

# ‘SUBLIME LIFE OF WONDER’ AND ‘UNIVERSAL HUMAN VALUES’: A ‘SLOW’ JOURNEY THROUGH BHAI VIR SINGH’S SELECT POETRY

Dr. Jasmine Anand\*

## Abstract

This paper reimagines Bhai Vir Singh’s life and poetic contributions through the concept of ‘SLOW’—‘sublime life of wonder’—a framework that emphasizes deliberate, profound engagement with life’s moral and philosophical dimensions. Bhai Vir Singh’s (hereafter, BVS) exploration of universal human values (hereafter UHV) emerges not merely as societal niceties but as deep existential insights that guide the individual’s conscious interaction with the world. In today’s fast-paced, ethically fragmented society, his works offer a meditative space to reconsider these values as timeless and essential. By slowing down to contemplate these values, BVS’s poetry invokes a wonder at the interconnectedness of ‘right understanding’, feeling, and human existence. This approach invites a reflective pause, where his ethical vision transcends temporal and cultural confines, presenting literature as more than a mirror to society—it becomes a transformative force that reshapes ethical consciousness. His works reflect the moral crises of his time and serve as a guidepost for navigating modern disorientation. In this way, his philosophy aligns with the ‘SLOW’ paradigm, where wonder and ethical deliberation foster a moral self capable of deep, sustained reflection. This paper critiques how BVS’s philosophy, in its engagement with universal virtues, functions as a living framework for personal and collective renewal. His alignment of spiritual insight with moral action creates a philosophical system that reshapes how we view literature’s capacity to promote ethical and societal elevation. His contributions, under the lens of ‘SLOW’, remind us that the contemplative life,

\*Assistant Professor of English, Mehr Chand Mahajan (MCM) DAV College for Women, Chandigarh. Email: jasmine18anand@gmail.com

immersed in wonder, holds the key to ethical progress and personal transformation.

**Keywords:** Bhai Vir Singh (BVS), Universal Human Values (UHV), Life, Sublime Life of Wonder (SLOW), World Literature, Punjab Studies.

### ‘Sublime Life of Wonder’ and ‘Universal Human Values’: A ‘SLOW’ Journey Through Bhai Vir Singh’s Select Poetry

This paper delves into a critical and philosophical exploration of Bhai Vir Singh’s (hereafter, BVS’s) life and poetry, positioning them within the framework of universal human values (hereafter UHV) while drawing on Goethe’s concept of *Weltliteratur* (world literature) to explore the promotion of tolerance, adaptation, acceptance, and peace. UHV transcend cultural and historical specificities, which are essential to human integrity and ethical existence. In today’s fragmented and divisive global landscape, the emphasis on these values anchors individual moral development and fosters a collective ethos that can bridge cultural divides. UHV, though often perceived as trite and monotonous in the whirlwind of contemporary existence, holds profound significance rooted in the quest for a sublime life characterized by wonder. This notion invites us to engage in self-exploration and cultivate harmony through moments of contemplation. As Puran Singh articulates in *Oriental Spirit of Poetry*, “Immensity is the substance of the sublime. Is not the sea much simpler than land? Touch it at any point, it is but water. Observe it from any vantage, and it remains the sea, its billows crowned with white foam, dancing eternally” (66). Here, the sea serves as a metaphor for the vastness of human experience and similarity in values, urging us to pause, reflect, and recognize the interconnectedness that transcends the chaos of our daily lives.

‘SLOW’ or the ‘sublime life of wonder’ is a contemporary movement in countries like the US, Italy, Japan, UK, France, and Scandinavian countries. However, I am using it as a trope adapted from the work of Cecile Andrews *SLOW is Beautiful* to study the poetry of BVS in the light of UHV. Andrews suggests that SLOW movement “offers a template for ways to analyze and confront the problems of our times” (10). In this book, he quotes Carl Honore’s *In Praise of Slowness* to assert that in a world dictated by velocity, where speed masquerades as progress, ‘fast’ and ‘slow’ emerge not merely as temporal markers but as philosophical imperatives. The

ethos of 'fast'—relentless, analytical, and voracious—reduces life to a series of transactions, privileging efficiency over depth. It stands for the logic of control and the lexicon of urgency. In contrast, 'slow' is a counter-narrative, a reclamation of presence and meaning. It privileges the intuitive over the mechanistic, the qualitative over the quantitative. 'Slow' is not inertia; it is deliberation, a mode of existence that cultivates depth, nurtures reflection and fosters genuine connections—with people, culture, labour, and sustenance. It is not about the dichotomy of speed but of being—a philosophical invitation to inhabit time rather than be consumed by it (9).

BVS's works resonate with the idea that literature functions as a transformative moral force that guides individuals toward ethical self-realization and societal harmony. In this context, BVS's representation of "right feeling and right understanding", stated as a maxim of the UHV course by the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), becomes not merely a reflection of local moral codes but a contribution to global discourses on the human condition, transcending temporal and spatial boundaries (Gaur et al.). Generally, BVS's poetry is perused at the level of history, mystical spiritualism, love longing, intellectual inspiration, nature, or Bhakti poetry.

Drawing upon Goethe's notion of universality in literature, this paper argues that BVS's poetry embodies a literary cosmopolitanism that aligns with world literature's potential to foster intercultural understanding and peace. Goethe envisioned literature as a medium through which different cultures could communicate and learn from one another and also develop the 'right understanding' to create harmony, fostering mutual respect and ethical engagement. BVS was born on 5<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1872 and died on 10<sup>th</sup> June 1957 at Amritsar. He was a poet, researcher, theologian, historian, activist, educationist and mystic philosopher. The paper focuses on two anthologies of poetry, *Nargas* and *Cosmic Symphony*, translated into English by Puran Singh and Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh, respectively, along with a few extracts of his poetry available in English. BVS's literary voice functions as a vital conduit between the particular and the universal, emphasizing the necessity for dialogue across diverse cultures, ideologies, and religious beliefs. His work encapsulates the experience of absolute values, which perpetually flourish beyond the constraints of hegemonic influence and logocentricity. In this manner, BVS transcends the particular and the global boundaries, transforming them into the universal convertible. To use the terminology "*Mauldi Nischitta*" by Jagdish Singh, which means "blossoming certainty", the

concept of UHV in regard to BVS is a dynamic interplay between certainty of values and the creative evolution of human beings (qtd. in Kaur xx). Looking at BVS through this lens, I see BVS as an advocate for a mutual understanding that honours both specificity and commonality, fostering a more prosperous and inclusive discourse. The convergence of BVS's ethical framework with Goethe's idea of universality suggests that literature can nurture a global moral consciousness. This philosophical inquiry ultimately situates BVS within the larger continuum of world literature, advancing the argument that his contributions resonate with Goethe's vision of a shared human ethos grounded in values of harmony that transcend cultural and temporal boundaries.

### *Exploring Human Values*

The contemporary theory of value, as articulated by Schwartz (1992), Lindeman and Verkasalo (2005), and further refined by Schwartz (2012), delineates ten distinct motivational values, each emerging from the theoretical framework of universal human needs. The 10 fundamental values, each followed by two exemplary items that express it, are "power (authority, wealth), achievement (success, ambition), hedonism (pleasure, enjoying life), stimulation (exciting life, varied life), self-direction (creativity, independence), universalism (social justice, equality), benevolence: (helpfulness, loyalty), tradition (devoutness, humility), conformity (obedience, honouring parents), and security (national security, social order)" (Schwartz, 2007, 712). In his paper, "Reinventing the Universal Structure of Human Values: Development of a New Holistic Values Scale to Measure Indian Values", Rajat Sharma confronts the limitations of a provincial approach to value systems by advocating for a more nuanced framework. He introduces an alternative paradigm that captures the intricate cultural particularities inherent in Indian philosophical traditions, responding to the reductionism of universal value models. He includes new value dimensions according to Indian ethos like Non-violence, Respect for an individual, Inspiration to give, Hospitality, Knowledge of the self, Self-improvement, Absence of egoism, Integrity, No jealousy, Truthfulness, Doctrine of actions and deeds, Sacrifice, Payment of debts, Faith, Simple living high thinking, Unpretentiousness, and Contentment (178). Sharma's work thus seeks to recalibrate the discourse on human values, foregrounding the complexities of Indian thought within a holistic and culturally resonant schema. The measurement of items that

Schwartz mentions as universal is not definite; for instance, a person who values community and cooperation will likely approach social interactions differently than someone who prioritizes individual achievement or competition. These values influence various aspects of behaviour, such as how we evaluate situations, the skills we prioritize developing, and our daily decisions. However, my paper moves away from the indefinite sense or even the alternate model to follow the Goethian way of understanding that is universal and definite. The 'SLOW' journey through BVS's poetry illuminates the sublime essence of a wondrous existence with right thinking challenging the conventional principles of piety. BVS writes in "The Ruins of the Hindu Temple of Martand", a poem from Kashmir, "The human heart is the true Ka'aba" (qtd. in Singh Puran 79). He, thus, invites us to partake in the nectar of life, becoming disciples of coexistence where the inner self and the corporeal body achieve a harmonious union. This journey also involves engaging with diverse lives, allowing them to manifest their harmonious identities. In this way, BVS's work serves as a profound meditation on the interconnectedness of existence and the transformative power of empathy and understanding.

### *Goethe's Universal Values and NEP 2020*

Goethe's idea that "poetry is the universal possession of mankind" offers a nuanced perspective on how literature serves as a universal and context-specific medium (qtd. in Damrosh 1). His assertion that all great literature acts as a window into another culture underlines the need to maintain a dialectic engagement between the particular and the universal, especially in the realm of values, where, along with differences and dissent, we can accept, adapt, and learn from one another; scaffolding our engagement on similarities. By exploring the life and poetry of BVS, this paper reinforces the argument that UHV, as embodied in his works, not only provides a transcultural ethical compass rooted in Indian or Sikh thought but brings the writer close to the idea of Goethe's concept of world literature that is resonant with the global human experience. In today's world, we are suffering from a metaphysical disease for which the cure has to be metaphysical, which gets under radar through a course on 'UHV' as developed by AICTE, helping both the students and educators explore their role in society, as a family member, as an individual, and as part of nature thus articulating the idea of *National Education Policy 2020*, i.e., "achieving full human potential, developing an equitable

and just society, and promoting national development” (3). In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle also reflects on contemplation, which extends to happiness and is precious for human beings (168). The ultimate goal of any human is to be happy, and “we must not think that the man who is to be happy will need many things or great things, merely because he cannot be supremely happy without external goods; for self-sufficiency and action do not involve excess, and we can do noble acts without ruling earth and sea; for even with moderate advantages one can act virtuously ... for the life of the man who is active in accordance with virtue will be happy” (Aristotle 169).

According to Goethe, as the paper takes the translation source, it is a tool that helps universalise human experiences and understanding. Walter Benjamin’s assertion that “Languages are not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express” is apt in terms of the act of universalisation (72). Goethe’s insight—that understanding foreign literature allows us to understand our own—resonates here, as each work reflects its origin’s ethical and philosophical frameworks, even as it contributes to a broader, global discourse on human values.

Mainstream Indian thought, notably *Vedanta*, offers a radically different conception of the self, “*Aham Brahmasmi*” (अहं ब्रह्मास्मि), in comparison to the west—where the individual self (*Atman*) is inherently linked to the universal self (*Brahman*). One knows the universe through the self, and there is a confluence between the self and the universe. Even if the western intellectual tradition focused on individualism that was isolated or socially determined, their journey of understanding too started from the ‘self’. Here, I bring in the first universal of ‘self’ to begin with perusing philosophical synthesis in BVS’s writings. Our codes and keywords of life are the same, but the style or art of living may be different. BVS’s poetry, much like Goethe’s conception of world literature, allows us to look both inward and outward—to recognize the universality of human experience while honouring its cultural specificities. His engagement with the metaphysical and ethical questions of human existence resonates with the larger philosophical project of world literature: to foster a shared moral consciousness that promotes tolerance, adaptation, and peace across cultures. Hardit Singh Malik, Paris Ambassador of India, counted BVS works rational, which appealed to the spirit and intelligence (qtd. in Singh Harbans 12). Schwarz aptly remarks, “Rather than being divorced from life, our reading experience-if we read actively and with intelligence-is central to life and contributes to the development of the mature personality. Literature provides surrogate experiences for the reader, experiences that, because they

are embodied within artistically shaped ontologies, heighten our awareness of moral discriminations" (5). Thus, literature allows us to experience lives and perspectives beyond our own, fostering a broader worldview that enhances our capacity for moral reasoning.

### *BVS's Counter Narrative to Colonialism*

During the colonial rule, the Pax Britannica created a paradoxical situation in which the British Raj maintained a superficial peace while deepening societal divisions. The alliance between India's landed elite and the British, alongside the rise of a nascent commercial class, led to an exploitative dynamic that marginalized the peasantry. Under the garb of secularism, this economic framework of the industrial economy generated an ego-centric society, emphasizing material wealth and social status over communal solidarity. Not only this but the Indians were seen as wild or savage by the Britishers' orientalist outlook. BVS emerged as a counter-voice in this milieu, advocating for a return to core human values that transcend the individualism fostered by colonial exploitation. His poetry reflects a deep-seated belief in the interconnectedness of humanity, echoing a vision of a society where empathy and acceptance replace division and conflict. BVS's philosophical outlook can be understood through his life experiences and literary influences. He was deeply engaged with Sikh spirituality, which inherently promotes values of equality and service. This spiritual grounding gave him a lens through which to view human existence as an interconnected tapestry woven from shared struggles and joys. His poetry serves as a reminder that happiness does not stem from material possessions but from a deep appreciation of the human experience. This perspective starkly contrasts the colonial narrative, prioritising wealth accumulation and status. His verses often invoke a sense of unity that transcends religious and cultural boundaries, reflecting the pluralistic ethos inherent in early Indic culture. He believed that true happiness lies not in the grandeur of achievements but in appreciating life's simple, often overlooked moments. His poetry underscores the importance of community, urging individuals to cultivate an attitude of acceptance toward others and emphasizing the moral imperative to uplift others.

### *Anonymity and Transcending Ego*

Ganda Singh, in "Bhai Vir Singh and His Times", writes that BVS "confined his activities to the production of inspiring and soul stirring



literature for the masses” (35) and quotes him as a “monotician” (34), unlike a politician because he projects universal self, synthesis of the divine and human, moral and ethical base in his writings. The universal resonance of BVS, both as a figure and through his literary contributions, can be critically understood through his deliberate act of effacement—he refrained from inscribing his name on any of his works as an author. In “*Banafsha da Phul*”, he writes, “*Mere shippe rehn di chah, te chipp tur jaan di*” (*Lehar Hularey* 33). This conscious omission speaks to a profound philosophical humility, relinquishing individual authorship in favour of a more universal message transcending personal ego. By negating the notion of self as the creator, BVS positions himself as a conduit of higher truths, aligning with the Sikh or Indian tradition that sees all creation as an expression of the divine. Tsutomu Nishiyama, Ambassador for Japan in *Bhai Vir Singh Shatabdi Granth*, wrote that the poetry of BVS was “about the transcendental philosophy of universalism” (qtd. in Singh Harbans 13).

His anonymity is a symbolic gesture that reflects a deeper ethical and spiritual stance: the writer’s identity dissolves into the work itself, allowing the values and wisdom within the text to stand autonomously. This self-erasure aligns with the concept of selflessness (*seva*) in Sikhism, where the individual is not the source of wisdom but a vessel for transmitting the eternal truths of the supernal power. In this way, BVS’s works cannot merely be considered the product of an individual author. However, expressions of UHV—love, compassion, unity—aim to elevate the collective consciousness. Ganda Singh also mentions, “Although he was virtually the founder of several institutions and committees, his name did not appear on the list of active members. He never became a member even of the Chief Khalsa Diwan ... He never accepted the presidency of the Sikh Educational Conference” (37). This anecdote represents a movement towards a more collective, transcendental authorship, where the work becomes a shared human experience rather than a personal legacy. This ethical and existential humility in BVS’s approach aligns him with broader metaphysical ideals of universality, where the message of truth becomes free from the constraints of personal identity and ego, accessible to all who engage with his works. Dhani Ram Chatrik gives a tribute to BVS by calling him “*daivi prem hulara*”, love incarnate (Singh Harbans 58). Ganda Singh also quotes BVS School Headmaster Mr. Donald J. Mackenzie’s written remark on his “honesty, uprightness and exemplary conduct ... [that] gives evidence of usefulness in this world” (21-22).



*SLOW Life and UHV: Basics*

BVS's poetic verses often explore the interconnectedness between humanity and the cosmos, urging individuals to recognize the divine essence within all creation. The verses reflect the broader human yearning for unity and belonging, transcending individualism and material pursuits. The notion of the 'SLOW life' transcends mere enhancement of individual well-being; it serves as a comprehensive framework for addressing many pressing issues. Rather than engaging in a piecemeal struggle against distinct challenges—such as environmental degradation, social justice, and global peace—the 'SLOW life' paradigm offers an integrated approach that encompasses these concerns simultaneously (Andrews 8). For the 'SLOW life' to gain traction, it is imperative to cultivate a fresh vision that intertwines the principles of 'slowness' with concepts of beauty, wonder, and the myriad positive aspects of existence. Transformation cannot occur without first igniting inspiration within the populace. Cecile Andrews mentions that the contemporary "consumer society stands for competition — destruction and division" and to "countermand the consumer society we needed a culture of connectedness — where we're connected with our true selves (integrity), each other (community), and life (nature and the universe)" (11).

The human condition embodies the intricate coexistence of the self, represented by consciousness and the body, as a material entity. The fundamental need of the self that is 'I' is the pursuit of happiness, exemplified by experiences such as the feeling of respect, which contributes to a sense of well-being. In contrast, the body's primary need involves acquiring physical sustenance, such as food. Specifically, the body's responses are limited and "definite," rooted in physical stimuli and material conditions. In contrast, the responses of the self are contingent upon the act of "assumption", which arises from the processes of perception and cognition (Gaur et al. 39). This reliance on assumption, affected by our likes and dislikes, preconditioning, beliefs, worldview, perspective etc. without knowledge of being naturally acceptable; renders human behaviour inherently uncertain and variable. Thus, the interplay between the definite responses of the body and the fluid interpretative nature of the self illustrates the complexity of human existence. The solution is only in knowing through "self-verification on the basis of natural acceptance and on the basis of living accordingly" when the assumptions become "definite on the basis of knowing", and the conduct too becomes definite because it gets "self-organised" (Gaur et al. 40). Thus, our happiness can only be fulfilled with the right

understanding and right feeling as discussed in the process above. In the poem “*The Kikar Tree*” from *Nargas*, translated by Puran Singh, BVS poignantly articulates a profound yearning for a minimal and conscious existence and writes:

I need but a small piece of ground for my roots to stand in, to  
blossom, bear fruit and die!  
I need neither raiment nor food from thee, O world!  
The rain-water is enough for me; I drink and I grow!  
I live on air, ...  
And yet for me, O world, thou hast but an axe! (59)

The imagery of the axe transcends its literal meaning, representing not only the threat of deforestation but also serving as a metaphor for the alienation and fragmentation that obstructs the harmonious relationship between the self and the body. This division hinders living authentically and aligning with one’s inherent nature.

In this context, the axe symbolizes the destructive forces of capitalism that prioritize material gain over ecological and spiritual sustenance. It highlights how societal distractions and divisions can sever our connection to the natural world and, by extension, to ourselves. The poet’s desire for simplicity and authenticity calls into question the values upheld by contemporary civilization, suggesting that true fulfilment lies not in material excess but in a deep, symbiotic relationship with the earth. Thus, the axe is a powerful reminder of the consequences of disconnection and the urgent need for reconnection with both our physical and existential roots.

### *Interconnectivity and Relationality for Happiness and Harmony*

In BVS’s poignant poem “Moonlight”/”*Chandani*”, translated by Puran Singh, we encounter a rich metaphor that invites a deeper examination of interconnectedness and relationality at all levels of being. The poem encapsulates the intricate dynamics between the moon and its light, serving as a reflective lens through which we can scrutinize our relations with others and the broader cosmos. He writes:

He has been looking on her for ages long;  
And she has been loving him for centuries.  
He pours his love on her, the moonlight that flows out of his  
soul.  
He loves to gaze into her eyes, the eyes of his very soul.  
He floods the moonlight with new, new love every night,

He floods her with the threads of an unbroken rain of love.  
 The moonlight spreads along the ground, she roams  
 everywhere;  
 She wanders over the river and the rocks, over the fields and  
 the forests;  
 She enters the cities, the lanes, the huts of the poor and the  
 mansions of the rich;  
 She touches with silver joys the foreheads of both sinner and saint.

(Singh BV 2-3)

This excerpt reveals a profound relationality that extends beyond the celestial to the terrestrial. The moonlight, a manifestation of love or right understanding and feeling, traverses diverse landscapes, affirming that harmony is not limited to idyllic scenarios but permeates all aspects of existence—bridging divides between the affluent and the impoverished, the sinner and the saint. This imagery evokes the essence of a unified consciousness: the self (representative of our inner being) and the body (the material world) that coexist, each reliant on the other for fulfilment. The aspiration for continuous happiness resides intrinsically within the self, necessitating an understanding that transcends mere individualistic desires. This example of aspiration is typical to each one of us and, thus, aligns with Gaur et al. assertion that our shared “purpose”, “program”, and “potential” underscore a collective journey toward happiness and harmony (76).

Thus, BVS’s poem serves not merely as a lyrical exploration but as an illustrative guide, urging and proposing us to recognize our interconnectedness and decode the fundamental harmony among all beings irrespective of colour, strata, gender, position, or any assumption. The essence of this realization lies in acknowledging that the other reflects the self, urging us toward a life lived in harmony at every level of existence.

The contemporary consumer society, as Andrews articulates, embodies a fragmented and destructive existence driven by relentless speed. This frenetic pace erodes the essence of life, leading to a disconnection from oneself, others, and the natural world. In contrast, ‘SLOW life’ advocates for a “culture of connection”, fostering a profound interconnectedness that aligns human existence with the rhythms of nature and the universe (203). M.K. Gandhi’s maxim for the upliftment of all-*Sarvodaya*, “the world has enough for everyone’s need, but not enough for everyone’s greed”, highlights the paradox of abundance in a landscape marred by insatiable desire (“The Environmental Swaraj”).

While crucial, the notion of physical facilities is merely a fragment of a more comprehensive program aimed at achieving harmony across multiple dimensions: the individual, familial, societal, and ecological. Here, the ‘body’ serves as a vital instrument, yet the ‘self’ emerges as the central axis of human existence—the observer, the agent, and the experience. This perspective urges us to recognize that our essence transcends mere corporeal existence, calling for a deeper understanding of our interrelation with the world. Gaur et al. mentions that “the programme related to physical facility is less than one fourth of [our] programme” (48). According to the proposal under UHV by AICTE, our priority must be the right understanding and feeling, the second priority should be fulfilment in relationship with humans, and the third priority should be ensuring physical facility with the rest of nature (Gaur et al.).

In an era dominated by technological solutions that often exacerbate environmental degradation and social discord, E. F. Schumacher’s critique remains resonant. Progress cannot be equated with the mere accumulation of power or the expansion of mechanistic dominion. True wisdom calls for an orientation towards the organic and the harmonious, “the gentle, the non-violent, the elegant and beautiful”—principles that foster coexistence rather than competition (18). The delineations based on body, wealth, and belief systems reflect profound misunderstandings about human potential and happiness. Equating human worth with physical attributes or material possessions fosters division. At the same time, recognising our shared humanity invites a more profound comprehension of competence as a spectrum of realized potential rather than a hierarchy.

### *Oceanic Sensibility: Acknowledging and Accepting Difference*

The essence of respect lies in acknowledging the complementary nature of our differences and perceiving the other as fundamentally akin to oneself. We may understand this through poetic dialogue found in BVS’s “The Birth of Ganga”/“*Himalya Ganga Samundar*” from *Nargas* where the sea elucidates the profound concept of “oceanic sensibility”. This sensibility embodies an ethos of equality and unity, challenging the superficial valorization of height or greatness. In its vastness, the sea teaches that true magnificence does not reside in elevation or dominance but in an expansive embrace of all that flows within it. The sea declares:

“... That greatness is of no avail, which has so much low, dark  
 littleness by its side.  
 O beautiful one! Those that are high have enough of the low!  
 Look at me! O fair new-comer from afar!  
 I am always of one level, neither high nor low,  
 Nor great nor small; one great vastness I.  
 I receive a thousand rivers, and I increase not,  
 A thousand rivers go out of me and I decrease not.  
 Nor have I any high peaks to show,  
 Nor is there any sudden rise or sudden fall in me.  
 No deep dark valley is in me, no half-scooped caves,  
 No cracked fissures or frowning wrinkles are on my face.  
 One great level, one vastness, one oneness I am!” (Singh BV 13)

In this reflection, the sea’s essence transcends ego; it articulates a profound philosophy of existence that values oneness over division. It embodies a call to embrace our shared humanity, to rise above the petty comparisons and competitions that fracture our connections. This attribute reminds one of John Keats ‘negative capability’ of having water-like quality mixing and matching sans biases or ego. In an age increasingly marked by conflict, the “oceanic sensibility” offers a counter-narrative that champions unity, harmony, and a recognition of the beauty inherent in our shared existence (Fisher 19).

In the poem “Curdled Bit” / “*Chiddi*” from *Mere Saiyan Jio*, translated by Nikky Guninder Kaur, the speaker, identified as *Chiddi*, articulates her identity through a series of negations:

I am born of milk, but I am not yogurt.  
 I am born of milk, but I am not cream.  
 I am born of milk, but I am not butter.  
 I am born of milk, but I am not buttermilk. (Singh BV 105)

Here, *Chiddi*’s declaration reflects a profound existential struggle against marginalization and rejection, as she is deemed “good for nothing”. However, she challenges this dismissal by asserting her unique capability to soften skin, a metaphor that underscores her intrinsic worth and utility. This poem illustrates a crucial philosophical tenet: every being possesses inherent value irrespective of perceived usefulness.

The poem invites us to re-evaluate our understanding of value in an age where societal norms often dictate worth based on competence or utility. Gaur et al. assert that our judgments about others’ intentions often stem from perceived inadequacies, leading to a misguided sense of opposition rather than acceptance (72). This misjudgment

is particularly pertinent in contemporary relationships, where the failure to recognize the intrinsic worth of diverse manifestations of humanity fosters division and discrimination.

Thus, *Chiddi's* plight is a potent reminder of the necessity for UHV—empathy, respect, and appreciation for the multiplicity of human experience. In its myriad forms, nature beckons us to embrace these values, emphasizing that differences in competence should not lead to demeaning or exploiting one another but rather to a complementary coexistence. In honouring the unique contributions of every individual, we forge a more compassionate and inclusive society that recognizes that every life has its purpose and beauty.

Nikky Guninder Kaur aptly observes in her “Introduction’ to the translation, “Preoccupied with our past and future, preoccupied with the big goals in life, preoccupied with a God out there, we miss out on the precious here and now and the spiritual energy in and all around us” (xxv). This perspective emphasizes recognizing our interconnectedness, especially in a polarized twenty-first century. If we could attune ourselves to the vibrations of the cosmic symphony, we might redirect our efforts from division and conflict toward fostering mutual harmony and goodwill. In this light, acknowledging equality and equity becomes essential in shaping a world that celebrates the multiplicity of human experience.

### *Sanskar: Lifelong learning*

In the reflective piece “Life, Long and Short”/“*Lami te Choti Umar*” from *Sahitik Kaliaan*/The Literary Buds, BVS poignantly illustrates a profound philosophical insight into the nature of existence and human value. The dialogue between the wayfarer and the rose transcends mere contemplation of beauty; it critically examines the significance of a life devoted to the service of humanity. The rose, aware of its ephemeral beauty, articulates a fundamental truth: its transient existence is rendered meaningful by giving fragrance. In stark contrast, the wayfarer’s concern for longevity becomes a poignant critique of a life devoid of purpose. This exchange underscores a vital tenet of UHV—the notion that true worth lies not in the duration of life, but in its contribution to the collective human experience.

Seeing its petals fall apart  
A wayfarer asked the rose,  
“Why so short-lived

This beauty, this bloom?  
 Isn't it a thousand pities?"  
 The rose laughed and said,  
 "My short span is worth it,  
 As it is spent in giving fragrance.  
 You worry about your long life, O man,  
 Because it lacks all fragrance." (qtd. in Khosla 115-116)

Similarly, the poem "A Fake Reader" critiques the superficiality of knowledge acquisition divorced from deep understanding. Gaur et al. emphasizes that education, or *sanskar*, is not merely the transfer of information but a transformative process that fosters harmony at all levels of existence. This continuity of universal human order passed down through generations, embodies the essence of human tradition—an aspiration that underlies our quest for meaning and connection.

The pundit made the housewife  
 Learn the Gita by heart,  
 And she read it over and over to the mynah,  
 Till it knew it by rote.  
 The parrot learnt it from the mynah  
 And rattled it off his tongue.  
 What learning is this,  
 That all four were innocent of its meaning ! (qtd in Khosla 116).

The illustrative narrative of the pundit, the housewife, the mynah, and the parrot is a cautionary tale about rote learning devoid of comprehension. It reflects a broader critique of educational practices that prioritize memorization over understanding, ultimately robbing individuals of the profound insights inherent in knowledge. Rabindranath Tagore's short story "The Parrot Training" also shares the same sentiment. The *sanskar* of education is meant to cultivate a sense of knowing that is dynamically tested through self-exploration, facilitating an engagement with the world that is both personally fulfilling and beneficial to the broader community.

In Nikky Guninder Kaur's "Exchange of Hearts" / "Dil Vatandra", we encounter another layer of this philosophical exploration. The metaphor of hearts resonating with one another embodies the interconnectedness and interdependence that characterize human relationships and our bond with nature. The assertion that love flourishes through giving—wherein paradoxically sharing one's heart leads to a more profound sense of fulfilment illuminates the intrinsic value of empathy and connection. This perspective



transcends the romantic connotation often associated with love, advocating for universal recognition of our shared humanity.

A heart can only chime with another heart!  
 We get by giving ours - this is the name of love  
 When we give some of our heart away  
 We are left with even more! There is no other way!  
 This we call the exchange of hearts, my dear  
 One heart is shared by the lover and the beloved  
 One heart - one body is the ancient way  
 So let our double hearts unite in my body. (Singh BV 106)

In essence, the poetic works of BVS advocate for an understanding of human existence that emphasizes altruism, comprehension, and interconnectedness as fundamental human values. They challenge us to reflect on the quality of our contributions to the tapestry of life, urging us toward a deeper engagement with ourselves and the world around us. Through this lens, we can appreciate that the true measure of a life well-lived is not its duration but the depth of its impact on others and the harmony it fosters within the greater human experience.

Amid a chaotic world, the path to solace and understanding lies in the profound practice of self-reflection and exploration. As illustrated in “Love and Wisdom: Told by a Nightingale and a Wayfarer” / “*Bulbul te Rahī*” from *Nargas*, the wayfarer imparts wisdom to the nightingale, advocating for a harmonious balance that honours both the passions of the heart and the insights of the mind. He implores the bird to turn inward, suggesting that the essence of lasting beauty and peace resides within oneself.

The wayfarer replies:

“Peace! Peace! O lovely bird!  
 There is the rose, still perfuming thy tender heart,  
 If it be thy wish to see the glory that fades not,  
 If it be thy longing to be with thy rose for ever,  
 Turn within, turn within thine own self thy love-thirsty glance! ...  
 Let the flame of the heart burn slow and steady,  
 Let the mind be calm, like an unrippling clear, transparent  
     lake;  
 And pass, O bird, into the being of the beloved, whence come  
 these forms of beauty! ...  
 O bird!  
 The worlds are all within thyself. (Singh BV 39-40)

This call for *sehajta* (calmness) and introspection is echoed in the

works of BVS, underscoring our collective human quest for harmony. By engaging with BVS's poetry through a critical and philosophical lens, we reveal the timeless concerns that resonate deeply within the human experience. His work serves as a poignant reminder of the universality of our condition, urging us toward a life characterized by greater awareness, compassion, and purposeful action.

### *SLOW Life: Fortifying Democracy*

Framing BVS's poetry within the context of UHV and the concept of a slow life promotes the development of "a reflective, contemplative mechanism or tool for change" (Andrews 39). This notion is particularly relevant in our contemporary society, where the rapid pace of life often eclipses the opportunity for reflection and meaningful action. In this context, the erosion of freedom and democracy becomes a pressing concern. The SLOW life is not merely a lifestyle choice but a vital component of a thriving democracy. Jamison notes that the energy and optimism of those who engage fully with life foster social connections and a willingness to take risks as "Joy fortifies ties between people" (qtd. in Andrews 58). Ultimately, embracing the 'SLOW' approach encourages us to take the necessary time for contemplation and thought, allowing us to navigate life with a sense of calm. Puran Singh terms BVS as "a democratic aristocrat, as every joyful man must needs to be" (qtd. in Singh Harbans 71). He recognized that true democracy flourishes not merely through political structures but also through the cultivation of character, wisdom, and shared values. BVS valued the perspectives of all individuals, understanding that each voice contributes to the vibrant tapestry of society. He championed the arts, education, and civic engagement as essential avenues for personal and communal growth. He embodied the idea that a well-lived life is dedicated to the betterment of society, uplifting others while celebrating the beauty of existence. BVS exemplifies a harmonious balance between privilege and responsibility, inviting us to envision a world where happiness is intertwined with social justice and the nobility of spirit transcends mere status. Puran Singh eulogises BVS as a "presence that inspires joy of life ... and goodness of [human being]" (73).

In revisiting BVS's poetry through a literary lens of close descriptive study, we acknowledge its significance as a vehicle for UHV. As Schumacher points out, seeking education to alleviate feelings of estrangement and meaninglessness cannot be fulfilled solely through acquiring technical knowledge. Proper understanding transcends

the scientific and speaks to the essence of human existence about the meaning of life through literature.

If, therefore, a man seeks education because he feels estranged and bewildered, because his life seems to him empty and meaningless, he cannot get what he is seeking by studying any of the natural sciences, i.e. by acquiring 'know-how' ... but it tells him nothing about the meaning of life and can in no way cure his estrangement and secret despair. (55)

### Summing Up: BVS's Poetic Philosophy As Discourse on UHV

To sum up, the insights from the AICTE course suggest that UHV must possess qualities of universality, rationality, naturalness, and verifiability, ultimately fostering harmony. This proposal starkly contrasts the indefinite values derived from Shalom H. Schwartz's quantitative assessments. The poetry of BVS catalyzes self-exploration and transformative growth, advocating for a holistic approach rather than a didactic one, as articulated by Rajesh Sharma. We can perceive universal values as a foundational framework for 'right understanding and right feeling' illuminated by Goethe's philosophical insights.

Moreover, BVS's poetry transcends the mere inquiry of "What to do?" to encompass the essential skill of "How to do?" This duality is examined through the lens of 'sublime life of wonder', as proposed by Andrew Cecile, and the appreciation of beauty in the mundane, as emphasized by E.F. Schumacher. Here, the concept of *sehaj* (calmness) emerges, illustrating the metamorphosis of darkness and irrationality—conceptualized as "*siah virattaa*" by Jagdish Singh—into a nurturing essence accessible through inner reflection and the deliberate practice of meditative pause (*dhyanam*) (qtd.in Kaur xix).

BVS, through his poetry, emerges from "*anubhavi dupakhta*" [a term by Jagdish Singh], the paradoxical nature of the experience of both the lower and higher world (qtd. in Kaur xx). He participates in lower through the higher consciousness- the human consciousness and not the animal consciousness; neither in anguish nor activism but through *sehaj*, the sublime value. The definitive nature of his poetic values is neither hegemonic nor logocentric; instead, this certainty flourishes in what Jagdish Singh describes as "*mauldi nischitta*". Here, "*mauldi*" suggests a dynamic evolution, while "*nischitta*" embodies the determinative essence of cosmic reality. BVS's poetry intimates a blossoming within this core of certainty, positing existence as inherently tied to coexistence. Hence, one's values are measured by one's capacity to contribute to harmony.

In contemplating the material realm, we observe its cyclical nature, wherein conditions perpetually revert to their origins, revealing a lack of proper development. Genuine evolution occurs solely within the human realm, where transformation of the self transcends cyclicity. This transformation necessitates engagement in the domains of consciousness—requiring knowledge, creativity, and critical thinking. Dialogue with oneself and others becomes vital for this exploration, achievable only through the *sehaj* of a sublime existence, as reflected in BVS’s poetry.

Harindranath Chattopadhyay aptly describes BVS as “the sixth river in the land of five rivers”, emphasizing his role as a life-giving force akin to the rivers that nourish their landscapes (Guleria, 1984, vi). His literary contributions serve as a cultural and spiritual reservoir for civilization, inviting profound reflection and inspiring a fervent pursuit of a life aligned with the universal truth of harmony. Each heartbeat resonates with the promise of a more meaningful existence in this alignment. ‘SLOW’ movement aims to emphasize mindfulness, sustainability, indigenous knowledge system, and a deeper engagement with life/nature. Reading BVS poetry in the light of UHV helps us to align with ‘sublime life of wonder’ to embrace a ‘SLOW life’ to reclaim time as a space for meaning, an assertion of autonomy over the relentless demands of efficiency. At its core, it is an ontological recalibration—an affirmation that true fulfilment resides not in perpetual productivity but in cultivating shared experiences, contemplative engagement, and communal joy. The essence of life lies in relationships, reflection, and revelry—conversations that unfold without haste, moments steeped in thought, and the simple pleasure of being with others. However, in a paradox symptomatic of modern existence, these fundamental acts of human flourishing are relegated to the margins if acknowledged at all. The tragedy of our temporal economy is not merely the scarcity of leisure but the erosion of our very capacity to prioritize what is essential.

## Works Cited and Consulted

- Andrews, Cecile. *Slow is Beautiful: New Visions of Community, Leisure, and Joie de Vivre*. New Society Publishers, 2007.
- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by W. D. Ross, R Pullins Company, 2002.
- Fisher, David James. *Romain Rolland and the Politics of Intellectual Engagement*. University of California Press, 1988.
- Damrosch, David. “Introduction: Goethe Coins A Phrase”. *What is World Literature?* Princeton University Press, 2003, pp. 1-38.
- Gandhi, M. K. “The Environmental Swaraj”. <https://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/environmental-swaraj>.

- Gaur, R. R. and etal. *Teacher's Manual for a Foundation Course in Human Values and Professional Ethics*. UHV Publications, 2023.
- Guleria, J. S. "Preface". *Bhai Vir Singh: The Sixth River of Punjab* edited by J. S. Guleria. Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan, 1984, pp. v-x.
- Guleria, Jagjit Singh. *Prasanglian: Bhai Sahib Bhai Vir Singh Ji de Aduti Jeewan Vichon Kuj Abhul Yaadan de Prasang*. Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan, 2021.j
- Kaur, Harjot. "Translator's Note". *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry* by Puran Singh. Naad Pargaas, 2024, pp. xix-xxi.
- Khosla, G. S. *Bhai Vir Singh: An Analytical Study*. Heritage Publishers, 1984.
- Lindeman, M., and M. Verkasalo "They Measure Values with the Short Schwartz's Value Survey". *Journal of Personality Assessment*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc., 85 (2), 2005, pp. 170-178. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa8502\\_09](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa8502_09)
- National Education Policy 2020. Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, [https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/NEP\\_Final\\_English\\_0.pdf](https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf)
- Rokeach, M. J. *The Nature of Human Values*. Free Press, 1973.
- Schumacher, E. F. *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*. Harper Perennial, 1989.
- Schwartz, Shalom H. "Universals in the Content and Structure of Values: Theoretical Advances and Empirical Tests in 20 Countries". *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 25 (C), 1992, pp.1-65. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(08\)60281-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60281-6)
- Schwartz, Shalom H. "Universalism Values and the Inclusiveness of Our Moral Universe". *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 38(6), 2007, pp. 711-728. <http://doi:10.1177/0022022107308992>.
- Schwartz, Shalom H. "An Overview of the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values". *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 2 (1), 2012, pp. 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1116>
- Schwarz, Daniel R. "A Humanistic Ethics of Reading". *Mapping the Ethical Turn : A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory* edited by Todd E Davis and Kenneth Womack, 2001, pp. 3-15.
- Sharma, Rajat. "Reinventing the Universal Structure of Human Values: Development of a New Holistic Values Scale to Measure Indian Values". *Journal of Human Values*, Sage, 27(2), 2021, pp. 175-196.
- Singh, Bhai Vir. *Lehar Hularey*. Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan, 2000.
- Singh, Bhai Vir. *Nargas*. Translated by Puran Singh, Publication Bureau Punjabi University, 2000.
- Singh, Harbans. *Bhai Vir Singh Shatabdi Granth*. Bhai Vir Singh Shatabdi Samiti, 1972.
- Singh, Ganda. "Bhai Vir Singh and His Times". *Bhai Vir Singh: Life Time & Works*, edited by Gurbachan Singh Talib and Attar Singh. Publication Bureau Panjab University Chandigarh, 1973, pp. 19-37.
- Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur. *Cosmic Symphony: Early and Later Poems of Bhai Vir Singh*. Sahitya Akademi, 2008.
- Singh, Puran. *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry*. Naad Pargaas, 2024.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. "The Parrot's Training". *IIT Kanpur*. [https://home.iitk.ac.in/~amman/soc748/tagore\\_parrot.pdf](https://home.iitk.ac.in/~amman/soc748/tagore_parrot.pdf).
- Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator". *Illuminations, Walter Benjamin: Essays and Reflections* edited by Hannah Arendt, Schocken Books, 1969, pp.69-82.