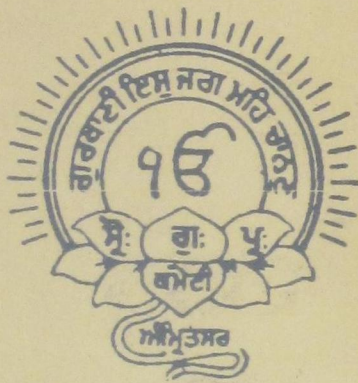




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Life-Sketch of the Poet-Bhai  
**SANTOKH SINGH**



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# **GURU PRATAP SURAJ**

'Guru Pratap Suraj' is a monumental epic, composed by Bhai Santokh Singh and based on the life, achievements and teachings of the ten Sikh Gurus and Banda Bahadur. This is an outstanding piece of literature, despite being the most voluminous of all works in Hindi literature.

## **Life-sketch of the Poet—Bhai Santokh Singh**

Bhai Santokh Singh was born at Nurdi (District Amritsar) in the year 1788 A.D., in a poor but religious-minded family. He belonged to a backward caste called chippa. His father, S. Deva Singh, spent his time in the company of 'Nirmala' Sadhus. Father's simple life and enlightened thoughts influenced the child Santokh Singh to a large extent. Apart from that, Santokh Singh had the good fortune of receiving his education from a learned scholar Giani Sant Singh, a priest at the Golden Temple, Amritsar. There, he studied Sanskrit language and literature, poetics, philosophy and Guru Bani and also practised, for about 15 years, the art of composing poetry. After completing his studies, at the age of about 25 years, he left for Buria, in the Ambala District (Haryana situated at the bank of river Jamuna, and started his career as an independent litterateur. He earned his living by reciting and propagating the preachings of the Gurus. It was here that he composed an ambitious epic—'Guru Nanak Prakash' based on the life and teachings of Guru Nanak; and also translated the famous Sanskrit dictionary 'Amarkosh' into 'Namkosh'. According to

local accounts he often had to face financial difficulties here.

In about 1823 A.D. he left Buria and visited several places to collect material relating to the lives of the Sikh Gurus. During the course of his travels he stayed at Patiala also for sometime.

By this time he had attained such poetic excellence and repute that the Maharaja of Kaithal—Bhai Udai Singh—deemed it fit to call him at his court and honoured him by appointing him as his court Poet in 1827 A.D. Being free from financial worries, now, he set himself whole-heartedly to his task. At the instance of his benevolent and religious minded patron he wrote a commentary on 'Japu Ji' entitled 'Garab Ganjani', and translated the whole of 'Valmiki Ramayana' into chaste and refined Braj Bhasha verse. Pleased with the poet's masterly rendering of these works the Maharaja bestowed upon him a village in reward and thus encouraged him to start work upon another stupendous work 'Guru Pratap Suraj', which was completed by him in 1843 A.D. It took him about ten years to complete this work. By common consent Bhai Santokh Singh's masterpiece is 'Guru Partap Suraj' an exhaustive semi-historical narrative poem embracing the life, achievements and teachings of the ten Gurus.

## **Personality**

Bhai Santokh Singh was a well-educated, widely travelled and properly equipped scholar and creative writer of great imagination. He was hard working energetic; humble and generous; liberal and contented, a well-wisher of others and noble in the real sense of the

word. His prolific poetic talent was suitably backed by a sharp intellect and progressive outlook.

## Structure and Form

'Guru Pratap Suraj' consists of two parts. The first part is based on the life of Guru Nanak and is named 'Guru Nanak Prakash,' while the second part 'Guru Pratap Suraj', popularly known as 'Suraj Prakash' deals with the lives of the other nine Gurus and Banda Bahadur. 'Guru Nanak Prakash' comprises of two sections, the first carrying seventy three chapters and the second fifty seven. In all it contains 9700 verses. 'Guru Pratap Suraj' contains 51829 verses in 22 cantos. This epic is divided in different parts each named after the Sun's Course viz., twelve Zodiac, six seasons and two solstices (Winter and Summer Solstice); which in turn comprises 1151 sunbeams.

This epic has a symbolic name illustrated through a very comprehensive metaphor. The poet maintains : As the sun rises the darkness of the night vanishes, thieves and thugs hide themselves away, owls and bats go to slumber and stars disappear, so with the advent of the Gurus, the rays of their spiritual light and knowledge spread all around and the darkness of ignorance disappeared, adherence to hypocrisy, blind faith, and external rituals spread by various sects and creeds lost their authenticity, the night of Shariat went into oblivion, the mullas and malvies who were misinterpreting 'Dharma' lost their hold. The Turks faded out like 'Kumud' and the Saints blossomed like lotus (Zodiac 12/68/21-33).

The poet appears to have derived inspiration for such a metaphorical expression from Sanskrit works

like 'Katha Sarit Sagar' of Somdev, 'Rajtarangini' of Kalhan and 'Harshcharitram' by Banbhatt. He has also been influenced by the following couplet of Bhai Gurdas.

"When Sat Guru Nanak Appeared  
The mist disappeared and there was light all around"  
(Kavitt Sawai 486-488)

However, the usage of Bhai Santokh Singh is all the more fascinating compact, meaningful and suggestive. It expresses skillfully the religious feelings and patriotic sentiments of the poet. It is more scholarly and poetical too. In fact, the whole epic is epitomized in this metaphorical passage.

## Sources of Plot

Bhai Santokh Singh maintained, that, "historical facts about the Gurus were scattered around like gold particles in dust, ghee in curd and pearls in the ocean. He collected them from several persons at different places and also from the account given by the earlier writers and then presented the glory of the gurus like gems before the world (Zodiac 1/5/6-9)." In the beginning of his work he has referred to some account narrated by Ram to Sahib Singh, which might have been available to him. (Zodiac 1/2) Some portions of 'Guru Pratap Suraj' bear clear impact of 'Sau Sakhi' ; 'Mahima Prakash' (Sarupdas Bhalla); 'Dasham Granth' and the compositions of some of the court poets of Guru Gobind Singh like Senapati and Ani Rai, 'Gurubilas' (Sukha Singh), vars and 'Kavitt Sawia' of Bhai Gurdass, and a number of hymns from the Adi Granth, which appear to have influenced the book abundantly.

# History of the Gurus

As stated earlier, 'Guru Nanak Prakash' and 'Guru Pratap Suraj' both are semi-historical epics. The poet has narrated at length the incidents relating to the birth, birth place, childhood (especially that of Guru Nanak, Guru Har Gobind and Guru Gobind Singh), day to day activities, marriages, family life, accession to Guru Gaddi; travels; social, moral and religious beliefs and their gospel; and the battles waged by Guru Har Gobind, Guru Gobind Singh and Banda Bahadur. Historical evidences about these events were scattered here and there. It was given to Bhai Santokh Singh to collect and arrange this material and present it in a compact form. Perhaps, this is the first available account of the life and achievements of all the Gurus at one single place, having a separate identity of its own. Besides this it throws some light on the internal feuds and inflightings of the Mughals, as well as their adventures and relationship with the Gurus. Undoubtedly, later historians dealing with this period have been abundantly benefitted by this narrative poem.

It may, however, be stated that Bhai Santokh Singh was not writing merely a biographical narration. This epic bears an imprint of a creative artist, his social consciousness, his spiritual outlook, and patriotic feelings which permeate his work. Bhai Santokh Singh looked upon history from a purposeful angle. He regarded the Gurus as an incarnation of the 'Akal Purakh' coming for the purpose of eliminating 'Adharma' and establishing 'Dharma'. His historical sensibility has a wonderful blending with his forward-looking-culture and social consciousness.

Apart from a historical description of the lives and achievements of the ten Masters, this great epic reproduces in a very vivid and authentic way the political, cultural, religious, social and economic condition of the Indian people during the three centuries of Mughal rule. Such a description is generally missing in the otherwise popular and known Hindi works of the age. In fact it is a mirror of that age and presents before us an authentic cultural history of the Panjab. The poet tries; his utmost to stick to facts and realism in regard to historical events, yet he does not hesitate to modify or even change these facts, if they do not confirm to his religious beliefs and social outlook. He even invented some events wherever necessary making full use of his creative genius to safeguard the honour and dignity and also to maintain and enhance the glory of his Masters—the Gurus, who are for him no ordinary personalities of history but the apostles of 'Dharma' and truthfulness held in high esteem and reverence.

## Mythical Contents

In an effort to portray the Gurus as incarnation of God, many a supernatural and superhuman incident have been associated with their personalities and the shapes of some events have been radically transformed. 'Guru Nanak Prakash' is a rich treasure of such miracles, though some restraint has been applied in 'Suraj Prakash,' where the poet is more factual and realistic. In 'Nanak Prakash' one may find, to one's amazement, anything happening anytime at the command of the Guru. The Guru is capable of granting life to the dead, appearing at different places in the twinkling of an eye or displaying any other miracle, which only his staunch followers can



believe. The visualization of such miracles may be thought to spring from religious fervour or poetic imagination of a devoted theist.

Furthermore, the poet has incorporated many a mythological legends in the main stream of the poem. He has not only used mythological references from the Puranas as metaphors and similes, but has also drawn parallels between many mythological references and the incidents relating to the lives of the Gurus. Guru Nanak has been described as an incarnation of 'Akal Purukh'.

Bhai Santokh Singh has enunciated and interpreted the philosophy of Sikhism, and has often quoted from 'Adi Granth' to elaborate his point of view. He has also incorporated in these epics the philosophical and religious essence of Hindu culture, more especially of the Vedanta, as also of Vaishnav and Shaiva cults at length and thus has given new dimension to the philosophy of Sikhism. He regards Hindus and Sikhs as channels of the same stream and speaks of the Sikh Gurus as Saviour of Hinduism. His writings created an atmosphere of goodwill and mutual understanding between the Hindus and the Sikhs and fostered their emotional and cultural integration.

## **High Values**

For the Poet the Gurus are the apostles of truth, embodiments of all virtues, champions of freedom and leaders of Indian Renaissance. Through them, the poet has portrayed the salient features of Indian culture, its spiritualism and ethical values. He points out the utility of these ethical values for the welfare and uplift of

humanity. He has very nicely and successfully elucidated the concept of the eternal Lord, Universal brotherhood of mankind and victory of the Spirit of the pure. He firmly believes in the gospel of truth, the supreme truth, which prevails in this universe and in the capacity of a human being to rise to the greatest heights by selfless service to humanity, piety, restraint, deflating of one's ego, obedience to the command of the Lord, forgiveness, contentment and Namjap.

There is a wonderful blending of Bhakti (devotion) and Shakti (power) in this great epic. The poet describes fully the heroic deeds of the sixth and the tenth Gurus and those of Banda Bahadur, which throb with enthusiasm, courage and patriotism. He brings to light the firm conviction of the tenth Guru "to use the sword to uphold righteousness if all other means fail" (Zafarnama 1/22). He has stressed the need for the assimilation of knowledge and the will to act. He has given a spiritual base to acts of heroism and bravery and is, thus, a great source of inspiration for the worldly and spiritual uplift of man.

## Theme

This epic has a distinct purpose. In brief the theme of this great epic may be summed up as follows :-

1. To give biographical sketches of the lives and achievements of the Sikh Gurus with utmost sincerity, devotion and faith.
2. To elucidate and propagate the spiritual, religious ethical and social ideas of Sikhism.

3. To bring out the utility, importance, and impact of the mission of the gurus in the proper perspective of their age.

4. To interpret the relevance of these ideas in the context of the environment of the poet himself.

5. To give expression to the sensibility and outlook of the poet especially his efforts to assimilate Sikhism with Hinduism.

6. To arouse the sense of heroism to fight injustice, falsehood and tyranny to uphold righteousness.

7. To uplift the total self of man by awakening his spiritual consciousness and by sublimation of human instincts and emotions.

8. To pave the way for equality and oneness of humanity, irrespective of castes and creeds.

9. To encourage and inspire mankind for a divine living so as to have closeness to the metaphysical world which is higher than our world of reality.

## **Influence on Sikhism**

This epic has been given a distinct place of honour by the Sikhs. In fact, it is considered an encyclopaedia of Sikh history, religion, culture and philosophy. It has not only been helpful in the propagation of Sikh religion, but has also contributed considerably to the strengthening of cultural, political and social fibre of Sikh community. It has been very popular amongst them and it is generally recited in Gurudwaras and religious congregations. In fact, its cultural and mythological content has given new dimension to Sikhism, and the daily life of the Sikhs has been

considerably influenced by this epic. It has even been responsible for giving birth to amongst the Sikhs, many a ritual and belief, which are otherwise forbidden in Sikhism.

## Technique

'Guru Pratap Suraj' , is an epic composed on the pattern of Jain narrative epic poem of Apbharansa called 'Raso' 'Rasak' 'Rupak' 'Prakash' or 'Vilas'. The Jain poets elucidated the principles of their religion through those epics, so did Bhai Santokh Singh. He has adopted the technique of story telling by introducing speaker-listner in the narration as has been done by Goswami Tulsidas in 'Ram Charit Manas' and Chander Bardai in 'Prithvi Raj Raso'.

The element of plot is dominant, it has a vast range. Although, it contains a large number of sub-plots and inner-plots yet, it is profound and compact. Of course, it is more narrative and less poetical and there are only a few incidents that are really touching. The majority of incidents relating to battle scenes, have been narrated in detail and with utmost care and interest. There is so much force and vigour in these narratives that they arouse heroism. On the whole the rendering is cosy and effective.

The teachings of this epic present's an interesting blending of the classical epics of Sanskrit, Jain narrative epics of Apbharans, neo-classical literary works of later medieval Hindi poetry and the vigorous Panjabi folk lore-vars.

## **New Vistas**

Bhai Santokh Singh, no doubt, opens up new vistas in the literacy trends of the age. In an age dominated by erotic and ornate poetry, he turned to devotional and heroic poetry and achieved a roll mark of excellence in it. Emotions such as love, affection, devotion, heroism, hatred, anger, sorrow, fear, pathos, jealousy and pride find an intensive expression in this epic though the sentiments of devotion and heroism are dominant. The expression of various feeling and emotions is penetrating and evocative. Apart from this, Bhai Santokh Singh is second to none in his flight of imagination, command over language and mastery of various metres. His avocations of nature, the seasons, mountains, forests, gardens, rivers, springs, etc. are vivid and picturesque. The description of cities, battle-fields, huntings, marriages, festivals, congregations, rituals, ceremonies etc. are detailed, realistic and lively. The poet has achieved remarkable excellence in these descriptions. the frequent use of apt and suggestive similes and metaphors renders these descriptions as fresh as the mountain breeze. For instance, in the battle-field of Bhangani when Kirpal Udasi challenges the Pathan Hayat Khan, the latter, in the words of the poet, turned back like a cobra whose tail has been trampled under the foot of a passerby.

There is abundant evidence of his poetic skill in these descriptions. We can hear in this verses the rattling of sabres, beating of drums and rumbling of the Guns.

## **Language and Style**

Though Panjabi Sikh by birth and upbringing Bhai Santokh Singh had a mastery over Braj Bhasha to be

matched only by the most esteemed poets of this language such as Surdas, Keshav and Bihari. He flourished in an age dominated by ornate poetry. That is why he has exhibited his mastery over the use of a rhetorical style in 'Mangla Charan' to claim for himself an honourable place amongst the poets of the age, since the use of such an ornate style had become a poetic norm with the court poets of that age in Hind literary world. Elsewhere, in the whole of the narration he uses practical and simple form of Braj Bhasha, which was best suited for this type of literary works meant for recitation amongst the followers of a particular religion. Although the language is simple and spontaneous the use of idioms, proverbs and sayings etc. has made it all the more expressive, suggestive and effective. The poet has full control over the use of language and adopts a form best suited to the occasion. At one place it may be Sanskritised Hindi while at another Persian and Arabic words may be found in abundant. His language and style are in consonance with the demand of a particular character or subject matter. Moreover, the poet makes full use of some Panjabi, Multani, Khari Boli and local words according to his requirements. Thus, he has aptly made his language an appropriate and powerful vehicle of his thoughts keeping it as near to the masses as possible.

## **Figures of speech (Alankars) and imagery**

He has made abundant use of several Alankars such as (1) Upma (2) Rupak (3) Ulekh (4) Utpreksha (5) Atishyakti (6) Drishtant (7) Deepak Visham (8)

Arthantarniyas (9) Paryayokti (10) Vibhavna (11)  
Virodhabas (12) Anupras (13) Yamak (14) Salesh (15)  
Punarktivadabhas (16) Vipsa etc.

The nearest equivalents of these Alankars in English may be: (1) Similies (2) Mataphor (3) Representation (4) Illustration (5) Hyperbole (6) Examplication (7) Illuminator (8) Incongruity (9) Corroboration (10) Periphrasis (11) Peculiar Causation (12) Oxymoran (13) Alteration (14) Pun (15) Paronomesia (16) Similar tautology (17) Repetition.

This may however be borne in mind that he was not very fond of ornamentation, as most of his Hindi contemporaries had been. He liked simple and easy style. The alankars were used wherever necessary and with great care and restraint and that too to illustrate and ilucidate certain philosophical points, for powerful expression of different emotions, for making various descriptions more vivid and lively, for the presentation of transient nature and characteristics of various personalities and also for highlighting the greatness and glory of the Gurus. The poet achieved significant excellence in the use of such figures of speech which are based on parallels, comparisons and similarities. One may find at places a beautiful chain studded with fascinating gems of metaphors and similies. Most of the images, and symbols and the objects of comparison used by him are traditional but they have been used appropriately with utmost care and aptness in close conformity with the demand of particular situation; as such they go a long way in enhancing its effect and intensity.

## Metrical Measures

Metre has a special role to play in a narrative of this kind, which is written mainly for recitation in religious congregations. 'Guru Pratap Suraj' on the whole is metrical and is rhymed too. In the use of metrical patters and also in the use of various metres the poet bears clear impact of earlier works such as 'Dasham Granth' and 'Gurubilas'. This epic has been written mainly in 'Doha-Chopai' pattern although he has employed some more rhythymical patterns such as Doha-Hakal, Doha-Bhujang prayat, 'Doha-Swaie', Doha-Rasawal' etc.

He has 33 metres in 'Guru Pratap Suraj,' prominent among them being Doha, Chopai, Sewaia, Kavitt, Nisani, Rasawal, Bhujang-prayat, Arill, Lalitpad, tribhangi, Sabas, Sortha, Chachri, Madhubhar, Runjhun, totak, Nishipalak, Chanchele, Nraj, Champak-mala, Amritdhuni, Padhri, Hansak, Anangshekhar, Pramanika, Srikhandi (Panjabi) and Bahare mutkarib Musaman Maksur Mohzu (Persian), Anustup (Sanskrit). These contain both matrik and varnik metres, although in number the matrikas are much more.

The poet has chosen his metres not only from Hindi but has made use of some Sanskrit, Persian and Panjabi metres and they have been used with equal expertise. He had used both the smallest and the longest metres with equal skill. In the use of metre his reputation and excellence dwells on his masterly use of all these metres-well suited to the occasion. This also speak highly



of his vast knowledge of the rules of prosody. He has chosen the right metre for the right passage. The choice is in strict conformity with the sentiments and emotions expressed. They go a long way in enhancing and intensifying the effect of those emotions for which they have been used. At places, a variety of metres have been used in a single context. This variety is visible especially in the narration of battle scenes. Here the metres change frequently . This frequent change of metre not only breaks the monotony of the narration, but also gives appropriate expression to the mode and speed of the battle. As the battle starts metres of slow speed are used and as the battle scene picks up, metres having more speed, swiftness and fastness are used and they go on charging according to the speed, tempo and fierceness of the fighting. This is how the poet has shown his poetic skill by making a very proper and appropriate use of various metres.

Needless to say that the metrical measures employed by the poet in 'Guru Pratap Suraj' bear an impact of a skilled craftsman and talented artist.

To conclude, it may be rightly said that 'Guru Pratap Suraj' is not only the most voluminous epic of all works in Hindi, it is a great piece of literature. This work has however, so far, won limited recognition as it has been looked upon as a religious work rather than a literary piece of great merit. The obvious reason for its limited appreciation is that it is written in Gurumukhi script, as such it remained a sealed book for Hindi

scholars. Fortunately, the Panjab Language Department has taken up the project of its publication in Hindi and it is hoped that with this publication it will find an honourable place in Hindi literature and will make Panjab a co-share in the great heritage of Hindi literature.



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