*, 82-83.
The Hindus, elite and common, are also quite different from the Sikhs. The scared Hindu maiden whose “soft wrist”\textsuperscript{66} the Muslim \textit{hakim} had no problem grabbing hold of at the time of her abduction, is transformed through amrit-induction into a brave Sikh – hardy and skilled enough to wound and kill in battle and soft hearted enough to care for her own and even those of the enemy who are wounded and dying.

\textbf{From worldly to the ‘Guru-Word’ family}

Their ten Gurus are sources of ongoing inspiration and example for \textit{Sundari}’s Sikhs. These Gurus’ lives and teachings and their followers’ fellowship and common struggle bind them together in this new family. In their communal life of a camp hidden in the forest, “they no longer even remember where their parents and worldly homes are. Every pore of their being is infused with the love for [the tenth] Guru Gobind Singhji; and they have understood their life’s work to be the safeguarding of the dharma.”\textsuperscript{67} Out of prior inclination and current gratitude for the rescue by her brother and his Sikh companions, Sundari aspires to join this community: “My desire is to succeed in providing life-long service to the Khalsa,” to live among her brothers and by working in the commissary, tending to the wounded, reading the Word, reciting the Name and rendering service.\textsuperscript{68} The sacrifices of the Gurus inspire them to selfless acts. Sundari is willing to immolate herself to prevent bringing harm to her family: “I do not fear the death in the least; [ninth] Guru Teg Bahadurji is beside me.”\textsuperscript{69} In their adversity, the Sikhs recall the greater hardships of the Gurus. After her first rescue by her brother, and subsequent rebuke and

\begin{footnotes}
\item[66] \textit{Sundari}, 2.
\item[67] \textit{Sundari}, 19. This is as close to a Thomas Morean utopia as this author portrays, except that their ‘island’ is a forest grove.
\item[68] \textit{Sundari}, 20.
\item[69] \textit{Sundari}, 6.
\end{footnotes}
disowning by her parents due to the fear of the local ruler, Sundari is determined to join her brother’s Sikh community as she recalled the “hardships of Guru Gobind Singhji.”

On her way she questions the exclusion of females from the honour of martial protection of the dharma, and wishes to be the first woman to become such a warrior like her brother.

The Gurus and the Transcendent are understood to fully participate in their Sikhs’ activities. The Sikh soldiers, upon rescue of the siblings in the nick of time before the brother’s hair is shorn and the sister wed to the Muslim, acknowledge: “the glory is due to the Gurus, who meant to uphold the duo’s dharma.” Upon being accepted in the all-male Sikh camp as a full member, the blessing of another female exemplar, Mayee Bhagon, is invoked as inspiration for Sundari. After joining this soldier unit as the dharm-bhain, sister-in-dharma, she finds succour in the Guru-Word and this community she is now linked to “with the thread of the love of the Guru.”

During her final moments, Sundari performs ablutions, recites Japji and prayer, asks for forgiveness for her sins, and gathers enough strength to prostrate herself in front of the Guru Granth. When she does not raise her forehead for a time, her concerned

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70 Sundari, 8.
71 Sundari, 8.
72 Sundari, 16.
73 “Sundari is cast as the model of Sikh morality…Her only ritual, her only worship is devoted to banī, the Word from Beyond…In this sense she belongs to the line of the archetypical women heroines of Sikh history such as Māī Bhāgo, who, in the time of Guru Gobind Singh, fought valiantly in the battle of Muktsar (AD 1705). Bhai Vir Singh thus invests Sundari with the noblest of Sikh merits derived from Sikh teaching and history.” Nikky-Guninder K. Singh, Feminine Principle (New York: Cambridge, 1993), 203.
74 Sundari, 20.
75 Sundari, 23.
76 Jap-’meditation’ is the (1st) Guru Nanak composed initial testament following the Invocation in Adi Granth. “The object of meditation is God whose concept is deciphered in Mul Mantra, the Invocation,” says Sangat Singh in one of the numerous translations of Japji in English. He adds: “Guru Nanak’s Japji contains the quintessence of Sikh religious thought and philosophy. In importance, it stands in comparison to Gita and the New Testament. To devotees, it at once provides inspiration, solace and a source of bliss.” Sangat Singh, Japji (Delhi: Hind Pocket Books, 1987), 1 & 15.
Companions to the numinous
The last of the corporeal Gurus had just passed away within the memory or experience of the Sikhs of Sundari; still, the Guru-Transcendent is ever present and angsang-with them. They count on their Master to sustain their faith and at times provide strategic assistance in their struggles to uphold dharma.

The ideal Sikh Sundari is a devotee of the Gurus capable of experiencing their ever-presence. Tired and on the run from the enemy, she gets down from her horse in a forest by a clean pool of water, and after ablutions and Japji recitation, falls in a trance so stony-deep that the birds of the forest collect about her. “For a long time, the Name-attracted Sundari remained at one with the Guru.” Yanked out from this trance by an enemy bullet whistling past her head, she is about to be caught again when she prays to her Master to save her dharma: “There is no other hope save Your mercy!” Directly from deep within her mind, her plaint reaches the “Guru’s feet” and she is granted a vision of the arrival of her brother with his companions. The rescuers are being personally directed by the Guru’s gestures from above in the heavens. The real rescuers arrive shortly after the private vision.

Their Master also manifests during a public performance. In the only comic-relief segment of the otherwise hagiographic tone of the narrative, a resourceful and quick-witted thespian-spy (Bijla Singh the ‘lightening lion’) acting as a well-versed sage

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77 *Sundari*, 96.
78 *Sundari*, 57.
79 *Sundari*, 58-59.
juggling a double-speak characteristic of a mixed-culture Panjab (he declaims from the Quran to assure the Muslim abductor of his genuine Islamic credentials, and slips in some asides from the Guru Granth to reveal to the Sikh abductee his true creed) is trying to free our heroine following another one of her abductions. Dressed as a Muslim *faqir*-holy man, he holy-talks his way onto the ferry carrying the palanquin-stowed and trussed-up Sundari. There are hardly any clouds; the water is calm. During the crossing, as the faqir upbraids the abductor for his dark secret (which he claims to detect through his knowledge of the “Occultation”) of having tied up a woman, the wind starts gusting and the waves rise up – until the abductor is weather-whipped into releasing her from the bonds. Upon her release, calm returns.80 This low-pressure miracle provides the two Sikhs the opportunity to help themselves to an escape.

Deprived of the living Gurus since the passing of the tenth Guru Gobind Singh, the Sikhs of *Sundari* are able to follow his exhortation to regard the Guru Granth as the living artefact containing the same “supreme religious authority” as the Masters.81 For the Sikhs of *Sundari*, however, the eternal Guru is ever present and never far.

### Utopia or Dystopic Eutopia: More, Ricoeur

Before addressing *Sundari* as a utopia, it is in order to briefly compare how this author’s stated association with this work compares to the relationship of another author to his work, the better known book of this genre, *Utopia*. The early seventeenth century Latin

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80 *Sundari*, 52-53.
81 “Fortunately for them there emerged from the time of Nanak the doctrine of an eternal guru. This eternal guru, as the writings of [the second Guru] Angad reveal, was no different from God.” Oberoi, 69-70.
work by Sir (and later, Saint) Thomas More contains puns and references within the text to indicate that the term ‘utopia’ was meant as ‘no place’ land – with possible connotations with the Greek-prefixed ‘eutopia’ as a ‘good place’ land. The ‘good place’ is the most commonly understood sense of utopia, with dystopia as its opposite. Thomas More artfully disclaims the contents of *Utopia* by first creating a separate narrator for the tale and second casting doubts on the narrator’s veracity, thus maintaining a separation between fiction and facts.\(^8^2\) The author of *Sundari* has no qualms about not only narrating and often directly addressing the reader, but he also situates his fictional characters in a historical setting, among historical events and personages – and, most personally, claims direct descent from one of the most admired characters in the novel to attempt the erasure of boundaries between history and fiction. More’s work performs the polemical functions by creating the double fire-wall described above between his targets and himself; he realizes his polemical aims through fictionalizing the ‘no place’ island.\(^8^3\) The author of *Sundari* polemicizes overtly and directly in his own voice as the author when narrating the eighteenth century events, and as the person who is doing the writing when addressing his 1898 contemporaries. For him, fiction is a means to gather and shape the previous century’s events of Punjabi history into a narrative of his choice, the Sikh utopia. The fiction permits his characters to do and say things which he cannot plausibly ascribe to historic individuals, but which are plausible enough to be historical. That in

\(^8^2\) The final sentences of Thomas More’s *Utopia* read: “I can not perfectly agree to everything he [Raphael, the narrator] has related. However, there are many things in the commonwealth of Utopia that I rather wish, than hope, to see followed in our governments.” - Project Gutenberg Ebook No. 2130, *Utopia*. http://www.gutenberg.org. Retrieved May 20, 2008.

\(^8^3\) For example, his real life opposition to women priests is addressed in his description of the women of *Utopia*, who though martially trained like men are restricted mainly to household tasks – not unlike Sundari who becomes part of the warrior camp to mainly look after the kitchen duties.
turn makes the other ‘historical’ characters, events and narratives less incredible. He fictionalizes a few characters for the purpose of realizing others. His is a practical utopia. In showing a preference for practical utopias to merely literary utopias like More’s *Utopia* (which, although an alternative to reality, its author has no hope of it being realized), Paul Ricoeur explains that practical utopian fictions are interesting “not when they are mere dreams outside reality but when they shape a new reality.” By the use of fiction rather than historical facts in *Sundari*, and aiming it at like-minded readers, the author’s didactic agenda is greatly facilitated. Ricoeur comments that,

\[\text{… the utopia in its literary form engenders a kind of complicity or connivance on the part of the well-disposed readers. The reader is inclined to assume the utopia as a plausible hypothesis. It may be part of the literary strategy of utopia to aim at persuading the readers by the rhetorical means of fiction.}^{85}\]

All is not perfect or even well in this utopia. There is no ‘good place’ harmony, equity or justice among its denizens, because it is also populated by Others. Quite early in the novel (page 18), a passage encapsulates the dystopic nature of this utopia. A Khalsa troop has just left after purchasing some provisions from the villagers when the Muslim soldiers arrive and upbraid the Muslim villagers for having helped the Sikhs.

No Sir! Do the Muslims ever help the infidels willingly? These Hindus were even delighted when they saw the Sikhs.

Hearing this, the Muslim commander got angry and ordered the arrest of the Hindus. He did not make any enquiry nor called for their explanation. He further ordered that they be beaten up. How unfortunate that the Muslims who had actually supplied the food to the Sikhs were regarded as innocent and the Hindus who had only obeyed their Muslim neighbours in the village were caught in the net. As a result of reckless and severe beating some of the Hindus died on the spot. One newly married bride’s husband lost his life through severe beating and the lady was asked to marry the Muslim commander. The pious lady requested that she should be killed like her husband. But who was there to listen to her woes? In sheer desperation, the lady moved forward and gave such a blow on the eyes of the commander that he lost his eye and became unconscious. A Pathan

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85 Ricoeur, 270.
soldier promptly drew his sword and aimed a heavy blow on the lady’s head, which was severed with a jerk, and the sharp point of his sword pierced the commander’s body.86

This is not a ‘good place’ of a religious utopia where reason and piety prevail, or even a Mannheimian utopia as a “vision of a future or perfect society, held by oppressed groups”,87 as the novelist perceives his contemporary Sikhs to be. This fantasy of the past of the author’s community consists mainly of its steadfast endurance of hardships.

Paul Ricoeur, in Lectures on Ideology and Utopia, while discussing Saint-Simon’s utopian writing describes this challenging power of utopias.

The result of reading a utopia is that it puts into question what presently exists; it makes the actual world seem strange. Usually we are tempted to say that we can not live in a way different from the way we presently do. The utopia, though, introduces a sense of doubt that shatters the obvious.88

As a religious utopia, Sundari is questioning the reality of Sikhism of its author’s time while its fictional account is facilitating the creation of an alternate account of the past.

Identity, Power and History through Modernizing Punjabi

Sundari is a discourse of identity. Perceiving his notion of a separate ‘true Sikh’ (Khalsa) identity under assault by the Christians, Muslims and especially Hindus who consider Sikhism as one of their sects, the author marks for recruitment the contemporary Sikh women as his missionaries of this identity-forming evangelism and seeks to address them directly. His didactic approach consists of the following strategies: the main character is

88 Ricoeur, 299-300.
an ideal-Sikh woman; the fictional account, interspersed with ‘historical’ narrative is
written in easy to understand contemporary vernacular; and the script used is Gurmukhi
with which even the least literate Punjabi women are familiar. The fictional Sundari’s last
polemically-pregnant words are addressed to the real Sikh women of the author’s time.
By admonishing Sikhs how to perceive themselves, he practically invents a new
discourse of religious Sikh identity where there are clear distinctions between Sikhs and
all others.

*Sundari* is a discourse of power vested in the separateness of identity. Paul
Ricoeur’s basic hypothesis in *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* is that “what is at stake in
ideology and in utopia is power. It is here that ideology and utopia intersect.”89 He adds
that all utopias, “whether written or realized, attempt to exert power in a way other than
what exists.”90 *Sundari*’s author attempts to influence the modes of deliberation of his
religious community, to wrest control of identity and identity-making, away from others
– the British rulers, the rival Arya Samaji Hindus, the ‘foreigner’ Muslims and even the
other non-Khalsa Sikhs. A mixture of fiction and a Khalsa-centric history is used to tell
the Sikhs who they really were and how they can reclaim their true identity, in the
present, by following the example of *Sundari*’s Sikhs.

Bhai Vir Singh’s medium for acquiring and exerting this power of separateness
for his Sikh community is the Punjabi Language. During the Raj and even before, the
Punjabi language had been considered a secondary vernacular and therefore under
perceived threat of absorption by official-language Urdu and dominant Hindi. The
Gurmukhi script had hitherto been used mostly for the Sikh religious and hagiographical

89 Ricoeur, 298.
90 Ricoeur, 310.
texts, and in the mechanically printed form since 1840s by the missionaries to convert Sikhs to Christianity. Punjabi was regarded even in the Panjab as suitable only for the basic education of the Sikh females; males studied Persian, Urdu, Hindi and English. By writing in Punjabi language, and using Gurmukhi script, he is also empowering the Punjabi language and its script. He is considered the first *shailikar* (stylist, technician) of Punjabi prose and the first Punjabi writer who was able to show independence from Brajbhasha through choice of diction and syntax\(^9\) that had been used for the hagiographical and ‘historical’ writings. (Both his father and maternal grandfather were Brajbhasha writers.) Starting with his modest skills on display throughout *Sundari*, he continued to improve and introduce techniques and styles influenced by modern Western education in his subsequent Punjabi writings. Through sheer volume of his writing alone, “he pulled the Punjabi prose out of the crude and amateurish narratives” of the Sikh hagiographies and hero accounts\(^2\) – of which *Sundari* may even be considered one of the last examples. Bhai Vir Singh’s involvement in the Khalsa Tract Society as the principal writer of Sikh mission tracts (he wrote about 720 tracts in the fifteen years starting at the end of 1890s\(^3\)), required the writing in plain and simple language, often intended for illiterate villagers. This motivated him to develop a more contemporary medium for his sole objective, to proselytize the Sikh ideals.\(^4\) Even in poetry, he is credited by some with initiating the modernity that became most evident in Mohan Singh in the 1930s.

Bhai Vir Singh helped bring about the same kind of revolution to the 20\(^{th}\) century Punjabi poetry as Wordsworth had brought to the 19\(^{th}\) century English poetry

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93 Kohli, 78.
94 Kohli, 58.
...We see in his poetry the seed of tendency towards romance that matured through Lala Dhani Ram Chatrik and Kirpa Sagar in the poetry of Mohan Singh.  

_Sundari_ is a discourse of nationalist history. In creating common language, traditions, identity and past – and hence ideology – the author is venturing on a political project. He is attempting to regain a nation of Panjabis ruled by Sikhs, which only a scant half-century earlier was lost to the British shortly after the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Sudipta Kaviraj, discussing nineteenth century formation of such national discourses in India and specially the Bengali writer Bankimchandra’s role in it, comments on the reliance of narrative and history on each other:

Thus history, instead of being distinguished by the trueness of the story, is now distinguished by the storyness of the truth. What distinguishes history then is a form, a way of colligating events; but the events so colligated can be true or imaginary.

In _Sundari_ history and story meet, reciprocate and reinforce each other. In _Time and Narrative_, one of Paul Ricoeur’s theses is that “historical events do not differ radically from the events framed by a plot.” Commenting on Ricoeur’s views on Biblical narrative, which has resonance in the religious utopia of _Sundari_, Kevin D. Vanhoozer comments:

His task, in _Time and Narrative_, is twofold: on the one hand he needs to show how history is more like fiction in relying on the power of the imagination to construct plots; on the other hand, he needs to show how fiction is more like history in its reference to the real world of human action … histories remind us of what was possible, fiction of what might be possible.

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95 Kohli, 77.
96 “The Bengalis must have history, or else, they would never become human beings.” Kaviraj, 124.
97 Kaviraj, 107.
Conclusion

One day Bhai Vir Singh, it is narrated, read in one of his mission school textbooks an English author’s opinion that the “Sikhs are fast disappearing.” He decided, on that day, to save the “Sikh religion from succumbing to this fall”, and the missionary and literary course of his life was set. In the process of “saving” his religion, Bhai Vir Singh helped revive and modernize the Punjabi language. His attempts at modernizing Punjabi are acknowledged by most writers who followed him, as is his greater preoccupation with the propagation of his faith. He was accorded the honorifics “Bhai” (Brother) to, and Saint-poet of, the Sikh Religion. There are accounts of wayward and lapsed Sikhs’ transformations in which they regained their religious faith and pride in community upon reading this book.

In creating this ‘conversion text’, he began with a grand vision to populate his Khalsa utopia with his ideal Sikhs of Sundari. In spite of, because of, and in addition to their martial attributes, their hardy and obstinate faith, their strong sense of social and moral outrage, their rough and non-effete demeanour, the big-hearted Sikhs of Sundari are also soft-hearted guru-tropic devotees, whose faith, like a sunflower, remains fixed towards its source of sustenance, the eternal Guru. This is the essence of the author’s creative intention behind the Sikh utopia.

Sundari is also a high-polemics gamesmanship of a utopia. In the mature and later years of his long literary life (he died in 1957 at the age of eighty-five, and remained

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100 Bikram Singh Ghuman, बांधु लीला मिश्रा अते डिम टे साम्राज्जी (Bhai Vir Singh ate Us de Samkali - Bhai Vir Singh and His Contemporaries), (Amritsar: Jasjit Sahit Prakashan, 1994), 14.


102 Kohli, 73.

103 From the 1930s “Afterword” to the novel, Sundari, 110.
prolific throughout), he was better known in his time for his religious and mystical poetry, and pietistic yet scholarly religious anthologies.¹⁰⁴ His attempts at novels were not particularly successful because of “his pre-occupation with Sikh teachings.”¹⁰⁵ Soon after Sundari, he gave up writing novels.¹⁰⁶ This novel is a product of the times of communal uncertainty and competing social, religious and political ideologies under the Raj. The book was a success within the Sikh religious circles and in the following twenty-five years went through as many modest but regular reprints. As we look back, we wonder if the ‘us and them’ utopia created in the book may have contributed to the more and more solid construction of the walls between the religious of the Panjab. The discourse of Sundari, and parallel discourses within the Hindu and Muslim communities, might have contributed to the foregone communal conclusions resulting in the madness of the events that accompanied the Partition of the Panjab in 1947. We abstain from speculating if during the last ten years of his life this thought did cross his fine and kindly mind.

¹⁰⁵ Sekhon and Duggal, 110.
¹⁰⁶ He left unfinished a novel started in circa 1902, even as he continued to write for the next five decades. ‘Deep’, 282-287.
II

GHADAR: AN IMPOSSIBLE IZZAT UTOPIA

I found to my great surprise the brilliance of a War of Independence shining in the “mutiny of 1857”. The spirits of the dead seemed hallowed by martyrdom. And out of the heaps of ashes appeared forth sparks of a fiery inspiration.
–Savarkar, The Indian War of Independence, 1857.¹

Fifty-seven years have elapsed since the mutiny of 1857; and another mutiny is badly needed. Today we start the war against the English Government.
What is your name? Ghadar. What is your work? Ghadar.
–“Ailan-i-Jang” (Declaration of War), August 4, 1914 Ghadar.²

Introduction

Ghadar, the armed revolutionary political movement which arose out of the West Coast of North America had strong connections with and influences on the South Asian immigrant community of the early twentieth century British Columbia. The movement made an equally important contribution to the evolution of Punjabi language through its newspapers, pamphlets and other revolutionary literature written and published by the Panjabi emigrants to North America.

Although the first record of a “Hindoo” gold prospector on the North American West Coast goes back to 1857, the year a ‘ghadar’ took place in India, it was not until the year following Sundari’s publication that a larger number of mostly-Sikh Panjabis arrived in Canada and the United States. The San Francisco Chronicle on April 6, 1899 devoted three column-inches to the arrival and permission to land of four Sikhs, “all fine looking men,” who were ex-soldiers and policemen of the British Empire.³

³ Suzanne McMahon, Echoes of Freedom (Berkeley: University of California, 2001), 5-6.
The first South Asians to do so, nearly 6,000 Panjabis of mostly illiterate and of farming or military background came to Canada between 1903 and 1908. Cool social reception and colder climate drove half of them towards California where these former landowners and farmers sought the opportunity to lease or buy land. This potential for “spirit of freedom” gained through such ownership was preferable to the lumber mill, railroad or day-labour farm work in British Columbia. The vast majority of labourers were Sikhs from the Panjab; most of the students were Hindus, a few Sikhs and Muslims. Panjabis worked on railroads, lumber mills or logging camps in B.C. and in California, Oregon and Washington states. These lesser-paid, more-willing hard workers were victimized by the anti-Asian ideology of the day. The leaders of the American labour movement helped form the Asiatic Exclusion League (for “preservation of the Caucasian race”), which succeeded in the imposition of immigration restrictions in the States as well as in a complete halt of immigration to Canada. This group and its sympathizers frequently practiced violence against the ‘Hindus’ in Canada and the United States and were often abetted by the politicians of the day. One such riot took place at night time in September 1907, when a mob of about 500 union men attacked Bellingham’s “Hindu colonies” to beat most of the residents, loot and destroy their quarters and to take other measures as they saw fit to “help drive out the cheap labour.”

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4 1904 Census of B.C. lists 258 ‘Hindus’ (all Sikhs); during 1905-08 over 5,000 more Sikhs arrived in B.C. Bhai Nahar Singh, *Struggle for Free Hindustan* (New Delhi: Atlantic, 1985), 332.
6 “White Canada Forever” was a very popular union hall song in B.C. where the Canadian branch of the Asiatic Exclusion League was formed as early as 1907. Bhai Nahar Singh, 332.
7 H. H. Stevens, a Vancouver member of parliament avowed that the “destiny of Canada” best remain in the hands of the Anglo-Saxon race and was opposed to any move that threatened “in the slightest degree this position.” H. Stevens, *The Oriental Problem* (Vancouver: n. d.), 11. Cited in Bhai Nahar Singh, 333.
But over 6,000 Panjabis did manage to establish themselves in North America by 1910. A socio-religious society in 1909, and by 1912 a Sikh Gurudwara, was established in Stockton, California (first Gurudwara in Canada was established in Vancouver in 1907) by the Sikhs – where not only Sikhs, Hindus and even Muslims but also Mexican Catholics gathered and socialized. The Panjabis in America were not allowed to purchase any land except for a place of worship. As farming business expanded in the Fresno area in California at the beginning of the 20th century, the Panjabis with their agricultural background and desire to work hard became well sought after. Soon, some Panjabis were pooling money to lease farm lands in northern California valleys instead of working as farm labour for others. As they were not allowed to bring their families from India, a number of them took Mexican wives. After marriage the husband and wife kept their respective religions and the children were baptized so that their mothers could remain communion-receiving Catholics.9 A large number of these inter-faith “bi-ethnic” marriages, which provided husbands to the often destitute Mexican farm-worker females and a small measure of social stability to the Panjabis, remained viable.10

The personal, legal, and social hardships experienced by these Panjabis readied them for influence by the revolutionary ideology of the times. The social and religious hubs of Stockton and other Gurudwaras also became the centres of political activity. A number of political tabloids were produced in Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu, the three vernaculars of the Panjab. As a large number of the immigrants were former soldiers in

9 McMahon, Echoes of Freedom, 40.
10 Even the ‘Hindu’-Mexican couples who lived away from the Sikh farming community were not immune to the Indians’ religious practices. Upon hearing of the death of a husband, a group of Sikhs came from another area in California to forcibly take his body away from his family to cremate according to the Sikh religious rites. As their descendents recalled, not all the Mexican women’s experiences with the Panjabis had been happy ones. Karen Leonard, Making Ethnic Choices (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1992), 7.
the British Indian forces, their inability to receive social justice led them to struggle for its achievement through militant means. A small number of students and professionals, the educated elite, from the San Francisco area led the revolutionary movement, commonly known as the Hindustan Ghadar (India Revolution) Party. An Oregon mill worker Sikh, Sohan Singh Bhakna, was made the first president; a travelling university lecturer Hindu, Har Dyal, the secretary; and an established Californian farmer Sikh, “the potato king” Jawala Singh, provided most of the covert financial support in the early years. November 1, 1913 saw the launching of the ‘revolution’ with the publication, and mailing to every Indian household in North America, of the first issue of the Ghadar newspaper. The paper was also distributed in Europe, the Far East and India.

The poetry and other writings published in this paper reflected the opinions, hardships and hopes of the Indians who were made aware of their lesser or nil legal and social status — not only due to their non-European origins, but also because they hailed from a subjugated Asian colony of a European Empire. As expanded later, this poetry, though rustic and traditional in composition styles, is the expression of an informed and modern world-view of the oppressed Panjabis who chose or were forced to work in North America. Their mostly unpleasant personal encounters with the host society highlighted their political plight. The poetry expressed this channelling of their personal be-izzati-loss of honour into their passionate desire to take revenge on the entity responsible for this disgrace — the British Raj.

Most of these émigrés, or their ancestors before the adverse economic conditions in the Panjab overwhelmed them, were from a “well-to-do class of peasant proprieters” with a traditional “touchy” sense of personal honour. Many had worked as soldiers or policemen for the British in the Pacific Asian countries before retiring. These retirees and their relatives and friends, who had hitherto been most loyal Raj subjects, became most virulent detractors of the British. At the root of this turnabout was the treatment they received in North America that directly attacked and affected their sense of izzat—personal honour. The poetry of Ghadar sets out to envision a world, not in a distant past or a remote future but “now”, where the Ghadarites’ izzat is reclaimed and restored.

A number of selections from this publication were subsequently anthologized starting with the 28-page Echoes of Freedom in 1914. The Kesar Singh Kesar edited Ghadar Lahir di Kavita (Poetry of the Revolution Movement) includes selections from many of the Ghadar movement and similar publications that propagated strong and simple sentiments of militant action.

Pre-Ghadar Conditions in the Panjab

The powerless receive succour nowhere. Which Durbar can they go to lay open their sorrows?—Azadi di Goonj (Echo of Freedom), No. 12, p. 15.

At home, with the arrival of the new rulers and new laws, cultivators experienced impoverishing increases in litigation, water taxes and debts. There were only three ways

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15 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Punjabi are by the present author.
to escape the famines, plagues and poverty: if able, service in the army; if available, naukri-service for the Raj; or self-exile in search of work.\footnote{Kesar, 21.} Their escape from the ghulami-slavery at home led to the “cooler” labour conditions abroad. The hard life of a cultivator from the Panjab might have acclimatized his body to the physical toil of the “green chain” or farm work in Canada and the U.S., but this naukri (literally, servant-ship) came with the additional burdens of racism and intolerance by the host society, and separation from wife and family. The living conditions were harsh. There were no lavatory or bath facilities in the squalid camps; “they did not even have the facility to cremate their dead. The first Indian person to die on Canadian soil was named Arjan Singh; his last rites were surreptitiously undertaken in a forest.”\footnote{Kesar, 23.}

In spite of, and due to, the brutal British suppressions such as the one visited on the Kukas in the 1870s, the militant nationalism in the Panjab had never ended. The 1897 Legislative Council wrought sweeping changes to governance in the Panjab to further tighten the Raj’s grip on its people who strongly voiced their vocal and sometimes violent opposition.\footnote{Pawan K. Singla, \textit{British Administration in Punjab 1897-1919 and its Reaction} (New Delhi: National Book Organisation, 2003), ix.} ‘Seditious’ writers like Ajit Singh and his writer-publisher partner Sufi Amba Prasad started many publications under different names as fast as the authorities closed them down due to their “highly offensive” and “anti-state” stance, such as telling Indians that 300 million of them could easily defeat 350 thousand Englishmen who ruled India.\footnote{Ganda Singh, Devinder Kumar Verma, et al., eds., \textit{Seditious Literature in the Panjab} (Patiala: Punjabi University Publications Bureau, 1988), xii-xiii.} Exiled to the Andamans, and following social protests brought back and released,
Ajit Singh left India in 1910 and subsequently had some contact with Bhakna and other Ghadarites in America.\(^{20}\)

The Panjab had already suffered six severe famines in the five decades following the Company takeover in 1848. The British had continued to export its grain even as Panjabis suffered famines. The next decade was no better. The drought of 1905-1906 followed by epidemics of malaria and plague had claimed over two million lives, causing a net loss of 2.2% of the population between the censuses of 1901 and 1911.\(^{21}\) The beleaguered farmers then faced the Colonization Bill, due to take effect in March 1907, meant to take away the peasant-cultivators’ rights by declaring that all land was to be the property of the Crown. In addition, the abiana-water fees were drastically increased. Ajit Singh, Lajpat Rai and others spoke and wrote against the bill. This was termed seditious literature by the government, and the writers and publishers of this literature were dealt with very harshly.\(^{22}\) Even though the protests had their intended result and the bill was vetoed, the repressive Raj had made it impossible for the protesters to remain in India. These Panjabis moved their operations overseas, particularly to the West Coast of North America.\(^{23}\) The loss or threat of loss of mortgaged land and loss of liberty had forced Panjabis such as Sohan Singh Bhakna and others to bdes-alien land, to work as and be treated like “coolies”. The foundations of North American Ghadar were laid in the

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Panjab. “Thus, an irony of history: the escape from communalism and colonialism lead to new forms of oppression and a sharper sense of ethnic identity and national pride.”\textsuperscript{24}

Even before the Ghadar movement of the 1910s, there existed some nationalist activity on the West Coast. A 1907 \textit{Circular-e-Azadi} (Circular of Freedom) in Urdu published by a political exile announced the formation of a Hindustan Association in San Francisco with branches in Astoria and Vancouver. Espousing the then-prevalent-in-Bengal \textit{swadeshi} (‘of/from our own country’, i.e., ‘self-sufficiency’) movement, it claimed: \textit{Swadeshi} is for India what \textit{Sinn Fein} (‘we ourselves’) is for Ireland.\textsuperscript{25}

During this period two immigrants came in contact with one another in America. One was born and reared a Sikh in a Panjabi village; the other was from a prominent Hindu family in cosmopolitan Delhi. The older man was almost illiterate yet experienced due to his social and spiritual pursuits in the Panjab; the younger famous for his academic brilliance and for winning a rare Raj scholarship to study in England. Sohan Singh was well regarded in the Panjabi community as a supporter of social causes even before he arrived in California to work as a labourer; Har Dayal, who came a few years later after abandoning his studies in England and was already known for his radical nationalist ideas, found a position as lecturer on Buddhist philosophy at Stanford. Sohan Singh had already helped organize a self-help and political lobbying association of the poorly treated, mostly illiterate immigrant labourers from the Panjab when Har Dayal was recommended to him to become its English language spokesman. As president and secretary respectively, they lead this group that quickly morphed into a revolutionary \textit{Ghadar Party}. Even though Har Dayal’s role was significant in the movement, especially

\textsuperscript{24} Juergenmeyer, 4.
\textsuperscript{25} Puri, 46-47.
in its change towards premeditation of violence, it is Sohan Singh Bhakna who more than any one else represented the idealism, aspirations and failure of Ghadar.

An Iconic Ghadarite Elder: Sohan Singh Bhakna

**Bhakna:** I was to be hanged in the morning. I remember the night to this day. The entire barrack had 24 jail cells; each had one of my co-prisoners. As was the custom, first we were weighed, (smiling) perhaps to see how strong a rope was needed. Then we spent the whole night in loud laughter, shouts and singing.

Q: Had you composed a song for this occasion?

**Bhakna:** No, friend! I wasn’t a poet – I never put together couplets or stanzas. Yes, I could sing the compositions of others.

–Bhakna, recalling 1915 in a 1967 interview at age 97. 26

Sohan Singh of village Bhakna was one of the many thousands forced to escape the Panjab’s adverse economic conditions to the New World in the new century. Like most others he started as a ‘coolie’ labourer and farm worker on the West Coast of North America. He was the first President of the organization which became the Ghadar Party.

A man of lowly education and lofty principles, he spent cumulatively 26 years of his adult life in prisons for his activism. 27 He composed no poems of nationalist passion, but there was compassion and rhyme in the way he served during his long life the ideals of freedom, self-respect and patriotism. His reasons for going to North America, his Ghadarite ideals and aspirations, and his active involvement in leadership position in the conduct of, and his utter failure in, the revolution make him an archetype for the movement. The Ghadar party members are often called बाबा (bābe = grandfathers, the Elders), a secular equivalent of ‘saints’. Baba Sohan Singh deserved his honorific.

26 Prem Singh Bajaj, दो पैरिहान इतिहास दian, Do Pairhan Itihas Dian - Two Trails of History (Ludhiana: Punjabi Sahit Academy, 2004), 64.
27 Bajaj, 35.
The only son of a line of the well-to-do landowner farmers, he was but a year old when his father and the husband of two wives passed away. Born two years before the Kuka movement was violently crushed by the British in 1872, he was also much influenced by its nationalist and humanist tenets.

Like many ‘saints’ he also had a contrary past. His formal education consisted of just five years of primary school from the age of ten to fifteen. The only son and progeny, he was deemed too valuable to be away from the family for higher education in the city. Instead, he took up the life and habits of the landed farmer and spent the next few years squandering his health and holdings. One of the legacies of the Raj had made it possible to borrow money against land and live beyond one’s means. He drank and wasted away his life for a decade. Then, one day he encountered Kesar Singh, a saintly personage who had been a close companion of the Rangoon-exiled Kuka leader Ram Singh, and began to “look inward and open the eyes of knowledge.” He joined the by then decimated and proscribed Namdharis (Kukas), in a group called Prem Sangat, Convention of Love, a trans-religious humanitarian organization devoted to social justice issues. Bhakna credited his time with this group for his Ghadarite and humanist ideals.

The wasted years had taken their toll on the recovered wastrel. He owed 3,000 rupees to the money lenders, the remaining meagre land holding was mortgaged, and he had no income to subsist on or to continue supporting the Sangat gatherings. On the day he was at the cottage of his spiritual master to ask for permission to go abroad for a few years to improve his economic condition – and was giving the details of his plight – another disciple, a rich Hindu businessman, was also in attendance. “Sanātani Hindus

28 Bajaj, 41.
29 Bajaj, 44.
believe that Merit can be purchased,” Bhakna recalled. The rich man proposed to their master that he would trade the sums needed to discharge Bhakna’s entire debt in exchange for the transfer of full credit of Bhakna’s meritorious works. The master laughed out loud and said to Bhakna: “You can do the trading here, and you won’t need to go to America.” Although tempted, Bhakna declined gratefully; and accepted the master’s advice to go back to his land to work with his own hands instead of living off the toil of the sharecroppers as he had done all his life.30

The second temptation came a few months later, he recalled. Rev. Wadhawa Mall, a Christian missionary and a friend of Bhakna from the Sangat circles, came to visit him. They met on a footpath outside the village. With a serf’s sore neck and a load of wet fodder on his head, Bhakna greeted his friend and laid the bundle down. The priest expressed unbearable sorrow at his friend’s adversity, and proposed: “By all means, do remain an outwardly Sikh. I can discharge your entire debt through the Mission. I know you already hold Jesus in high izzat. But accept in your mind that you are a Christian!” Bhakna declined this friendly offer of trade also (a third temptation was presented to him by his mother in his death-row prison cell a few years later). He came to understand that the destitute are subject to religious as well as political exploitation: and he resolved to resist the temptation to earn a living either through religion or politics.31 This idea, too, influenced his Ghadar work.

Unable to make a go of farming, he did accept his American-resident Panjabi friend’s earlier invitation and offer of help to emigrate in 1909 – leaving his wife, and his

30 Bajaj, 46. Bajaj interviewed a fragile but intellectually agile Bhakna (Bajaj, 35) when the Ghadarite was in his late 90s. The interviewer’s deference to the rare surviving Ghadarite might have elicited the auto-hagiographical elements in the Bhakna exposition. As in Bhai Vir Singh’s Sundari, the past might have been somewhat idealized.
31 Bajaj, 45-47.
father’s two wives, behind. In Seattle, the immigration officers had just two main questions for him: Are you in favour of polygamy; were you invited here by someone? He said “not at all” to both and was let in.\footnote{Bajaj, 49.} His first day at the job, near Portland, Oregon, was at the construction site of a saw mill. He started pushing wheel barrows full of cement, sand or mixed concrete up the wooden ramps along with other “Hindoo coolies”. By lunch break this former wrestler was too exhausted to continue. His friend requested the boss to let him work only half days for a week as he was new to this work. Eventually he could not only work the daily regular 10-hour shifts but also worked the additional two hours at overtime pay. He recalled that as his spiritual mentor had extracted him from a life of debauchery, the backbreaking and often undignified manual labour in America drove out his sloth, and introduced to him the value of hard work.

This capacity of the Indians to work reliably and hard had not escaped the notice of the Euro-American workers. Bhakna recalled that even though Chinese, Japanese and other nationals were willing to accept even lower wages than the Indians, the wrath of the organized American labour fell mostly on the Indian labourers, such as the “be-izzati” assault on the Indians in a Portland sawmill. They lacked a government to fight for their rights.\footnote{The Chinese and Japanese governments had set up organizations to support their émigrés. The British, on the other hand, had sent a police officer, W.C. Hopkinson, to set up a network of agents to spy on the Indians in North America. McMahon, 35-36.} The British Consul in America tendered no help to these British subjects.

Bhakna recalled his experiences as a labourer on the West Coast of America:

For the reason that we were a subject nation, even the passerby children would tease us: ‘Hello Hindoo slave!’ We were taunted: Are the 300 million of you men or sheep who can’t free yourselves from the 200,000 Englishmen; and, you Hindoos are not human but rats that spread the plague of slavery. In fact, at heart the Americans disliked the British and used to prod us into action against them. … After many deliberations we reached the conclusion that as long as we are not
free we are worthless and that freedom is gained, not received. Without armed revolution neither can the freedom be obtained, nor democracy and nor the respect for our race.34

The helpless immigrants set up a mutual-support group, Hindi Association, in Portland, Oregon in 1912, to do what the Raj had refused to do for them. Bhakna, with a history of association with the anti-British Namdhari movement of the nineteenth century, participation in the 1907 Peasants Movement and a reputation for community service was the choice for President of the newly formed organization in America. His lack of higher education or command of English were no hindrances to his work with and leadership of the mostly Panjabis who were its members. However, soon they realized the need for a “dual leadership” where the effective control could be retained by the founding and funding but mostly illiterate Sikh farmers like Jawala Singh and Bhakna while the English language communications with the authorities were to be carried out by the literate spokesmen who were mostly Hindus.35 They invited Lala Har Dyal, a Hindu revolutionary writer of some repute who was teaching at Stanford University, to speak to this group in March 1913. Following this talk, the gathering decided to hold a series of conferences among the Indians on the West Coast to “raise awareness, induce the desire for freedom, and then form a strong organization for the purpose of armed revolution.”36 Thus an itinerant Hindi Association, with the objective of cultivating benevolence towards Indian labourers among the host society, evolved into the Hindi Association of the Pacific Coast constituted by the labourers, students and revolutionaries from India. This association gained fame and notoriety as the Ghadar Party, after it started to publish the Ghadar series of periodicals and pamphlets. Its main tenets were: the achievement of

34 Bajaj, 51-53.
35 Khushwant Singh, 16.
36 Bajaj, 53-54.
freedom and equality for all Indians through armed strength, the contributions of all work on volunteer basis only, support for all those who seek freedom the world over, and completely non-religious in composition (“we were all Hindustanis”).

The Ghadar training was split up in various groups. Use of guns and pistols was undertaken under a retired gunnery soldier of the Raj; Kartar Singh Sarabha, the young poet, assistant editor and translator for Ghadar, was tasked to apprentice with a German avionics company to learn to fly; and the Irish supplied lessons in bomb making. “I was there the day Harnam Singh ‘Tundilat (Lord Stubby Arm!’) lost his hand in a bomb making experiment. I took off my turban and tied his arm with it,” Bhakna recalled.

**Har Dayal**

Lala Har Dayal, the brilliant intellectual, dramatic propagandist, fiery orator and anti-Raj polemicist par excellence, is often credited with conceiving and leading the Ghadar movement. He played but a cameo albeit crucial role in the party’s transition. A well-read man of restless intellect, he had started a Socialist publication as a graduate student in England, participated in the prevailing Anarchist movement, lectured for a semester on Buddhist philosophy at Stanford, wrote virulent pamphlets against the Raj such as the ‘Bravo!’ piece following the bomb attempt on Viceroy Hardinge in 1912 (cover

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37 Bajaj, 55.
38 An only son and orphan, Sarabha had left college in 1912 to come to America. He worked in the print shop and translated Har Dyal’s Urdu writings in Punjabi at Ghadar. Returning to India to mount revolt, he participated in many activities including robberies in the Panjab. He forewent an opportunity to escape upon the revolt’s failure, and was sentenced to death and hanged in November 1915. He was 19. Kesar, 440-441.
39 Bajaj, 58.
41 *Indian Socialist* was patterned along the lines of the World Revolutionary Movement. Ganda Singh, xv.
42 ‘Tundilat’ recalled Har Dayal’s special fascination with Bakunin and his ideas. Puri, 171.
inscription: ‘Price per copy: The head of an Englishman.’), speculated on the potential for receiving help from Germany against the Raj in the impending war between Germany and England, and wrote on ‘similar’ militant movements in China, Russia, Egypt, Ireland and Mexico with the insinuation that these countries would help Ghadarites against the British. He was arrested in California on March 25, 1914 for “anarchist activities” and soon released on bail. He condemned the “despicable pro-British subservience of the United States” for his arrest, and fearing re-arrest and deportation escaped to hide out in Europe. After less than five months, during which he was the chief and prolific writer and editor of the periodical, his practical involvement with Ghadar, and the movement it represented, ended. The Panjabi émigré movement which had been already organizing to pursue lawful means for gaining izzat and social justice in North America before his involvement was changed into a violence-prone nationalist party – in part due to Har Dayal’s injection of rhetoric of violence. A few years later he would recant this anti-British ideology. That was his last word on the Ghadar revolutionary movement.

Har Dayal’s argument for a violent revolution to end the Raj was based on his conclusion that because the British and Indian interests were irreconcilable the Indians were ready to rise in revolt against the tyranny and degradation imposed on them by the “British Vampire”. Patriotism was the rallying idea for his revolution. He had seen in London, following the Boer War, how the English considered patriotism a “supreme

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43 His message: “It is the bomb that frightens the government into conceding rights to the people. The chief thing is to frighten the government.” Puri, 82.
44 Puri, 83.
45 Puri, 86.
47 Puri, 123-124.
social virtue” even as they labelled it “sedition” in India. “Well, Har Dayal felt, what was good for an Englishman was also good for an Indian.”

He may have lacked the staying power of a true leader for this revolution, but his charismatic communication skills helped to shape and start it. He opposed co-operating with the Raj to gain concessions and minor liberties as he believed the Indian Congress was doing. The Congress had failed because it could not communicate clearly that “such is their state, these are the causes, and how to remove the causes.” Har Dayal could. An account of his first meeting with the Panjabi farm labourers in America reads:

Har Dayal and I went, and a good number of farm workers gathered in a field. They sat down all around us. There was no formality. They sat quietly and I said a few things. Then Har Dayal talked about the position of the Indian people in India and abroad, the need of independence … He finished and there was no applause or any other visible response from the listeners.

But a few minutes of silence and quiet was broken when one or two men came forward awkwardly, saluted Har Dayal with reverence and placed a few dollar bills before him, as they used to do when offering their contributions in a temple. One by one, almost every one made some cash contribution or wrote out a cheque. A few hundred dollars were collected within half an hour.

His personal charm is also said to have helped him get away from the Ghadarites to relative safety. After his brief detention in early 1914 in California, he received timely help in this escape. A co-ed who had attended his Stanford lectures was the daughter of a San Francisco police inspector. She obtained $500 from her mother and gave it to Har Dayal one evening, along with the information that he was to be re-arrested the following morning by her father. Har Dayal left right away, for Mexico and thence to Switzerland.

49 Grewal, 178.
50 T. R. Sareen, 35.
51 Grewal, 182.
Not allowed to enter India, he moved about Europe and the USA, and died of an apparent heart attack in New York in March 1939.52

**Kama Gata Maru in a white man’s country**

Conceived as a business opportunity by an enterprising Sikh trader as well as a way to challenge an unjust and duplicitous Canadian law, the *Kama Gata Maru* episode had a significant influence on the Ghadarites and the Panjabi community in North America as well as in India. The incident, more than any other single act, highlighted the Raj-based assault on the *izzat* of the Panjabis and their helplessness to do anything about it. This was not an incident of an individual and private loss of honour to one but a protracted and grand scale humiliation of a whole community as the Western world witnessed it without sympathy. Some of the virulence in the *Ghadar* poetry is explainable by just this incident.

Following the entry of a large number of Indians and other ‘Orientals’ in Canada at the beginning of the first decade of the 20th century, the labour unions organized strong social and political pressure on all levels of the Canadian government. Popular union hall songs included words about fighting “Oriental grasp and greed” to preserve “white Canada for ever.”53 Premier MacBride of British Columbia declared: “To admit Orientals in large numbers would mean in the end the extinction of the white people and we have always in mind the necessity of keeping this a white man’s country.”54 There were calls for, and efforts towards, the outright ban of immigration from India and to “relocate” the resident immigrants away from Canada. The British dilemma consisted of the accession to Canadian demands versus the causing of “offence” to their Sikh soldiers of the Raj

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52 T. R. Sareen, 40-41.
53 Khushwant Singh, 2.
54 Khushwant Singh, 26.
whose relatives would be affected by the Canadian ban on immigration. Khushwant Singh states:

Canada’s immigration policy vis-à-vis the Indians was, therefore, formulated after prolonged negotiations between Vancouver, Ottawa, London and [Raj capital until 1912] Calcutta. The governments conceded, however, the principle that British Columbians were entitled to exclude and expel Indian immigrants if they wished to do so; their only concern was that the measures should be so framed that it should not appear that there was any discrimination against the Indians.55

A new law was brought in without parliamentary debate. In May 1908, a Governor-General-in-Council Order prohibited immigrants to come to Canada otherwise than by a continuous journey from their country of origin or citizenship. Another June 1908 Order also required the Asian immigrants to have $200 in their possession before landing.56 There were no ships sailing directly from India to the Canadian West Coast. Kama Gata Maru was chartered to bring mostly-Sikh passengers directly from India. When it arrived in the Vancouver harbour, the passengers were not allowed to disembark. After two months of cordonning off, during which the Indian community in Vancouver area exhausted sparse legal and political recourse to help while the passengers bore squalor and famine on board, the ship was made to turn back. HMCS Rainbow, the pride of the fledgling Canadian Navy, was given its first commission to chase away Kama Gata Maru from Burrard Inlet.57 During the night of July 21, Rainbow with its 150 blue-jackets sidled up to Kama Gata Maru and trained its guns on its passengers from the Burrard Inlet side. The harbour side was lined with the Canadian militia, Irish Fusiliers and Seaforth Highlanders. Rear Admiral Hose, commander of the Rainbow, received a perfectly executed semaphore through the weary arms of an “old white-bearded fellow”

55 Khushwant Singh, 5.
56 Puri, 33-34.
57 Bhai Nahar Singh, 336.
from the bridge of the passenger ship that carried a number of the former British soldiers: “Our only ammunition is coal.”58 In the early hours of the following morning, the two-month-long eyesore of a ship in the picturesque Vancouver harbour and its humiliated passengers silently set off towards the Pacific.

The treatment meted out by Canadians to the Kama Gata Maru passengers had been receiving wide news coverage in India. Ghadrites, who had already believed that America’s negative attitude towards Indian immigration to the U. S. was due to British influence, saw another example of Raj malevolence in this humiliating incidence. It did not escape their notice that Canada, a British dominion country, was more hostile than even the Americans to Indian immigrants.59

**Without bang or whimper**

Bhakna set off from America within days of the Kama Gata Maru ouster from Canada. On the way, he purchased a few hand weapons in Yokohama, met with a German consul in Japan, avoided an arrest by the British police in Nagasaki, visited Shanghai where fifty policemen resigned their posts to accompany him to India as Ghadar soldiers, escaped another attempt by the British to arrest him in Shanghai, was tailed from Penang onwards and was forced to dump weapons and other Ghadar materials at sea.60

He was caught upon arrival in Calcutta, sent to the Panjab and by October 1914 was already in the Multan jail. This was the first of his jail terms totalling 26 years. Many

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58 Khushwant Singh, 28.
attempts were made to turn him into a government witness. He was one of the more than 60 tried for the Ghadar Conspiracy, one of the 24 given death sentence as well as forfeiture order for his land and property, and one of the 17 of the 24 whose death sentences were commuted to life sentence of hard labour at *Kale Pani* (Black Waters), the infamous penal colony that was expanded by the British in 1858 to house the prisoners of the 1857 ‘ghadar’, on Andaman Island in the Bay of Bengal. While in and out of prisons after the commutation of his first “life sentence”, he continued to fight for social justice issues well into his eighties. One of his many hunger strikes was in the prison cells of the independent India where he was sent for protesting the new government’s slovenly attempts at peasant reforms. He came away with a partially fused spine from that ordeal, “the imprint on me of my own government in my old age,” he commented. His regular presence at the Desh-Bhagat Yadgar Hall (Patriots’ Memorial Centre) in Jullundur remained a source of inspiration to those who visited this post-Independence Ghadar museum.

The mass departure of Bhakna and other leaders for India left a leadership vacuum in San Francisco. The post-Har Dayal *Ghadar* had continued to mimic his ideology and style, even though the Sikh-farmer and the student-revolutionary factions could not agree upon the strategy to affect their revolution. While the former returned to India by the hundreds to “launch an impossible revolution”, the students who described these farmers as “illiterate and impulsive Sikhs” stepped away from them to follow their

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61 Isemonger, 145.
62 Panjabi historians’ figures differ from the official Isemonger Report. Ram Singh Majitha states that 55 were hanged or killed, 310 received life imprisonments, 80 received lesser sentences; and their properties were seized; in addition, about 300 were kept in custody without charges and 1460 were detained within their villages. Majitha, 39-40.
63 Isemonger, Appendix C, xi, Lahore Conspiracy Case.
64 Bajaj, 76-78.
65 Tatla, xxx.
own course — that consisted of mainly working with the Germans. They requested Germany for an inter-national loan to be repaid after the defeat of the Raj, arms and ammunition to defeat the Raj, and for Germany to persuade its ally the Turkish sultan, as head of Islam, to declare jihad against the British. The German involvement, however, was focused on anti-British manoeuvres; and the Ghadarites were treated merely as “enthusiastic errand boys to be financed, advised and ordered about.” In July 1914 Ghadar pointed out the opportunity which was to be had after the English troops left India for the European battlefields, “O, Warriors! The opportunity you have been looking for has arrived! ... proceed to India forthwith.” The leaders knew they were not ready but the prospect of an advantage from their enemy’s adversity was irresistible. “Patriots without any arms decided on waging an immediate armed revolution.”

The war-beset British, informed by their North American spies, saw these returning Panjabis as “advance guard of a large army” and adopted the Ingress into India Ordinance (firstly, to deal with the returning Kama Gata Maru) in September 1914 and the Defence of India Acts in March 1915 to deal with the Ghadarites. They convinced the “Sikh gentry” to advise the Lt. Governor of the Panjab that “all the returned emigrants should be interned in jail, as was obvious that all were actually or potentially dangerous” and intent upon preaching Ghadar to or looting the villagers, and to “tamper with troops, raise the country and drive the English away.”

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66 Puri, 3.
67 Grewal, 195.
68 Puri, 104-05.
69 Puri, 94.
70 Isemonger, 54.
71 Isemonger, 59.
72 Isemonger, 73-75.
The Ghadarites who had so far evaded the authorities after arrival in India in 1914 were leaderless. They contacted Ras Bihari Bose, from a Bengal-based revolutionary group, to take over the Ghadar planning. Lahore was chosen as the new headquarters of the revolution. February 21, 1915 was set as the date for the coup d’état — to be initiated by the 23rd Cavalry at Lahore. An ex-pharmacist was tasked to set up “bomb factories”; some (as it turned out, inadequate) wire cutters and other tools were obtained to disrupt telegraph and railway lines; new flags were ordered; and, of course, fresh batches of the “Declaration of War” booklet Ilan-i-Jang were printed.

Aware of the Ghadarite activities, the police recruited Kirpal Singh, a returned immigrant from Shanghai and relative of a soldier in the 23rd Cavalry, to infiltrate their Lahore headquarters. During his fortnight long career as the police mole, he acted his part so well and swiftly that within a week he was promoted to the inner circle of the revolutionaries, and within the next three days they began to suspect him. Two dates were set for the start of the coup by the planners, the second due to their suspicion of the spy among them. Both dates were passed on to the police. A day before the final date the revolutionary headquarter was raided. The potentially rebellious soldiers of the 23rd had already been disarmed; many were court-martialled and a few executed. “The revolutionaries waited in vain for the troops to come out. Then they too dispersed — only to walk into the net the police had spread for them.”73 Three “inkpot bombs”, a dagger, a revolver, seditious literature and revolutionary flags was the total haul from their headquarters.74 Thus ended their “act of war” in India. Just as Har Dayal had walked out on the Ghadarites before they could make plans to start the rebellion so too left town the

73 Khuswant Singh, 43.
74 Isemonger, 123-124.
new leader Rash Behari Bose before the police arrived to put a stop to it. The main trial of the Ghadarites, the few arrested in Lahore and the scores caught earlier in Calcutta and the Panjab upon arrival from America, was based on the testimony of three police agents and ten government witnesses termed “approvers”. Six of these ten were Ghadarites who had been coerced and bribed to change sides.\textsuperscript{75} Adept at meting out exemplary punishment, the British made sure to take away the land, the icon of their izzat, from most of the accused. The police mole, who had betrayed the Ghadarites and Indian soldiers including a relative in Lahore, was rewarded with a 25-murrabba (625 acres) parcel of choice Canal land – although his enjoyment of this bounty was cut short by the Ghadarite retribution for this betrayal.\textsuperscript{76}

Back in California, on the eve of joining the Great War and finally acceding to the long and forceful insistence by the British whose network of “over 200 agents” in North America had been allegedly collecting evidence against the Ghadarites, the U.S. authorities arrested seventeen Indians and eighteen Germans including their consular officer. After the arrests in April, the “Hindu-Hun Conspiracy” officially known as “USA v/s Franz Bopp and others...” played out in the San Francisco federal court from September 1917 to April 1918. The cost to the government was about seven million dollars of which the British reimbursed the Americans nearly half.\textsuperscript{77} Ram Chander, who had succeeded Har Dyal as the editor and chief organizer in America, was one of the defendants. His leadership had already factionalized the movement. Some Ghadarites had accused him of misappropriation of Ghadar funds and even possibly being a spy for the British. On April 24\textsuperscript{th} the last day of the trial, another co-defendant Ram Singh whose

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{75} Isemonger, Appendix D, xxiv.
\item\textsuperscript{76} Majitha, 125.
\item\textsuperscript{77} Puri, 117.
\end{footnotes}
Canadian-earned money donated for the Ghadar activities had allegedly been “retained by Ram Chander for personal use”, pulled out a gun in the courtroom building and fatally shot Ram Chander. Ram Singh was in turn killed on the spot by a bailiff. Following the trial, the subdued and fragmented movement continued at its new office at 5 Wood Street in San Francisco until 1947, when its assets were turned over to the government of India. The Stockton Gurudwara also retained some role in religio-political activities.

**Ghadar: Make-up and Message**

First published from November 1913 to September 1917 and irregularly continued in the twenties and thirties, the graphic look of *Ghadar* appeared to commemorate the eighteenth century age of Sundari: to evoke an idealized past of a community of martyrs. The masthead letters ‘gh’, ‘da’ and ‘r’ in Gurmukhi script were sometimes in the shapes of various rough-hewn inexpertly drawn medieval-age hand weapons. In addition to the *bande matram* (salute-to-the-Mother) slogan and occasionally a line sketch of Mother India with a drawn sword standing inside the lion-headed cartographic outline of the subcontinent, an epigraph contained the modified quote from the Sikhs’ first guru Nanak. Originally lithographed from hand scribed layout, some later issues were printed using Gurmukhi typeface imported from the Panjab.

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79 McMahon, 36.
80 Tatla, xxviii.
81 Puri, 9. Some issues were published, irregularly, even during the 1920s and 1930s. Kesar, Appendix 2.
82 \( \text{Jau tau prem khelan kā chāu; siru dhari talī galī merī āu} \). (Literally: If you desire to play Love, come to my street with head upon palm.) - Guru Nanak, “Slok Vārān te Vadhik 19a”, *Adi Garanth*, 1412. Some *Ghadar* mastheads had modified Punjabi folksaying version of the original Braj: \( \text{je chit prem khelan da chao, sir dhar talī galī merī āu} \).
83 Bajaj, 11.
The poetry of Ghadar is simple, direct and to the point. The opening four of the 38-line poem *Sunaihri Mauka* (Golden Opportunity) exhort:

> Arise, O Indians, it’s already noon; call is made again to wake us up. 
> Work hard, earn dollars; buy tickets to return to homeland. 
> Our companions have reached India; we are left behind in ignominy 
> World calls us slaves; we fear giving our life to gain our Nation.84

The journalistic enterprise and production values were often amateur grade but consisted of dedicated volunteers, many of whom were aspiring writers and intellectuals of the day who had made it to the West Coast. The revolving doors at the Ghadar Ashram editorial offices let in many revolutionary writers like Lala Har Dyal as the founding editor, Ram Chander (Pashauria) who succeeded Har Dayal and Bhai Bhagwan Singh ‘Pritam’. Others included young Kartar Singh Sarabha, Harnam Singh ‘Tundilat’, Kartar Singh Latara, and Bhai Basant Singh Chaunda. The well-regarded poet Munsha Singh ‘Dukhi’ was a regular contributor. The “emotional character of the movement” was plainly reflected in the heroic poetry, appeal for solidarity and unity “and a crude picture of the British misrule in India through selected data marshalled as arguments.”85

*Ghadar* (and later, when the movement was factionalized, the concurrent *Hindustan Ghadar*) also printed other news. There were frequent references to revolutionary movements of that time in Ireland, Russia, China and Egypt, and to suggest their affinity with Ghadar they were also called Ghadarites.86 The content was directed towards the Indian labourers working abroad in difficult, often humiliating, conditions:

> We are faced with innumerable miseries; we are called coolies and thieves.

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84 Kesar, 182.  
85 Tatla, xviii.  
86 Puri, 129.
Wherever we go, we are treated like dogs; why is no person kind to us.  

“Angrezi Raj Ka Kacha Chittha” (Balance Sheet of English Rule), a regular front-page points-form feature accused the Raj of extraction of high taxes, exportation of India’s wealth to England, causing famines and diseases, divisive policies, unjust laws, and suppression of indigenous religions to aid Christianity. It always concluded with the reminder that nearly 57 years have elapsed since the ‘ghadar’ of ’57 and now was the time for another. Or, as the British authorities noted:

Below the name of the paper appear the words ‘Ghadr, enemy of the British Government’… In short, its exclusive raison d’être is to bring about a rebellion in India. Its columns are devoted to maligning the British to the best of its power, imputing all the basest motives to the English, even to ascribing plagues and famines to them. They are described as drainers of the wealth of India, desecrators of religious places and bent upon extirpating Indians like aborigines in other countries.

In addition to the serialized translation of Savarkar’s *The Indian War of Independence, 1857* other topics included the American War of Independence against the British, French Revolution, Bismarck’s efforts to unify Germany, and William Jennings Bryan’s lecture on “The British Rule in India”, a scathing denunciation of the Raj.

**Poetry and Ideology of an Izzat Utopia**

*A new calendar is launched in the history of India today on November 1, 1913, because today a war against the British ruler is launched from an alien land in our native language. It is an auspicious day that a paper in Urdu and Gurmukhi is launched to root out the British evil (from our country).*


*Wanted – Brave soldiers to stir up Ghadar in India. *Pay* – Death.  
–Hindustan Ghadar (first issue), Nov. 1, 1913.

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88 Puri, 78-79.  
89 Isemonger, 18-19.  
90 Sareen, 37.
Like the Sikhs of Sundari, the Sikhs of the Ghadar movement used the example of their 10th Guru, invoking the spirit of this imagined and honourable past of bravery and sacrifice and martyrdom to propose violent struggle against the British oppressor. Their personal izzat could only be regained through the end of British colonialism in India.

“For vindication of that honour annihilation of the enemy became a crucial imperative.”

The line from a typical poem, Sacchi Pukar (Truth 'Plaint [to the Nation]), bemoaned:

बल देते अधिष्ठि भाषा संग संग संग, मूडी हमरी देखी मंडल फिरों ती।

The whole world calls us black thieves; how can your children live happily?

The Indian, especially Sikh, headgear became a symbol of the clash of cultures. Whereas a turban, of a length of cloth or other materials and tied variously, is an icon of honour worn by men and women of many cultures, the immigrant Sikhs’ turbans had garnered the most notice in North America. The mostly-Sikh Indians were already known as ‘Hindus’, and,

… on the Pacific Coast the term ‘Hindu’ especially meant a Sikh, because he was the one most conspicuous, if he was orthodox in the sense of wearing the turban, keeping the beard and the long hair. As far as laws were concerned they would apply to all Indians, whatever their religion, provincial culture or any other background; but the anti-Hindu feeling and legislative drive was undoubtedly rooted in the Americans’ (and Canadians’) antagonism to the ‘Sikhs’.

The 1908 Asian Exclusion League-organized violent demonstration in San Francisco and subsequent racial sentiments whipped up against the “turbaned tide” and the “rag heads” in the U.S. and Canada were most effective in curtailing immigration. Only a few years previously in the Panjab during the 1907 protests against the Colonization Bill, a poem that became an immediate and emotional success among the Panjabis contained the first
line and refrain: *Pagri sambhal jatta, pagri sambhal oe!* (Take care of ‘turban’ (self-respect), peasant! O, guard your ‘turban’!).\(^{96}\) So, while the Indian immigrants equated *pagri* with personal *izzat*-honour, to their dismay the North American society looked down upon it as a symptom of their shamefully alien backwardness.

There is a direct line from the folk song, narrating the loss of honour of a family, upon which *Sundari* was based to the folk poetry of *Ghadar* – repetitious, uncontrolled outpouring of outrage at the loss of *izzat*. “Heaped symbols of shame and oppression were used to generate a certain auto-intoxication of disgrace. They had been robbed of everything, their *izzat* above all.”\(^{97}\)

With the zeal and hope of millenarians they looked back to the 1857 ‘ghadar’ and counted their time from it as the first war of independence. The number ‘57’ had thus a mystical value for the Ghadarites. They believed that in 1914 it would have been the auspicious 57 years since the first *inqlab*-revolution of ’57. Their specific interpretation of the events of the past influenced the timing and the manner of their actions. With the sense of a ‘date with destiny’, they were so sure of the auspiciousness of the opportunity and their enduring victory that they started a new calendar from the day of declaration of this war.

Ghadar poetry was the expression of the foreign-sojourning ex-patriots, except that without a free nation to call their own, the term ‘patriot’ barely applied to them.

For them, the first issue was that of the necessity of having to leave home to toil in inhospitable foreign lands, and its root cause, the occupation of their land: *Asin watan wale pardes rulde, ih frang sadha des mall gia je ...* \(^{98}\) We natives languish in foreign lands [while] this ‘European’ occupies our homeland.

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\(^{96}\) Its other exhortations included: be prepared to fight and die; don’t cower brothers, unite and challenge the authority, et cetera. Majitha, 89.

\(^{97}\) Puri, 138.

\(^{98}\) Kesar, 21.
There was a discord between their living conditions and their aspirations. Sadhu Binning, in a lecture on Punjabi-Canadian literature, states:

In Canada as well as in the United States, these early Punjabi immigrants faced a racially hostile society which was determined to keep them out. Historical observations reveal for example, that they continuously struggled for their rights for immigration and equality in Canada, yet this struggle does not resonate in their poetry. The question arises: Why their day to day struggle did not find its expression in their writings? … However, while they laboured to realize their personal dreams [of making money and going back], they did not exist as individuals here. … Due to their unique historical and cultural background which celebrated manliness more than anything else, the only dream they could openly share with others, without being labelled as cowards or unworthy of their cultural heritage, was to fight for India’s freedom.’

Too proud, and vulnerable, to face and express plainly their personal shame and perpetual loss of izzat in their everyday lives, they found in poetry a ‘public forum’ and a ready vehicle to express their outrage. Most of the poetry is unsigned. This facelessness is in part due to the writers’ need to hide their identity from the Raj spies. It also masks the personal pain and shame expressed so frankly by the anonymous poets.

The Ghadarites’ poetry thus turns out not to be a means for the revolution it exhorted but an end in itself, depicting a self-referential utopia where a Ghadarite, like the Khalsa Sikh of Sundari, is an ideal human whose total preoccupation, and occupation, is this revolution. This sentiment is perhaps best depicted in an 18-year-old’s well known and crafted quatrain, which, the legend goes, he sang while working through the nights in the Ghadar printing shop.

\[\begin{align*}
\text{ले शैली पुढ़े विच भेल ते कुभ} & \text{ दे कर ते करजी ते सम भधर}। \\
\text{सुधर त्रिटाक त्रंगम थेरंग} & \text{ त्रंगत ते करभ भधर}। \\
\text{सम्भन संग्रंज जयी वभनी} & \text{ रंग वादु पूरा दी भड जती ते}।
\end{align*}\]

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And Ghadar, the main organ of the movement, also appeared to be its only weapon. In one of the many self-promoting poems, one typical couplet declaims: “The Ghadar knows our sorrow verily, no other is concerned with our loss or gain; only it tells us the facts; it has taken our true pulse.”101 The rough-hewn verse-making about the revolution-making was the only part of the ‘revolution’ that was realized.

From the other side of the globe, the Ghadarites conceived of an India which was ready to join them in getting rid of the enemy, by any and all means, who had robbed them of their izzat. They dreamt of a Panjab and her Sikh soldiery that was ready to wash the dishonour of siding with the enemy in the first ‘ghadar’ of 1857.102 In reality, they themselves were condemned as apostate Sikhs and “criminals” who brought dishonour to the Sikh community.103

The Panjab province had continued to supply its best male bodies to the British war machine in Europe and Middle East. An influential Sikh religio-political party had openly avowed loyalty to the Raj and its priests were actively recruiting Sikhs through their weekly sermons while at the same time labelling Ghadarites unpatriotic bandits.104 A police Commissioner in the Panjab reported at the end of 1914, after most of these Ghadarites had been rounded up, that there was no chance of their receiving “any

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100 The above version of the Kartar Singh Sarabha poem is from the citation in Ved Prakash Vatuk’s “Foreword” to the 1998 reprint of the Isemonger Report. Isemonger, xiii.
101 Kesar, 92.
102 Puri, 133.
104 Ganguly, 84-85.
measure of popular support” in the Panjab.105 Gerald Barrier writes that their assumption about the Panjabis on the verge of revolt resulted in their dismay at a “reasonably content population that handed them over to authorities as criminals.”106 The original sympathy for the Ghadar, following violent acts in the Panjab by some Ghadarites, turned to “distrust and then rejection. The [Chief Khalsa Diwan] C. K. D. labelled the Ghadarites as “Non-Sikh” and issued its now familiar call for Sikhs to demonstrate support for the Raj.”107 None of the poetry had anticipated this antipathy to their aspirations: it sang about dying a martyr’s glorious death in the course of destroying the enemy, not about being hunted by their own village posses and endlessly rotting in the ‘kale pani’ penal colony.

The closest the Ghadar movement came to a recognizable ideology, “a framework of consciousnesses”, was during the brief Har Dayal stewardship. His above mentioned “such is their state, these are the causes, and how to remove the causes” was meant to unite the Ghadarites in an awareness of their problems, desired social and political goals and, only generally and vaguely, the actions required to bring about the changes.108

In communal terms, even though the immigrants were well aware of the differences between their Hindu, Sikh, Muslim and other beliefs, to the mostly-hostile host society they were all alien “Hindoo” Asiatics. Yet, when the organization was being formed, “Bhakna objected to the use of terms ‘Sikh’ or ‘Punjabis’ for them. ‘We were Hindustanis. Our religion was patriotism’.109 It was a conscious decision to turn this pejorative cover-all into a “Hindustani” mantle of nationalist pride. This was a practical

105 Puri, 98.
107 N. Gerald Barrier, 187.
108 Puri, 7.
109 Puri, 76.
secularism, which condemned the sectarian control exercised by their respective
religions, necessary for their revolutionary objectives. Ghadarites and some others
claimed that theirs was the first “purely secular movement” aimed at liberation by force
of arms.110

No Pundits or mullahs do we need
No prayers or litanies we need recite
These will only scuttle our boat
Draw the sword, it’s time to fight. (Vol. 1, No. 4)

Though Hindus, Mussulmans and Sikhs we be
Sons of Bharat [India] are we still
Put aside your arguments for another day
Call of the hour is to kill. (Vol. 1, No. 23)111

Based on the evolving conviction that the be-izzti (honourlessness, shame) of the
colonial dependency and servitude of the British in India were the reasons behind the
racist and discriminatory treatment of Indians abroad, the Ghadarites undertook the
utopian “mytho-political project of reclaiming and reconstructing a homeland”.112

Cosmo-rustic language of proto-progressive poetry

Ghadar poetry is the first-person exclamations of the dispossessed and the dishonoured.
Whereas Sundari invents characters to enliven and give voice to an imagined history,
Ghadar poetry is the actual direct voices of the historic figures living and imagining
dying for their revolution. “Under pen, real or assumed names, these are the poems by the
very revolutionaries who participated in the freedom-fight, not as distant by-standers,”
writes Kesar Singh Kesar, editor of the Kesar Singh Navalkar-compiled Ghadar Lahir di
Kavita. He adds:

110 Khushwant Singh, 57.
112 Malini Sood, “Expatriot Nationalism and Ethnic Radicalism: The Ghadar Party in North America, 1910-
A large number of these were the discharged [Raj] soldiers who had gone to the East, America or Canada to work off their family’s poverty. Those who were farmers in India became common labourers abroad. At the roots of these poems is this dual experience. They contain the home and abroad experiences of the farmer-labourer-revolutionary life; and contain odes to the bravery of the [Ghadari Babean] Ghadar Elders. It is a Folk-epic because it describes a people as it describes its individuals. In this way, all these poems are a single long-poem.113

Therein lay its magic and its secret. The sublime secret of this rustic poetry is not that it stands up to the poetry of Professor Mohan Singh or even Bhai Vir Singh; the secret lies in that it dares to stand up. It insists. The poetry of this utopian movement undertook to free not just the colony of India it also chose to strive for the freedom of all European controlled colonies. In challenging the British Empire, it sought to take on all other empires. The indignity visited upon one ‘desi’ (‘countryman’, of India) at the hands of one ‘gora’ (‘white’, British) became reason for solidarity with all those the world over denied basic dignities.

Poetry had always been important to the Panjabi villager. Dhadis, the travelling folk singers, had used it to recite the popular legends and romances like Hir Ranjha or Mirza Sahiban. Composed by and for the same villagers, the Ghadar poetry used the traditional forms and utilized its “popular rhetoric and historical metaphors”.114 They used the traditional forms of baint (from Persian bayt, e. g., two halves of a ghazal line), kabitt (from Sanskrit kavita, poem) korrha chhand, bara mahi (‘12-monthly’), and pantees akhri (‘of 35 letters’; where the first letter of each successive couplet is the letter of the Gurmukhi alphabet in sequence), where the usual format kabitt (with the usually 32-letter tuk, in four segments of rhyme pattern a, a, a, b), is a quarter of a Chhand-

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113 This painstakingly assembled anthology of the Ghadar movement has a large number of the poems from Ghadar di Goonj anthology as well as poems from other, similar, publications from Canada and the United States. Kesar, 7.
114 Tatla, xxxvi.
These forms also suited well the grand tradition of public recitation. These poems were obviously read by the authors among their fellow-aspirants. A frequent contributor ‘Dukhi’, who in his later years was a well regarded Punjabi author, commented on the literary merit of the poetry in Ghadar and other similar publications by saying that no one had the time to judge whether the frequently used poetic form Chhands were wholesome or half-formed. “It was a creation of the revolutionary people, suited to this period and riding the waves of its time.”

Therefore, although the Ghadar poets are contemporaries of Bhai Vir Singh, Puran Singh and Dhani Ram Chatrik in the Panjab, their poetry-making is neither innovative nor experimental. It is also not provincial. It is a rustic poetry informed by the mostly bad experiences of the foreign-travelled and wider-world aware people of the Panjab. It is ahead of its time in content even as it employs traditional forms. Kesar Singh Kesar comments on the avant garde sensibilities in the Ghadar poetry.

Ghadarites were perhaps the first poets from India (certainly the first from the Panjab) who wrote the revolutionary poetry with a forward-looking awareness. It not only coaxed the “Pre-nationalist” sectarian and provincial Punjabi poetry towards secular, modern and nationalist direction but also gave it the internationalist appearance. … The internationalist poetry is considered to have begun in the 1935-36 progressive literary movement, but Ghadar poetry shows that in Panjabi poetic-culture the internationalist awareness predates 1930.

He adds that the preoccupation of the earlier colonial Punjabi poetry had been to either “partner with the virtues” of the English culture to reform the indigenous culture (the method of the Arya Samaj movement and its Anglo-Vedic educational institutions) or to

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115 Even though the Chhand is based on the formal Sanskrit 32-syllable form, the Punjabi folk and traditional poetry has always taken liberties with this structure. The above practical definition is provided by Amritsari ‘Kushta’ in his 1930s important work on the history of the mainly-Muslim Punjabi literature. Kushta, Panjab de Heere - Jewels of Panjab (Chandigarh: Shruti Pocket Books, 1996 Reprint), 54-55.

116 Bajaj, 7.

117 Kesar, 56.
insulate from new and foreign impurities the indigenous religion and culture (the method employed by Bhai Vir Singh in Sundari). The Ghadarites’ most obvious preoccupation is with a direct attack on the colonial status quo, to free and rebuild the nation and its culture.  

These émigré writers were looking outwards to borrow words and concepts—merely fifteen years after the communalistic and hagiographic language of the author of Sundari. Just three short poems contain the following English words phonetically reproduced in Gurmukhi: rail, note, India, German, France, dollar, and council. The Punjabi-izing of borrowed words is commonplace, such as, dollar-an (plural suffix) and bigle (bugles). The poetry is also full of words reflecting their daily experiences: union, port, machine, West, golden, tax, jail, deputationan (pluralizing with -an), Africa, mister, duty, Japan, France, Iran, Europe, Madam [e.g., Coma, Indian revolutionary in France], science dan (scientist), dirty (as they were often called), and leader, as they derisively called the Sikh priests of Amritsar (and elsewhere, others), who ‘sell out’ to the Raj.

Our leaders are selling-off the Harimandar [the most holy temple of the Sikhs] that was built by the Gurus themselves, O, Singhs!

These Punjabi publications were the first ‘diasporic’ literature of the language. Their secular and universalist ideas contributed to the 1930s ‘progressive’ internationalist wave of Punjabi poets like Professor Mohan Singh. These inspirational and martial sentiments written in Punjabi and published in Gurmukhi script enjoyed wide populist appeal. It is

118 Kesar, 60.
119 Kesar, 77-79.
120 Kesar, 96.
claimed that some Hindus and Muslims learned Gurmukhi script so that they could read
the poems themselves.121

The Ghadar poets’ world-view also enables their assertion of their own view of
Memory of the [18]57 Gadar), more than likely by ‘Dukhi’, the poet gives the detailed
indigenous version of the account of the ‘mutiny’ and dismisses the British view by
deriding Britons’ inept language skills and ridiculous pronunciation: अन बैंट ‘टूम लेखा
उवू नहंता’ (they tell us today: ‘zou peoples knows no ōing’).122 With the experience
of having lived and survived in more than one country and culture, they are also aware of
the recent history of imperialism and struggles against it. In सरह जग िजल भवसहल
बैठा123 (The Entire World Exalts in Happiness), the unknown poet encapsulates the
freedom struggles of other people (including citing some lesser known but inspirational
incidents from history) who have attained, often with others’ help, happiness through
self-determination. The first line challenges:

मान नज़द िजल भससल बैठा, जात स्युप व हिंदी िजलमजल चढ़ गई।
The entire world exalts in happiness; why are you, Hindustan, in swoon? …

And continues with,

The Bulgarians took matters in their own hands … Italians took Tripoli and
encircled the Balkans … The “Rum” [Anatolia regions] is gaining freedom; Italy
and Serbia unite to free the Greeks …

The poem returns time and again to the theme of honour that lies in the bravery to

achieve one’s nationhood:

121 Kesar, 13.
122 Tum log kuch jāntā nahi, betrays incorrect retroflexion, inexact idiom and ill-matched number suffix in
what is a condescending judgement on the natives in their language. Kesar, 125.
The fear of death is expelled from the mind, when the pride of a race surges in the hearts of its worthy sons.

In places, this poetry also serves as a journal of the movement, and, if used judiciously, a history archive. In 仇律师 阵地 生产 转 

124 (Enemy’s First Blow), published in the April 7, 1914 issue, a first-person account of a recent meeting of the Ghadarites and sympathisers where Har Dayal was served with a “warrant” on March 25, details the evening’s and subsequent days’ events. The first line declaims: “On Wednesday, at eight in the evening, the Hindustanis convened a meeting.” The poem goes on to record,

The meeting was arranged in San Francisco … through newspaper advertisements … three officials came bearing the “warrants” [summons?] … Har Dyal was entering the hall as he was presented with the warrants … he laughed upon seeing the warrants … the officials said to go ahead with the meeting … meeting started at eight-thirty … In his lecture, attended by both men and women including Ghadarites, Har Dyal spoke about the atrocities perpetrated by the Raj in India; and then told us about the warrants for his arrest … it lit fire in our hearts … the authorities had expected to cower us with the warrants; we only applauded and celebrated … Later the Ghadar council resolved to start the revolution as soon as possible … we sent telegrams everywhere of the news of the imminence of the Ghadar … and also sent money by telegram, for quicker payment, for financing it … and published our intentions in our paper … the pen has done the work of cannon to shake the foundation of the tyrant Raj …

As is common in Ghadar poems, the last line contains the usual exhortation: “Get ready right away to undertake Ghadar!”

On the eve of the World War, there is this urgency to start the revolution. There is also an acute awareness of, and shame in, the manner Panjabis have done the killing and dying for the British. In an up-tempo, quick-phrased, twenty-seven stanza poem (each

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124 Kesar, 118-119.
stanza consisting of four short half-lines and the common refrain, “Hurry up, brother, let’s mount revolution!”) 

(Hurry Up!), a stanza rues:

We killed in China and Indo-China, The unfortunate Boers of Africa; In Kabul, Iran and Kandahar, We died, and killed our brethren. Hurry up, brothers, let’s mount revolution!

In order to motivate the active soldiers of the Indian army to join in this Ghadar, the Panjabi, especially Sikh, soldiers are reminded (by the Ghadarite poets, some of whom were retired soldiers themselves) of the 1857 ‘gadar’ in which the Sikh soldiers did not participate. In धीरे धीरे ध्वजन (Petition to the Panth [Khalsa]), the poet reminds:

Our land would have enjoyed freedom today, Had we then embraced ‘gadar’, O Singhs! Mother India’s children would not have been for sale today, Had we nurtured that ‘gadar’, O Singhs!

In another of the many poems addressed to the Raj soldiers, the road to izzat-honour through freedom is shown to lie in first turning away from the dishonour of serving the blood-thirst of the Imperialist firangi. In उठे उठे सम्भाग़े नागा देखे (Arise, Worthy Sons of India, Wake Up and See!), they are reminded to turn their bravery to the cause of freedom:

You go and fight for the white man; why don’t you think, simple Singhs? You regularly attack others’ nations; why don’t you guard your own? Why would you conquer Tibet, China and Africa to hand over to the Enemy? Soaking your hands in blood, why don’t you understand Firengi’s treachery? Arise, glimpse freedom! Why don’t you unite to play with the colours of holi?

125 Without the 27 refrain lines, the poem has the auspicious-number 108 lines. Kesar, 110-113.
126 Kesar, 95.
127 Kesar, 115.
In a beautiful turn of phrase, the soldiers are given the choice of adorning their hands with the indigenously holy coloured-powder of the holi festival celebrations instead of soiling them with their own blood and the blood of the foreign victims of the Imperialist.

The (auspicious number) 108-lines long poem ends with:

रेट्री गायत्री भक्ति दी चैंचे विवादी। देनो किरदार कुमार आते मिलें।।
Hurry up and prepare to conduct the revolution, the Akal (Time-less, an attribute of god in the Sikh scriptures) will deliver victory to you, O, Singhs!

A soldier’s honour, in or out of uniform, is at stake again, and a solution is in sight:

मंदे राहे तीव्र दी मानत चंसा, दिले बलै दे मानिसा मानिसा ल।
देम आपुना अप्ना संघटन लूटैँ, भै बुध दर्जनिसा मानिसा ल।।
Death is better than dishonourable conditions, all braves so testify.
Let’s take charge of our land, drinking the blood of all Firengis.

The Ghadarite poets also see through the “martial castes” smoke-and-mirrors of the Raj.

In addressing the Hindu-Muslim factionalism and the need to put aside inter-communal differences, the मंजूल मिन्नत हमारत नमे (Remain Mired All Hindus and Muslims), the reader is asked to see through the identity-building propaganda of the Englishman:

चुलीयूं लिदे वे कभी बुलाब नाड़ा, बुध भाग ने हे हैं तंजीयूं संजीयूं ल।।
We are known as slaves in the world; the fame-pride of our army soldiers is false.

This unhappy yet informed world-view was not yet available to the pre-World War Ghadarites’ contemporary poets who are writing in the Panjab.

A ‘pen and ink’ Revolution: Why Ghadar Failed

The first issue of Ghadar had boldly declared:

Today, there begins in foreign lands, but in our country’s language, a war against the British Raj … What is our name? Ghadar. What is our work? Ghadar. Where will Ghadar break out? In India. The time will soon come when rifles and blood will take the place of pen and ink.

128 Kesar, 97.
129 Kesar, 92.
130 Kesar, 116-117.
This declaration of departure from pen and ink remained mired mostly in pen and ink. They confused prosody making with war games. On the way to India aboard ships from America the Ghadarites practiced memorizing choice verses from Ghadar\textsuperscript{131} instead of practising with the small cache of weapons they carried or making any battle plans. 

In its impracticality, Ghadar met the classic definition of utopia; it existed on paper only, and in the Ghadarites’ fervent imagination. Their main battle plan was based on their understanding of the events of 1857. The failure of that ‘ghadar’ was attributed to the Sikh soldiers’ fighting on the side of the British. Many of the ex-soldier Ghadarites believed that the success of this Ghadar was to be achieved with the help of the Sikh regiments whom they would win over.\textsuperscript{132} The strategy of Ghadar therefore consisted of “operations with a view to launching \textit{coup d’ état} with the support of disaffected Indian soldiers of the British army.”\textsuperscript{133}

Forced out by the economic conditions at home, and attracted abroad by the ‘wanderlust’ they had acquired through overseas service in the Raj, they had sought to improve their lot. Their decision to emigrate and face uncertainty reflected not only their dim prospects in the Panjab but also their impulsively self-confident ‘devil may care’ attitude: \textit{vekhi jaau}, they asserted.\textsuperscript{134} This was the same attitude taken towards Ghadar planning. From a far off California valley and its potato farms, a handful of Ghadarites hoped to invade India and inspire its millions to a “spontaneous uprising” to throw out an Empire: “A quixotic hope, and a tragic mission, as it turned out.”\textsuperscript{135}

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\textsuperscript{131} Isemonger, 50.
\textsuperscript{132} Puri, 133.
\textsuperscript{133} Puri, 8.
\textsuperscript{134} Puri, 22. \textit{कैसी लहरी!} Literally, \textit{it (fem.) will be seen}; we’ll see.
\textsuperscript{135} Juergenmeyer, 1.
\end{flushright}
In spite of their ideals of unity and secular nationalism the ‘class’ divisions persisted. In this coalition of convenience of the villagers and educated urbanites there was friction among the two groups. “The Sikhs looked down upon the Hindus as English-knowing Babus and expected them to do as they were told. The Hindus treated the Sikhs with the contempt a lawyer treats his rustic client from whom he drew money.”

Ghadarites came to India by the boat loads, over 3,000 mostly-Sikh Panjabis in 1915 alone, to discover that India was by and large loyal to the British. Gandhi had volunteered for the Raj’s medical service corps; young Panjabi males were going to Europe and the Middle East to lay their lives for the King-Emperor. The Sikh political leadership avowed its loyalty to the British while condemning Ghadarites as renegade non-Sikhs. They were treated as “common bandits” and “murderers and plunderers of honest men” and were hunted down in aid of the authorities. If the core tactic for starting this revolution was to precipitate a coup by the Indian soldiers, the main method of making the soldiers act was by mailing them letters. A letter from California to a soldier in the 82nd Panjabis at Nowshera cantonment (in part) read:

The greatest Sikh temple of worship is at Amritsar, and has been taken by the English. Before this, the Khalsa College, at which the sons of the Sikhs were reading, was taken away. It is written that it is far better for the community which loses its sacred places to die … The only remedy against these tyrants is that the troops should mutiny… The Englishmen’s dogs are better off than our men for they get food for begging. The English take no notice of our begging: we shall have to bite…

These ‘chain’ letters asked the addressees to pass them along to other soldiers with the same request for its subsequent propagation. Only a few of these letters were posted, and

136 Khushwant Singh, 17.
137 Khushwant Singh, 38.
138 Isemonger, 117.
139 Isemonger, 24.
the 23rd Cavalry at Lahore was the only unit where a substantial number of soldiers were contacted to start the coup. According to a Ghadar leader turned government witness, Nawab Khan, they were given the following general, and as it turned out unrealizable, advice before boarding at San Francisco:

> Your duty is clear. Go to India and stir up rebellion in every corner of the country. Rob the wealthy and show mercy to the poor. In this way you will win universal sympathy. Arms will be provided for you on your arrival in India. Failing this you must ransack the police stations for rifles. Obey without hesitation the commands of your leaders.\(^{141}\)

The brutally unsympathetic yet matter-of-fact report by a Police Commissioner, F. C. Isemonger, provides the government’s assessment of the failure of the Ghadar:

> Lack of organisation, bad leadership, and incapacity to maintain secrecy, and the Indian habit of regarding the ideal as the fact accomplished no doubt played their part in defeating the revolutionaries … \(^{142}\)

It further identified the reasons for the Ghadar failure. Lack of weapons: had all the weapons reached India, “they could not have provided more than two or three hundred men with pistols and a limited number of rounds of ammunition”; and fractionalization: Canadian “conspirators” had a larger cache of hand guns, some of which they, and their American counterparts, used on one another. Most of the actions taken consisted of arranging and conducting meetings to discuss action plans. All these problems demonstrated a lack of “unity of command”.\(^{143}\) Wishful thinking and loud musings, expressed sometimes in good rhyme, made up most of the poetry. An August 25th, 1914 poem by ‘Dukhi’ declaimed.

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140 Isemonger, 81.
141 Isemonger, 50.
142 Isemonger, 49.
143 Isemonger, 80-88.
144 Kesar, 146.
The *farang* (English) are engaged in battle with the Germans, let us not waste this golden opportunity; our enemy is trapped, lest he manages to escape with his life.

The soldier-poets wrote poems about their marshalling details. As the ships carrying Ghadarites were sailing towards India, the rhymed battle plans were being published for all to read. A 75-line poem laid out the whole strategy, whatever there was of it.

We have a large army in our ships, discharged [ex-Raj] soldiers and reservists … Turkey, China, Egypt, Kabul [Afghanistan] and Germany are our allies.

It went on to condemn “dogs of the government” Indians cooperating with the British and those pretenders to the leadership who sold out their *izzat* in return for control of the Mosques, Temples and Gurudwaras. It exhorted all to get together to decimate the English race while it lay encircled by the Germans; it explained how first the Ghadar party will alert the people throughout India, then loot these English thieves to collect weapons, and do whatever else necessary; it warned that this opportunity might never come again to snare this shameless English race, etc. One stanza could have come right out of the sufficiently paranoid Raj’s Criminal Investigation branch files:

Prevent export of food staples to England: burn the wheat silos at railway stations.
Cut the rail and telegraph lines, demolish bridges; around night, set explosives.
If confronted by the Indian police or soldiery, enlighten and turn them to our side.

These “apostles of murder, robbery and revolt” were quite inept at sabotage or even dacoity. They went to loot a holy man’s establishment and lost their way; tried again the following night but by then everyone including police knew they were coming. Their
wire cutters would not cut the telegraph wires; they found it too hard to dislodge railway ties without proper tools, so abandoned the venture. The Isemonger Report detailed accounts of the pitiful efforts of many a ‘gang’ that could not shoot straight.

The Report also highlighted the facts, perhaps with a view to discredit the Ghadarite claims of non-communal ideology, that most of the looting by the Ghadarites, most of whom were Sikhs, was perpetrated on Hindu households and businesses. At their Lahore headquarters there were no organizational charts, weapons’ caches, money or any other resources; the principal inventory consisted of the six duplicators for printing copies of *Declaration of War, Echoe of Mutiny* and similar poetry collections.\(^{146}\) This was a revolution fuelled by and consisting of the printing ink for rustic prosody.

Just as most Ghadarites felt justified in their grounds for and their conduct of this war and were anxious to overthrow the Raj by any means fair or foul, many among them were also willing to spy on their own comrades on behalf of the Raj.\(^{147}\) They had neither the means to rally public opinion to their side nor the weapons of war to defeat the enemy by force. Unduly influenced, among other accounts of revolutions, by the serialization in *Ghadar* of Savarkar’s history of the 1857 ‘ghadar’ in which the Panjabi contra-participation was given as its cause of failure, the Ghadarites convinced themselves that this time, with their participation, the overthrow of the British would be accomplished. Based on hope alone they counted on the Panjabi Sikh soldiery to trigger and carry out the *coup d’état*.

\(^{146}\) Isemonger, 101-119.

\(^{147}\) The British had already sent W.C. Hopkinson of Indian Police in 1909 “to conduct investigations about the activities of Indian nationalists” in Canada and the U.S. He hired Indians to infiltrate organizations in both countries; and continued to lobby both countries’ authorities to disallow Indians’ immigration, while charging money to the Indians in Vancouver area for assisting them with immigration matters. Sareen, 8.
Great ideas, like good crops, don’t grow, mature and bear fruit by themselves. As centuries-long cultivators the Panjabis should have known this. The Ghadar movement suffered from the absence of a consistently careful tending. The amateur revolutionary ideas and the premature abandonment of the movement by Har Dayal, and the ‘whatever happens’ attitude to the outcome by those who were left behind to execute it, rendered it impractical. By their haphazard acts of attempted violence they lent weight to their adversary’s characterization that the easily susceptible “virile and war-like Sikhs” were, “as a rule, ignorant but sturdy men of the peasant type” – as Michael O’Dwyer, the then Governor of Panjab, later opined.148

How it Succeeded

Harish Puri credits the Ghadar for a “political socialization” that changed the “world-view and self-image of the uneducated peasant immigrants” who sought the answers their class had never encountered before: their poverty and destitution were not pre-ordained and had economic and political causes. Liberating India was primary to their individual liberation from feelings of alienation.149 An onslaught on the British, therefore, appeared to them to be both a national imperative and a subjective necessity.

In an apt defence of the Ghadar and its poetry, the Ghadarite poet ‘Dukhi’ offers:

Poetry is a powerful weapon that also mirrors the society. I admit that the poetry of revolutionary movements is mostly preachy, but did it not help boil the blood of its listeners, majority of whom were illiterate, to help drive out a foreign ruler? If that were not the case, the authorities would not have confiscated the newspapers and jailed their editors. To view such poetry insignificant and base from the sheltered and comfortable Post-independence vantage is not justified.150

149 Puri, 209.
Historians like Khushwant Singh believe that even though the uprising failed, it was well thought out. India was denuded of British forces, and the Indian soldiers were disaffected enough due to heavy losses in the Middle East to be susceptible to the influence of the Ghadarites. But it failed due to heavier odds: no arms, no command experience, no confidentiality, an efficient British spy network, strong counter-insurgency measures in place, and brutal police methods to extract information and turn key Ghadarites as informants and court witnesses.\textsuperscript{151}

The Ghadarites had merely idealized a dream of armed revolution; the Raj executed thoroughly planned and detailed measures to suppress it. Neither a popular uprising nor a \textit{coup}, it was an impossible utopia of the ex-patriots influenced by, but unable to participate in, the freer and self-respecting societies abroad. It was a secular movement to the point of being anti-sectarian. Even though most of the participants were Sikhs, there were Hindus and Muslims who were equals in this struggle. The common need to defend against the racism and physical hostility of “white labour” united men of all religions and classes that was, and would have been, impossible in India.\textsuperscript{152}

It did not defeat the British, but it started to alter the special relationship the Sikhs had with the British since the middle of the nineteenth century. Juergenmeyer in his eponymous essay called this radical diversion of the ex-soldiers’ feelings for the Raj, from absolute loyalty to violent hatred against it, the “Ghadar syndrome”.\textsuperscript{153} This political consciousness of Panjabis, especially Sikhs, changed their perception of the Raj from \textit{ma-baap} (mother and father) of its people to an oppressive exploiter.\textsuperscript{154}

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\textsuperscript{151} Khushwant Singh, 55.
\textsuperscript{152} Sareen, 8.
\textsuperscript{153} Juergenmeyer, 1.
\textsuperscript{154} Tatla, xxxvi-xxxvii.
\end{flushright}
nationalist propaganda of the Ghadar movement succeeded in linking the immigrants’ plight abroad to their oppression in India. The political awakening of the Panjabis became the basis of their mostly left-leaning ideology that followed. Most of the Ghadarites who had not been killed or executed, or survived ‘life’ term imprisonments like Baba Bhakna, continued their involved in social justice movements in the Panjab and India.

The encounter with free society gave them a taste of what ‘freedom’ could be like, and humiliation at its hands gave them the reasons for their ambitions to achieve it. To those who contended that Ghadarites’ violent actions and sacrifices detracted rather than added to the struggle for freedom of India, Baba Bhakna responded: “I do not agree that the nation was freed without shedding a drop of blood; those who claim that disrespect the blood willingly shed by the sacrifice of thousands and lakhs of freedom fighters.”

The Raj might have been successful in demonizing the Ghadarites for a while, but they left their mark on the Panjabi consciousness just as their poetry touched their villager ham-darad (co-sufferer) folks. The Ghadar di Goonj (Echo of Freedom) anthology was revered as des bhagat bani (Testament of Patriots) by many of its readers. Many illiterate Panjabis learned Gurmukhi so they could read the Ghadar literature. Even in its utter failure, the Ghadar movement succeeded in creating awareness and necessity for nationalism and freedom in the minds of the Indians.

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155 Puri, 3.
156 Khushwant Singh, 57.
157 Bajaj, 86.
158 Majitha, 108.
Conclusion

The Ghadar movement was both realistic and impractical. In the early twentieth century world-wide climate of many freedom movements, their aspiration of gaining self-respect through self-determination was not completely unrealistic. But in not realising the scope of the method employed to achieve their aspiration, by declaring war on an empire, they failed to keep this revolution-to-regain-honour utopia at arm’s length, on a Thomas Morean imaginary island or Bhai Vir Singhian idealized past or in the idyllic future of a universalist poet like Mohan Singh. Their self-respect demanded the violent righting of all wrongs done to them, right then and there – which made it an impossible izzat utopia.

The warrior-poets of the Ghadar movement planned big; and published their plans in long poems. Without any resources or many participants, they set a date for the start of a revolution; it was leaked and the plan did not materialize. They hid and spied, and in turn were spied on, caught, jailed, exiled, shot or hanged. They aspired to lend moral support and tried to get material support from the countries opposed to the British. They may not even have tried all they could, which was not much and certainly not enough.

But in mounting, or trying and failing to mount, their pen-and-ink aided armed revolution they succeeded in sowing the seed of an evolution in Punjabi poetry from the hitherto regional and traditional ideas to the modern world-view influenced issues. This would bear the first of many fruit in the progressive, universalist and modern compositions of Mohan Singh.
Sawe Pattar (Green Leaves) and Kasumbharha (Safflower):

Utopia of Love Transcendent

We are the lowly green leaves
Whom none a thought spare.

Brief slumber 'neath the flowers
Brought our luck to bear.

In a bouquet for beloved
When they set to go,

Taking pity on the lowly
Took us also there. 2

Mohan Singh is that golden tower of Punjabi literature who stands apart, and alone, at this time. A few years from now people will ask incredulously: Is it true that he had to eke out a living in publishing or teaching at a college, and had to plead for living expenses in his last days? 3

Introduction

During the few years before his death in 1978, just as his nearly four decades of unprecedented influence on Punjabi language and literature was waning, a number of books came out which contained deferential analyses of Prof. Mohan Singh’s poetry and its influence on Punjabi language and literature. As if in a race to pronounce on him before he passed away, his considerable body of literary output, starting with the early poetry collections Sawe Pattar (1936) and Kasumbharha (1939), 4 were scrutinized often line by line to praise, critique or both, and to trace likely influences on the compositions considered primary and prime examples of modern Punjabi poetry.

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1 Title poem of Mohan Singh’s ਸਵਾਈ ਪਟਰ (Sawe Pattar - Green Leaves), (Jullundhar: New Book Co., 1998), 9.
2 Unless otherwise indicated, this and other English renditions or translations are by the present author.
4 Mohan Singh, ਕਸੁਮਭਰਹ (Kasumbharha - Safflower [Carthamus tinctorius]), (Ludhiana: Lahore Book Shop, n. d., 1990s reprint?).
Like the Panjabis who grew up in relative privilege and were later uprooted by Partition, Mohan Singh encountered a large number of both accolades and adversities in his life. His first ‘first prize’ in poetry, at just seventeen in 1922, was at a public recital for a religio-patriotic declamation commemorating the sacrifices and sufferings during a peaceful protest in the face of brutal treatment by the authorities.\(^5\) The poet recalled in *The Journey of My Pen*:

This journey started in 1921-22, when the anti-English agitation was in full swing. The incidents at Jallianwala Bagh and at Nankana Sahib had brought Akali and Congress movements together. Religious and patriotic sentiments overlapped; feelings ran high not only in the cities and towns, but even in remote villages.

I had just passed my Matriculation examination. A conference was to be held in Adhwal and a poetic symposium was a part of this conference. The refrain given was “Sada Guru te Guru da Bagh Sada” (Guru is ours and so is Guru’s Bagh). I wrote my first poem at this time. It took me just two hours. When I recited it at the conference I was astounded by the applause I received. My poem was adjudged the best and I got the first prize.\(^6\)

The poem had such a catchy refrain and it caught the spirit of the topic so well that all those who heard it could not help but be moved. Mohan Singh went on to skillfully incorporate the common idiom of regions of the Panjab to connect with the illiterate and semi-literate listener-readers\(^7\) while creating a standardized diction in literary Punjabi.

By 1934, after teaching in a high school for eight years and then going back to Oriental College at Lahore, Mohan Singh had completed his Munshi Fazal (in 1930), and Master of Arts and Master of Oriental Languages (Persian),\(^8\) and was installed as Professor of Persian at the Amritsar Khalsa College. He later moved to Sikh National

\(^5\) At a public recital praising a protest to gain control of some land adjacent to a Gurudwara near Amritsar.


College in Lahore, and also started the ‘progressive’ literary magazine *Panj Darya* (Five Rivers). A few years later he started Hind Publishers to support and publish Panjabi literature as well as conduct a commercial printing business – as Bhai Vir Singh had successfully done forty years earlier, and the Ghadarites had tried in 1910s in America. This was the beginning of his influence on Punjabi literature, and of his many other non-academic adventures. While the literati of the eastern half of post-Partition Panjab started to hold annual fairs to commemorate his contribution to Punjabi literature, he was trying out various commercial ventures while always having to fall back on the modest remunerations of academia. After being displaced to Amritsar following Partition, he started a two-buffalo dairy farm; the buffaloes were stolen. He bought a horse and tonga-buggy to start a ‘taxi’ business; the horse was stolen. A life-long avid chess player, occasional imbiber and *chai* addict, he opened a tea-house that too had to be closed down due probably to his preference for entertaining friends over tea, drinks and chess instead of running the restaurant. He taught at a number of colleges in the Panjab and barely eked out a living. Late in his life he was further recognized for his abilities and contribution to Punjabi with a somewhat financially stable appointment as Professor Emeritus at the Ludhiana Agricultural University.9

Heavily influenced by Marxism, and secularism,10 Mohan Singh’s poetry challenges the foreign rulers as much as it warns communal factions against falling prey to the Raj’s policies of divide and rule. His 1943 collection, *Adhwate*, contained the harshest poetry against the British Empire. He speaks of love – human, and of humanity – and patriotism, equality, fairness, and a better future for all Indians after the departure of

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10 C. Markanda, 18.
the British. He universalized his personal loss and despair into a concern for human suffering. From the mid-1930s when his first book was published, he continued to command and influence the Punjabi literary scene into the sixties.

Mohan Singh was born in western Panjab, where his doctor father was stationed at the time. One of a “loyal” member of the new professions, the doctor depended completely on the Raj for his employment and social status. Even though their family village Dhamiyal was also in that region near Rawalpindi, as the young man was growing up, his father was often transferred to towns in other regions of the Panjab thus providing the talented future poet an enriching exposure to the variety of vernaculars and cultures of the province. His precision of word choice, his regard for the traditional forms of Persian and Indian poetics, and his skill at the purity of diction being practiced by the best Urdu poets of his day, can all be traced back to his formative years. In addition, due to his father’s position in the Raj and his professional-social standing, Mohan Singh received the best colonial education including a dose of the nineteenth century English literature available to Panjabis of his time. With these skills he read the hearts and minds of a society in great turmoil and recited their hopes and aspirations back to them in easily remembered, memorable turns of beautiful Punjabi phrase. In doing so, he also influenced other Punjabi writers to take up the much vaunted project of modernity and universal “progress”.

12 Pritam Saini, फोर्मुल सिंख-चितरा ते कला (Prof. Mohan Singh-Chintan te Kala - Prof. Mohan Singh-Thought and Art), (Patiala: Pepsu Book Depot, 1975), 5.
13 Narula, 5.
Mohan Singh’s friend and mentor Principal Teja Singh wrote the Introduction to *Sawe Pattar* and called him a “romantic poet par excellence”. He was not alone in paying attention to this poet.

However, the credit for projecting his poetic excellence in proper perspective went to Sant Singh Sekhon, who wrote seven detailed articles. In these he traced Mohan Singh’s growth from a romanticist to a people’s poet intent on voicing their feelings, emotions and experiences through poems forged by employing old as well as new devices.

Like Mohan Das Gandhi, Mohan Singh appeared to be influenced by Tolstoy’s version of dogmaless ethical precepts of Christianity. Bakunin’s nineteenth century anarchist ideas may also have inspired his twentieth century cry against the societies which lacked personal and social freedom. Recalling and recounting injustices and atrocities committed under the aegis of religion, he spurned all faiths. Like Tolstoy’s, his utopia consisted of “innocent love evolved out of cooperation of natural beings.” His political messages were the right-to-freedom, equality and universal emancipation.

Mohan Singh, acutely aware of the communalism on the eve of freedom, was wary of the political leadership. As usual, he appealed for social and communal unity directly to the people. In *Ao Nachiye* (Let’s Dance!), to be discussed later, his evocation of the

… sentiments of religious unity in the interest of national freedom implied only pooling up of the resources of all traditions and evolution of a new national identity transcending traditions and the differences created by them.

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14 Starting in the early 1930s under Teja Singh’s influence, he literally discarded his religio-revolutionary poems to concentrate on the Romantic and ‘progressive’ compositions. Narula, 7-10.
Mohan Singh, writing in the mid-1930s, reflected the changed Panjabi society of his day. So much had indeed changed in the twenty years from the days of the Ghadarites.

Uneasy Interregnum, the Panjab between the Wars

For the Raj, it was not all quiet on the Panjab front even after the effective suppression of the Ghadarites. During and at the end of the Great War, the Home Rule movement, the Bolshevik Revolution, the Montagu-Chelmsford Report and the Rowlatt Commission all played important roles in galvanizing the aggressive Indian attitude to the British regime. The Home Rule leaders had hoped for an autonomous “dominion” for India, a la Canada, within the British Empire. The Montagu-Chelmsford Report had recommended such an arrangement, considerably watered down version of which was in fact approved. This was an attempt by the Indian leaders to achieve self-government by constitutional methods based on the perception of the “British sense of justice”. Just as the victory of the small Asian island nation of Japan over an Imperial European power Russia in 1905 had encouraged Ghadarites and other Indian revolutionaries, the success of the Russian Revolution encouraged the change in tone of the self-rule demands. The Raj, on the other hand, in reaction to the Ghadarites’ actions and other protests in India established the Rowlatt Commission to investigate the acts of “sedition and conspiracy” and to suggest new measures to deal with these – instead of implementing the modest reforms pledged in Montagu-Chelmsford. The British also felt threatened by Lenin’s interest in India manifest in various Russian proclamations and a Blue Book on India. Published in June 1918 and instantly banned in India, the book’s Introduction was written by a senior

20 Sareen, 8.
Bolshevik who had previous association with various Indian revolutionary groups. A new era of politics and social change was dawning in India.

Just as Vir Singh’s early books, starting with Sundari, were the product of and in response to his times, and Ghadarites’ publications expressive of their plight and plans, Mohan Singh’s early poetry was the product of his broad-based education and the changing dynamics of Indian and Panjabi politics and society. Panjabis had by and large worked with the British administration. The British had rightly placed heavy strategic emphasis on keeping control of a region bordering their Great Game adversaries. During the 1857 ‘mutiny’ Panjabis had mostly sided with the British. The Raj had carefully cultivated and accorded its peasant-soldier Jats the ‘martial race’ status. But the harsh treatment meted out to the Kukas in the early 1870s, the peasant protestors at the beginning of the 1900s and the Ghadarites in the 1910s had resulted in loss of mutual trust and cordiality in this relationship. After the Great War in which Panjabis had paid a heavy price and still felt less and less respected by the Raj, politically defiant acts continued to increase in the region. India had provided nearly one and a half million volunteers to the British, and most of them had gone to fight oversees as far as north of France. The Panjab, with only 7% of the Raj population, had contributed 62% of the Indian soldiers to the British war. Despite their great sacrifice, these volunteers were disappointed by the lack of recognition due to them and hence the izzat-honour their sacrifice had deserved. Instead, they had returned to face the hostile Raj, the drought and famines following the failure of 1918-19 rains, the plague in early 1919, and the world

21 Sareen, 53.
influenza pandemic that killed the Panjab’s share of more than six million Indians. The veneer of the Raj as *ma-baap* of its subjects had already begun to come off in the minds of the Panjabis due to the harsh methods employed to punish the suspected and actual Ghadarites, and the perception or reality of the lack of medical aid the Raj provided during pandemic, plague and famine. Together with the collapse of the grain prices following the World War, these new and desperate realities faced the jobless discharged soldiers, farmers and the rest of the society. The Raj saw this social and political anxiety and unrest as a challenge to its authority. In this climate, a pivotal event took place that changed the Panjab-Raj relationship forever.

**Gardenful of targets**

A lot of nasty activities went on during a single week that ended in an awful obscenity at sunset on the thirteenth of April 1919. April 6th was the day of an India-wide Satyagraha (truth-struggle) *hartal*-strike, called by Gandhi to protest the suppressive Rowlatt Bills by suspending businesses and peacefully observing a day of fasting and prayer. There were unrests, demonstrations, protests, mob-rule and Raj-brutality during the following days. The week ended with the unprovoked massacre of hundreds of peacefully assembled Panjabi men, women and children by a junior general of the Raj military – on April 13th, the Sikh holy day and in Amritsar, the sacred Sikh city – forever altering the carefully cultivated Raj reality and perception of the special relationship between the British and Panjabis.

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24 Institutional Author(s), *Jallianwala Bagh* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Govt. of India, 1969), 4.

Governor Michael O’Dwyer, who had been the Lt. Governor in the Panjab since 1913 and was responsible for orchestrating and manipulating the collection of money and men for the war, saw danger and conspiracy in every speech or political-social gathering. With *in camera* quick trials of the individuals or groups deemed participants in “anarchical or revolutionary movements”, no right-to-counsel or appeal when accused and convicted, and the suspension of Criminal Procedure Code and Evidence Act, the Rowlatt Bills had the effect of the imposition of *de facto* martial law. In the first *hartal* of March 30th, and a successful reprise that followed on April 6th, O’Dwyer saw a direct challenge to his authority. He had most of the political leaders expelled from the Panjab. A peaceful protest rally and procession on April 10th turned violent in response to the police shooting and killing of some protesters. A British soldier and three bank managers from two different banks were killed by the protesters. Miss Sherwood, a Christian missionary, was badly beaten until rescued by a Hindu family who lived nearby. A mob attacked a number of other Europeans, including women. The security forces reopened fire on the mob and killed at least twenty participants. The prospect of further protests and violence, especially the potential of attack on the Europeans, unnerved the authorities enough to resolve to take any steps the “military situation” warranted. On April 11th the city of Amritsar was handed over to the military, and the brigade commander was given control. The ex-Afghan-war veteran Brigadier General Dyer immediately ordered a dusk-to-dawn shoot-on-sight curfew, cut off water and

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26 In the Panjab, magistrates acquitted or convicted criminals accused of civil and capital crimes based on whether or not they had given money to the war fund. *Jallianwala Bagh*, 5.
27 *Jallianwala Bagh*, 5-6.
28 Perkins, 58-60.
30 Perkins, 58-60.
electric supply to the residents, and prohibited public assembly without making proper attempts to warn the public of the prohibition. Governor O’Dwyer had already promised the “puerile” demonstrations of the “ignorant and credulous” Panjabis with a “day of reckoning” in a Legislative Assembly speech on April 7th. Dyer, as he would later testify before the Hunter Committee enquiry into the massacre, went about in a warlike manner to deliver on that promise.\textsuperscript{31}

An eight-acre rectangular lot amidst “native” residences with a single seven-and-a-half-foot narrow lane leading to it, Jallianwala Bagh was enclosed by the rear walls of the surrounding houses.\textsuperscript{32} The elevated entrance area, three shade trees, one run-down tomb and a hearthless well were the only features of this “open piece of wasteland”\textsuperscript{33} occasionally used for public gatherings. Following the events of April 10\textsuperscript{th}, 11\textsuperscript{th} and 12\textsuperscript{th} with the out-of-control mob and consequent killings by the military, a peaceful gathering was hastily arranged for the afternoon of the 13\textsuperscript{th} at this site.

Brigadier Dyer saw this challenge to his authority as a hostile act that required to be met with “military efficiency”: “For me, the battlefield of France and Amritsar was the same.”\textsuperscript{34} This Baisakhi in Amritsar was the day of the 220\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary of the formation of the Khalsa by their 10\textsuperscript{th} guru as well as the day of ancient annual harvest festival. About 20,000 men, women and children were reported to be present when the speeches from a platform in the centre of the Bagh began. As the crowd had peacefully assembled and began to listen a plane made passes over the assembly. Meanwhile, two armoured vehicles and about 90 men with rifles and khukris were accompanying Dyer towards the

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Jallianwala Bagh}, 10-11.
\textsuperscript{32} Perkins, 82.
\textsuperscript{33} Bakshi, 34-35.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Jallianwala Bagh}, 15.
site at “ordinary walking pace” as it was a very hot afternoon. At around five, the armed men entered the lane to the Bagh leaving the too-wide armoured vehicles outside. “When you got into the Bagh what did you do?” Lord Hunter asked Dyer at the enquiry a few months later. He replied, “I opened fire.”

- At once?
- Immediately; I had thought about the matter and I do not imagine it took me more than 30 seconds to make up my mind as to what my duty was.
- In firing was it your object to disperse?
- No, Sir. I was going to fire until they dispersed.
- After the crowd indicated that it was going to disperse why did you not stop?
- I thought it was my duty to go on until it dispersed. If I fired a little, I should be wrong in firing at all.\(^{35}\)

The firing went on until the entire ammunition of about 1600 rounds ran out.\(^{36}\) During those ten minutes, Dyer “checked his fire and directed it upon places where the crowd was the thickest (the “targets”, to use his own words, “were good”)\(^{37}\) because he had made up his mind to punish them for having assembled.”\(^{38}\) Dyer’s subordinate officers stood by and watched the troops “firing calmly and rhythmically into the dense wall of humanity, every shot aimed and true.”\(^{39}\) Having discharged his duty, the Brigadier left with his men; rendering aid to the dying was not his job, he later said.\(^{40}\)

As many as a thousand people might have perished at the Bagh; the dead and the wounded could not be helped due to their sheer numbers and the now even more credible shoot-on-sight curfew. The survivors, and the eyewitnesses from the back of the houses surrounding the site, attested to the firing upon of those climbing walls to escape, or

\(^{35}\) Jallianwala Bagh, 16.
\(^{36}\) Bakshi, 42.
\(^{37}\) Jallianwala Bagh, 17.
\(^{38}\) Jallianwala Bagh, 16.
\(^{39}\) Perkins, 85.
\(^{40}\) Jallianwala Bagh, 15-16.
laying down flat on the ground. It took weeks, and decomposition odours, before the discovery and extraction of nearly one hundred bodies stacked in the well.

The following day, the Deputy Commissioner warned, “Do you people want peace or war? We are prepared in every way… The revenge will be taken upon you and your children.” Public floggings, a requirement of saluting all Europeans upon all encounters, crawling on stomach to pass a check point near where Miss Sherwood had been assaulted\textsuperscript{41} and long marches to the flag installations to salute the Union Jack were some of the indignities the brigadier had thought up to punish Panjabis for their unruly disobedience “with the enforcement of humiliations in the Panjab unparalleled since the Mutiny.”\textsuperscript{42}

Later, after the submission of the Hunter Committee report to the Parliament, Dyer was made to resign. The report was approved by the House of Commons but rejected by the House of Lords. Many people in England donated money to reward Dyer for “appreciation of his services”.\textsuperscript{43} Many Indians of influence saw firsthand how the people in England itself felt about the Indians. In July 1920, Rabinderanath Tagore wrote from England:

The result of the Dyer debates in both Houses of Parliament makes painfully evident the attitude of mind of the ruling classes of the country towards India. It shows that no outrage, however monstrous, committed against us by the agents of their government, can arouse feelings of indignation in the hearts of those from whom our governors are chosen. The unashamed condemnation of brutality expressed in their speeches and echoed in their newspapers is ugly in its frightfulness. The late events have conclusively proved that our true salvation lies in our own hands; that a nation’s greatness can never find its foundation in half-hearted concessions of contemptuous niggardliness.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{41} Bakshi, 46.
\textsuperscript{42} Hugh Tinker, \textit{Separate and Unequal} (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1976), 43.
\textsuperscript{43} The priests and congregation at the Golden Temple also honoured Dyer with an honorary Khalsa initiation, in spite of his refusal to obey the rules of not cutting his hair or not smoking. Bakshi, 176.
\textsuperscript{44} As cited in \textit{Jallianwala Bagh}, 25.
A version of the failed Ghadar envisioned by the Indian expatriates was finally being executed by desis in the des-homeland through the events of 1919 in the Panjab and elsewhere. The Indian Congress later that year saw self-rule as the only honourable option, and progressive non-cooperation the method to achieve it. It began with the surrender of Raj titles and honorary offices, resigning from appointments, boycott of British goods, courts, and even refusing foreign army service by some. It catapulted an until-then reluctant Gandhi to take charge of the freedom struggle. Following the publication of the Hunter Committee report in May 1920, and the Raj protecting its officials through a hastily enacted Indemnity Act that followed the publication, Gandhi, hitherto compliant to and cooperative with the Raj, wrote to the Viceroy: “I can retain neither respect nor affection for a government which has been living from wrong to wrong in order to defend its immorality.”45 The maa-baap Raj was no more.

**Making of a Modern Punjabi Poet**

In *Secularization of Modern Punjabi Poetry*, Attar Singh writes that the Punjabi literature written in Gurumukhi script had been identified with the Sikh religion until the end of the nineteenth century. Thereafter, the Punjabi language began to undergo “self-alienation” to become receptive to secularization. It also needed to leave the medieval behind to embrace the modern, and go beyond the indigenous to embrace Western thought and ideas. He continues:

> Whereas secularization had religious orientation to contend against, the modernization had to assert itself against medieval thought and Westernization

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45 *Jallianwala Bagh*, 32-34.
against indigenous forms. We may as well say that when we use the term modern Punjabi literature we imply a literature secular in ideology and western in form.\textsuperscript{46}

\textit{Sundari} is an example of the non-secular, medieval and indigenous Punjabi literature. It is a testament to the British and Western influence on the education, culture and politics of the Panjabi society that within less than two generations of \textit{Sundari}'s publication there appears fully secular, modern and universalist poetry in \textit{Sawe Pattar} and \textit{Kasumbharha}.

Bhai Vir Singh’s grandfather had handed his son a profession of traditional Ayurvedic healing. Mohan Singh’s grandfather wanted his son to be educated in the new western medicine. The family’s dry goods business, based on transport of products on mules from the interior of the northwest India for trading in the \textit{mandi}-market of Rawalpindi, was adversely affected in the new machine-age. To diversify, the grandfather retained one of the sons to continue the old trade and sent the other to learn the new ways of modern medicine. Even before birth, the influence of modernity and West was cast upon Mohan Singh.\textsuperscript{47}

\textbf{Western influence}

Born in 1905, Mohan Singh is a product of the Western education and ideas of the 1800s comingled with the even older Perso-Indic languages and culture of the Panjab. The influence of the nineteenth century English poets, included in the Raj curriculum in Panjabi colleges, is easily traceable in Mohan Singh’s early poetry. In addition, his formal education in Persian, which he began to teach after obtaining a Munshi Fazal and Master’s, also remained in evidence throughout his poetry. The influence of the Panjab’s indigenous languages and literary traditions is also well marked.

\textsuperscript{46} Attar Singh, 11.
\textsuperscript{47} Balbir Singh, 72.
It is clear that Mohan Singh is influenced by the Kissa tradition of Panjabi poetry exemplified by the medieval romance-tale format of Waris Shah. This influence is in evidence of his choice of *baint* meter, which Mohan Singh continued to employ even in his later progressive movement poetry.\(^48\)

Along with the changes in the political climate in the Panjab in the 1920s came the changes to the literary climate for Punjabi. The Indian Congress and the Sikh Akali Dal organized regular public meetings where political and or religious speeches were preceded by new poetry recitations. In 1925, two prominent Punjabi writers, Dhani Ram Chatrik and Maula Baksh Kushti founded a Punjabi Society which sponsored regular poetry recitations throughout the Panjab. A number of magazines began to publish literature, current topics and especially poetry. This helped with the evolution of a *theth*-standard Punjabi.\(^49\) Thus Punjabi was being transferred from a rustic vernacular to an urbane language capable of sophistication, range and seriousness that is evident in *Sawe Pattar* and *Kasumbharha*.

Mohan Singh’s mastery at combining indigenous verse making styles with those of the Persian, and creative adaptation of ideas and themes from the European Romantic and earlier poets, is in evidence throughout his first two collections. In *Baccha* (male Child), inspired by and composed in the same rhyme scheme as *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*\(^50\), the poet sees the divine inspiration for poetry in a child’s eyes and lips. The poem may also bear influences of William Blake’s *Innocence*, and Wordsworth’s *Immortality Ode*.\(^51\) *Taj Mahal*’s early stanzas evoke Coleridge’s *Kublai Khan*, and the “illusion and

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49 Singal, 50-51.
51 Sutinder Singh Noor, *Mohan Singh da Kawe-Sangharh ‘Kasumbharha’* - Mohan Singh’s Anthology *Kasumbharha*, (Mohan Singh
reality” themes similar to Frost’s *Birches* and Keats’s *Ode to Nightingale*.\(^{52}\) Alexander Pope’s *Ode on Solitude*\(^{53}\) (*Thus let me live, unseen unknown; thus un lamented let me die; Steal from the world and not a stone tell where I lie*) may have influenced his “And in such namelessness, quietly let me die. Let no one light a tall flame of cremation, or mark my grave.”\(^{54}\) Stevenson’s *Heather Ale* is the model for his *Des Pyar*, as discussed later.

Through adaptation of English poems, Mohan Singh is creating a new and modern idiom in Punjabi to address and cater to the Panjabi ethos. His skill as poet lies not in being able to ‘copy’ or ‘translate’ the ideas and themes from Western poets but in adopting and restating them to suit his culture, traditions and history, and thus to enhance the capacity of the Punjabi language to express these new notions. This adoption of Western themes resulted in the moving away of his poetry from the hitherto practice of medieval styles of recital poetry occupied with the descriptions of and singing ornate praises to the beauty of female eyes, lips, hair and mouth.\(^{55}\)

In *Modern Punjabi Poets and their Vision*, Jogindersingh Bedi credits Mohan Singh with leaving behind the old poetic patters of Bhai Vir Singh and establishing new ones for those who followed him. He modernized traditional cultural values through his strong individualistic approach to poetry. He also practiced poetic craft with greater technical accuracy than it had hitherto been practised in Punjabi.\(^{56}\) Tarlok Singh Kanwar adds:

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\(^{52}\) Soze, 55-56.


\(^{54}\) Sawe Pattar, 23.


The generation of Punjabi poets following Mohan Singh, such as Amrita Pritam, Shiv Kumar, Haribhajan Singh, Pritam Singh Safir and many others, went on to fill in the elements of modernity outlined and influenced by him. The flows of Amrita Pritam’s imagery, Haribhajan Singh’s aesthetics and Shiv Kumar’s unending passions originate with the new poetic-subconscious established by Mohan Singh.57

Mohan Singh is extraordinarily skilled at adapting English, and Persian/Urdu, narrative forms and styles to enable a modern Punjabi language. The confluence of these traditions is embodied in his lyrical poetry. Navjot Kaur Kasel identifies main characteristics of lyricism as brevity, metrical coherence, subjectivity, passion, sensuality and particularity of image, found in the modern Punjabi poetry of Mohan Singh.58 Karanjit Singh adds:

Even though Mohan Singh’s predecessor Punjabi poets had accepted the influence of English poetry, this acceptance never went beyond its poetic forms. Bhai Vir Singh and Prof. Puran Singh never crossed the threshold of the feudal-age experience.59

In describing how poetry more than any other form of literature best embodies the evolving genius of a language, Darshan Singh Maini places Mohan Singh at the right juncture to provide “a fine blend of classical graces and regional energies” to Punjabi:

Thus when a poet appears at a moment of significance in the life of a language, he will not rest till he has fashioned for himself a rhetoric capable of registering the needs of his psyche on the one hand, and the shades of social reality on the other. For, finally, language, psyche and society form an organic and poetic paradigm… Mohan Singh came of age at a time when Punjabi poetry had not yet evolved an idiom or patterns of prosody which could render the whole range of contemporary experience… there is no doubt regarding the modernity of his poetic sensibility. He brought not only a refreshing candour into Punjabi verse which had grown grey in platitudes and pieties, but also a rich, flexible idiom drawn from several sources.60

58 Navjot Kaur Kasel, मोहन सिंह की धृतित्व दर्शन (Mohan Singh’s Lyrical Poetry), (Ludhiana: Lahore Book Shop, 2000), 17.
Mohan Singh freed the verse-making of its prudish medieval *janamsakhi*-hagiographic heritage. He talked about human love, not as a stand-in for the love of the Sufi-Bhakti divinity as Punjabi romance-tale poets like Waris Shah had, but as a blood and flesh love of man and woman – he romanced Punjabi into the age of Marx and Freud. Whether through the demurely purposeful Sabzan leading a haughty but beauty-smitten Saida to her sanctum to offer him her precious “eggs” in *Saida te [and] Sabzan*,61 or the imagery of two strangers fording through the surge and fall of tumultuous waters in *Kurhi Pothohar di* (The Maiden of Pothohar),62 or bursting through the material grandeur and beauty decreed by a feudal lord to reveal the ugliness of exploitation of the masses in *Taj Mahal*,63 the vernacular of the Panjab was being readied through new ideas and experiences to take its place among the modern languages of India.

Mohan Singh employs, except where he deems appropriate to demonstrate his mastery of words, be they Perso-Arabic or Pothohari,64 the most-widely accepted standard Punjabi words and idiom from the greater Majha regions of Central Panjab.65 He minds and mines time and place of language. For example, he uses the regional Pothohari words almost exclusively for the *geet*-folksongs set mostly in the remote Swat Valley in the western Panjab.66 At the same time, he relies on Persian words and tropes because these are known to his contemporary urban Panjabis. Writing about Mohan Singh’s gift of lyrical poetry, Balbir Singh remarked that he knew the value of words; the

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61 *Sawe Pattar*, 50-51.
63 *Kasumbharha*, 31-34.
64 Spoken between the Rivers Jhelum and Chakwal in the district of Rawalpindi, Pothwari/Pothohari dialect is a form of Lahndā (‘setting’, of sun) or Western Punjabi. G. A. Griersen, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Volume 8, Part 1 (Delhi: Low Price Publications, 2005), 477-480.
65 Saini, 155.
66 In the sexually suggestive brief ballad *Saida te Sabzan* with many Pothohari words, the twosome bear Pothohari names and wear Pothohari garb. *Sawe Pattar*, 50-51.
way he clothed the new and old in the most appropriate and suitably embellishing language demonstrated Mohan Singh’s complete cognizance of his diction. In Sawe Pattar, his diction was coloured by Urdu and Farsi, but as his experience matured he began to employ simplified and standardized Punjabi language and diction.67

In A History of Punjabi Literature, S. S. Sekhon and K. S. Duggal acknowledge Mohan Singh as the poet “conscious of his responsibility” to his modernizing society. Most of his academic colleagues were students and lecturers of English literature who closely scrutinized his writing. Unlike Bhai Vir Singh’s vague Sufi-style spiritual love, Mohan Singh wrote about his love and beloved in modern concretized sensual idiom. His symbolism, stream of consciousness, and use of diction that brought language of poetry closer to everyday speech are some of the features which he shared with his contemporary Western writers.68

**Cilice of separation**

*Hijr, viyog or birha*, the pain of separation, was new to young Mohan Singh but not in Punjabi. One of the first Punjabi poets, the 12th century Baba Sheikh Farid, had already admitted its sovereignty over humans: *birha tu sultan* – birha, you are the ruler of all.69 The romance epics of the Panjab are replete with their lover’s anguish of separation, their story lines modified to suit the Panjabis after borrowing from Persian poetry that brims with it. The Sufi-Bhakti *hijr-viyog* is central to the man’s relationship with his god.

This *viyog* is also central to Mohan Singh’s being. In one of his earliest poems,

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67 Balbir Singh, 59.
Basant, in his dream when he describes the anguish of separation from his deceased wife, she consoles: “What ever Rabb does is for the best; how could you have become a poet, Mohan, had I not died?” Peerh of hijr, the anguish of separation from his beloved, defines the poet. He wears it like the usual Sufi-trope garment, an article of faith and a prized adornment. In Jhanan, by asking to have his phul (‘flowers’, meaning ashes) cast in the Chenab, he eschews the “clueless” pious Ganges by declaring, I am a poet, my ashes can only be respected by an aashiq-lover river:

\[
\text{RuhN hIr qy sohxI dIAwN,} \\
\text{iPrn JnwN dy AMdr peIAwN,} \\
\text{pYrwN dohwN dy vwihxy,} \\
\text{mEhE bE\'l hEt\' mEs\' pAhE.} \quad 73
\]

Spirits of Heer and Sohni, Live and walk in the Chenab, I want to follow in both their steps, Cast my ashes in the Chenab.

This casting of the poet’s ashes as flowers evokes two images. The remains of ordinary mortals are mere ashes; that of a poet, especially who has reached such a state and stature through the anguish of separation, are the homage-flowers to be offered to the hamdarad-co-anguished, kindred spirits of the heroines of the famous Panjabi romances. And they are offered to the river made holy as it is the repository of many a lovers’ loss and pain.

Mohan Singh feels and champions the pain of the women of his poems like Basant, Anarkali and Ambi de Boote Thalle (Under the Mango Tree), and indulges in empathetic details to describe their anguish of separation. The poet himself, a Mughal crown prince and a Raj soldier, respectively, are the causes of these three women’s pain. The poet abandoned his wife Basant’s memory, the prince used and abandoned Anarkali, and a nameless soldier leaves his loving wife to engage in wars in far off places. The

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70 Sawe Pattar, 26.
71 God, see following pages.
72 Heer saw Ranjha and instantly fell in love with him at the Chenab bank. Sohni perished crossing the Chenab to meet her beloved Mahiwal, who also drowned himself upon hearing of her death. K. S. Duggal, Folk Romances of Punjab (New Delhi: Marwah Publications, 1979), 12 (Heer) and 24-28 (Sohni).
73 Sawe Pattar, 83.
74 Kanwar, 19.
common conclusion is that men are and have always been fickle, deceitful and uncaring.

The social relationships he explores are expressed from the point of view of a woman, and of the feudal-age ideal of love where she is merely a man’s “property”. She also appears to accept this status. In Anarkali, when the poet condemns the callous prince for his treatment of the palace beauty, even in death she defends him unequivocally.

Spoke to me the voice from her grave
Pay heed, poet, to the Merciful!
Standing here right before my eyes
Do not speak ill to my Salim!

In the lyrical Na Vanjh Dhola (Don’t go, O, Beloved!), its female protagonist’s constant pain is heightened by the regret of having loved consistently in the first place:

Had I a clue there would be separation
Mohan, I would have restrained my desires
I would have loved you not so thoroughly.

Over a hundred years earlier, Shelley had confessed: “Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.” Mohan Singh wrote such sweet songs.

To Mohan Singh, his poetry is a divine gift. In his genealogy-of-poetry quatrain Kawita (Poem), Rabb-god creates Beauty to manifest his lineage, the forces of Love respond to the presence of this Beauty, Ecstasy in the lover’s heart spurts out of the magic of this Love, and when the sounds of this Ecstasy rise up the flood of Poetry arrives. Proud recipient of this Rabb-originated flood of Poetry, Mohan Singh is a self-conscious poet. Third-person references to himself as shāir-poet or Mohan are commonplace. Ahnhi Kurhi (Blind Maiden) starts with the poet accusing his Rabb of

75 Markanda, 27.
76 Sawe Pattar, 45.
77 Sawe Pattar, 84.
79 Sawe Pattar, 15.
being so unenlightened as to have created such a beautiful mandir-temple without providing a lamp in it. Also employing Persian inspired world-as-garden metaphors, he likens his own gift of poetry with the beauty of the blind maiden to accuse the divine painter of neglecting to complete both these “paintings”. His advice to the tardy Rabb is:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{तेरी वचन मे मेरे आफ़े,} & \quad \text{Take out my eyes, apace,} \\
\text{वल भावना दुहुँचे मनकर} & \quad \text{Fill the sockets on her face!} \\
\text{विस्मृत भेंती क्रोध भयूँ,} & \quad \text{I may stay half-replete,} \\
\text{हिंद उभनीं उँचे तैँहे पूरी।} & \quad \text{One painting will be complete.}
\end{align*}
\]

This poet feels confident enough in his talent, his poetic vision, to offer it as a worthy bargain to Rabb. Even his eponymous opening poem in Sawe Pattar conveys the pride of his humility. Reworking the Sufi trope of the raison d’être of a flower to adulate the Beloved, he avers that his “lowly” poems are favour-worthy enough to aspire. In Nur Jahan, he visits the neglected gravesite of the once mighty queen of the Mughal Emperor Jahangir. Where others mourn merely the loss of her regal glory or her ravishing beauty, the connoisseur-poet in him mourns her poetic gifts. In return, he receives a benediction from the famed beauty, empress and poetess:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{भेंती माथिबी सी सिनेंे चद्द बढ़वें,} & \quad \text{As you have shed the four tears to honour my poetry, so, Mohan, will other} \\
\text{भेंती चढ़न उँचे बढ़वें,} & \quad \text{people shed countless tears to also honour your memory (and poetry).} \\
\text{फिसी खेरवला कैहुं सी लाच खड़वें,} & \quad \text{In the autobiographical Basant, the poet, separated from his young deceased wife,} \\
\text{खेंती खेतवला बघलाईूँ} & \quad \text{dreams of her. It is the lovely season of spring-basant. The reawakening of the pain of} \\
\text{खेंती} & \quad \text{separation from the beloved Basant upon seeing her foto leads him into a reverie. He sees} \\
\text{खेंती} & \quad \text{a river at the foot of a great mountain, a hut beside the river, and a beautiful woman} \\
\text{खेंती} & \quad \text{is sitting in front playing a song of separation accompanied by sad strumming on her sitar.}
\end{align*}
\]

80 Sawe Pattar, 70.
81 Sawe Pattar, 82.
The song is about him: his betrayal of Basant’s love by his remarriage to another shortly after her death. He is condemned along with his kind. Fickle men have always betrayed the faithful women through the ages. “The six basants have come and gone; you never remembered your Basant?” The contrite and love-sick poet reaches out for her and receives a forgiving embrace, swoons and wakes up to find himself fallen out of the bed and his second wife standing by his pillow.

This is a characteristic of the early modern Punjabi poetry that a loving spouse of a wife at his side is still psychologically engaged in such a profound interaction with his departed first wife. This outlook considers love for the ‘new woman’ a betrayal of trust of love. Mohan Singh condemns this infidelity of man, and goes on singing about the anguish of separation from Basant.82

In the divine cause and effect Beauty-Love-Ecstacy-Poetry genealogy discussed above, there is an all important intermediate effect and cause that defines Mohan Singh. Love has produced not only sounds of Ecstacy but sighs of Birha—pain of separation. It is through Mohan Singh’s birha that Rabb is made manifest in his Poetry.

**Enquiring faithful**

Mohan Singh’s currency of poetic contemplation, or what has been described as “four primary units”, consists of woman, gold, wine and Rabb-divine, with woman accorded the primary status among the quartet.83 As Bhai Vir Singh in Sundari claims that the soft body of his heroine contains a resolute mind, Mohan Singh starts the eponymous Anarkali, abandoned lover and beloved of the Crown Prince Salim (later Jahangir), by generalizing:

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Appears soft the body of a woman  
Like the tender pomegranate flower.  

Once she has set her sights somewhere  
Like a rock deflects the point of sword.

He both rejects and accepts gold for the temptations it offers and for its necessity to him and others. The euphoria of his wine is for des-pyar (‘love of country’, patriotism), or, traditionally, the beauty of a woman. God, whom the poet almost exclusively addresses as Rabb, is immanent in his poetry.

This [primary] unit has specific importance in Mohan Singh’s poetic arrangement. To be connected with ‘Rabb’ at conscious and subconscious level is the characteristic of the traditional, medieval and metaphysical individual; whereas the modern, progressive man’s central focus is on the individual. Mohan Singh does talk about society and man; but unlike Nietzschean or Marxist awareness his arrangement does not exclude ‘Rabb’ who in a spiritual-metaphysical sense is always present. This situation has a profound influence on the language of his poetry.

Mohan Singh’s Rabb had arrived in the Panjab with Islam and its Sufis, but by his time it had also acquired just as non-denominational a connotation as it still has of informal, multi-purpose ubiquity like ‘god’ in English. Mohan Singh’s relationship with Rabb is familiar and multi-faceted. Like Rilke with his Nachbar Gott (Neighbour God) in his earlier poetry, Mohan Singh is ever informal and almost as intimate with his god. Rabb is perhaps the most frequent significant word occurring in Sawe Pattar: it is constantly invoked, it dwells at the irrigation well, it created heavens by borrowing the

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84 Alluding to the nickname the young palace-beauty was known by: Anarkali, Pomegranate Flower-bud.
85 Sawe Pattar, 54.
86 Noor, मोहन सिंह दा काव्य-जगत (Mohan Singh da Kawe-Jagat), 47-49.
87 In the poem Ao Nachiye (Let’s Dance), Kasumbharha, 19.
88 Noor, मोहन सिंह दा काव्य-जगत (Mohan Singh da Kawe-Jagat), 56-57.
90 Du, Nachbar Gott, wenn ich dich manchesmal / in langer Nacht mit harzem klopfen Störe … (You, next-door-neighbour God, if once in a while during the long night I trouble you with my urgent knocking …). Rainer Maria Rilke, Die Gedichte (The Poems), Frankfurt: INSEL, 1995, 201.
shade of the village trees, it adorns itself with the tokens of human poverty, and it takes away the beloved from the lover to make a poet of him.  

For a modern man, Mohan Singh has an adult’s wary fascination with the divine and a child’s confidence of the security felt in its immanence. In Man (Mother), he writes: “There is no dense-shade tree like a mother; Rabb borrowed this shade from her to construct heavens.” In describing his infant daughter in Bewaddi: “Lost in deep contemplation of mother, father, and milk – the three Rabbs – sleeps soundly my daughter.” His famous poem Rabb opens with the quatrains:

रब धराह यव्रज व्रमण डर धरा लेख घरन-पेंजा।
वेंद्र लक्ष्मीं वेंद्र हेम देव लाबट दे नामे मेंता।
वर्णन वेंद्र दर वे नींदे वेंद्र मृत ता नामे।
रबीन्द्रनाथ भेंट हे वेंद्र घरन चंद्र।  

God is an entangled enigma, an intricate contraption; Unthreading it turns a believer into an infidel.

Let not the fear of losing faith deter from the search:

Enquiring infidel is better than a credulous faithful.

His Apni zat vikhalan badale Rabb ne husan bnaya is not a metaphysical statement but an expression of a formulaic “medieval outlook” where Rabb is the centre of all thought. God’s creation of beauty, and the sight of this beauty inspiring magic of ishq-love for the divine, is a patently Sufi point of view and a constant theme in Persian poetry, starting at least as early as with Rumi, that influenced Mohan Singh. Even the eighteenth century Panjabi poet Waris Shah starts his romance epic Heer with “अष्टकः

उत्तर ध्वनि रा दिस्तर बीमि दिस्तर बीमि मृत्यु कै नृत्यु मृत्यु भीमि” (Praise and worship to Khuda-god whose ishq is the origin of the world, friend!). Where Mohan Singh departs from the tradition is in stating that a man’s love for a flesh-and-blood woman is the origin

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91 Sawe Pattar, passim.
92 Sawe Pattar, 28.
93 Kasumbharha, 27.
94 Sawe Pattar, 10.
95 “God created beauty to reveal/show-off his pedigree.” The poet’s choice of the word for beauty, husan, an Arabic import to Punjabi, also means ‘goodness’. Sawe Pattar, 22.
96 Noor, मोहन सिंह का कविता-जगत (Mohan Singh da Kawe-Jagat), 21-22.
of poetry; sensory and sensual human love, not Rabb, is at the centre of this thought. A beautiful woman is not merely made in god’s image, she is god’s seed.

Even though there appears no discernable influence of Bhai Vir Singh on the extant poetry of Prof. Mohan Singh, he is known to have admitted that his earliest religio-revolutionary compositions were modelled in part on the former’s Sikh poetry. He was advised by his early mentor Principal Teja Singh to put aside these early poems and to explore his Romantic-progressive vision. The *Rabb* quatrain provides a modern man’s rebuttal to the medieval spiritualism in the Bhai Vir Singh quatrain which enjoined men to stop their curious wanderings to follow only One that leads to the happiness of intoxication: “Ecstasy is better than knowledge, it keeps you anchored.”

Mohan Singh’s utopian road to “humanity” leads through the discovery and assertion of one human: himself. It is here that his modern poetry departs from the traditional god-centric Punjabi literature. In *Aapa* (Selfhood), he says that even if he is personally enjoined by Rabb to become one with the divine – the highest aspiration of a Sufi or a Bhakat – he would want to stand apart. Becoming one with Rabb is betrayal of his self, and obstacle to his sensory enjoyment of the manifest world. He continues:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{हैर जी को हैर?} & \quad \text{What kind of man,} \\
\text{मैं भी मंगा,} & \quad \text{Good or evil,} \\
\text{तथा से सब से सब सुलीभा है} & \quad \text{Can not keep apart from the whole world} \\
\text{बहुत आपना आप} & \quad \text{His own individualism?}
\end{align*}
\]

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98 Surinder Singh Kohli, *BweI vIr isMG drSn* (Bhai Vir Singh Darshan - A Look at (the Philosophy of) Bhai Vir Singh), (Jullundhar: K. Lal & Co., 1975), 76.
99 Narula, 10.
100 ‘तिहून गेड़ा?’ ये ‘लीलों गेड़ा?’ और धर्म मंगे मिलाए, इसी लंबा धर्म तिधि सिंह निम्न लंब धर्म धर्म, \\
हठतर हट गट अट गट कंबे, धर्म मंगे मूढ़ भक्तः, जैसे सब भक्तः भक्तः भक्तः कंबे। From Bhai Vir Singh’s anthology *Wiki* दे टुड़ (Lahiran de Haar - Garlands of Ecstacy), (New Delhi: B. V. S. A., 1962), 6.
101 Sawe Pattar, 71-72.
Mohan Singh constantly launches his Punjabi readers on voyages of self-discovery. For the young the voyage starts with self-indulgence. His Youth is not subject to communal dictates regulating Sundari and her cohorts; or the freedom fight ideals of the young Ghadarites like Sarabha who wrote revolutionary poetry, made bombs, lead dacoity parties and was hanged by the age of nineteen. Mohan Singh’s Youth, like the poet, is subject to the beauty of a woman. In Jawani (Youth), it is mightier than everything else but it succumbs to Beauty.

For Bhai Vir Singh, his god’s immanence is the unquestioned fact of his ideology and pious rhetoric. The immanence of Prof. Mohan Singh’s god, as in his poem Nikka Jiha ik Deeva Timke (Burns a Tiny Lamp), is perhaps no more than a rhetorical device to express universalist piety. In Nikka Jiha, the poet-aspirant speaks of a tiny lamp that is aglow in his being. How he tends it and protects it from the storms of existence; and how he is disheartened when he looks up in the sky and realizes the insignificance of his tiny lamp compared with the celestial manifestations of light and warmth. Discouraged and in despair, he decides to put it out. As he readies to do so:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ਪਾੰਤੀ ਰੱਧਾ ਭਾਰਾਮਰੋ ਦੀਆਂ,} & \quad \text{ Came a voice from the skies;} \\
\text{ਤਾ ਦੇ ਸਾਡੇ ਦੁੱਪਾਂ।} & \quad \text{Wait! Do not despair!} \\
\text{ਨੀਮ ਦੀੜੇ ਪੁੱਛ ਮਸ਼ਟ ਨਹੀਂ ਕੀਏ,} & \quad \text{The lamp you deem so useless,} \\
\text{ਤੈਟ ਲੱਧ ਵੀ ਤੱਹਿਰ ਲੱਧ,} & \quad \text{Are sighing to extinguish it;} \\
\text{ਦੀੜੀ ਲੱਧ ਲਾਖ ਕੇਦੀ ਕੀਏ,} & \quad \text{To seek that lamp, my child,} \\
\text{ਚੁੜ, ਮੂਲਾ, ਉਡੀਖ ਰਾਂ ਲੀਓ,} & \quad \text{Moons, suns and stars have I} \\
\text{ਲੇਖ ਦੀਆਂ ਮੇ ਪਵਲਾਂ।} & \quad \text{Lit in the universe.}
\end{align*}
\]

One communes with Mohan Singh’s divinity through individual angst and introspection, and with Vir Singh’s god via communal rituals. Nationalists first, the Ghadarites invoke god to mostly warn against communal rituals that divide society in its name, and to assure

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102 Saini, 97.
103 Sawe Pattar, 77. Master of the Punjabi language, here the poet uses a layered word *daru* meaning: addiction, alcoholic drink, medicine, cure, gun-powder, ammunition; to Youth, Beauty is all of these.
104 Kasumbharha, 77-78.
themselves that *Akal*, the time-less god, is on their side in the opportune acts to regain *izzat*. As Mohan Singh’s poetic consciousness moves in the direction of nationalism and universalist ideals, the echos of Ghdarites’ antipathy to the gods of communal rituals become more audible.

**Nationalism project**

Mohan Singh grafted a “Galloway Legend”, used by Robert Louis Stevenson in his 1890s poem *Heather Ale*, onto his Panjabi neighbourhood and history; but his *Des Pyar* (literally, ‘love of country’; Patriotism) is more insidious than *Heather Ale*, as it inverts the “clever Khalsa” trope of *Sundari*. Here, a Sikh commander is easily manipulated into the needless and cruel act of killing an innocent, and most likely a Muslim, youth. In *Sundari*, such acts of senseless oppression perpetrated on the innocent Sikhs are ascribed to the Muslim rulers. Set in a period when Sikhs had control of the Panjab, the poem also reflects on the nature of the powerful and power itself. In the Stevenson version, a Scottish king wishes to extract the Picts’ secret of making ale from heather. The Pict “vermin” having been annihilated, he discovers that an old man and his son are the ‘last’ of their kind who know this secret. The old man easily tricks the king into having his son killed as he did “*doubt the sapling courage / that goes without the beard.*” After the youth’s death the old man is ready to be tortured and to die for guarding the brewing secret. Mohan Singh’s Khalsa commander had laid siege to an Afghan fort atop a hill with a secret access. An old man and his young son are picked up and brought to the commander. Like the Picts, they are threatened with loss of life unless they reveal the

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secret. In words with almost identical meanings, both fathers express their hesitation in cooperating on account of the loss of honour from such an act in front of and in the eyes of their children. The young Pict is thrown into the sea, the young Pathan over a cliff. For the old father the threat posed by his son is the loss of a ‘racial’ secret to the enemy; the Afghani father’s concern is the possibility of his callow son dishonouring his race by revealing a military secret to the enemy. The nature of the secrets, the Pict ale or the Pathan redoubt, is less important; although Mohan Singh ennobles his subject by turning a brew recipe into patriotism. Both utopian poems concern themselves with the power of izzat of the powerless.

The theme that runs through Sundari, the Ghadar poems and Des Pyar is that of fidelity of the individual to the group he is a part of – that is, nationalism or patriotism. In all three cases, there is also an oppressive ‘other’. Unlike the defined and deplored ‘other’ of the Ghadarites, and of Sundari, the scant ‘other’ in Mohan Singh’s contemporary narrative is often an unidentifiable and neutral abstraction. In Sipahi da Dil (Heart of a Soldier), the soldier declaims: “Wich rang de devi hai nar sadi, wich jang de devi ktar sadi ... My goddess of pleasure is my beloved wife, just as in the battlefield my goddess is my dagger.”106 It’s a testimony, ironic or otherwise, to the British that the Panjabi male had become so much a part of the Raj that he sees no distinction between fighting for his colonial masters and similar sacrifice for his own land. An act of acculturation has taken place. It also shows the lack of political awareness in his pre-1936 poetry that begins to fade by the time of the 1939 anthology. Unlike the Ghadarites, Mohan Singh does not yet target the British as others.

106 Sawe Pattar, 56.
Over a mere three year span between the publication of *Sawe Pattar* and that of *Kasumbharha*, there is a discernible shift in focus towards ‘progressive’ issues: from the personal to the abstract-universal to the political. Compared to the personal and personalized women of the earlier work (the deceased wife, the poetess queen or the discarded courtesan) who are flesh-and-blood objects of the poet and other men’s desires, his later ‘woman’ is an abstraction. Now, instead of the transient experiences of sensual exchanges the subtlest of sensory stimuli are needed to forever internalize the experience. The girl in *Kurhi Pothohar di* (Maiden of Pothohar) remains unseen and, except for a single phrase, unheard. The ethereal, bundle-of-fodder camouflaged face of the maiden of Pothohar is a Wordsworthian “thing of beauty” that sustains the poet forever:

The greatness of the maiden who fords the river with the poet’s help lies in the fact that she has the power to help the love-anguished man cross his spiritual rivers. The Pothohar Maiden has been internalized. The entire shakti-power encapsulated in a single touch and one spoken phrase.¹⁰⁷

In another poem, the poet’s desire is limited to only sitting beside the woman of his romantic fantasy. “He does not know the girl his wait for whom is the purpose of his life; she adorns an unknown golden islet, and may not even be born yet.”¹⁰⁸ Now she is not Basant or Nur Jahan or Anarkali but a *Panjaban* reflecting its society and traditions.¹⁰⁹ In *Panjaban da Geet* (Song of the Panjabi Woman), her object of love is he who fights for her “land”:

> Whose blood boils when enemy lays hands on it,  
> Who defends the honour of the Five Rivers.  
> Who stands forefront to fight for the nation,  
> His I wish to become; to live for him, die for him.  
> I am the girl of Panjab, the beauty of the Five Rivers.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Diljit Singh, 22.  
¹⁰⁸ Noor, “मनुष्यविविधता-वृक्षों ‘प्रमुखता’” (Mohan Singh’s Anthology *Kasumbharha*), 36.  
¹⁰⁹ Noor, 41.  
¹¹⁰ *Kasumbharha*, 70-71.
It is interesting to note, as Pritam Saini remarks, that the range of “land” and patriotism in the above poem is limited to the Panjab only, highlighting the feudal-age sentiments where “nationalism” did not reach beyond regional boundaries.111

The first phase of Punjabi progressive poetry expressed itself through the nationalist and secular tendencies. In *Ao Nachiye*, the poet’s dreams of national freedom can be realized only through the Indians’ struggle, this “dancing together”, to free themselves of their class, caste and other divisions. The most formidable obstacle to achieving this goal is religion.112 In this regard, Mohan Singh echoes and moves forward the secular ideas of the early Ghadarite poetry. This stanza in *Jaag Jaag O Jvanaa* (Awake, Awake, O Young Man!) would have been indistinguishable from the better composed but not any shriller *Ghadar* entries:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Those, your contemporaries,} & \\
\text{Russians, Chinese, Japanese,} & \\
\text{Have vindicated their Youth.} & \quad \text{Do you not feel the shame?}
\end{align*}
\]

But Mohan Singh is not a Ghadarite patriot, or a Congress nationalist. *Sawe Pattar* is not a companion piece to the 1930s freedom movement and nationalist politics. His freedom in *Main Nahin Rahina Tere Gran*114 (I Don’t Want to Live in Your Village!) is from the bonds of society and not for the freedom for his society. In commenting on other critics who have called *Ao Nachiye* forward-looking or ‘progressive’, Karanjit Singh disagrees. He believes the designation should apply to the work that self-consciously sets out to propagate ‘progressive’ ideas. The revolutionary sentiments expressed in this poem are

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111 Saini, 102.
112 Noor, “भारत मैं भगत सम हैं” (Mohan Singh’s Anthology *Kasumbharha*), 39-40.
113 *Kasumbharha*, 59-62.
114 *Sawe Pattar*, 21-25.
expressed only at a sentimental level.\textsuperscript{115} In an interview thirty-five years later, the poet commented: “I was an anarchist in Sawe Pattar, I was not conscious of any social revolution.”\textsuperscript{116} He went on to object to the 1930s ‘progressive’ label applied to him. The progressive literary movement is not tied to a time period. When Guru Nanak addresses Babur [1620s, following Babur’s invasion of India and the accompanying havoc in the Panjab], he is progressive. We have to see if a writer is sympathetic or inimical to the people; if he is sympathetic, for me he is progressive. Tolstoy did not understand social revolution, but still he wished for some kind of change – for the benefit of the people.\textsuperscript{117}

Mohan Singh is a Romantic first, in the manner of the nineteenth century English poets. This temporal offset makes him just as much a man of the nineteenth century, as Bhai Vir Singh’s \textit{Sundari} places its author in the beginning of the eighteenth.

\textbf{Transcending Love: Romance to Progressivism, Sacred to Secular}

\textit{Taj Mahal} is a ‘progressive’ poem that appears inspired in part by S. T. Coleridge’s \textit{Kubla Khan} as well as by the Marxist ideology pervasive in the 1930s. Its realist descriptions of the Taj and its surroundings using imagery of river, trees, vines, moonlight and gardens are similar to Coleridge’s. Coleridge’s \textit{Shadow of the dome of pleasure / Floated midway on the waves} is comparable to Mohan Singh’s \textit{Reflection of the Taj Mahal lay sleeping in the sleep-filled waters / As if Jamuna hid it in her cloak to steal it away}. Coleridge’s opium induced “vision in a dream” remained a “fragment” due to an interruption.\textsuperscript{118} Mohan Singh’s dream-vision of this “Mughal beauty” is interrupted from within the dream, in romance-to-realism transition, when the Taj’s white dome

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{115} Karanjit Singh, 51.
\textsuperscript{116} Karanjit Singh, 130.
\textsuperscript{117} Karanjit Singh, 140.
\end{footnotesize}
bursts open to reveal the ugly reality of those whose painful labour had built the marble mausoleum. A flood of wailing and imploring men and women labourers pour out.

Children clinging to the teats
Of their labour-engrossed mothers;
Tears welled up in eyes,
Their hearts full of sighs.

Here, Mohan Singh, unlike Coleridge, is not an outsider fantasizing about the exotica of the Orient; he is local. He witnesses daily the contemporary counterparts of the exploited labour indentured at the Taj. The Marxist-humanist poet ends this rumination on beauty with: “Is a thing of beauty really beautiful if it is reared on the tears of the wretched?”

_Taj Mahal_ displays the struggle between the poet’s romantic and realist emotions; he is equally unable to let go of the former as he is anxious to acquire the latter. The divided struggle of the poem reflects this dichotomy, making it expressive of the mid-1930s ‘progressive’ writing in Punjabi.

Whereas _Sawe Pattar_ shows a transition from the traditional to the Romantic, individualist and universalist themes, his progressive ideas bloom in _Kasumbharha_. Even though the transition from romance to realism happens over his two anthologies from 1936 and 1939, the roots of his realism are in plain sight in his pre-1936 poem _Rabb_. In the last line of the opening quatrain of _Rabb_ cited above, the tension between the inquiring infidel and the credulous faithful is the dialectic between the religious dogma and (modern) scientific knowledge. But Kesar Singh does not give him the benefit of his lack of doubt:

From a critical viewpoint, rejection of religious superstition is a primary tenet of the progressive thought; that’s why it can be said that this line contains the seed of Mohan Singh’s progressivism, but it is only a seed as Mohan Singh even while

119 _Sawe Pattar_, 33.
120 _Soze_, 58.
negating trust in Rabb does not negate the idea of its existence, whereas progressivism accepts the material reality of the world as it repudiates the idea of Rabb.121

In *Jaag Jaag O Jvanaa* (Awake, Awake, O Young Man!), Mohan Singh’s ‘progressive’ journey begins with the condemnation of the god establishment, in waking up from the “stupor of religion”. The rich may deserve the blame for the poor’s destitution, but the responsibility of rising from it is that of the poor themselves.122

The whole world is prosperous; your share is abject poverty. Without clothes on you and food in you, how long will you tolerate this?
So many temples and mosques; so many devotions to Rabb;
So many traditions and rituals; and yet you have nothing to eat.
Don’t listen to any religion; I see *bhai* (Sikh priest) and *mulanha* (Muslim imam) collaborating with the *gair*-‘other’ (meaning Raj).
How can they who feed on the ‘other’ call themselves religious?123

In *Main Nahin Rahiṇa Tere Gran* (I Will not Remain in Your Village!), the poet wishes to escape not only from the injustices and communalism of his contemporary society he wants to escape this society. His utopia is similar to that of Mikhail Bakunin, and of Leo Tolstoy. The “anarchist” Bakunin had envisioned “a unified human community” from some Golden Age of primitive harmony marching towards the Marxist-ideal.

Bakunin’s conception of the path to its attainment, like Marx’s version of progress towards the ideal of the unified man, owed much to a radical version of Hegel’s Idealism, but while the millenarian yearning underlying Marx’s vision is concealed beneath impressive layers of historical and economic analysis, in Bakunin’s anarchism it was a personal obsession expressed with a candid and breathless impatience.124

Mohan Singh also details his ideal with equal breathlessness:

चाहे उजड़ अस्तानी विदे दिना अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे अस्तानी दिना विदे

May freedom manifest all around …

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121 Kesar Singh ‘Kesar’, “मेंटर मिश्र रा पुजारिया” (Progressivism of Mohan Singh), *संवा मिश्र लघन-प्रसादिया* (Mohan Singh Kwa-Smeekhiya), 55-56.
122 Diljit Singh, 79.
123 *Kasumbharha*, 60-61.
125 *Kasumbharha*, 24.
May the birds sing what their hearts desire,  
Butterflies kiss any flower,  
Buds send fragrance towards anyone,  
Rivers change course in any direction.  
In this atmosphere of freedom,  
May I live in a new world.

The object of Bakunin’s real love, and life, is god; not the conventional “cut-price practical morality” offered by religions. His god does not sit remotely judging the living and the dead, but instead lives in and around mankind, “the one who is raised up when man is raised up ... the one who speaks in the poet.”¹²⁶ In Mohan Singh’s *Khooh di Gadhi Utte* (On the Driver’s Seat of [Ferris-wheel] Well, with the refrain “God Lives at Our Well”), the divine embodies and is embodied by the cool shades, cleansing waters, hypnotic sounds and pleasant sights of the well’s water works; and equally resides in the comely, resplendently decorated and voluble village maidens who frequent the well every day. At the end of such a divine day, on cue and without any effort on man’s part, Rabb’s stars light up the heavens above the well to carry the idyll into the night.¹²⁷

Mohan Singh is influenced by the writings of Bakunin and Tolstoy which he had read with great interest in the early 1930s. Bakunin’s disdain for political authority, private property or institutional religion, and Tolstoy’s “Christianity without Churchianity” as the basis of universal love and equality¹²⁸ also inspired Mohan Singh’s poetry of love, both towards humans and humanity, in addition to the indigenous Bhakti and Sufi ideals. Tolstoy’s ‘bhakti’ is directed not only at god as in Hinduism but to all humanity which is part of the divine creation.

This is Tolstoy’s path of love and compassion which is expressed in his fiction and writing. Tolstoy distinguished between two kinds of love: love of and love

¹²⁶ Kelly, 40-41.
¹²⁷ *Sawe Pattar*, 16-17.
¹²⁸ M. P. Kohli, 69.
for. The former is personal and exclusive, centering on one person or object; the latter is universal and manifests itself as God’s law, or compassion.\textsuperscript{129}

Mohan Singh’s own journey from this “love of” to the “love for” is aptly represented in the euphoric \textit{Ao Nachiye} (Let’s Dance!)\textsuperscript{130} where he manages to combine his ‘love is all’ romanticism with the communal-unity progressivism. It neighbours Tolstoy’s utopia of a heaven-less bliss on earth “cleansed of faith and mystery”.\textsuperscript{131} Here an intoxicating melange of sights and sounds overwhelms one with his infectious idealism. The pace and rhythm of the 31-line long poem, set in short half-lines, matches its mood. The identical rhyme-ending of every line in “...aal wale” (\textit{wale} is, roughly, ‘towards’) builds up towards a crescendo like the faster and faster whirling dance of a dervish, as if the dance is on the eve of the long sought and fought for social and political freedoms. The first three lines begin with an invitation to and preview of the dance:

Come, O Indians, let’s unite and begin an intoxicating rhythm of love!
Let’s lift the veils, lower the partitions, and dance side by side!
Let’s drink the wine of love-of-our-land to lose ourselves in ecstasy!

All Indians, particularly the religious of the two main competing faiths, are invited and welcome to this grand dance of togetherness:

Let the black and white, the rich and poor, Hindus and Muslims,  
all castes, and women and men of all ages dance!
Let Mullahs, Sufis, Bhais and Yogis abandon their priestly duties to join the dance!
Let the mosques, temples and other places of worship join in dance!
Let the Granths, Qurans and Vedas dance together!
Let Nanak, Ram and Muhammad dance together with the Cow-herd Krishna!
As the dance intensifies, let the arms rise like the waves of oceans…
Let the waves of Ganges jump to mingle with [a well in Mecca] Zamzam…
Let the combined brightness of lakhs of eyes burn bright like lakhs of torches!
Let the shared beat of lakhs of hearts bring about earthquakes!
Let the shared laughter of the countless lips shine and sound like lightening! ...
And towards the creation of what utopia is such raucous indulgence in communal harmony and universal goodwill aimed? The last two lines explain: “O, Indians, if we unite and dance like this even once, why will our ideas and dreams not come true?”

This is the utopia of a free and fair society: free of the 1930s Panjab with smouldering communalism, political posturing, repressive Raj, oppressive and exploitative landlords and religious leaders. Some thirty years earlier, even on his deathbed in Astropovo Tolstoy had repeatedly uttered in delirium, “one must run away, run away.”¹³² The poet’s escape from reality, in life not after death, is towards a utopia of communal harmony, equity, mutual love, respect and understanding. Above all, love.

**Conclusion**

The ethos that brought forth writers like Prof. Mohan Singh was very much the product of twentieth century phenomena and events such as modernity, Western cultural influences, Ghadar, the Bolshevik Revolution, and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. If the post-World War 1919 is the year of a divide in the colonial history of the Panjab, Prof. Mohan Singh who had turned fourteen that year belonged to the post-1919 generation.

Regarded as a mere vernacular of the classical languages Sanskrit and Persian, Punjabi was like the “lowly green leaves” of the Mohan Singh poem – secondary to the “flowers” of the classical languages. The Punjabi of Mohan Singh is of the mongrel, hardy and expressive Panjabi words which have bubbled out of a cauldron of various cultures, languages and religions; each word a metaphor, each metaphor a story – often a tragic story of love and loss but a lover’s tale nevertheless. As the saint-poet Sheikh Farid

had said, बिजन बु रुखुर-बिर्हा तु सुल्तान, the king of all the pains is the pain of separated lovers. Mohan Singh’s poetry is the language of such a lover.

Nearly a millennium earlier and more than a thousand miles to the west, proud Firdowsi had employed a purely pre-Islamic Iranian native vocabulary to write about the ancient glory of his Persian civilization which by his time had been more than three hundred years under the hegemony of the language and rule of the new masters. The English Raj educated Mohan Singh demonstrated his mastery of and pride in the Punjabi language by keeping it unadulterated by the Panjab’s most recent century-long foreign ruler’s words.133 He demonstrated that Punjabi, hitherto considered a mere vernacular of a region, had the capacity to express modern universal ideas.

The universalism of Mohan Singh’s poetry, within less than forty years of the communal literature produced in the modernizing Punjabi, is remarkable not only for the pace of evolution of the language but also the facility shown by its authors to embrace modernity. While the polemics in Sundari established the opposites ‘us and them’ where ‘us’ is only the Khalsa Sikhs and ‘them’ is everyone else, the Ghadarite poetry’s ‘we and they’ saw all oppressed people, irrespective of other distinctions, as ‘we’ and all oppressors as ‘they’; the dialogue in the poetry of Sawe Pattar and Kasumbharha is between ‘I’ and ‘you’. ‘I’, however, is not just the person of the poet but his whole Indian community on the eve of free nationhood, indeed the whole mankind. Unlike the worlds of Sundari and Ghadar, other than the colonizers on the eve of departure for whom he bears no malice there are very few ‘others’ in Mohan Singh’s utopia. And ‘you’ for him is not an accusation but a term of endearment.

133 A rare instance is his use of the word ‘philosopher’ in his pre-1936 poem Rabb. Sawe Pattar, 12.
OF PREACHERS, PARIAHS AND POETS: AN AFTERWORD

The above texts chart the progression of Panjabi responses to the changes imposed on the region during the British Raj – the sectarian identity-forming movements, the oppressions of and adaptations to colonization within a diasporic experience, the World War, the post-Russian Revolution social ideas, and the Western education, values and religious incursions – and its desire to be free of the Empire expressed in its selected literature.

It is a symptom and result of the social, political and communal upheavals and dysfunctions in the Panjab that its writers have constantly needed to invent and escape into utopias. The callow writer of Sundari constructed an ideal past that never existed; the rag-tag labourer poets of Ghadar scheduled dates and proclaimed a new calendar to mark the struggle for defeating the largest empire on earth; and an apprehensive idealist poet of Sawe Pattar and Kasumbharha hoped against all realities that the about-to-arrive political freedom would not fan the simmering sectarian violence.

As for the British and their rational-legal mandate for ruling the Panjab: they started off better than when they walked away from it. Paul Valery had said that a poem is never finished, just abandoned. Was good governance of the Panjab a poem the Empire chose to work on but left unfinished? Wavering in their sense of Destiny, did they even try hard enough?

In implementing the “Panjab Tradition” of swift ‘justice’ and harsh rule, and literally ‘creating’ more land with which to punish or reward their subjects, the British show studied understanding of the Panjabis. Just as it was before their arrival, so too
during their rule remains the idea of ‘land’ subtly and obviously tangled up in the Panjabis’ ethos. Their izzat wrapped in the fee-stamped paper of their Raj-recognized title deeds to land, and their honour and aspirations furrowed on its great hewn swathes of dark upturned musky soil. The Panjabis know it and the devil who tempts the Panjabis knows it. Whether it is Bhakna propositioned to make a Faustian trade of his ‘merit’ for it, or later threatened and bribed with its loss or reward in a jail cell, or the Raj spy receiving choice bits of it for betrayal, or émigrés compromising their religion and culture to marry Mexicans to acquire or keep it, the land and the multi-layered izzat it represents is essential to the Panjabis. The British play the land card so regularly and expertly in the Panjab. They make it convenient for the cultivator-owners to borrow and waste their way until it is lost to the money lenders or larger landowners. They try to institute laws to take away all rights to land from the cultivators to vest in a distant sovereign. And most expertly and regularly, they induce young men to lay down lives for token bits of it upon discharge from the imperial army.

The ‘landscape’ of the Panjab, in all its senses, is the objective of the issues raised in the utopias of communal identity-making, revolutionary nationalism by the diaspora, or modern day search for a universalist secular society. An imagined golden past when the newly formed Khalsa’s faith was pure, a phantom golden opportunity to regain izzat by vanquishing the oppressor, a wishful golden idyllic of the advent of a peaceable kingdom of Tolstoy and Bakunin with a free and fair society where the greatest adversity is no more than a lover’s pain of separation from the beloved. The three evolving utopias representing the three responses to the circumstances and challenges of these three
periods in the life of British Panjab also represent the three stages of evolution of the Punjabi language.

Bhai Vir Singh can be said to be the product of a climate of special relationship and a separate ethnic and religious identity made or cultivated by the British with the recently defeated Sikhs whose kingdom they had just taken over and who they had found to be their “martial race” allies during the 1857 ‘mutiny’. The Ghadarites are the products of their experiences as displaced and diaspora people who came to identify their wretched conditions with their loss of izzat—honour due to their colonial status. A Panjabi scion of modernity, Mohan Singh is a post-Ghadar, post-Jallianwala Bagh, romantic-socialist, Rabb-conscious follower of Tolstoy’s universalist secular ideas. But, like Bhai Vir Singh and the Ghadarites, he is still a colonial subject of the Raj. And like them, he needs to look in the past to understand his present. He begins it by looking within, by looking to his Rabb, and looking for the Beauty inherent in humans and humanity. From Bhai Vir Singh’s utopia where the stand-out characteristic is apartness to the Ghadarites’ utopia where the key concern is revenge evolves Mohan Singh’s utopia, his personal “loves’s destination”, where the overwhelming ingredient is universal love. While Bhai Vir Singh is occupied with a noble and past ‘Sikhness’, and the Ghadarites with the presence of an ignoble and foreign oppressor in their homeland, Mohan Singh transcends the communal and group angst to deal in the most basic unit of humanity, the individual.

Because of his religious faith and need for its propagation that underlay all his writing, Bhai Vir Singh has been called the Saint-poet. The Ghadarites who composed rustic verses more suited to the revolutionary billboards than books were the soldier-poets of Punjabi. Mere twenty years later, Mohan Singh emerged as the modern lover-poet with
his new idiom, pure diction and polished prosody. Bhai Vir Singh, hapless Ghadarites and Prof. Mohan Singh – preacher, pariahs and poet – reflected and became iconic of the three generations of the Panjabis who, respectively, dwelt in a golden past, dealt with a “golden opportunity” and dreamt of a golden society.

Bhai Vir Singh’s language, even though almost freed of Brajbhasha dominance, is still that of a religious pamphleteer looking back. The Punjabi of the Ghadarites, full of borrowed words and notions of freedom and nationalism from inhospitable aliens, is the language employed to address the nearly uneducated by the marginally less so. Mohan Singh’s language, influenced by the ideals, ideas and interactions of modernity, and standaradized through the 1920s Punjabi literary revival movements, is the language of a well-informed secular idealist looking towards a universalist future.

Bhai Vir Singh’s writing helped empower Punjabi to free itself from the medieval Brajbhasha influences on its first steps towards modernity. The Ghadarites contributed new words and notions to the language to help it along that journey. Mohan Singh, with his profound knowledge of its past and an idealist’s confidence in its potential, helped Punjabi reach its destination of becoming a competent modern language.

In the process of helping the evolution of the Punjabi language these writings also shaped and reflected the ethos of the Panjabis. They also helped make the point about understanding history through literature, to not judge literature on literary grounds alone but to see how it interprets a society and a generation’s aspirations. The three Raj-created aspirations to idealize, the triptych of utopias presented here, it is hoped, provide some insight into the evolution of the society and native language of the colonial Panjab.
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