

## Responding to Darshan Singh Tatla

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My paper "The Two Bhai Sahibs" provoked Dr. Tatla, a senior scholar in the field and a close friend, to write a long rejoinder. The main thrust of his argument pertained to my views about Vir Singh's contribution. So, I focus on that part of his argument.

Tatla believes that critics holding leftist views have largely been interested in denigrating Vir Singh. I do not think this perception is correct. Yes, they had their ideological reservations, but they all gave him what his due was, recognized him as the founder of modern Punjabi poetry, and acknowledged his contribution to other genres of Punjabi literature. Unfortunately, Tatla's rejoinder does not show his awareness of Sant Singh Sekhon's *Bhai Vir Singh te Ohna da Yug* (Bhai Vir Singh and His Period), nor does it reflect an acquaintance with Attar Singh's thesis presented in his *Secular Element in Modern Punjabi Literature*. My paper sought to unveil aspects that were not touched upon in their evaluations.

### My Criteria

Tatla complains that the criteria I have employed in judging Vir Singh are deficient and injudicious. He has identified them as "comfort zone" and "hegemonic discourse," respectively. Taking offence at my use of "comfort-zone" he alleges that I trivialized Vir Singh's integrity and profundity, which are "beyond any doubt." In this regard, he has drawn attention to the dictionary meaning of the term, comfort-zone. Singular insistence upon the etymology of words, however, cannot be the primary concern of serious criticism. We all know that languages evolve and so do the meanings of terms.

What did I mean by employing this term for the purpose of elucidation? Lyrical poetry, intent upon expressing spiritual vision, enfolding sensuous and even sensual urges, formed the basic core of his creative sensibility. Rather than crystallize itself by passing through the sieve of lived experience, fertile nature and secular world, his spiritual vision remained oriented towards a mysterious power, supra-mundane in essence. His spiritual vision could experience only from without. With focus upon springs, streams, flowers and fruit-laden twigs, he

consciously sought affiliation with Gurbani. But this affiliation could only be half-hearted because Gurbani illuminated nature as it mediated through bodily work and sensuous wonder. Where this mediation did not prevail, Gurbani either evinced no interest or criticized the void for not showing any concern for humanity. Gurbani's mediation with humanity could not be termed as transgression. At the same time, it did not advocate any comfort zone for human beings to rest content in dreams and illusions. Conscious-cum-conscientious way of living was that it held essential for them to observe and practice in life.

### **His Education**

Whatever formal education Vir Singh got, it was in a missionary school, whose patrons were not advocates of the 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic poetry excepting some pagan-cum-mystical poetry of Wordsworth. As a boy, Vir Singh also embraced some element of this poetry that got reflected in his lyrical output. This reflection is not visible because its feeling of revolt could not accord with Vir Singh's spiritual vision. Thus, refined restraint, coupled with judicious reluctance, became an integral aspect of Vir Singh's lyricism. For Sekhon, hearing hymns of Gurbani is like inhaling fragrance of flowers blossoming in the wild while reading Vir Singh's lyrics, particularly of the later period of his life, is like smelling scent from the vials. No wonder, mystical and mysterious reluctance does not let Vir Singh's creative or poetic urge to flourish.

### **Its Variation**

Vir Singh's epic *Rana Surat Singh*, the first one in the genre in Punjabi literature, shows it in a varied way. It revolves round a queen's desperate wandering in far off regions to have a sight of her dead husband. They were together only for a short while. The overwhelming mission to wage war against the foes of his faith called him to the battlefield. On getting to know that he was dead, the wife went wild with grief. Like a haunted being she began to wander in unknown and unrecognizable places. To rule over the kingdom should have been the essential mission for her, but it had no significance in her thinking. One day, while wandering at some unknown place, she got bewildered and fell unconscious. On regaining consciousness, she found herself in a gurdwara where recitation of Gurbani was going on and her husband

was tending her with divine glow upon his face. On being told that her husband had turned into a heavenly being, she was asked to return to her place and resume the duty, devolved upon her. In earnest measure, she started doing so with the difference that her spiritual occupation, comprising recitation of Gurbani and prayer before the Divine, became the primary task of her life. By implication, the mission to rule for the good of the people receded into the background. This was a change that was invisible not only to her but also to all the people of the kingdom.

### **Title and its Dominant Tone**

For Vir Singh's audience, the title of the epic alluded to the late Raja Surata Singh, a scion of the Majithia family. He was also the father of Sundar Singh, who was Vir Singh's patron in Amritsar. The epic gives no inkling of what, in the long run, happened as a result of the fight Rana Surat Singh waged against the enemies and his martyrdom in the battlefield. Did his martyrdom prefigure actual Sikh raj implied in this illustrious writing? On this the epic is woefully silent.

A message of another sort and significance is conveyed which does not accord with the will to participate in the historical struggle and face the consequences. It is to show discretion as better part of valor and take care of religious and spiritual matters. Its core is life couched in disengagement and comfort. This varies from what Gurbani conveys wherein such a way of living is viewed with sarcasm. What the epic's end recommends is philanthropy for which misery is an anathema. This misery, essential to alleviate, is what people suffer from as creatures. Sickness, blindness, illiteracy and any other affliction of this sort, comprise its core content. Out of its purview stays human misery, caused by economic inequality, social discrimination, political oppression and historical cataclysm, Gurbani views this also as abhorrent and thereby scores over what the epic's denouement implied.

Gurbani's comprehensive message was beyond the purview of Vir Singh's poetic grasp. Eagerness to awaken the Sikhs to the glory of their past, to restrict them from deviation and to educate them so as to improve their living condition, were the issues which, then, figured on the agenda of the Singh Sabha. Vir Singh was accepted as an important figure with the role of leadership going to Sunder Singh Majithia. No wonder, the epic's denouement replicated a sort of resonance, the Singh

Sabha ethos sought to garner in the changed historical situation under the benign look of Vir Singh.

### **Further Overtones in the Novels**

In the novels he wrote in quick succession, this resonance acquired additional variations. In *Sundari*, the Sikhs, invariably baptized, come into frontal conflict with the Muslims who regard it as their birthright to plunder the people and abduct their women. The Hindu families feel helpless and can only plead that they be spared and allowed to live in safety and security. Averse to all their pleadings, the Muslims loot and plunder them with impunity. The Sikhs, invariably baptized, not only resist the excesses the Muslims commit but also show them their place. In *Sundari*, the heroine, bearing the same name, is a Hindu by birth who, before her marriage, is abducted by the Muslim soldiers. Her family members bewail a lot but that has no effect upon the abductors. Her brother, already turned a baptized Sikh, accosts them on the way and frees his sister from their clutches. Rather than return to her parents, she accompanies him into the jungles, gets baptized and feels blessed in serving the Sikhs who comprise a jatha under her brother's command. All of them consider her as their real sister and one or another is always there when and where, she gets trapped, happening several times.

Vir Singh views Punjabi people as divided essentially into three communities, which are distinct by nature and nurture. The Hindus are timid and bear all excesses. The Sikhs are heroic who, with courage and conviction, regard it their mission to guard them from excesses. They take themselves as the instruments of the divine plan. The Hindus, who get baptized, cease being timid and get transfigured into confident beings. They mold themselves into the image of their Sikh brethren. The Muslims essentially stand for tyranny.

In his next novel, *Satwant Kaur*, the Muslims believing in the Sufi doctrine figure as considerate beings. In the novel, the heroine, is kidnapped by the marauders and taken to Kabul. To force her to marry the chief, she is interned under severe surveillance. The chief's wife sick of her husband's philandering and a votary of the Sufi faith, helps Satwant Kaur in withstanding all the restrictions imposed upon her. Ultimately, she succeeds in performing a noble deed with the help of her guard, who is a kind-hearted Sufi. Ardently firm in her faith, Satwant Kaur not only survives but also retains the purity of her mind and the

chastity of her body. More than this, she is able to persuade the guard and the chief's wife to let her escape to Punjab. They not only help her do so but also accompany her on the hazardous journey.

In his third novel, *Bijay Singh*, Vir Singh's attitude towards the Muslims gets more considerate. In this novel, the hero, bearing the same name, is in prison for defying the Muslim chief's order. After the chief dies all of a sudden, his wife acquires the reins of power and becomes the ruler. Impressed by Bijay Singh's wise counsel to manage the state, she gets mesmerized by his honesty and begins to consult him about her personal affairs. Actually, she falls in love with him and is ready to marry him provided he embraces Islam. Bijay Singh is not willing to renounce his faith. So, her proposal falls through but this does not antagonize her. Her sincerity stays intact and she issues order to release Bijay Singh. The novel ends without resolving a parallel enigma. Had she converted to Sikhism, could Bijay Singh have married her?

One thing is common in these three novels i.e. the place, the Sikhs have entitled themselves to claim in the verisimilitude of Punjab. In retrospect, it had seemed to Vir Singh that they, as destined saviors of people in the Punjab, excelled the Hindus and the Moslems in all respects. Morally and ethically puritan, they had dignity and integrity of the singular sort. The Hindus were timid and selfish and were not capable of guarding themselves. The Muslims were aggressive and brutal and they had no compunction in plundering the Hindus and abducting their women. The Sikhs guarded them against such outrages and in this noble cause the role of the Hindu males after entering into the Sikh fold, was worthy of notice. Likewise, the Muslim males, come under the sway of Sufism, chose to sympathize with the Hindus and admire the Sikhs. Their merger nowhere figured in the landscape of his mind. Gurbani's stress upon their transfiguration into common humanity did not strike a chord in the innermost recesses of Vir Singh's mind. His imagination fell far short of the vision Guru Nanak forwarded by holding *Sabhnaa jian ka ek Data* and Guru Arjan by elaborating it as *Sabhe Sanjhiwal sadain, tohe koi na dithe bahra jio*.

### **Vir Singh's Cult**

Vir Singh imbibed various peculiarities from factors in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when his ancestors from the maternal side opted to offer qualified support to the Sikhs in the war waged against the marauders.

During Maharaja Ranjit Singh's rule, the religious *dera* his paternal ancestor had raised was not accorded any grant or favor. This was a factor that seems to have hindered him, subconsciously if not consciously, from exploring the origin, growth and culmination of the Sikh struggle. The prestige accorded by the votaries of Singh Sabha was so satisfying that the neglect he faced from the Akali Dal from 1920 onward did not bother him. From the historical situation, he definitely was alienated, and he transported himself into a sublime solitude that seemed adorable to mature men and women, living in urban surroundings and feeling content with their lot.

Puran Singh, having nurtured himself upon the Japanese verisimilitude and the German idealistic philosophy, helped Vir Singh feel that there was nothing wrong in being a cult figure. Vir Singh responded to his overture in his own way by observing reticence of the adorable sort. This eventually manifested in the form of Bhai Vir Singh Sadan in New Delhi, the capital of the country.

Glossy editions of his works were brought out with diligence and devotion. Of late, it has flaunted his lyrical poems relating to the Kashmir landscape in three languages, Punjabi, English and Kashmiri respectively. Adorned with preface by Manmohan Singh the former prime minister, foreword by N.N. Vohra, the governor of Kashmir, and introduction by Surjit Patar, the leading Punjabi poet, this volume is meant to assuage the hurt feelings of the Kashmiri people. It is hard to believe that the recall of flowers, twigs, fountains and trees will charm the people who see nature ruined, society devastated, relations failed and soil turned into a desert in the name of peace. As the late Agha Shahid Ali had put it, from a beautiful, fragrant and melodious land, Kashmir had changed into a wilderness, "a country without a post office." By bringing out this volume, the custodians of the Sadan may be supporting the political designs of the government, but it is an act of injustice to the detachment Vir Singh had observed to historical and political issues all through his life.

So valuable was his nonchalance toward matters historical that even the Partition of the Punjab did not arouse any response from him. For six months, communal riots raged with horrendous ferocity and took a terrible toll of death and destruction. Comfortably ensconced in his elegant house in Amritsar, Vir Singh lived with indifference that, three decades back, he had observed when innocent men and women were shot dead in the Jallianwala Bagh. His swan song, *Mere Sian Jio* (My Dear

Lord) failed even to replicate what he had earlier articulated in apparently deliberate vein. As a result, he went through acute decline in his creative power but to compensate for that, he did lot of editing work. Laudable in quantity, it was lacking in quality. His *chamatkars* written to project the excellence of the Sikh Gurus can be placed in the same line.

### **Vir Singh and Sikh Nationalism**

Tatla holds that beneath this demeanor, Vir Singh aspired for "Sikh nationalism with a vision and consciousness harnessed around Punjabi consciousness." Sadly enough, no evidence of it can be gathered from his writings. While he was in his fifties, the following report about him was sent to the ruling authorities by some functionary of the intelligence wing of Punjab under the British rule:

*He seems to have acquired for himself the position of a guru and obeisance has been done to him ...a jealous new Sikh and thoroughly anti-British.*

A cursory reading of Vir Singh's articles shows that there is nothing political in them. These only conveyed social message to the effect that communal organizations representing the Hindus, Muslims and Christian preachers posed a danger to Sikhism. Vir Singh's grouse against Christian preachers was particularly strong: they were eager to draw unprivileged persons into the fold of their own religion. On this issue, he wrote a play as well, which was not a literary work of any merit. Let alone Sikh nationalism, no political issue ever caught Vir Singh's imagination.

### **Vir Singh's Premonition**

In a low tone but without any doubt, Tatla concludes that Vir Singh had premonition of what was to happen in 1984. Rather than figure out as a sober reader of Vir Singh's writings, Tatla appears to behave as a palmist or an astrologer. In his inimitable writing, *The Stars down to the Earth*, T.W. Adorno has described that a palmist tells the past and future of a customer by reading lines of the hand, all the time caring first to warn about hazards and then to hold out a hope. And the astrologer employs movement of stars for the purpose by first talking of some privation and then assuring prosperity. In imagining Vir Singh's life, Tatla seems to

have performed the role of the soothsayer. In the world of reality, however, Vir Singh's inheritance disposed him to work with the powers of the time, his printing press, *Vazir Hind* ("Viceroy"), is just one indication, and his idealization of Sikh values was without an adequate historical contextualization. Since history was an essential element in the vision of Guru Nanak and as a result it has been an indivisible part of Sikh consciousness, it may well be high time to revisit the legacy of Vir Singh, a Sikh 'icon' in the words of Dr. Tatla.