

# Gurdial Singh: Messiah of the Marginalized

## *Gurdial Singh speaks to Rana Nayar*

Recipient of the coveted Jnanpith Award for 1999, Gurdial Singh, a doyen among the contemporary Punjabi novelists, is a storyteller par excellence. Story telling is, indeed, not just an art or a craft, but an entire way of life with him. It is no coincidence that his own life reads somewhat like a piece of fiction. Born into a poor family of artisans of Malwa, as a young lad, he was forced by his personal circumstances to abandon his studies and undertake moulding of iron-sheets, which he occasionally did for as many as eighteen hours a day. Finally, encouraged by his school teacher, he decided to resume his studies, which often made him fall back on his own effort and initiative as support from the parents was not really forthcoming. From a JBT teacher to a school lecturer, from there to a college lecturer and finally a professor at a Regional Centre of Punjabi University, his has been a slow journey, uphill; a real saga of courage and gritty determination. As one of the most illustrious exponents of Punjabi language, literature and culture, he has served its cause for well over four decades now.

Though he kick started his literary career in 1958 by writing a short story, initial success came to him as a novelist when he published his first major, path-breaking work *Marhi Da Deeva* in 1964. Translated into English as *The Last Flicker* (Sahitya Akademi), it was hailed as a modern classic soon after it first appeared in print. However, his early success did not either stand in the way of or become any kind of a disincentive for his later, equally powerful and significant works of long fiction such as *Anhoe* (1966), *Addh Chanini Raat* (1972), *Anhe Ghore Da Daan* (1976) and *Parsa* (1991) et al. Despite his immense success and popularity as a pioneering novelist in Punjabi, he continued to nurture his first love for short fiction. Small wonder, he has managed to produce as many as eight collections of short stories so far; the more notable ones among them being *Saggi Phul* (1962), *Kutta te Aadmi* (1971), *Begana Pindh* (1985) and *Kareer di Dhingri* (1991). Apart from nine novels, all of which have been widely read and acclaimed, he has authored some three plays, two prose works no less than books for children. Recently, he has published his autobiography in two volumes. Besides, he has translated several of his own works into Hindi and those of the other reputed Indian and non-Indian writers into Punjabi. Apart from *Marhi Da Deeva*, another two of his novels, viz., *Addh Chanini Raat* (*Night of the Half-Moon*, Macmillan), *Parsa* (NBT) and a collection of his fourteen stories, *Earthy Tones* (Fiction House) are also available in English translations.

Tall and gangly, Gurdial Singh is modest to a fault, almost painfully shy in face of the media-strobes. Though he doesn't quite attach much significance to it, recognition has certainly come his way in the form of countless awards and honours, both national as well as international. Among others, special mention may be made here of *Punjab Sahitya Akademi Award* (1979), *Soviet Land Nehru Award* (1986) *Bhai Veer Singh Fiction Award* (1992) all of which settle lightly on his mildly hunched shoulders. Having retired from active teaching and research, he now lives at Jaito, his hometown. On being awarded the prestigious Jnanpith for his life-long contribution to literature, Gurdial Singh spoke to Rana Nayar some time back on a variety of subjects connected with his life, times and works. Here are the excerpts from the interview:

**Question:** You're no stranger to literary awards. But still, how does it feel to be the recipient of the prestigious Jnanpith?

**Answer:** Since its inception, Jnanpith has come to Punjabi, the second time. In 1982, it was Amrita Pritam who was given this award and now, after 18 years it's been given to me. If you ask me, this award truly belongs to Punjabi literature and its rich cultural heritage.

In a way, it is in recognition of those about whom I write. A tribute to those who live in the pages of my several works. An acknowledgement of the fact that the spirit of the common man is bound to triumph ultimately, that his spirit is undying, irrepressible.

**Q:** You have produced a substantial body of both long and short fiction. Having done so, how do you look back at your own literary career? Are you

satisfied with what you have done and the way you've done it?

**A:** It's a matter of great satisfaction for me that my work has won several awards and it has also been read, appreciated and recognised extensively by scholars, readers and critics alike. But there never was much of a room for over joyousness. Perhaps because, in my case, writing has always been dictated by the

compulsions of the life I lived. For me, art has never been very far from life. Nothing upsets me, not even the bitterest piece of criticism. Often people ask me to write something 'marvellous' in Punjabi, or do what Indian writers in English often do. I simply smile away all such suggestions, as if to say 'Gentlemen, thank you for reposing so much of faith in me. But forgive me. I'm unable to write what you expect me to.' Writing is not an assembly-line product. It isn't a market-driven commodity, either. It is a way of connecting with people, a bridge between the people and society. Coming back to the question of satisfaction, well, creativity always breeds a nagging discontent. You constantly struggle with yourself, and also with the forces outside. I've always been spurred on to a greater awareness of my limitations. It's only when you read biographies of men like Lincoln, you discover how little you are able to do or actually succeed in doing. Sometimes, when it's difficult to write a single word for months on end, frankly, it's quite a humbling experience. We, the writers of the Third World, create despite our inhospitable conditions and circumstances. To my mind, that is a satisfaction good enough.

**Q:** What inspired you to become a writer? And who all have been your role models in this respect?

**A:** Had I not taken to writing, I would have probably exploded. So strong and so compelling was my inner need to write. But it isn't quite so easy to single out the most important influence upon my writing or me as a writer. I don't think, it's possible for me to do that. Perhaps, motivations for any aesthetic/literary endeavour are too complex to be enumerated or spelt out

in identifiable terms. But I have always believed that a writer has a responsibility towards society. S/he has to do what s/he can to change the way we either look at ourselves or think about ourselves. Writer is not a passive observer, living in his own little world, but is rather an activist, a catalytic agent of change. If you look through the history of Punjabi literature, you'll know what I'm talking about.

**Q:** Could you please elaborate a little upon this?

**A:** Punjab has always been on the brink. It has had a long-drawn out history of invasions, of continuous, uninterrupted assault and aggression. Its cultural history has constantly been under an attack. This has given rise to the tradition of protest and dissent in Punjabi literature. You can hear voices of dissent even in the verses of Baba Farid or Guru Nanak. During the Bhakti Movement, too, the main impetus was not so much spiritualism as social thought. In Nanak's verses, you often come across a strange fusion of love and violence. For instance, he says, "Jar tar prem khelan ka chao, Seer dhar tali gali mori aao" (Whenever you wish to play the game of love, come to my street, balancing your head upon your palms). It's this tradition of questioning the authority, of dissent against the conventional, received wisdom that is the real hallmark of Punjabi literary/cultural tradition.

**Q:** Right through 80s and early 90s, Punjab has been through a long phase of turmoil and turbulence. Do you think Punjabi writers have responded to its challenge adequately? Have you written anything specific on this theme?

**A:** First, let me speak for myself. I must confess that so far I haven't done even a single novel on Punjab tragedy. Perhaps, it's too early for me to make an effective, creative/imaginative response to it. Most of us are still reeling under the shock of what we have lived through. It has left us numb, much too perplexed for words. So complex has been this process of turmoil that it continues to baffle imagination, defying attempts at its rational understanding. This problem has several facets, historical, cultural, social, economic and political. All of these need to be discussed threadbare. And that's where the real challenge lies. First we have to make sense of whatever we have been through. Only then will it be possible for the writers to create something enduring out of this problem. And that, I'm afraid, shall have to wait for a couple of years more. Don't forget that Tolstoy took over thirty years to create *War and Peace*. But I'm not saying that in Punjabi, writers haven't really responded to this tragedy, at all. You find quite a few short stories and poems of recognisable literary merit on it. Paash and Pattar have poems on this subject. Among the short story writers, Mohan Bhandari and Waryam Sandhu have written very successfully upon this theme.

**Q:** Writers often have a grouse against the critics, saying they are more misunderstood than understood by this tribe. What has been your experience with the critics?

**A:** Those who think that literature is something of a commodity or a consumer durable, perhaps, do need critics to sell their wares as well. I don't quite subscribe to this notion of literature. I believe, good literature survives on its own strength and not

necessarily through the mediation of critics. The best in literature has always survived not because of the critics but in spite of them. Was there any critic around when Baba Farid, Guru Nanak Dev, Bule Shah or Waris Shah did their writing? Even centuries later, their works are still being read and appreciated. Be it an oral or a written tradition, literature only survives in the minds and hearts of the people or in our cultural memory, so to say. And it survives only if it maintains a living relationship with people, language and culture. But I suppose, criticism and critics do have a function, and a very useful one, at that. If only they were to understand it for what it is and carry it out with utmost restraint, responsibility and sincerity. A budding writer may actually be able to profit from a piece of healthy criticism. It may actually help him grow and blossom. So either way, there's nothing much to complain about.

**Q:** Could we say that the critics do have a role to play in creating, promoting and strengthening literary traditions/conventions? If so, how do you perceive the critical tradition in Punjabi literature today?

**A:** As I said earlier, we in Punjab have a very dynamic literary/cultural tradition, something we have genuine reasons to be proud of. Let me put it this way, there is or rather should be a symbiosis between creativity and criticism. I've certainly no patience with this trend where critic becomes more important than the writer, and the writer tries to steal a march over his writing. A creative work must ultimately be a product of the society within which it is created and first and foremost, must also belong there. In other words, there has to be a dynamic,

reciprocal relationship between literature and society. Both facilitate each other's growth and each is enriched by the other. And it's for the writer to make a proactive intervention in this complex process.

**Q:** From what you're saying, it appears, you advocate content-based approach to literature. In this scheme

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of things, what place do you accord to formal inventiveness? How important is the form or formal inventiveness for you personally as a writer?

**A:** Formal inventiveness is useful but only up to a point. That too, in a rather limited sense. Novelty for the sake of novelty is not really a good policy. As literature reflects the cultural pattern of a certain society, changes of all kinds including those of the form must be inspired by the social/cultural changes within that society. Mere experimentation, as an isolated aesthetic activity, is not known to have revitalised literary traditions either here or elsewhere.

**Q:** And now moving towards the evaluative aspect of literature, what, according to you, are the pre-requisites of good writing?

**A:** I repeat, once again, that good writing is 'good' only in a given time and space. As a matter of fact, there cannot be any general prescriptions for what a good writing is or should be. Each society creates its own parameters, throws up its own ways of assessing or evaluating literature. And that has to be done with specific history of that society in mind. As a writer, I take care of both the pre-requisites, viz. subject matter and style. And both have to be located within the parameters of local traditions and conventions. Though comparative evaluation has its own justification, it won't really be fair to judge a work in Punjabi literature outside its historical/ cultural context. Each literature has its own specificities, which have an important bearing upon its understanding and evaluation as well.

**Q:** From whatever I know, you're essentially a writer with a definite ideological commitment. Don't you think that adherence to any single ideology could sometimes be self-limiting for a writer?

**A:** First of all, we have to be clear about the meaning of the term 'ideology.' It is a science of ideas and ideas are the products of human consciousness. Though thinking is a faculty natural to men, organised thinking certainly is not. Thinking becomes organised when man makes conscious efforts to distil his/her experiences. It's man in confrontation with nature, which has, over the centuries, produced what we call a body of knowledge or ideas. In their

own respective social contexts, right from Socrates to Marx, the thinkers have only tried to grasp human situations and human history. And that's what came to be known as their ideology. In so many different ways, ideology could also be seen as an expression of philosophy. If that's the way we interpret ideology, then it's difficult to imagine a writer without an ideology. It's a writer's way of exploring the mysteries of life, man and society. I won't know if you would still insist upon calling it self-limiting. For me, ideology is a corner stone of all progressive literature, a necessary ingredient of its transformative potential. And if that's what it is, there is no escape from ideology.

**Q:** It's often argued that your novels primarily create male-centred fictionscape in which women are often no more than mere shadowy figures. Do you accept this? If not, how would you like to react?

**A:** I don't quite accept this charge to be true. You just have to read *Kuwela* and *Marhi Da Deeva*, and you'll find that in both the novels, women characters prove to be stronger than men. But I do admit that historically, our society has been essentially male-dominated, even oppressive of women. And Punjabi society, as we all know, is still quite feudal in its orientation. Being a critical realist or a progressive, I must portray what I either see or experience for myself. I'd not like to give an unfaithful picture of our society. Women are still bought and sold in certain parts of Punjab. Repression is still practised in different forms and this is precisely what I seek to capture in my works, too.

**Q:** Tell us something about your creative process. How do you

conceptualise a novel, through characters, situation or an idea?

**A:** It's always in totality, not in a piecemeal fashion, that I often conceptualise a novel or a short story. It begins to take shape in my mind much before it finds an actual, concrete expression on the page. I have to wait for the pressure to build up, for the urge to get so strong that I'm able to hold it back, no longer. While working on my first draft, I allow my ideas and emotions to work freely upon the conceived material. Then I simply put it away and don't return to it for months, even years, sometimes. Later, on reading the first draft, it's the critic in me who takes over, revises and rewrites, sometime complete chapters, in an unsparing, almost ruthless manner. I continue to revise until satisfied that I've managed to create exactly what was in my mind in the first place. So writing is truly a labour of love for me. A very demanding job, indeed!

**Q:** Quite a few of your works have been translated into English and other languages. You've also been doing translation work from time to time. Do you think that, regardless of its quality, the essence of a literary work almost always gets lost in translation? Or is there any defence for it?

**A:** Whatever little experience I've of translation says that all languages, no matter what their similarities, always remain different in nature and character. This has to do with the way in which languages are often born or rather grow historically. No two languages, howsoever similar, have the inherent power to carry the full burden of transmission within themselves. Having said that, it's equally important to stress that in

absence of translations, there will be no communication across languages or/and cultures. But this, we know very well, is not so, historically, at least. We have a long, well-established tradition of translations across the languages. It is so, because translation is perhaps the only way of reaching out across to some of the best works in languages other than our own. But for translation, we wouldn't have really known Chekhov, Tolstoy, Hemingway, Steinback or other such great minds. So despite its flaws, translation needs to be promoted on a much bigger scale than it is, today.

**Q:** One last question, any piece of advice you would like to offer to the young and upcoming writers in Punjabi or other Indian languages?

**A:** All I would say is, writing is a matter of commitment. I can't really think of situation where it could be otherwise. It's a serious business, and so must be taken seriously. It should neither be trivialised as pure entertainment, nor vulgarised as a pure commercial venture or a money-spinner. Especially if you happen to be writing in any of the Indian languages, except, of course, English. You may find it surprising if I were to tell you that even after nearly four decades into a fairly active literary career, my total earnings don't exceed a couple of thousand rupees. No, this doesn't mean that I have any regrets. Certainly not. The point is that you mustn't write for the lure of money. So youngsters, if they wish to write something durable and not something disposable, shouldn't ever lose sight of their commitment to life or to people.

Rana Nayar is  
Reader, Dept. of English  
Panjab University, Chandigarh