

My Concept of Poetry

*The beauty of word and phrase may attract the eye,
But O my friend, it is the heart's blood that brings poetry to life.*

MY PHILOSOPHY OF POETRY is not the child of thought and reflection alone. It is born of life itself. It is, however, not limited to my own experiences. It arises from that limitless ocean of human life which surges around us.

My poetry, which I regard as the cry of the soul, is a gift of the two great spiritual luminaries, my divine Master Hazur Baba Sawan Singh Ji Maharaj and my revered father Sant Kirpal Singh Ji Maharaj. I have sought to acknowledge my debt to them in the following words:

*With every breath I must bow to my Friend,
For I owe my life to his grace.*

If I were to sum up my philosophy as an artist in two words, they would be "fellowship" and "brotherhood." In employing these terms I do not have in mind any "ism" or creed. I am referring to that principle at the root of human nature, which is, in fact, the very foundation and crowning jewel of the universe - the principle of love.

If the subject of love were grasped in its fullness, it would be seen to encompass all existence. Let me cite some of my verses on this theme.

*O Cupbearer, the intoxicating wine you served overflowed the
goblet of my heart,
And now I am in love with all humanity.*

*Embrace every man as your very own,
And shower your love freely
wherever you go.*

*I have learned to cherish all creation as my own,
Your message of love is the very meaning of my life.*

*What does it matter if I am called a man?
In truth I am the very soul of love;
The entire earth is my home
And the universe my country.*

*From dawn to dawn, let us speak of peace and listen
to the message of love,
The shower-laden clouds of Sawan have enveloped
the tavern of time,
O Cupbearer, let the cup of love
go 'round and 'round and 'round.*

I believe in the goodness of all creation and of those who inhabit this beautiful planet suspended in a limitless expanse of space. The Almighty did not work without a design. He had a definite purpose when He created the universe, to which the holy scriptures make reference. Khwaja Mir Dard has defined it thus:

*It was to share in the pain of his fellow beings that God
created human beings;
He had no dearth of cherubim to sing His glories.*

This thought is carried a step further by Dr. Mohammed Iqbal:

*The Lord has a thousand devotees who seek Him
day and night in the wilderness;
But I will be a devotee of one who is a lover
of those whom God has created.*

Being part of God's creation, we are ultimately all one. This unity is fundamental to our nature. We may differ with regard to color, race, or nationality, but these differences are the result of living in varying geographical regions and environments. When we experience pain or sorrow, joy or happiness, when we perceive a moral order or a spiritual power that spontaneously invites devotion, we are indivisible from each other.

I seek a world in which each individual is valued for his or her uniqueness and merit, and all people lead a life of dignity and respect. It is a world in which we live together in harmony, with sincerity, sympathy, and kindness toward each other, sustained by hope and spiritual aspiration.

*Let this world become a temple of love
and peace,
Let love and Truth illumine the world,
And the adversaries of peace awaken to its Light.
This sacred land of God has been trampled with
the burden of oppression.
Life is not a dagger stained with the blood
of hatred;
It is a branch filled with the flowers of love
and compassion.*

Humanity has always dreamed of a time of amity and peace when we would live and let others live, when one would pursue his or her chosen ideal unhindered and attain self-knowledge and God-realization. This hope, at first sight, may seem impractical. But if we individually and collectively determine to realize our full potential, the impossible will become possible. Humanity will move towards its true destination and its highest point of development. There are some, no doubt, who will regard my faith in God with disapproval. But I am a believer and regard creation as a divine trust which no one has the right to exploit.

We are part of the common fabric of humanity, and we must stand together if we are to

survive. We must do so, not merely to save Europe or America or Russia or Asia. Life itself is threatened, and we must unite to save humanity from destruction.

Is it not strange that:

*We are communing with the moon
and the stars,
But alas, we have not reached the heart
of our neighbor.*

All nations have a right to attain and preserve their independence and sovereignty. Goaded by a misplaced sense of patriotism, they must not build nuclear arsenals to perpetrate a balance of terror, which they refer to as peace. Such peace is, in fact, a preparation for war and generates fear and suspicion. No country has the right to destroy another in order to expand its territory and to gain power.

II MYSTICISM

I grew up in the lap of mysticism. I do not look upon the mystic life as inactive or sterile. Despite its emphasis on meditation, pure living, and persistent striving for God, it is a vibrant philosophy. It affords us an ever-renewing intoxication and fills us with the joy of life. It is a source of strength and wisdom that brings about our moral and spiritual evolution. Our ancient rishis, and the saints, fakirs, and swamis who came after them, trod the spiritual path without feeling that they were rejecting life. It is a gross error to assume that our spiritual guides encourage humankind to reject the world. Rightly understood, renunciation is a dynamic philosophy. This philosophy, as I see it, rejects an egocentric view of life based on "me" and "mine," which inevitably leads to the clash of wills. It invites us to lead a more expansive and universal life. It rejects our negative thoughts, emotions, and impulses. If we study it in this light, we will come to realize that continence and self-denial have helped humanity to progress. Why should we not rid our lives of the narrow possessiveness and selfish desires which are at the root of tension and conflict? Why should we not seek instead to create a world in which we see ourselves as part of an ever-expanding unified community in which each member helps and supports the other?

I am a firm believer in what I term "positive mysticism." I have little use for a negative philosophy that encourages indifference and resignation towards life. True mysticism compels us to pursue life's supreme goal unwaveringly. It focuses its attention constantly on that divine Power which is indivisible, complete, and perfect in itself. You may refer to this Power as God, Allah, Khuda, Wah-e-Guru, or Parmatma. The Almighty created and sustains the cosmos and all living things. Those who pursue the mystic path and succeed in attaining the ultimate goal not only become one with God, but also become one with His creation. Those who have attained this exalted state cry out in ecstasy: "Aham Brahm Asmi," or "Anal Haq," which means "I am God." This experience of spiritual union is shared alike by mystics of all religious traditions.

Both my spiritual guides lived by the principle of universal love. They held that God is love, and the soul being of His essence is love, and the way back to God is also love. If God is the whole, then the soul is a part. If He is the ocean, then the soul is a wave upon that ocean. Love necessitates *ahimsa* or noninjury, a spirit of live and let live. Through their teachings and through

the example of their own lives, both these saints spread this message throughout the world. They taught us to love God, to love all creation, and to work for human unity and brotherhood.

I was indeed blessed in being brought up under their influence. It was from them that I learned of the oneness of all humankind and of the goal of divine union. When I pursued the study of comparative religion under their guidance, I came to the firm conclusion that all religions point to a single reality underlying existence. This universal Truth is the solution to the world's problems.

III SOURCES

Poetry, in whatever language, is the outcome of pure thought and intense feeling. It is born when the spirit is deeply moved. The Urdu and Persian term for literature, *adab*, signifies "respect for others." Its equivalent in Hindi and Sanskrit, *sahitya*, points to "that which is spoken or written for the benefit of others." The English word "literature" and its various equivalents in European languages perhaps have a similar intention. Literature, at its most sublime and uplifting, comes to us in the form of poetry or poetic prose. Thus, we have the compositions of the Vedas, the verses of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, the Psalms of the Bible, the Ayats (sayings) of the Holy Koran, and the devotional songs of the Adi Granth. Poetry and music are inseparable from each other. Excellence in any of the five arts - be it music, poetry, painting, sculpture, or dancing - is a divine gift. Indeed, the fine arts themselves seem to have been born of that instinct that inspires words and leads us to prayer. Of the five arts, music is often regarded as the purest, with poetry close behind. Indeed, poetry contains two essential elements of music - melody and rhythm. Poetry is a divine gift and is the song of the soul. I have tried to express this thought in the following lines:

*He is hidden in every instrument, in every song
and melody.
All creation reflects His glory.
There exists not a sparkling wave nor a fiery star that does
not owe its radiance to His Light.*

I do not mean to imply that great poetry has been produced by saints and mystics alone. During those moments of intense concentration when one is lost in ecstasy and communes with the inmost depths of the soul, one spontaneously breaks into verse. Poetry, as it were, descends upon one. The great Urdu poet, Mirza Ghalib, has said, "Such thoughts come from the unknown; the scratchings of my pen are, in fact, divine music."

The suggestion that poetic inspiration descends from a hidden source is not mere fancy. When the poet's mind becomes truly transparent and still, the veil of duality is rent. He enters a world of poetic thought and expression, and he moves in complete unison with them.

The poet's spirit is quickened by his environment and by his experiences. His heart is the repository of life's joys and sorrows, its successes and failures. When the creative moment arrives, external influences and personal experiences are woven together inextricably, and his verse comes forth as revelation. His poetry then conveys to us a crystallization of what is most intense and heartfelt in his life.

My own poetry is an unfettered expression of such moments of inspiration. In fact, I compose only when I am in a state of poetic exaltation. I do not believe in sitting down to write poetry through an act of will. Others sometimes attempt to induce such inspiration. The result is often a composition that relies on literary artifice, injures the very soul of the verse, and shames the good name of poetry. There are writers who rely upon intoxicants to excite the poetic mood. For some, it becomes almost an indispensable aid. I have even heard a writer declare that it is impossible to compose poetry without resorting to drink. My own literary career spans more than fifty years, and I am proud to say that I have never touched an alcoholic drink. In fact, I have been unable to discover any special bond between eating, drinking, and the writing of verse. Not only am I a teetotaler, I am also a vegetarian. I lead a simple life. It is from the joys and sorrows of existence itself that I distill the wine of my poetry, and it grows more intoxicating with the passage of time.

I regard poetry as the cry of the soul. As it is said, it is from the abundance of the heart that the tongue speaks. There surges in the heart and soul a boundless ocean of perceptions and felt experiences, and every word which rises from its depths is impregnated with its riches.

This sea of consciousness which is the source and fountainhead of my poetry is illumined by the light of my two spiritual Masters and of all the prophets of Truth who came before them. I consider myself to be an instrument which, through their grace, has grown ever more subtle. But the music which issues from this instrument - a music which is theirs and not mine - is subtler still. As I have expressed this idea:

*The music coming from the depths of my heart
affects the hearts of the listeners;
My instrument may be subtle, but your music
which passes through it is subtler still.
I quaffed the wine of divine knowledge
wherever I could find it,
And I met the same Cupbearer in every tavern.*

IV THEMES

I believe that the poet's insights and experiences should be presented in a form which fills the reader with such ecstasy and inspiration that one is liberated from one's ordinary consciousness and steps forward on the path which leads to the abode of love and Light. This impulse to move forward is greatly reinforced when people belonging to all religions and cultural backgrounds come together in pursuit of unity. Such a living and dynamic forum brings us closer to one another and to that Supreme Power to which we all bow and to which we owe our existence. Our faith in the Almighty draws us together and can help the caravan of human life move forward towards its cherished goal. Indeed, the very purpose of our literature should be to illumine this spiritual horizon which beckons us so that all humanity is inspired and guided by its Light.

We have in this age a golden opportunity for sharing in a living and active faith. The conflict between science and religion arises when belief in a living and enduring faith disappears. I am of the firm conviction that if we can practice the life-giving and eternal principles of the saints and prophets, we can achieve lasting peace on earth.

I named my first collection of poems, *Talash-e-Noor* or *Quest for Light* (1965). It contains several ghazals in Urdu and Persian. It also contains poems employing traditional stanza forms such as the rubai (quatrain), and more modern forms such as free verse, blank verse, the sonnet, and poems using diverse lyric measures. I endeavored in this volume to celebrate the soul-inspiring mystic message of the founders of various religions, viewing them in the context of their life and times. The more I studied their teachings, the more I realized that they all saw the Creator as our supreme goal. They came to remind us of this Truth and to teach us a practical way by which we can attain this end.

Guru Nanak was one such Godman who came to help true seekers to achieve self-knowledge and God-realization. My second volume, *Manzil-e-Noor* or *Abode of Light* (1969) consists of a long poem of one hundred stanzas which celebrates the universal message of this great poet-saint. The teachings of spiritual Masters, while inevitably presented in the languages of their day, are timeless in character. They are not meant for any one people or age, but are a divine gift for all humanity.

I believe that if we can only transcend our seeming differences of form and name, and live by the basic principles taught by various religions, we can achieve true happiness. In fact, our well-being and redemption depend on this. In one of the stanzas of *Manzil-e-Noor* I make the fervent appeal:

*He bears a thousand names, call on Him by any;
Summon Him to the assembly of your thoughts
and adore Him;
Offer Him a seat in the innermost chamber
of your heart, and burnish His image;
Suffuse your life-blood with His name,
and fix Him in your soul.
You surely will meet Him, just let your soul soar,
He is close to you, just call for Him.*

The Vedic dictum, *Vasudhev Kutumbhkum*, "All creation is God's family," expresses a truth central to my poetry. Sheikh Saadi points to the same principle when he says:

*Humanity is like the limbs of the body:
When one limb aches, the whole body is in agony.*

Wherever we may be, we share a common heritage and destiny. If a disaster occurs in one region, it affects humanity in other parts as well.

My poetry offers equal reverence and adoration to all the world's religions and their founders. It serves to further human unity and peace, and to nurture a climate of faith. As I said in some of my verses:

*All places of worship are symbols
of the One Beloved.
Bow your head when you see a temple,
and salute when you see a mosque.*

*When the flowers of the church, mosque
and temple gather together
Spring will blossom forth in Your garden, O Lord.*

When presenting these universal truths of spirituality, I feel my poetry gives expression to the message of Buddha, Ashoka, Guru Nanak, Christ, Kabir, and the Sufi Masters.

Spirituality had become a part of my being early in life; however, it was some time before I began to focus on spiritual themes in my poetry. In the early days I tended to write on conventional subjects and employed traditional meters. I was moved by a romantic impulse and wrote on patriotism, the beauty of nature, human love and friendship, the changing seasons, and the festivals, fairs, heroes, and sages of my country.

My first two books, *Talash-e-Noor* and *Manzil-e-Noor*, have recently been followed by *Matah-e-Noor* or *Treasure House of Light* (1988). This volume brings together ninety ghazals and five sonnets. As a great deal of my poetry remains uncollected, I propose to bring out two further volumes in the near future. These will include my poems on human unity, universal peace, national festivals and landscapes, literary figures and patriots, and verses written for special occasions.

I still vividly recall how I came to write my first poem on a spiritual subject. On reading one of my ghazals in a college magazine, my father remarked, "You write poetry quite well. Would it not be wonderful if you could compose a ghazal to recite on Hazur Baba Sawan Singh Ji Maharaj's birthday?" I replied, "How could I do justice to the great Master?" Being a novice, I perspired from head to foot, but I had no choice. To get me started on my poem, my father gave me a hemistich. It began thus: "The Light of God has manifested itself in the form of my resplendent, glorious Master." I went on to recite the poem at the birthday celebration, and Hazur generously applauded this maiden attempt.

As time passed I gained increasing mastery in the art of poetry. It was Janab Shamim Karhani who recognized that mysticism was in my blood, and I went on to pursue it as the main theme of my verses. Indeed, I have been given a heart so tender that it is unable to behold "man's inhumanity to man" without suffering deeply. Many of my poems have resulted directly from this state of anguish. As I have put it:

*In this world, each is consumed with his
own afflictions,
Only Darshan shares the sorrows of his fellow man.*

And again:

*Hidden in my verses are a million heartbeats,
My soul gives voice to the sorrows
of the world.*

V STYLE

Having spoken of the subject matter of my poetry, let me now turn to its style. The content and form of a poem lend strength to one another, and this interplay has great importance in the composition of poetry. However profound the thought, its impact is determined by the manner in which it is expressed.

I began writing poetry in 1938. A year earlier, after matriculating from school, I joined Government College in Lahore. When graduating from school I had obtained such high marks in my examination that I could have received admission to the best medical or engineering college and trained for any career of my choice. But before making a decision on the matter, my father took me to Beas to seek guidance from the great Master, Hazur Baba Sawan Singh Ji. On learning of my outstanding performance, Hazur congratulated me and said, "My son, Persian is a very sweet language. It contains the writings of many mystics. It is well worth study." He went on to recommend history and English literature as well. It was a result of this directive that, instead of becoming an engineer or a doctor, I entered the literary field.

I had been interested in literature all along, but having taken up its study in college, I began to try my hand at poetical composition. I was greatly encouraged in this by Sufi Ghulam Mustafa Tabassum, who not only taught Urdu and Persian but who was himself a leading scholar and poet in these languages. My other literary mentor at this time was my English professor, Eric Dickenson. From the former, I learned Urdu prosody, and from the latter, I learned the niceties of English scansion. After completing my studies, I moved to Delhi where I was fortunate to receive guidance from the distinguished Urdu and Persian poet, Janab Shamim Karhani. It was he who instructed me in the finer points of poetry by correcting my work. I am also indebted to my revered brother, Ali Jawad Zaidi, and to my dear friend, Rifat Sarosh. They have helped me generously with their advice. As in the spiritual domain, so too in the literary: I have been most fortunate to have received my training from true adepts. I have always kept before me the advice of my mentors that a verse is justified if it expresses a new thought, or expresses an existing one in a new way.

It is over fifty years since I began writing poetry. In the early days, some of my ghazals were published in our highly regarded college magazine, *The Ravi*. In 1938, my poems began to be broadcast on All India Radio, and later on television. In addition to composing poems in Urdu and Persian, I also have written verses in English. Two collections of my English poems and translations have been published: *The Cry of the Soul* (1977) and *A Tear and a Star* (1986). I have also composed poetry in Hindi and Punjabi. Over the years I have taken up numerous subjects and have employed varied poetic forms. I regard the different poetic measures as fit ground for exercising a poet's imagination. I do not believe that one should be a prisoner of any single meter. In fact, a poet should be free to develop new poetic forms to give expression to his thoughts. This right, however, is reserved only for those who have already mastered the art of versification.

In its style and form, poetry must avoid the stereotype and must not allow itself to become static. It should be dynamic and change with the times. But I do not believe in violent experimentation. I am, in fact, opposed to all violence, including violence in literary expression. Our literary heritage has behind it centuries of effort, and we must not allow it to be lost. I believe in poetry which for all its subtlety is direct and transparent, and can move the hearts and minds of

the common person. To my mind, there is no need at all for sacrificing well-trying poetic forms on the altar of originality and modernism. We have only to look at the poetry of Dr. Mohammed Iqbal or Faiz Ahmed Faiz to see that a poet can express with perfect ease and directness the most complex and subtle insights without abandoning existing modes. I myself have not found it difficult to render my sentiments and thoughts in verse while accepting the bounds of poetic tradition.

VI SPIRITUALITY

To fulfill a behest of his Master, Hazur Baba Sawan Singh, my father established Ruhani Satsang, an interreligious and international organization. This was followed by his presiding over the conferences of the World Fellowship of Religions (1957, 1960, 1965, and 1970). Finally, in 1974, he hosted the first Unity of Man Conference. The deliberations of the World Fellowship of Religions were open to devotees from all faiths. But when the Unity of Man Conference was called, the unit was "Man" instead of "religion." This worldwide conference welcomed believers and nonbelievers alike. Its doors were open to atheists as well as theists. Sant Kirpal Singh firmly believed that the same Truth radiated from the hearts of all. As a Sufi poet has said: "The same Truth is manifest in the infidel as well as the believer."

Shortly before my beloved father left us, he told me to continue his spiritual work and to take up the task of directing Sawan Kirpal Ruhani Mission - the Science of Spirituality. This organization carries on the spiritual mission of Baba Sawan Singh and Sant Kirpal Singh, and, in fact, all the saints, mystics, and Sufis who came before them. It is a common forum where men and women of all religions and of all nations gather in love and friendship in order to learn the practical side of spirituality. Like an open school or university of mysticism, all are welcome to pursue the common mystic goal while adhering to their own religious customs and practices. We actively pursue the highest goal of human life: self-knowledge and God-realization. While the educational institutions of the world are busy turning out doctors, engineers, lawyers, and people with various specializations; here we endeavor to mold and shape human beings in the true sense. We become truly human when we are moved by the spirit of love and affection, and we show consideration for all our fellow beings and living creatures. We are taught here to live by the highest principles of noninjury, purity of heart humility, and selfless service. In short, we learn to live by the philosophy of positive mysticism and to honor our obligations to our family, our community, our society, our nation, our world, and, now that we have acquired an interplanetary perspective, to the entire cosmos.

Within the last four decades, science has made spectacular progress. Escaping the pull of gravity, human beings have entered the realms of outer space and are reaching for the stars and the Milky Way. As human beings explore the shoreless ocean of space, we are shedding our old and restricted terrestrial consciousness and are acquiring an interplanetary character.

If we look at the findings of modern science as presented in the New Physics, it strikes one that science is beginning to confirm those mystic truths which find expression in our ancient religions. During this revolutionary period in which we live, a great change is overtaking our thinking and writing, and our domain of exploration and inquiry.

The expression of my philosophy is not restricted to poetry alone. It embraces all literature. My call for love which earlier found expression in highly lyric verse, used the traditional imagery

of the tavern - the goblet, the wine, and the Cupbearer. Now, however, my thought articulates itself through poetic prose. I have been on numerous world tours, and have used the public forum, radio, and television to share the message of universal love, self-knowledge, and God-realization. I endeavor to present spirituality in the language of modern science and technology. It is my wish that the spiritual message should be available to seekers in every language, and I feel most fortunate that my writings have been translated or are under translation in more than fifty languages. Three of my collections of English talks have already been published: *The Secret of Secrets* (1977), *Spiritual Awakening* (1983), and *The Wonders of Inner Space* (1988). Another volume is underway.

During my long literary career, I may not have always expressed myself with the same artistic felicity. Whether or not my literary efforts succeed is for readers to judge. What has been important for me has been to find expression for the creative impulse, of which I am but an instrument. That impulse springs from a source which is inexhaustible for it is a God-given gift. The Ocean of Light is without limit; it is life that is so short. As I have said:

*Where is the completion of the magnificent
edifice of my desires?
So far I have only drawn a few lines, and am preparing a
blueprint.*