

PROF. PURAN SINGH'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY ON PATHS OF LIFE: A CRITICAL STUDY

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Abstract

Prof. Puran Singh appeared as a shining star in the world of literature with his book "The Sisters of Spinning Wheel". He was a poet, writer, philosopher and a great scientist. He wrote his autobiography in the year 1924 but it was published in 1927, almost a century ago when autobiographies were rarely written. So this autobiography is a rare gem in itself which gives a peep into the style, structure, language and pattern of this genre of literature of those times. It is also important to note that Prof. Puran Singh was contemporary to Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore.

Key Words: Memories, Punjab

Rabindranath Tagore once applauding Prof. Puran Singh's book '*Unstrung Beads*' wrote, "It is best that you should send out your beads unstrung. It is for your readers to string them with a single thread of delight" (Dhanwant xxii)

This piece of oeuvre reflects some of the aspects of his versatile personality which otherwise are difficult to fathom. His daughter-in-law Basanti Kumari recollects some of his memoirs in '*Reminiscences Of Puran Singh*':-

Puran Singh, a man of versatile interests and variegated moods, has always been a riddle to others as well as to himself. He could not be understood nor could he understand himself. (Foreward)

Puran Singh was one of the pioneers of modern Punjabi Poetry. His love for Punjab filled him with divine essence that flows in the form of words in his writings which earned him the honour of 6th River of Punjab. Although he was drenched in love for Punjab and his mother tongue but he took up writing in English and his count of English work is more in number than Punjabi work.

In this autobiography, he has recorded memories of his village, childhood, blossoming youth, his visit to Japan etc. His life is an epitome of humility, generosity, love, dedication and devotion. He has shared his experiences of life and sacred realization through his mystic writings. For this book in Preface he wrote, "Remembrance is life and gathering of roses and men and stars in the basket of mind its most glorious task".

He did not intend to recollect the past for audience but for his own joy as he felt that no one has so much time to spare to read and know about his uneventful life. The book opens with

reminiscence of Abottabad. He was born on 17 February 1881 in a small village named Salhad, Abottabad. It was a small muslim village with less population of Hindus. As a little child he was loved by both communities but his personal inclination was towards the 'pathans'. He would feel like a free bird as he kept on changing places with the transfer of his father who was a petty government revenue officer. The first six years of his childhood were spent in Abottabad, Gandhara and Pothohar. Each place has gentle reminders of the bonds he shared with people and the nature. Abottabad appeared to him as a 'new cradle swinging on the silver threads of streamlet'. He would often think of Gandhara as a sacred amalgamation of Guru Nanak's divinity and Buddha's humanity. Pothohar being the place of his parents always attracted him as a child as it was the place where he had enjoyed a gala time of feasts and togetherness with his relatives.

His events of remembrance shift to Havellian (1886-1890) where he started his schooling which was a mosque that had the impressions of ancient Iraq and Baghdad. He was put under another tuition to learn Gurmukhi from Bhai Bela Singh. In 1890, the family migrated to Haripur and he was put into an Anglo-Middle school. He considered Haripur as a luscious plethora of jasmine flowers and fruit gardens. One of the incidents that frequently visited the vicinity of his mind was miraculous recovery of a goldsmith who was suffering from Asiatic cholera. His wife feeling helpless and disappointed went at the doorstep of Guru's Dharamshala. She wept bitterly in despair and begged with heart piercing cries for her husband's life. It was a spiritual wonder that her husband recovered. This mysterious recovery kindled spiritual belief in the

sub-conscious mind of young Puran Singh.

From Haripur he passed out his Middle School and shifted to Rawalpindi (1893-1895). It is during this period that he came out of the cocoon of his childhood and confronted the harsh realities of life. He saw the miserable condition of his eldest married sister Lajjan who bore the brutality of her in-laws and finally died of tuberculosis. His younger sister also lived a distressed life and passed away at a very young age. Although this sorrowful phase gave him everlasting pain yet it gave him insight of the vague social customs and the pathetic condition of women in the society and the need to change the mindset of people to uplift the condition of women. It was during this time that only he got to see the bold and unbending attitude of his mother who took ardent stand for her daughter by bringing her home in order to save her from the tyranny of her in-laws.

In chapter VI- A Few Memories, the author once more embraced the souvenir of his childhood. As a child, he was fond of kids and often took them out for grazing. He had a great fascination for flowing rivers. He had a belief that all the rivers halt to take rest when the sun goes down. The flour mill was a universe to him. He wondered about the working of two stones that ground the grains and made flour. He would never get to understand why his mother called that miller a wise man in spite of his stern face and rough behaviour. He charmingly notes about the echoing impressions of red earthen pitchers, the blacksmith, the parade ground, the falling snow, rains, green parrots, horse, their dog Tinni, Karvachauth, and etc. There is an unforgettable bunch of candid memories attached with all the elements of his childhood.

His next shifting place was Lahore where he pursued his college. Lahore had much to offer to the aesthetic needs of Puran Singh as it was all concrete, covered with smoke, flawless, dark and its soil reeking of Sikh tragedy. Still coming to Lahore was the biggest turning point in his life. Even before he could complete his degree, an opportunity struck at his doorsteps. Bhagat Gopal Chand, his English teacher, provided him a chance to study glass making at Tokyo University Japan. One of his another relatives of Damodar Singh also got ready to study electric engineering in Japan. This opportunity brought a

big change in their life.

This new change brought along with a transformation from a village look to a complete gentleman outlook. For the first time they wore tailor made suits. It filled them with excitement as they became Englishmen without getting converted into Christianity unlike Shankar of Haripur. Their journey to Japan started from Bombay port. He had not much to remember during his stay in that stony city except his first experience of hotel and meeting with Mr. Bodas and Mr. Justice Ranade. All that time, he kept missing the hospitality of Pothohar. On reaching Singapore after journey of ten days, his inner child regained stubbornness revived in full bloom and he insisted on eating chappati and chicken curry as he literally starved on the board with distasteful food.

Now only home cooked chicken curry and chappati could satiate his hunger and tantalize the taste buds. Fortunately, he got Lal Singh who understood his craving and served his needs. He was full of admiration for Singapore as he liked ochre roads, well maintained lawns, trees and fruit gardens. The next place of halt was Hongkong. The huge hotel buildings appeared to him as monsters that had engulfed the sweetness of homes. He was being sentimental about the loss of human warmth and contact that he had received in his village. But the magic of his oratory skills won him hearts of many at an extempore held in a Sikh Gurudwara. He was enthralled by the splendid response shown by the audience. The straw hats of Hongkong brought back his scintillating childhood and he insisted on buying one and that wish too was granted by Damodar Singh who was well acquainted with him by now.

He reached Japan in 1900 and on landing on a new land he was received with due respect, affection and warmth. After crossing the boundaries of his own country, he realized for the first time that he was no more a Punjabi but he was an Indian. It was strange for him to absorb as how leaving his own land had degenerated the savagery of castes and religions. Puran Singh got the exposure of his life in Japan. He met many people and made a few life long friends. In the company of Rama Kanta Roy, he developed love for Keshab, Shiv Nath Shastri and Anand Mohan Bose about whom he would often hear

from Roy. Through Roy and Kulkarni he met other revolutionaries who sparked the flame of patriotism in him which made Puran Singh start his journal 'Thundering Dawn'.

Here in Japan, he met Swami Rama Tirath at a religious conference. This meeting unveiled the whole conspiracy of the universe about Puran Singh's journey to Japan. Swami Rama Tirath infused in him the spiritual quest that could only be quenched with the realization of self and by knowing the real worth of life that lies in remembering God. While sharing his feelings, he wrote, "strange were my own fascinations in those days of delightful renunciation. What to old Bhikhus was a sacrifice, to me was a joy, so light I felt in my flowing robes, bare feet and that modern American clean shaved face which many camera tried to capture."

At another place he mentions:

I never walked in those days. I would throw my arms forward

and feel like flying (108). Seeing cherry flowers floating in

air, I thought it was my soul flying. I was fresh like roses,

soft like dew. I was not real at all and the universe appeared

to me but a dream of my sleep ecstasy (Puran 109).

He narrated two incidents that took place in Shanghai where his orange yellow robe earned him great warmth and respect. He was flummoxed on the strange behaviour of people as according to him he had not done anything to be worthy of such respect.

Puran Singh's conscience never let go off the very first impression of Japan which made him understand the real functioning of a friendly and people centered government. He made brutally honest comparison between Indian and Japanese Government in which the former treated the people as slaves and the latter considered it as their moral and social duty to care for its people. He was astonished to see Japanese culture which is so soulfully rich in holy radiance that leads towards Nirvana. It's Japanese tea, The Kobe waterfall, houses, Kankoba (market), plum, lotus etc that celebrate the life of spirituality. He called the days of his frequent meetings in Oriental Club with Philippine Patriots, Korean Patriots and students

from China with whom he used to discuss their resolutions to fight for independence and gruesome situation of their countries. He describes in brief his meeting with Okakura the writer of The Book of Tea who trusted Puran Singh and showed his loyalty towards his mission i.e to fight against tyranny of British. He also started an Indo-Japanese Club which would work for the progress and development of commercial and social relations between the two countries.

In 1904, he came to India. The sojourn of five years on a new land and newly attained identity of a monk bestowed upon him a new insight to perceive life. Returning to his own land made him sad from within. He met his only happiness on meeting his family, relatives and his village. On seeing the gloominess prevailing in the air, he lost all the hopes of betterment of his country. In this atmosphere of sadness, he was burdened with another wish of his parents to get married. He himself was not sure if his wife would ever understand him and accept his childlike tendencies. He considered himself a wayside flower who wanted to enjoy life with freedom. He never wanted an organized life full of discipline that a married life demanded. Bowing to his parents wish, he got married to Maya Devi. Although he left his orange garb but not the principles of a monk.

Upon analyzing the autobiographical elements in Prof Puran Singh's autobiography, one can safely conclude that his autobiography is more a critique of his own journey rather than a chronicle of events. It is a truthful and sincere account of his feelings and thoughts and an expression of his love for a free and unbounded life. His love for nativity is also a sharp feature of his personality revealed by his autobiography. He remains faithful about his portrayal of the voyage of his life.

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