

Book Review

Name of the Book: Professor Puran Singh: Scientist, Poet and Philosopher

Book's Author: Hardev Singh Virk
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Professor Puran Singh, a unique synthesis of a poet, philosopher and scientist, rose like a celestial star on the firmament of modern Indian literature. The many splendoured personality of this great chemist, mystic poet, visionary and interpreter of the Sikh cultural consciousness still beckons scholars to explore the extent of his vision in various fields. After a splendid in-depth study of the Life and Work of Puran Singh, Dr. Hardev Singh Virk has made a successful attempt to unravel the persona of this multi-dimensional genius in his book titled 'Professor Puran Singh - Scientist, Poet and Philosopher.'

The book is an anthology of 11 essays - 7 in English and 4 in Punjabi. In the 'Introduction to the book, the author traces a brief history of the kindling of his interest in the 'Life and Works of Puran Singh.' Then he articulates the purpose of the book to elaborate the ideas of this eminent scholar through different mediums to reach a wider audience. Dr. Virk stresses that poetic and other literary works of Puran Singh are of International standards and worth a Nobel Prize in literature. Still, sadly these works have not been adequately projected at the world forum.

In the chapter, 'Professor Puran Singh-Scientist, Poet and Philosopher,' the author points out that Puran Singh was a highly volatile and emotional young man. His thought and personality were shaped by four pivotal events in his early life; his Japanese experiences, his encounter with Walt Whitman, his discipleship of Swami Ram Tirath and his meeting with Bhai Vir Singh, the great Sikh savant. He was a brilliant student of Tokyo University, a great orator, a revolutionary in the offing and a handsome young man. He was so much fascinated with Japanese life and culture that he became a Buddhist Bhiku in Japan.

Puran Singh was introduced to Walt Whitman through an American Professor teaching at Tokyo University. He read his 'Leaves of Grass' and was so infatuated with Whitman's verse that it became the essential attribute of his poetic works and craft. Whitman-Puran Singh's identity is so complete as almost to suggest the idea of poetic reincarnation. The author describes him as a poet of Sikh Spiritual Consciousness (Santa). After providing an overview of this multi-

dimensional genius, Dr. Virk has summed up this chapter with an annexure containing a list of Puran Singh's literary works, Gems of thought, and a few quotes from his poems. This additional information is highly relevant to the topic and makes the reading much more exciting and valuable to the readers.

After a thorough investigation, the author has presented a detailed report on the research interests of this eminent Chemist of Punjab in the essay titled; 'Life and Works of Puran Singh.' The author elaborates that Puran Singh was the founder of the Chemistry of forest products in India. As Imperial Chemist at the Forest Research Institute, Dehradun, published 53 research papers/reports in various journals in India and abroad on multiple aspects of forest products' chemistry. He also made an extensive survey of Indian forests from the Himalayas to the eastern regions, including Bengal, Assam and Burma. He patented a novel technique for cleaning and decolouration of crystal sugar prepared from raw sugar. The inclusion of a list of published scientific works of Puran Singh in this chapter is highly useful in bringing out the valuable contributions made by this great scientist to light.

'Puran Singh's Commentary on the Poets of East and West' is the topic in chapter 3 of the book. The author points out that Puran Singh was a prolific writer with about two-dozen literary works to his credit. He wrote fluently in English, Punjabi and Hindi. His book 'The Spirit of Oriental Poetry' was published in 1926 by Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., London. In the book, he provided an interesting commentary on the works of several great poets of the West, e.g. Shakespeare, Tennyson, Browning, Shelly, Wordsworth, Milton, William Blake, Carlyle, Goethe, Walt Whitman, Edward Carpenter, Emerson. A similar review of the works of some Eastern poets such as Rabindra Nath Tagore, Rama Krishna Paramhansa Vivekananda, and Sarojini Naidu had also been presented in it.

In the chapter, 'The Sikh Gurus, The Sikhs and The Khalsa,' the author has presented Puran Singh's views on Sikhs and Sikhism. Some precious gems of his thoughts are: (i) After Buddha, it was Guru Nanak, who for the first time championed the cause of the masses in caste-ridden India. (ii) The world has yet to understand the Ten Gurus in the splendour of their thought. (iii) Guru Granth of the Sikhs is the most authentic account of the Guru's soul. (iv) Freedom of the human mind and soul is the Guru's passion. (v) The Khalsa is the son of the Guru, who brings everywhere his heaven and its delectable freedoms. (vi) Khalsa stands for the sovereign society. (vii) Khalsa is the ideal future international state of man. (viii) The Sikh people are a race of straightforward men of action. They live a simple, austere life of continuous

labour, have inventive genius, and love for life's practical pursuits. (ix) Out of the downtrodden, oppressed, lifeless slaves of Punjab, Guru Gobind Singh moulded a nation, which has the potentialities of a progressive nation. (x) The Guru Khalsa state is based on the essential goodness of humanity.

In the article titled 'The Mystic Hair,' the author points out that Puran Singh has described the 'Sikh Symbols (Kakars)' as the 'gifts of the Guru' in his writings, although he was highly critical of adorning symbols as a mere ritual. To emphasize his points, the author quotes Puran Singh's views on hair (Keshas): 'Assuredly, without the hair-idea of Guru Gobind Singh, there would have been no Sikh song and life today, except that the Guru Granth would possibly have been another Purana of the Hindus.'

In describing 'Puran Singh's Concept of Khalsa Democracy,' the author elaborates that Puran Singh was highly critical of the parliamentary form of democracy, Soviet brand of socialism, secularism and ritualism. He was a pioneer interpreter of the sovereignty of the Khalsa doctrine of Guru Gobind Singh. According to Puran Singh, the Khalsa is the ideal, future international state of man: it is the absolute monarchy of the kingdom of heaven for every man, the absolute democracy, distribution of bread and raiment of the kingdom of labour on this earth—all in one. It is a brotherhood of the souls where the intensity of feelings burns out all differences. The Guru Khalsa state is based on the essential goodness of humanity.

The English section of the book is summed up with an article titled: 'Prof. Puran Singh-A Whitman Re-incarnated in Punjab'. Dr. Virk elucidates that Whitman-Puran Singh identity is so complete as almost to suggest the idea of poetic reincarnation. There is a psychic unity of the soul-consciousness underlying the 'Sikh Compositions' of Puran Singh and 'Leaves of Grass' of Walt Whitman. Both of them had a similar philosophy of poetry. Whitman also establishes the relationship between the poet and the scientist: 'The scientist is the father and the law-giver of poets. The poets are born of the scientists' father stuff, who develop the poets' souls, their vision of the reality of life and universe.' Puran Singh fully realized the truth of it in his own life. For him, poetry and science were not two opposite poles of reality as is often believed. He was a distinguished chemist by profession as well as a creative genius in Punjabi literature. Whitman and Puran Singh both rebelled against the established tradition in poetry or the meter-making argument. All the poetry of Puran Singh is in verse libre. Whitman and Puran Singh both stress the role of comradeship in making democracy a success. Puran Singh identifies the Khalsa ideal

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of Guru Gobind Singh in the writings of Walt Whitman. This identity is so complete that he called him, 'A Guru Sikh born in America to preach the Guru's ideal to the modern mind.'

The second section of the book contains four articles in Punjabi, namely; 'Prof. Puran Singh-An Overview', 'Puran Singh as a Scientist,' 'Puran Singh: A poet of Sikh Spiritual Consciousness' and 'Sikhism and Khalsa Ideal.' These articles' ideas and opinions are almost the same as described in the first section of the book. To elaborate the concepts of 'Sikh Spiritual Consciousness,' 'Sikhism and Khalsa Ideal' in Puran Singh's writings, several quotes from 'Gurbani' have been provided by the author. After a detailed analysis, the author opines that the concepts propounded by Puran Singh are in accord with that enunciated in Gurbani.

Dr. Hardev Singh Virk has done meaningful work in projecting the scientific and literary works and spiritual thoughts of Professor Puran Singh to the modern world through this book. Puran Singh's vision in various fields has been presented brilliantly through this work. Dr. Virk's thesis is strongly supplemented by appropriate references and quotes from Puran Singh's writings. Though there has been some repetition of quotes and textual material in the book yet, it does not take the reader astray; instead, it clarifies things. Although the book is a gist of several research papers prepared for/presented at various seminars by the author, each article is complete and is a treat to read. The younger generation is likely to gain much from this treatise of scientific, literary and spiritual knowledge. It is pertinent to add that this is one of the best books ever authored on this topic. I strongly recommend that this book should be on the shelves of all the libraries. The youth of today must be encouraged to read works of this nature. The new researchers in this field can take the lead from Dr. Virk's work and can explore the impact of other two pivotal events of Puran Singh's life; especially his discipleship of Swami Ram Tirath and his meeting with Bhai Vir Singh, the great Sikh savant, on his life and work.

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