

Birth of a Poem

Every birth is a rebirth of mystery. Perhaps more so in poetry. The making of Singh's poem, *Sat Sri Akal*, reveals many faces of this mystery.

The poem began in the early summer of 1979 when Singh happened to stay close to my residence in a house whose owner had gone to India for the summer.

In the evenings we would go for a walk or to a coffee shop, talk poetry, philosophy, cooking, or just nonsense and often laugh at ourselves being so silly. Occasionally Harkinder joined us and walked quietly often watching Singh in amazement as if he were a laughing Buddha or a Shakespearean fool.

One evening, while making chapattis, Singh began talking, "Kneading dough is more than a physical act. It is an art of molding energy like the art of molding language into poetry. Making chapattis is like writing poems though chapattis sometimes can express much more than poems do".

"Wonderful, Singh," I said, "If you could write a cookbook on poetry, maybe more people would start relishing poems."

Singh smiled and said, "I believe the *rasa* is the same whether it comes from food or poetry. That is why poetry is as essential as food for our living. The Indian poetics seems to be connected to the poetics of food."

I said he might be right, but I still couldn't see how chapattis could be more expressive than poems.

He gave two examples to illustrate his point: the Gospel narrative of Christ's breaking of the bread, and a folkloric account of Guru Nanak's coming back to his sister whenever she wished him to eat the special chapatti that puffed on the hotplate. "I think the chapatti in the Nanak lore expresses many things: affection between brother and sister,

ordinary humanness of Nanak and his love for ordinary things. I can't see any single poem doing so many things so beautifully," said Singh.

Our conversation momentarily shifted to a paper "Being a Sikh in Canada" which Singh was working on for an upcoming conference in Ottawa. He said he was getting nowhere on the question of Sikh identity, particularly how Nanak and other Gurus molded the stuff of which the Sikhs are made.

"You mean how they 'kneaded the dough'," I said playing upon his dough metaphor.

"Yeah, the dough," he laughed, "Any idea, how they did it?"

"Must be through poetry and music," I replied, "Guru Nanak lived his whole life singing and writing ('I was assigned with this *kaar*', he says), and other Gurus did the same. It was an epic experiment in poetry and music which took over 200 years to mould the *surta* (consciousness) of the Sikh people."

"So poetry and music," Singh jumped in, "must be the stuff that the Sikhs are made of. *Chhad de Jaikara! We got it!*"

Singh was all excitement. Apparently he had struck a definition of a Sikh. To be a Sikh is to be a creative person. Carefree. Liberated. A Sikh is a poem and a poet together. "That is why Puran Singh called Walt Whitman a Sikh." Singh burst out into a wild laughter.

Another evening Singh asked me how a poem comes to me. "Does she stamp her heel to ring the anklet before coming?"

"Not to me. I don't see her coming," I hesitated a bit. "There are poets like the Vedic rishis, who actually see poems coming and there are poets who compose them word by word. The *Janam Sakhi* often mentions Guru Nanak asking Mardana to pick up the rabaab when he saw the shabad coming. I don't belong to those rishi poets. I am more of a composer than a seer."

"Perhaps every poet is both. And every poem is both made and received," Singh philosophized. In the days that followed Singh started reading Guru Nanak and other Gurus and talked more about their poetry.

Then one day he suddenly left the house, and checked in a nearby motel surrounded by green fields. The house, he said, was filled with negative vibes. The writing place “must be sacred like a teertha because it breathes through your words. The place is not simply a physical expanse, it is a living presence with memory. The teerthas are teerthas only because they have memories of the rishis who had meditated there for ages.”

“I thought writers can write at any place and it is their writing that makes any place a teertha,” I said.

“You too are right,” Singh replied casually.

One day we were strolling in the motel lawn. Singh stopped by a bush bloomed afresh, and asked, “Where does a poem begin?”

A difficult question it was. I tried to brush it aside: A poem begins before its beginning and ends after its ending

“No metaphysical mumbo jumbo,” Singh reacted.

“Like question like answer,” I laughed.

“O.k. Let me clarify it. There is a concept called critical point. Water at its critical point (380-386°C) loses the distinction between its liquid state and vapor state. But past its critical point the water changes into vapor from liquid. Is there such a critical point in poetry too, past which a nonpoem becomes a poem?”

“Good question, Singh, but I doubt if poetry has or can have such a critical point. The chemistry of poetry doesn’t work this way. Since every poem is unique, no critical point can explain how and where the nonpoem turns into a poem. The universe of nonpoem itself is open, expanding and consists of anything imaginable. Also it is not possible for a poem to reconstruct its nonpoem completely. You cannot disassemble a butterfly back into the moth it came from,” I said.

“But a poem,” said Singh, “does have a beginning and ending. Doesn’t it begin with its first line and end with the last?”

“Sure, it does,” I replied, “every physical object or event must have a beginning and ending, otherwise it would remain incomprehensible. And a finished poem in this sense can be construed as an object and

the act of its writing an event. Still the beginning of a poem viewed as an object/event would not entail the alleged critical point because the poem, like the vapor state of water, begins past the critical point, if any. Even the reduction of a poem to an object or an event is questionable. Unlike physical objects the poem has no fixed boundaries. Its first line can be shifted to the last and vice versa. The end may become the beginning. You can also decrease or increase its size by deleting or adding lines. Its shape can be changed on the page and you can read it in different voices, recite it in different styles. But what really makes a poem more than an object is not its fluidity of shape, size and sound, but the sensibility radiating from it. Unlike most physical objects the poem is not closed by its boundaries.”

“Very interesting. And what about the poem as an event? Is the event made to happen the way Galileo dropped the balls from the Tower of Pisa, or it just happens like the falling of Newton’s apple?” Singh asked with his characteristic clarity.

Every poet would love to have his poems dropped into his lap, I said, but can it really happen in the Newtonian universe, a causal system? Newton himself discovered that his apple was dropped by gravity. In a causal universe nothing happens by itself. “No leaf swings without His will” makes perfect sense if *hukam* is understood as causality.

“Then,” asked Singh, “how do you explain your claim that Vedic rishis saw poems coming to them? And the belief that Quran came to Mohammad from above and the Adi Granth is the voice from of the origin?”

We had no clear answers to these questions but I knew for sure that Singh’s poem *Sat Sri Akal* was in the making.