

# Translating Punjabi Poetry: An Approach

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I believe that through translations, Indian English is evolving into a confluent site for many disparate voices from scores of Indian languages, dialects and oral traditions. These enrich it, enlarge its perspective and give it a real flavour of India's rainforest diversity and make its readership hear voices that not only surprise and delight but also shock and disturb and bring within its earshot what is unheard or ignored, or dismissed as too commonplace or dangerous. However, all of this is insufficiently reflected in the domain of Indian-English Poetry.

It is within this framework that I will talk about three Punjabi poets in this paper, whose poems I have translated. These poets, like many other regional language poets, make us hear voices that question, reject, overturn and subvert many traditional and mainstream notions of State, nationalism, religion, art, culture and society.

The first Punjabi poet I translated was Puran Singh Kanwar (1942-1996), who was my colleague at a Delhi University College, and a poet of unusual talent. His first and only collection of poems *Raatan Di Rut* (1984), was characterized by poetry around a "unique paradigm" in Punjabi. I translated his poems because I thought his poetry, however unknown, deserved to be preserved and broadcast. It was published in English as *A Season of Nights* (Kanwar, 2006), along with the Punjabi text. This

poem illustrates why I considered it worthy of translation:

Lines on my Palm

Bhrigu is dumbstruck –  
thrusting my eyes  
into his  
I laugh through them.  
He starts!  
The mad man might  
suddenly charge  
and strangle him  
in broad daylight...

He's the master of his art  
and has peered  
at the innumerable lines  
on my palm...  
One of them  
spells suicide  
and hundreds  
speak murder.

When I was born,  
people tell,  
my mother  
had laughed and laughed:  
that laughter  
was her death-knell.

In my childhood  
during his sleep  
I had slit open with a knife  
my father's jugular vein.  
He has been asleep since then...  
I have let him sleep.

At our mansion  
nuptials are performed  
everyday.  
The family barber dresses me  
in the bridegroom robes of the royal family.  
The palki-bearers  
seat me in the palki  
and move in a trance  
as if snake-sniffed.

Every night I sleep  
with the living corpse  
of a new queen.  
At dawn  
the priest  
calls...  
O prince  
wake up  
you have to be ready again  
for the nuptials...

Kanwar's poetry explores the human subconscious with a ruthless honesty and frankness that implicates the reader and unsettles him. In each of his 34 poems, he explores a non-ordinary state of mind far removed from what we call the normal, which leaves the reader breathless with fear, admiration and amazement.

The next two poets I translated were Avatar Singh Sandhu (1950-1988), popularly known as Pash, and Lal Singh Dil (1943-2007). Both of them were revolutionary poets—products of the Naxalite movement in Punjab in the early seventies of the last century.

Pash was perhaps the most dramatic literary figure to emerge out of the Naxalite movement. The movement failed, but it produced a number of poets who substantially altered the world view of Punjabi poetry. Pash revolutionized the subject matter, the language, the idiom, the imagery and the tone of Punjabi poetry. Lal Singh Dil, along with another Dalit-Naxalite poet Sant Ram Udasi (1939-1986), brought to the centre of Punjabi poetry the issues of untouchability and caste discrimination and laid the foundations of Dalit literature in Punjabi.

Pash was an extremely popular poet. Hundreds of people, most of them students and young men, came to listen to his recitations in kavi sammelans. The central theme of his poetry was the overthrow of what the Naxalites called and still call the semi-feudal and neo-colonial state with its comprador bourgeoisie dispensation, and its replacement with an egalitarian communist dispensation. So Pash took on the Indian State, with its mainstream view of nationalism centred around its pride in the constitution, the parliamentary system, the elections, the national flag, free speech. No surprise then that he faced imprisonment a number of times (on a false charge of murder once), and was subjected to police atrocities. His life became further complicated because he was an open and strident critic of the

Khalistan movement, at its peak in the 1980s, for which he paid with his life when he was shot dead by Khalistani militants in 1988. Although his poetry shows a progressive change from a fire and brimstone revolutionary to a meditative one, and his disillusionment with the Naxalite movement itself, he remained a revolutionary till the end of his life. He can be seen in the tradition of certain rebels in Punjab of which the clear examples, apart from the Sikh Gurus, are figures such as Banda Singh Bahadur and Bhagat Singh.

I began translating Pash in 2007. I first read Hindi and English translations of his poetry and then read his original work. Pash's language posed many problems. Friends and relatives helped where dictionaries failed. I also read his contemporaries, particularly the leading revolutionary poets, Lal Singh Dil and Sant Ram Udasi. I read most of the available literary criticism on Pash and Naxalite poetry in Punjabi, Hindi and English. I also read Pash's diaries and letters, and about the Naxalite movement in general and particularly in Punjab, about the Sikh history and traditions, the Ghadar Movement and Bhagat Singh to have a better understanding of the poet. My own training in English literature, my knowledge of European and Latin American literature and a modest understanding of Marxism were useful in this regard.

The next stage, after I had obtained a reasonable understanding of the poet, was to translate his poetry into English, a language that is culturally so alien to Punjabi and especially to the kind of language Pash used. Pash's language is

almost totally colloquial and he does not hesitate to use slang. In fact, he seems to consciously, almost willfully, reject the embellishments of Punjabi poetic diction as is clear from an excerpt from his poem "I Refuse" (Ghai, T.C. 2010: p. 131).

Don't hope that I, a son of these fields,  
shall talk of your chewed and spat-out  
tastes

My approach was to translate line by line, as far as possible, keeping in mind the difference in the syntactical structures of the two languages. To achieve a semblance of an acceptable translation, I had to stretch my resources of both the languages as well as desperately forage through dictionaries. Although Pash is often complex and meditative, since he is a revolutionary poet and speaks without any inhibitions, his language is very close to prose, and the rhythm in his poetry is spontaneous. It is the rhythm of the spoken word uttered by a revolutionary in many rhetorical shades. I have included here, some excerpts from his poems as translated by Ghai (2010)

You go riding in a steel car

I have a steel gun

I have eaten steel

You only talk of steel

("Steel", 2010, p. 46)

People turning Time's wheel

don't die of a fever

("Turing Time's Wheel", 2010)

Go and read the Frontier or the Tribune

Talk of Calcutta or Dacca

("Time's Not a Dog", 2010, p. 60)

Listen, you who write letters to your ladyloves

(“An Open Letter”, 2010, p. 68)

You have always known the door

through which you could burst in

And now we shall show you the door

through which we shall dispatch you

(“Resolution”, 2010, p. 70)

We shall fight, comrade, for the unhappy times

(“We Shall Fight, Comrade”, 2010, p. 95)

It is the tone and natural rhythm that are more important in Pash, rather than any artificially imposed rhythm and metre. I thought it prudent to use English that was neither literary nor too colloquial. The first would have made Pash look wooden and the latter made him talk too much like an Englishman. So I tried to use the shortest and the simplest (and as neutral as possible) words or phrases or collocations, and avoided heavy literary or ponderous expressions or those with rich connotations. My translations, therefore, are more prosaic than poetic. It was relatively easy to capture the tone of his poetry and often his rhythm. However, the cultural nuances and connotations, the flavor and sounds of colloquial Punjabi, its slang and many other things have been lost in the translation.

My attempt has been to convey the heat and intensity of liquid steel that is the hallmark of this revolutionary poet, his rebellious spirit and fearlessness with which he questions everything, his explosive love of life, his

impossible dreams. One big, and possibly crucial deficiency in my translations is that I did all my work outside Punjab. I did not even visit Pash's village or Punjab, or talk to people who had known him personally. How far this has affected my translations for better or for worse, I cannot say.

In order to provide background information on the Naxalite ideology, the Naxalite movement in Punjab, relevant literary background, biographical information and my own assessment of his poetry I also wrote an introduction and appended at the end, a glossary of terms, names of places, persons, customs, social practices and events relating to the Punjabi life, history and culture that Pash refers to in his poetry. This was to facilitate a better understanding of Pash's poetry by readers outside Punjab. I had done something similar while translating Puran Singh Kanwar when I had written an introduction to his poetry, placing him within the framework of the European Surrealist Movement, since that seemed the best way to approach his poetry (which defies all commonsense and rationalist interpretations). However, I did not append any glossary because his poetry, essentially an exploration of the human subconscious, uses images and symbols that are archetypal. The images and symbols recurring in his poetry are those of birth and death, father and mother, the earth, the sky and the sun, light and darkness, pure and impure, repressed violence, delusions of grandeur and depths of self-denigration.

Coming to Lal Singh Dil, I became familiar with his poetry while translating Pash and was intrigued by the sad fact that a poet should be forced to sell tea and wash tea cups

for a living. Translating Dil presented very different challenges. The socio-economic environment in which Dil grew up was very different. Pash was the son of a middle class land-owning Jat farmer. Dil, on the other hand, belonged to the Ramdasia Chamar community, and his father owned no land, and throughout his life worked mostly as a wage labourer on others' land. His was a family without any financial and intellectual resources. Dil's boyhood and youth were blighted by caste humiliations at school and college and in society.

Dil joined the Naxalite movement to overcome economic and social exclusion. Like Pash, he suffered imprisonment and police atrocities, although for him physical torture was matched by psychological persecution that constantly reminded him of his caste. After release from jail in 1972, Dil, with no support from any quarter, fled to Uttar Pradesh to escape police persecution and seek respite from caste humiliations; and once there, he converted to Islam. He spent nearly ten years doing odd jobs no better than those of a daily wagger. Dil returned from UP in 1983 and lived to plough his tragic and lonely furrow till his death in 2007.

To translate Dil, one needed a different mindset. My understanding of the Naxalite movement in Punjab had to be supplemented with an understanding of the issue of caste discrimination in all its ramifications and complexity. The world of Dil's poetry was the world of a totally marginalized humanity, ignored and forgotten and outside history: Once again the grain winnowers walk off an alien land

A long train of people is on the move  
carrying loads of insults  
casting long shadows  
children riding the donkeys  
fathers holding their dogs  
mothers carrying cauldrons  
on their backs  
with their babies asleep inside  
A long train of people is on the move  
carrying on their shoulders the poles for  
their huts

Who are these hunger-driven Aryans!  
Whose land in Bharat  
are they now planning to grab!  
("The Colour of the Evening", my  
translation)

I'm the spirit of a father  
trampled upon in the fields.  
The heart of a mother  
robed in tatters.  
("Love's Self-Murder", my translation)

I followed a similar approach for Dil as I had done for Pash, selecting about 100 poems. I read all of Dil's works including his autobiography, most of the commentaries and critical appraisals available on him, and talked to some people who were his friends or close to him. Watching a documentary film by Ajay Bhardwaj on the marginalized traditions of Punjabi life featuring Dil himself also gave me an insight into Dil's character and poetry. Dil's language however posed some problems.

Punjabi dictionaries have not always been helpful because many turns of phrase in Dil's colloquial language seldom find a place there. Talking to people who knew Dil helped.

Regarding the translations, my attempt has been, as in Pash, to remain faithful to Dil's content, images, tone and rhythm. I have provided footnotes where necessary. I have also added a detailed introduction delineating his life, character and poetry.

Finally, I am quite conscious that my translation of each poet is just one of so many possible translations. The new discipline of Translation Studies recognizes the impossibility of the perfect transposition of a poem from one language to another, not only because of the linguistic, socio-cultural and temporal distances between the source and target languages, but also because of the personality of the translator, his intention, his capabilities, and his own self that always intrudes into a translation surreptitiously. Translation Studies has mapped and documented various forms a translation can assume and it is evident that the relation between the poem and its translation remains fluid: a fact which language teachers would do well to draw the attention of learners to when engaging with a translated text. Depending upon the intention and purpose of the translator, a translation can assume many forms. It can be literal, or in spirit, or an adaptation, or a trans-creation, or free, and even become independent of the original. The translator can become a creator in his own right, or become invisible. My translations, as shown above, are closer to the literal and I have tried to make the translator in me invisible, as far

as possible and let the poets speak for themselves, albeit in Indian English! It is for those engaged with teaching and learning of translated texts to decide if the poet's voice in translation sounds like the one in the original language.

## References

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