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A SIKH SPIRITUAL CLASSIC: VĪR SINGH'S *RĀṆĀ SŪRAT SINGH*

'Modern classics' are defined partly by date, partly by quality; and the later the former, the harder it is to be sure of the enduring quality of the latter. This paper accordingly looks to that safe middle distance of an early modern classic. It takes as its theme a long Panjabi poem of 1905 which has certainly come to assume the status of a classic for those able to read it in its original language and script: assured full mention in literary histories, approved for educational institutions by the Director of Public Instruction, and safely revered rather than read.

*Context*

As its date will suggest, *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* has many of the characteristics of other major products of that golden literary dawn of pre-First World War India, whose glow had by the turn of the century belatedly reached even areas as far removed from the great metropolitan cities as the Panjab. The richness of its effect derives from the fashion in which the author is able to draw naturally upon the still living traditions of the past, and the ways in which he is able — even if not always without some awkwardness — to recast these in the then still emerging language of the present. In other words, this fine poem is very long, very serious, and very confident. Like most other Indian literary classics of the period, it is certainly not free from prolixity, clumsiness or naivety: but these defects, however evident to modern tastes, should not be allowed to obscure the nobility which truly makes *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* a classic.

In terms of local literary history, *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* is certainly the first poetic classic of modern Panjabi literature. No reservations need be attached to this bald claim, given the peculiar evolution of Panjabi as a literary language, and the quite sharp shift of emphasis which occurred in its cultivation towards the end of the last century. Historically, Panjabi had indeed formerly provided a major component of the poetic

language created by Gurū Nānak, used in the hymns of his immediate successors included in the *Ādi Granth* (1604), and still found in the prose *janamsākhī* literature of the seventeenth century. But the predominant language of later Sikh literature was Brajbhāṣā, albeit still written in the Gurmukhi script; and the Panjabi classics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were almost all written by Muslim authors, using the Persian script and drawing ever more extensively on the vocabulary and imagery of Persian poetry.<sup>1</sup>

Panjabi was, however, far less important as a literary language than Urdu, established by the British as the main educational and administrative language of the province, and enthusiastically adopted from the later decades of the nineteenth century onwards by writers of the Muslim majority community in a tradition of language use which continues in Pakistan today. Consequently, as is well known, the development of modern Panjabi literature was very much the result of initiatives from within the Sikh community, the only major religious group which did not seek to identify itself with a non-local language. More specifically, these initiatives were formulated by the leaders of the Singh Sabhā reformist movement which rather rapidly after its foundation in the 1870s came to assume so central a position within the community. Given the length of the preceding period during which Panjabi had been largely neglected for Sikh literature, a new idiom had first to be forged, based certainly upon spoken Panjabi but also influenced by contemporary Urdu-Hindi norms, besides consciously looking back to suitable elements of the scriptural language of the *Ādi Granth*.

Both this modern standard Panjabi and the literature associated with it,<sup>2</sup> written in the Gurmukhi script, and hence used almost exclusively by Sikh writers, were still in their formative stages in the 1890s when Bhāi Vir Singh (1872-1957) was at the outset of his long literary career. His contribution was to prove enormous in every sense, not merely in the sheer bulk of his output over some six decades, but also in its variety and generally remarkable quality, often in genres for which there was no prior model in Panjabi at all. While a good case can be made for considering his spiritual epic

<sup>1</sup> Cf. C. Shackle, 'Transition and transformation in Vāris Shāh's *Hir*' in C. Shackle and R. Snell, ed., *The Indian narrative: perspectives and patterns* (Wiesbaden 1992), pp. 241-63.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. C. Shackle, 'Some observations on the evolution of modern standard Punjabi', in J.T. O'Connell et al., ed., *Sikh history and religion in the twentieth century* (Toronto 1988), pp. 101-9.

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*Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* to be his finest single artistic creation, its qualities are best assessed against the background of his work as a whole.

*Bhāi Vir Singh: life and works*<sup>3</sup>

Originally from Multan, Bhāi Vir Singh's family had been comfortably established in Amritsar since his grandfather's time. His father was trained as an Ayurvedic doctor and composed poetry in Braj, and he passed on to his son the considerable family tradition of Sikh learning, also inherited by Vir Singh from his mother's side. To this was added a modern secondary education, pursued up to matriculation at the Church Mission School, Amritsar.

From the outset, therefore, he was well equipped for the great task of conveying the message of a revived Sikhism stripped of the accretions abhorrent to the Singh Sabhā reformers, which was to preoccupy him through sixty-five productive years of unremitting industry. Never obliged by economic necessity to seek formal employment, and personally disinclined to become engaged in the political or social activism which attracted so many of his leading contemporaries, he spent all his life in Amritsar, free to devote himself to the cultivation and development of his outstanding gifts as a propagandist, as a scholar, and as a creative writer.

The dissemination of reformist Sikh teachings always lay at the centre of Vir Singh's activities. In 1892, together with his friend Vazir Singh, he established the Wazir-i-Hind Press, from which all his writings were published. In the following year he founded the Khalsa Tract Society to produce pamphlets on Sikhism in imitation of Christian missionary tracts. Well over a thousand of these were written by Vir Singh himself, those relating to the lives of the Gurūs later being edited to help form his extended devotional biographies of Gurū Gobind Singh (*Srī Kalgīdhar camatkār* (1925)) and Gurū Nānak (*Srī Gurū Nānak camatkār* (1928)).<sup>4</sup> He also founded the weekly newspaper *Khālsā samācār* in 1899, which he produced virtually single-handed

<sup>3</sup> The best account in English is Harbans Singh, *Bhai Vir Singh* (New Delhi 1972), in the *Makers of modern Indian literature* series published by the Sahitya Akademi.

<sup>4</sup> For the way in which the last looks to the past as much as to the present, cf. W.H. McLeod, *Early Sikh tradition* (Oxford 1980), p. 42: 'Vir Singh was an unusually gifted Pañjābī writer and his *Srī Gurū Nānak Camatkār* can be regarded, in terms of language and style, as the climax of janam-sākhī development.'

for many years; now in its ninety-fifth year of publication, this continues actively to promote Bhāi Sāhib's memory under the auspices of the Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan, which recently authorized a welcome facelift to its layout.

As a scholar, Vir Singh concentrated chiefly upon providing reliable editions of classic works of Sikh religion and history, all of which have since become standard. The first of these was the very important *Vārān Bhāi Gurdās* (1911), produced in collaboration with his maternal grandfather. Many other texts followed, of which his edition of the *Purātan janamsākhī* (1926) is probably the most widely used. His magnum opus in this field was his edition of the vast early nineteenth century account of the Gurūs known as the *Sūraj prakāś*, whose preparation occupied Vir Singh for nine years, and which was published with a huge commentary in fourteen substantial volumes in 1934.<sup>5</sup> In old age he continued work on a commentary on the *Ādi Granth* on a similarly monumental scale: and while rather less than half was completed before his death, the resulting *Santhyā Sṛī Gurū Granth Sāhib* manages to occupy seven volumes of no mean bulk.

#### *Creative works*

All this work, astonishing enough in itself for a single individual, was accompanied throughout by creative writing in both prose and poetry. While still at school, Vir Singh had begun work on an historical novel, published as the first Panjabi novel in 1898. This was *Sundarī*, a modern Panjabi classic if ever there was one, which had gone through thirty-six editions by 1979, collectively comprising over a million copies, and continues to be widely read. Very much a product of its time, it is an exciting tale set in the heroic age of the eighteenth century, when only the bravery of the Sikhs served to defend the Panjab and its craven Hindu inhabitants against the tyrannical oppression of fiercely competing Muslim warlords. The story tells of the rescue of the young Hindu girl Surassatī from the clutches of a Muslim baron by her Sikh brother, who has joined a band of Sikh guerillas in the jungle. Renamed Sundar Kaur after her conversion, she helps the guerilla-band as their resident cook and nurse through many adventures, before dying of the wound inflicted by a treacherous

<sup>5</sup> The scale of the commentary may be judged from the enormous length of its well known excursus on Devī worship, which occupies fifty pages in Vir Singh, ed., Santokh Singh, *Sṛī gur pratāp sūraj granth*, 4th edn. (Amritsar 1965), vol. 12, pp. 4969-5027.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Bābā Naudh Singh*,

Muslim. The early chapters in particular are written with great verve; and although the later passages dwell extensively on the broader history of the times and their lessons for the Sikhs of the present, with much weight being given to the part played by Vir Singh's ancestor Divān Kauṛā Mal (d. 1752), followed by over-copious extracts from historical texts like the *Prācīn panth prakāś* (later to be edited and published by Vir Singh in 1914), *Sundarī* well deserves its huge reputation. It proved to be much the most popular of Vir Singh's works, on whose title pages he is generally described as '*Sundarī kartā*'.

The next novel, *Bijai Singh* (1899), is similar in character, though the genders are reversed: Bijai Singh is the Sikh hero who has to escape the wicked wiles of a Muslim lady. Though perhaps more convincingly constructed, it has never proved quite so popular as *Sundarī*.<sup>6</sup> Set in the same period, the third short novel of this early trilogy was *Satvant Kaur* (1900), a much more far-fetched account of the escape of a Sikh girl from Afghanistan to India.

Perhaps having realized he had gone as far as he could with the historical novel, Vir Singh then turned to poetry and produced the first long modern Panjabi poem with *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh*, which was first published in 1905, and which forms the subject of the present paper.

His later prose compositions are artistically less successful, being frequently overladen with heavily didactic passages. The Panjabi drama has always been a decidedly artificial genre in the absence of any sophisticated local theatrical tradition, and while *Rājā Lakhdātā Singh* (1910) is dutifully remembered in literary histories as the first Panjabi play, the summary of its plot, dealing with the conversion of a Sikh princeling from a life of selfish pleasure to the cause of promoting literacy among his subjects, is hardly encouraging. Rather greater importance attaches to his later novels, particularly *Bābā Naudh Singh* (1921), whose rambling prolixity contains within it some good scenes, particularly those where the wise old Bābā preserves the peace of his village from the narrow bigotry of visiting Arya, Muslim and Christian missionaries,<sup>7</sup> but whose narrative is eventually unable to sustain the weight of

<sup>6</sup> Available in an English translation by Devinder Singh Duggal (Singapore 1983). There is a full summary of *Sundarī* in Harbans Singh, *op.cit.*, pp. 39-45. Cf. also Bhagvan Das Arora, *Bhāi Vir Singh de nāvalān de nārī pātr* (Jalandhar 1976).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Bābā Naudh Singh*, 20th edn. (Amritsar 1974), pp. 24-45.

Vir Singh's interminable homilies. Finally, the sermonizing tone becomes all-pervasive in the lengthy second part added to the already weak *Satvant Kaur* (1927).

Apart from *Sundarī*, Vir Singh is thus rightly remembered chiefly for his poetry. After *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh*, this was cast in the form of short lyrics, which appeared in a series of slim collections from the early 1920s onwards. The character of Vir Singh's lyric poetry is perfectly conveyed by the titles of his best-known collections, suggesting an ecstatic nature-mysticism all too reminiscent of Tagore, at least as familiar from the English *Gitanjali*,<sup>8</sup> e.g. *Lahirān de hār* ('Wave-wreaths', 1921), which incorporates a section headed *Trel tupke* ('Dewdrops') in the Perso-Urdu *rubā'ī* form, yet another first for Panjabi; *Bijliān de hār* ('Lightning-wreaths', 1927); and *Maṭak hulāre* ('Quivers of grace', 1925), the product of a visit to Kashmir, whose natural beauty has so often proved appealing to modern poets from the Panjab plains. The inward and mystical interpretation of Sikhism which had always been so central to Vir Singh found full expression in *Kambdī kalāī* ('The trembling wrist', 1933), a collection of poems in honour of the Gurūs, and this is fully sustained in his seventh and last collection *Mere sālān jō* ('O my Lord!', 1953). This won him the Sahitya Akademi Award, just one of the many honours heaped upon him after independence, culminating in the conferment of the Padma Bhushan a year before his death in Amritsar in 1957, when he was in his eighty-fifth year.

#### Rāṇā Sūrat Singh: *metre and language*

*Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* first appeared in the form of tracts in 1905, and was then revised for its second edition as a book in 1919, further revisions being undertaken for the fourth edition of 1937, subsequently several times reprinted. Since the poem is hardly

<sup>8</sup> The tone is perfectly caught in the slim volume of translations by Puran Singh, *Nargas: songs of a Sikh*, by Bhai Vir Singh (London 1924), whose art nouveau frontispiece illustrates the line 'The dew is falling everywhere, and wet is every rose': cf. *The dewdrop on the lotus-leaf* (p.1): 'I am the dewdrop trembling on the lotus-leaf, / As the flower floats on the water! / Borne on a ray of the sun, I dropped, / Like a pearl strung on a thread of gold. / I quiver on the lotus-leaf as quivers the morning ray, / The hand that dropped me from on high / In itself holds all the strings of guiding light. / It is the hand of my King! / I play on the lotus-leaf to-day; / To-morrow I shall be with him! / He drops me, and he draws me up—, / A dewdrop on the lotus-leaf.'

available in English,<sup>9</sup> appropriate starting-point.

The poem comprises 300 stanzas. It is divided into thirty sections, sometimes interspersed with prose placed enticingly near the end of appendixes devoted to the poet's mind which is a classification of scriptural texts as a guide to devotion (1905). Vir Singh's religious concerns are others: but since the poem, *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh*, its religious concerns are largely treated as given.

At the beginning of the poem describe the workings of the human story. The preface contains

<sup>9</sup> Six extracts from the poem are in G.S. Talib *et al*, *Bhai Vir Singh: a selection of the lyrics*.

Besides Harbans Singh, 'Some significant features of the poem', in Attar Singh, *Bhai Vir Singh: a study* (New Delhi 1972), pp. 2-3, and by G.S. Talib, 'Rāṇā Sūrat Singh: another bilingual collection', in 1985 under the auspices of the *Singh, samikhiātmak* etc.

The copious critical edition of *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh*, includes Bhai Vir Singh *jī dī kāv* (Amritsar 1974).

<sup>10</sup> All subsequent references to the poem are by numbers in the text of the poem.

available in English,<sup>9</sup> a formal description of the standard edition<sup>10</sup> provides an appropriate starting-point for the critical consideration of its contents.

The poem comprises 14,270 lines, rather forbiddingly arranged in double columns. It is divided into thirty-five cantos of varying length, mostly of 300-400 lines each, sometimes interspersed with scriptural quotations. Three coloured illustrations are placed enticingly near the beginning of the book, which concludes with two short appendixes devoted to the sort of schematic table that so appealed to that part of Vir Singh's mind which delighted in compiling complex commentaries: the first is a classification of scriptural hymns (*gurbāṇī*) by spiritual function and name, the second a guide to devotion (*nām*), both being illustrated with copious scriptural quotations. Vir Singh's religious concerns are thus very much to the fore in this book, as in all his others: but since the concern of this paper is primarily with the literary qualities of *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh*, its status as an important text of reformist Sikhism (*sikkhi*) is here largely treated as given.

At the beginning of the book, a brief preface establishes its purpose, which is to describe the workings of mystical love, before going on to summarize the plot of the story. The preface concludes with a brief description of the choice of metre, a break

<sup>9</sup> Six extracts from the earlier cantos are given in the UNESCO-sponsored translation by Gurbachan S. Talib *et al*, *Bhai Vir Singh, poet of the Sikhs* (Delhi 1976), pp. 113-155, following a representative selection of the lyrics.

Besides Harbans Singh, *op.cit.*, pp. 55-64, descriptive material in English includes G.S. Talib, 'Some significant features of Bhai Vir Singh's epic, Rana Surat Singh', in Gurbachan S. Talib and Attar Singh, *Bhai Vir Singh: life, times and works* (Chandigarh 1973), pp. 122-8; and Madan Mohan Singh, 'Rana Surat Singh — a mystical epic', in Harbans Singh, ed. *Bhai Vir Singh shatabdi granth* (New Delhi 1972), pp. 293-300, a bilingual collection which also includes a much fuller Panjabi study by G.S. Talib, 'Rāṇā Sūrat Singh dī baṅtar dā ādhār', pp. 310-31. (I have seen only the title of another bilingual collection of papers from a seminar on the poem held in New Delhi in September 1985 under the auspices of the Bhai Vir Singh Sahit Sadan, published as *Mahān kāvī Rāṇā Sūrat Singh, samikhiātmak adhiāin* (New Delhi 1987).)

The copious critical literature in Panjabi on Vir Singh's poetry, with occasional reference to *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh*, includes Meva S. Tung, *Bhāi Vir Singh dī kāvī srishṭī* (Patiala 1971); Seva S. Sevak, *Bhāi Vir Singh jī dī kāvī-kalā* (Amritsar 1972); Dalip S. Dip, *Bhāi Vir Singh jīvan te kāvī cintan* (Amritsar 1974).

<sup>10</sup> All subsequent references are to the eighth edition (Amritsar: Khalsa Samachar, 1973). Bracketed numbers in the text of the paper refer to cantos and lines of this edition.

from traditional Panjabi poetic practice, which favoured ample rhymes and had its well-established metres for narrative verse.<sup>11</sup> Vir Singh observes that rhyme often obscures the sense; and he points to the precedent of Sanskrit poetry and the free verse favoured in Greek, Latin and English.<sup>12</sup> Besides the absence of rhyme in *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh*, the metre too is rather novel. Although he points to its occasional use in earlier Panjabi poetry, little previous systematic employment had been made of the short metre he terms *sirkhandī chand*. This consists of 20 *mātrās*, divided as 11 (ending long + short), plus 9 (ending short + long). The inherent vowel is indicated by superscripts in the following example (11:88-91), picked almost at random:

'mainūn āgyā deu	'kallī jāike	'Now grant me leave to go alone
'lyāvān turat <sup>a</sup> surāg <sup>a</sup> — patā uthāuñ dā.		'And quickly bring a trace — some clue,
'marī ji ose thāuñ	tusiñ na āv <sup>a</sup> nā,	'If there I die, you must not come,
'jyundī je ā jāuñ	jāñāñ tāñ tusāñ.	'If I return alive, then go.'

Even this short extract may indicate the great care which went into the preparation of *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh*, as seen in the elaborate punctuation of the original. Later quotations will show how this extends even to e.g. the use of double quotation marks to mark doubly reported speech, a convention hardly achieved with much certainty even in present-day Panjabi prose. Extending to the careful use of spacing to mark paragraphed sections, the punctuation has an important stylistic function in organizing the flow of a poem which has dispensed with end-stopped rhymed verses.

Similarly, the metrical count is extremely carefully preserved throughout the poem. Sometimes verging on the pedantic in the minuteness with which special orthographic signs and rules are employed to secure it, this exactitude is of course entirely consistent with the strongly held conviction of the Singh Sabhā writers like Vir Singh that Panjabi was no crude rustic patois, but a language fully capable of being used for the most refined literature. Besides such purely orthographic conventions as the liberal use of written conjunct -y where modern Panjabi follows the norms of the *Ādi Granth*

<sup>11</sup> These are the (*lamme*) *baiñt* of Vāris Shāh's *Hir* (20 + 20 = 40), and the shorter *baiñt khurd* or *davayye* (16 + 12 = 28).

<sup>12</sup> *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh*, p. v.

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<sup>13</sup> Other exceptional orth the bearer īrī to indicat exceptionally careful u realization of vowels i mahil / rahi; cf. also pauñc<sup>a</sup> / baut<sup>a</sup> for p



in preferring *-i* (thus *āgyā* / *lyāvān* above for standard *āgiā* / *liāvān*),<sup>13</sup> more substantial features of the poetic language of *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* are similarly determined by the twin requirements of strict scansion and the stylistic desirability of an elevated diction. There is thus a considerable prominence of archaic scriptural forms (e.g. *deu* / *jāike* / *thāuñ* / *āvaṇā* for modern *dio* / *jā-ke* / *thān* / *auṇā*). While entirely appropriate to the poem's theme, these no longer form part of the idiom of modern Panjabi verse, which looks rather to the colloquialisms also judiciously incorporated *metri gratia* into the language of *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* (e.g. *'kalli* / *jāuñ* for standard *ikalli* / *jāvān*). Less judicious, perhaps, is the freedom Vīr Singh permits himself to imitate sub-standard spoken Panjabi usage in the elision of pre-tonic initial vowels, where phrases like *dharam* *'nusār* are in disagreeable conflict with the rules of sandhi; perhaps accordingly, this was one innovation not followed by later poets.

Archaic scriptural forms are particularly frequently employed for their value as convenient sources of the short syllables required before the caesura and in the penultimate position of the line. Here, the normal 'long-short-long' is similarly sometimes effected by the use of pseudo-Sanskrit forms with nasalization of the final inherent vowel (e.g. *sūkhamāñ* for *sūkham*). More frequent use to the same purpose is made of the more natural device of *-ṛ*-extensions, well established as a very familiar stand-by of pre-modern Panjabi verse: the necessary penultimate short syllable is thus provided in e.g. *sār<sup>a</sup>ṛe* / *kīt<sup>a</sup>ṛā* (for *sāre* / *kītā*, etc.).

As a whole, the language of *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* is, as one might expect, very deliberately based on the standard Mājhī of Amritsar and Lahore. As would also be expected, the Khaṛī Boli forms naturally casually present in older Panjabi poetry are here quite rigorously excluded in the cause of delimiting Panjabi from Hindi and Urdu: *dā* and *nūñ* have sturdily expelled *kā* and *ko*, although metrical convenience does allow quite a number of lines to end in *mujjh<sup>a</sup> nūñ* or *cāhīe* (for *mainūñ* and *cāhīdā* (*hai*)).

<sup>13</sup> Other exceptional orthographic devices include the occasional use of the vowel-sign *sihārī* without the bearer *īrī* to indicate an initial elided *i*-, e.g. *(i)'k* for *ik*. Particular mention should be made of the exceptionally careful use of the subscript *-h*- (typically used in modern Gurmukhi to indicate the tonal realization of vowels in proximity with voiced sonants) for metrical purposes, e.g. *mail<sub>h</sub><sup>a</sup>* / *r<sub>h</sub>ai* for *māhil* / *rahī*; cf. also the quite common instances of subscript *-h* with unvoiced consonants, e.g. *pauñc<sub>h</sub><sup>a</sup>* / *baut<sub>h</sub><sup>a</sup>* for *pahunc* / *bahut*.

Within these newly defined boundaries, however, there is still a rather greater freedom in the selection of forms from different Panjabi dialects than is characteristic of the present-day literary language, e.g. the different dialectal endings of the future tense in the following simile (12:138-9, 144-5), whose Lucretian tone is rather typical:

<i>zor<sup>a</sup> bhār<sup>a</sup> de ḍubb<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>heṭhān jāv<sup>a</sup>sī</i>	Beneath its weight, it will descend,
<i>bhāṇḍā usse thāuṇ</i>	<i>ṭikiā hī rahū...</i>	And in that place the pot will rest...
		[The air inside the sunken pot]
<i>phir<sup>a</sup> pāṇī toṇ bār<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>uppar<sup>a</sup> nikkalū</i>	Then from the water will ascend,
<i>vāyū maṇḍal<sup>a</sup> vicc<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>carṭ<sup>a</sup>dī jāigī</i>	And in the atmosphere will rise.

Modern standard Panjabi does not use the short *-ū* future, except e.g. in dialogue, and has lost the forms in *-sī*, as part of the general eastward orientation of Sikh Panjabi since the transfer of population in 1947. To Vir Singh, steeped in the older literary idiom with its stronger infusion of western dialects, not to speak of his ancestral Multani background, such forms came naturally, as did the occasional use of extended verbal terminations e.g. western *kareṇḍā* for standard *kardā*, or verbal forms with pronominal suffixes, e.g. *ākhius* 'he said' for *us ākhiā*, common also in his early novels.

In summary, therefore, the language of *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* represents an interesting intermediate stage in the standardization of modern literary Sikh Panjabi; and the poem's own importance in advancing that standardization of course needs to be borne in mind throughout the following discussion of its literary qualities.

#### *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh: shape and style*

The process of mystical love, whose description is the explicit purpose of *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh*, is essentially spiral, if not circular in its working. It is thus peculiarly well conveyed through the timeless glimpses afforded by the lyrical hymn, as is so amply and so directly shown by the magnificent poetic literatures of medieval north India, where so many paths are so vividly shown actually to lead to the One. As these same literatures also show, the process is much less easily conveyed through lengthy poetic narratives, with their inherent risks of dissolving into religio-philosophical excursions which leave the story behind, or of letting the story-line assume an independence that retains the interest of author and reader at the expense of increasingly awkward

accommodation to the medieval India, therefore fully successful.<sup>14</sup>

Since Vir Singh was to say, *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* at the expense of the much of the poem's appreciation of the sky in many ways a new movement, with what jettisons much more of

In striking contrast where the characters addressing God and mountain valley. In its flowers a princess comes the affairs of state in flowers, she establishes dead husband, whom sustained laments (1:1 verses whose bald literature. As so often inserted to reinforce t (1:263-74):

<sup>14</sup> Even more rarely can Weightman, 'Symmetry', Snell, ed., *ed.cit.* pp. 19

<sup>15</sup> Whereas most of the for their doctrinal content significant points late appropriate poetically, described in C. Shackle *Studies*, V, 1 (1978), p

accommodation to the allegorical superstructure: in contrast to the religious lyric of medieval India, therefore, rather few of its religious narrative poems can be felt to be fully successful.<sup>14</sup>

Since Vīr Singh was not only a poet but also a reformist publicist with a great deal to say, *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* almost inevitably falls on the side of favouring the message at the expense of the medium. But the two are far from unsuccessfully integrated for much of the poem's length, and much of its interest and appeal derives from the appreciation of the skill and beauty with which Vīr Singh manages to convey what is in many ways a new message, i.e. the reformed Sikhism of the Singh Sabhā movement, with what is equally obviously a new medium, his blank verse which jettisons much more of the traditional idiom of Panjabi poetry than its rhymes.

In striking contrast to the traditional way of beginning narrative poems in Panjabi, where the characters start talking to each other almost as soon as the poet has finished addressing God and his readers, *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* begins with a fine picture of a mountain valley. In its centre there is a marble mausoleum, to change whose withered flowers a princess comes accompanied by her attendant, who chides her for neglecting the affairs of state in her grief. As the princess mournfully changes the withered flowers, she establishes the mood of passionate yearning (*birahoṅ* (= *viraha*)) for her dead husband, whom the mausoleum commemorates. This first of many finely sustained laments (1:188-268) ends typically with a rather abrupt descent into narrative verses whose bald simplicity could hardly be paralleled in the traditional poetic literature. As so often throughout *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh*, a scriptural quotation<sup>15</sup> is then inserted to reinforce the main theme, on this occasion at least to very beautiful effect (1:263-74):

<sup>14</sup> Even more rarely can it be shown in their own terms how such poems succeed: cf. S.C.R. Weightman, 'Symmetry and symbolism in Shaikh Manjhan's *Madhumālī*', in C. Shackle and R. Snell, ed., *ed.cit.* pp. 195-226.

<sup>15</sup> Whereas most of the scriptural quotations interspersed throughout *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* are included for their doctrinal content, this verse — like those inscribed on the mausoleum (1:36) and others at significant points later in the poem (6:198, 20:31, and especially 22:241) — is also highly appropriate poetically, being taken from Gurū Arjan's verses in the lyrical 'South-Western' style, as described in C. Shackle, 'The South-Western style in the *Guru Granth Sahib*', *Journal of Sikh Studies*, V, 1 (1978), pp. 137-60.

'tūn sain̄ ṭukṛā nūr dehī jāñiān,  
 'tūn sain̄ prem prakāś̄ suhṇā jāṇke  
 '—patī jāṇke— nitt̄ tainūn̄ seviā,  
 'tūn sain̄ cānaṇ sāph, annhī main̄ rahī;  
 'hāi! bakhś̄ tūn āp "terī" ākhde.'  
 iuṇ kahi roī pher, hanjhū ā caṛhe.  
 naiṇ vahin̄; dariyāu mānoṇ kāṅg sī,  
 sakhi pūñjhdī jāi, bass na hoṇvdī,  
 bhijj̄ gae rūmāl, sukkaṇ naiṇ nā,  
 sāvaṇ chahibār sīg mānoṇ pai rahī,  
 roṇḍī roṇḍī pher, āh iuṇ mārḍī:-  
 'je tūn mitra asāḍarā ik bhorī na vechoṛī. 'If thou be my beloved keep me not away,  
 'jīu mahinjā taū mohiā kadi pasī jānī tohi.' 'O stealer of my heart, may I see thee  
 some day!' (Mārū ḍakhaṇe M5, 2)

After describing the princess's fresh outburst of longing for her dead husband as she clings to the marble statue of him mounted as noble Sikh warrior on horseback that she has had placed in the mausoleum, the second canto returns her to the palace, and the background to the story is revealed. We are taken to the heroic age of the Sikhs, but not directly to the Panjab plains where they battled for survival. The widowed heroine, Rāj Kaur, is the daughter of the Rajput rajah of a small state in the hills, converted to Sikhism by the saintly Sādhū Singh, to whose son Sūrāt Singh he gave his daughter and bequeathed his kingdom. When Rāṇā Sūrāt Singh, a paragon of Sikh chivalry, died fighting alongside his beleaguered co-religionists in the Panjab, he left Rāj Kaur to rule the state; but grief for her husband has rendered her incapable of this, to the consternation of her mother, Cand Kaur.

The Rajmata soon establishes herself as the most vividly drawn human character in a poem with remarkably few characters for its great length, and those few being anyway chiefly remarkable for their heavily underlined symbolic functions than for any human individuality. Although faithful to the Sikhism adopted by her dead husband, Cand Kaur is desperately anxious at a human level not only for her daughter's sanity, but for the integrity of her kingdom. On the advice of her chief minister, anxious only for the latter and anyway suspicious of the caste-origins of Sādhū Singh, an exorcist is summoned to treat Rāj Kaur.

The heroine, how  
 superstition, and tell  
 transported from her  
 spiritual realms (*kha*  
 Nānak's *Japī* 35-7 (*n*  
 devotional quest with  
 Sūrāt Singh sitting in  
 world of material exist

The narrative patte  
 Rāj Kaur's yearning s  
 now repeated. Other  
 her, purporting to ha  
 encouraging her to m  
 immediately discerns  
 (...*dekhān maut hai* /  
 show of spirit, and V  
 prominent in his histo

'kī sī autrī maut mer  
 'dekh maut dā rūp āk  
 'kadi na mannān, man  
 'sikkh na mannīs̄ koī  
 'jang vicc̄ je maut āv  
 'uh ākh phir "hāi āi n

Better counsel is of  
 companion, who sug  
 Sūrāt Singh had once  
 physical dimension an  
 journey across the m  
 famous 'Ode to Sleep  
 clear Gurmukhi' (12:7  
 them about him and  
 abode, which turns o

The heroine, however, reveals that she is far beyond the reach of this sort of superstition, and tells of her recent overwhelming experience, in which she was transported from her bed by a mysterious female guide to ascend through the four spiritual realms (*khaṇḍ*), whose glorious but tantalizingly brief description in Gurū Nānak's *Japī* 35-7 (naturally quoted and expanded upon in 5:118 ff.) provides the Sikh devotional quest with its principal chart; and in which she was vouchsafed a glimpse of Sūrāt Singh sitting in light near the Gurūs, before she was led back down to the heavy world of material existence.

The narrative pattern established by these opening cantos, in which descriptions of Rāj Kaur's yearning suffering in her loneliness are followed by a spiritual journey, is now repeated. Other stratagems to arouse her having failed, a faked letter is read to her, purporting to have been written by Sūrāt Singh with his dying blood, and encouraging her to marry the ruler of the neighbouring state of Kahlur. She however immediately discerns it is a fraud from the line 'Before me now, *alas*, stands death' (...*dekhān maut hai / āi gāi huṇ, hāi mere sāmḥṇe* 10:118-9), prompting her to a rare show of spirit, and Vir Singh to the praise of Sikh martial values so often wearisomely prominent in his historical novels, but here hardly present elsewhere (10:182-7):

'*kī sī autrī maut mere sant nūn,*  
'*dekh maut dā rūp ākh 'hāi' o:*  
'*kadī na mannān, mann kadī na sakkdī;*  
'*sikkh na mannsī koī pucchīn jā kise.*  
'*jang vicc je maut āve sikkh nūn*  
'*uh ākh phir "hāi āi maut hai?"*'

'What dreadful death did my dear lord  
'Behold to make him cry 'Alas!'  
'No, this I can't and won't believe,  
'No more will any Sikh you ask.  
'If death comes to a Sikh in war,  
'Will he say, "Death, *alas*, has come!" ?'

Better counsel is offered by Rādhā, Rāj Kaur's stereotypically faithful attendant and companion, who suggests they visit the distant fairy mansion (*parī mahil*), where Sūrāt Singh had once gone. The second spiritual journey in the poem thus also has a physical dimension and is described at appropriately greater length (11-17). After their journey across the mountains, finely described with lengthy poetic asides including a famous 'Ode to Sleep' (11:195-287), they find the fairy mansion and an inscription 'in clear Gurmukhī' (12:77) carved by Sūrāt Singh, and are greeted by the 'fairy' who tells them about him and her own conversion to Sikhism. She shows them round her abode, which turns out to have been of Buddhist origin, subsequently taken over by

the Jains, then by the Gorakhnāthī yogis. All this allows Vir Singh to develop in his remarkably flexible verse medium a brief history of Indian religions, whose internal contradictions are inevitably seen to be answered only by the teachings of Sikhism (13:48-52, 57-64):

'samān pāi phir jain maddham ho giā	'As time went on, the Jains grew weak,
'śaktī pūjan pher ethe phailiā;	'The cult of Śaktī then spread here;
'śaktī mūrati auh dekho hai khanī,	'See here the form of Śaktī carved!
'gorakh dā phir zor iddhar ā piā	'And then as Gorakh grew in strength,
'hikmat kar ih thā[u]ñ litā jogiāñ...	'His yogis made this place their own...
'phir ethe sī zor pāiā rājiāñ,	'The Rajahs then grew powerful,
'jo sige rajpūt pūjan devīāñ,	'Who, Rajput goddess-worshippers,
'dar enhāñ toñ khāi jogī sādhuāñ	'So filled the yogis' hearts with fear,
'dittā butt banāi kṛṣṇavtār dā	'They had a Krishna-statue made
'nāle devī butt ik khanvāiā,	'And of the goddess one besides,
'miśrat ho gyā kamm pūjan devīāñ,	'The worship muddled then became
'durgā pūjan nāl vaiśnav devīāñ	'Of Durgā and the Vishnu-cult,
'jogī par is thāuñ vasde hī rahe...	'But still the yogis dwelt on here.'

Extended spiritual discourses follow, causing Rāj Kaur's long absence from home. The fine canto devoted to her mother's consequent distress (18: 'Mātā vilāp') is analysed separately in the following section of this paper. Rāj Kaur eventually returns for the last of the sections of the poem set on earth. Though the reunion between mother and daughter brings each some relief, Rāj Kaur's continuing quest is further delayed only by the reading of letters penned — this time genuinely — by Sūrat Singh on a variety of religious themes, whose text is given in the poem's longest canto (21:118-1182). This is followed by the last canto of readily appreciable poetic excellence, which describes Rāj Kaur's depression at still being bereft of Sūrat Singh (22: 'Toṭ').

Many thousands of lines have yet to follow. Some Sikh musicians (*rāgī*) from the Panjab appear, who talk about Sūrat Singh and sing hymns, before they are sent on their way back to the battlegrounds of the Panjab with an appropriate donation for the

Sikh cause from Rāj Kaur with the ever-faithful I man, the leader of a Si With the appearance o poetic appeal of the fi monotonous exposition these closing cantos se careless reader of the r Singh's mausoleum and

'pūjā butt samādh soñ  
'bhāven sī parlāp 'vas  
'jis vic ih kuch āp hai  
'par jaṛh-pūjā yog hai

Such references to discourses with which citations of scriptural v than enthusiastically in and supplier of yet fur one of the Singh ji's typical (33:295-302):

'huñ jo kahī vicār hai  
'os nāl ih tuṭṭ haūman  
'uh varte śubh matti p

<sup>16</sup> Cf. 23:376-80, more ap  
jisdī labbhī sūñh pāsoñ  
māyā bheṭā āp ghallī  
minstrels about it, so the

<sup>17</sup> About 100 quotations t  
which 43 are found in t  
cantos 33-5.

Sikh cause from Rāj Kaur.<sup>16</sup> This paves the way for her final journey, which takes her with the ever-faithful Rādhā into the mountains again, where she is found by an old man, the leader of a Sikh congregation (*satisang*) founded by the tireless Sūrat Singh. With the appearance of this reverend 'Singh jī', the remarkably sustained and varied poetic appeal of the first two thirds of *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* gives way to an increasingly monotonous exposition of neo-orthodox Sikh teachings. It is true, however, that these closing cantos serve to tie up some loose ends, e.g. any misunderstanding by the careless reader of the much earlier description of Rāj Kaur's naive adoration of Sūrat Singh's mausoleum and statue (31:361-4):

'pūjā butt samādh soṇhī gall nā	'Both shrine- and idol-worship shun!
'bhāven sī parlāp 'vasthā prem dī	'No matter that love's madness drove
'jis vic ih kuch āp haisī sājiā	'You on to make all this yourself —
'par jaṛh-pūjā yog hai nahin rānie!	'Blind worship ill beseems us, queen!

Such references to the poem itself are, however, rare features of the prolix discourses with which Rāj Kaur is favoured by this ultimate guide. Their copious citations of scriptural verses, heavily underlining the unrelieved *kathā*-tone, are more than enthusiastically imitated by the Singh jī's alter ego, Vir Singh himself as author and supplier of yet further references in footnotes.<sup>17</sup> The following short extract from one of the Singh jī's elaborately numbered expositions of Sikh doctrine is all too typical (33:295-302):

'huṇ jo kahī vicār hai main, rāj jī,	'What I have told you, lady Rāj,
'os nāl ih tuṭṭ haūmain jānvdi,	'Are principles which break the Self;
'uh varte śubh matti phir hai aikurān	'These goodly counsels run like this

<sup>16</sup> Cf. 23:376-80, more appropriately rendered in prose translation: *panth vikhe sī loṛ māyā dī paī / jisdī labbhī sūnh pāsoṇ rāgiān / rāṇī nūn kar pucch hālat panth dī. / is karke us rāj mattī prem ne / māyā bhetā āp ghallī panth nūn.* 'The Panth needed money, as she had heard from asking the minstrels about it, so the love-drunk Rāj sent it some as an offering.'

<sup>17</sup> About 100 quotations from the *Ādi Granth* occur at intervals throughout *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh*, of which 43 are found in the final cantos 31-5, plus an additional 58 verses cited in the footnotes to cantos 33-5.

(u)	(a)
'burā kise dā nāhiñ maithon hoi jī,*	'Let me not cause another harm,
(a)	(b)
'bhalā sarab dā pher ride vasāñvdā,†	'The good of all then fills the heart,
(i)	(c)
'phir kardā hai kamm nekī vālre,††	'The deeds it does will then be good,
(s)	(d)
'nekī karke oh phir hai socdā	'In doing good it then reflects
'is vic haiñ hañkār nāhi cāhiē,**	'No pride or ego is required.'

\*para kā burā na rākhahu cīta / tuma kaū dukhu nahī bhāi mīta. (Āsā M5, 62)

tathā — dūkhu na deī kisai jīa pati siu ghari jāvaū. (Gaūrī vār M5 17)

† terai bhāñai sarabatta kā bhalā.

†† onhī mandai pairu na rakhio kari sukritu dharamu kamāiā. (Āsā vār M1, 7)

\*\* je loṛahi cangā āpañā kari punnahū nīcu sadāiāi. (Āsā vār M1, 5)

Faced with such material as this, extended over many pages, the reader is well advised to follow Vīr Singh's notes directing him to the appendixes, where the learned author is able to cover the same ground in a much more succinct and systematic fashion. Those who do pursue *Rāñā Sūrat Singh* to the end will find little to detain them in the cursory concluding description of his widow's return from the Singh jī's company to a life of grateful devotion and practical good works (35:357-90).

#### Rāñā Sūrat Singh: the poet's art

As should have been established, however, the preceding cantos of *Rāñā Sūrat Singh* contain much fine poetry, particularly remarkable for the way in which Vīr Singh not only created a stylistic idiom essentially novel to Panjabi literary tradition, but was also able to employ it to such successful and varied effect. The quality of a poem of this length is only fairly to be judged from an appropriately extended passage; and to this end the eighteenth canto, describing the grief of Cand Kaur over Rāj Kaur's long absence in the fairy mansion, has been selected for more detailed examination.

Passages of natural description serve to begin many of the cantos of *Rāñā Sūrat Singh*, the one which opens the whole poem being particularly frequently anthologized.

Since the eighteenth can  
her mother, it too appro  
the heat shed by the mon  
the Panjab plains than  
splendidly maintained (1

kardiyāñ māro mār pūra  
din de rāje āi tahat jamā  
takhat sunahiri baiṭh kī  
jikkur hunde tīr mār uḍ  
dhund havār kuhīr dhar  
andherā huṇ chaḍḍ rāre  
nass giā ḍar khāi isde t  
guphāñ, koṭhīāñ, tang,

lukiā ihniñ thāuñ sunga  
cakkarvartī rāj sūraj de  
phail giā sabh des, dan  
thal vāñgū asmāñ māñ  
jis par vahe samund tej  
ulṭā sundar khel: heṭhār  
utte thal sarpoś vāñgū  
tikkhā cānañ sāph ḍal  
bhariā vīcc akās thāthā  
isdā molhe-dhār ik ras  
latthā heṭhāñ mīñh sār  
koṭhe, kandhāñ heṭh, v

śahirāñ, saṛkāñ, bāg, n

nakā nakk bharpūr cāñ  
ucce parbat baiṭh is vic

18 All subsequent bracketed



Since the eighteenth canto marks an abrupt shift in the narrative, from the heroine to her mother, it too appropriately begins with a long prelude finely evoking a picture of the heat shed by the morning sun. Even if this in reality would be felt more keenly on the Panjab plains than in the hills where the narrative is set, the epic tone is rather splendidly maintained (18:1-49).<sup>18</sup>

*kardiyān māro mār pūrab lānbh toṇ  
din de rāje āi tahaṭ jamā liā  
takhat sunahiri baiṭh kirmā[n] mārda  
jikkur hunde tīr mār udānvda  
dhund havāṭ kuhīr dharī chāiān  
andherā huṇ chadḍ rare maidān nūn  
nass giā ḍar khāi isde tej toṇ  
guphān, koṭhīān, tang, parbat  
kandarān,*

*lukiā ihnīn thāuṇ sungar saimhiān,  
cakkarvartī rāj sūraj dev dā  
phail giā sabh des, ḍankā vajjiā,  
thal vāṅgū asmān māno hai raṛā,  
jis par vahe samund tej prakās dā  
ulṭā sundar khel: heṭhān jal vahe,  
utte thal sarpoś vāṅgū rakkhiā,  
tikkhā cānaṇ sāph ḍalhkān mārda  
bhariā vicc akās thāṭhān mārda  
isdā molhe-dhār ik ras bajjhvān  
latthā heṭhān mīnh sārī bhūmī te,  
koṭhe, kandhān heṭh, viccīn  
veṛhiān,  
śahirān, sarkān, bāg, nadiān,  
jaṅgalīn,  
nakā nakk bharpūr cānaṇ ho giā,  
ucce parbat baiṭh is vicc nhānvde;*

In furious tumult from the east  
The day's great king proclaimed his power  
And from his golden throne shed rays  
Which, arrow-like, soon put to flight  
The fogs and mists which wrapped the earth. 5  
The darkness fled the level plain  
And from his glory fled in fear  
In hollows, stores, nooks, mountain caves

To hide, and there it shrank in dread.  
The sun-god's universal rule 10  
Spread everywhere, quite unopposed.  
The sky was like a desert plain  
Submerged by seas of brilliant fire,  
Say rather: waters flowed below  
With deserts as their covering, 15  
The sharply shimmering brilliant light  
Filled all the heavens with its rays,  
Which then uninterrupted  
Rained down upon the earth below;  
Walled places, houses, inner courts, 20

Roads, cities, gardens, jungles, streams  
Entirely overflowed with light,  
The lofty mountains bathed therein;

<sup>18</sup> All subsequent bracketed references in the text are to verse-numbers of canto 18.

<i>baiṭhe sāve bricch tubbhiān mārke,</i>	Green trees dived in to sit in it,	
<i>cānaṇ molhe-dhār pai pai upparon</i>	As light unbroken from above	25
<i>tilhak dharā nūn jāi us pur phaildā,</i>	Kept pouring down to spread on earth,	
<i>pāṇi-haṛ jad āi sabh kujh ṭhārdā,</i>	By floods of water all is cooled,	
<i>par is cānaṇ kāṅg jagg tapāiā, —</i>	But this light-flood inflamed the world, —	
<i>dhartī tap gai tāp jikkur hoṇvdā;</i>	The earth as if with fever burned;	
<i>bricch tape te des, paṇ tapātīān,</i>	The hot winds burned the trees and land.	30
<i>es tapat toṇ pher ghābar phailarī,</i>	Then from this heat distress arose,	
<i>ṭhandīn thāīn jāi lokīn baiṭhe;</i>	In cool spots people went to sit.	
<i>aipar birahoṇ tīr khāḍhe sī jinhān</i>	But those whom longing's shafts had struck	
<i>es tapat de vicc prītam bhāḍe;</i>	In this fierce heat still sought their loves;	
<i>unhnān dī o dhāl bhajī andaron</i>	That shield of theirs had snapped within	35
<i>jo garmī dī rok kardī sī kadī:</i>	Which used to check the heat before:	
<i>garmī de bī tīr pai gye jhallṇe,</i>	Heat's arrows too they suffered now,	
<i>rāj kaur dī māuṇ rāṇī briddh bī</i>	So Rāj Kaur's mother, aged queen,	
<i>lagī sahiṇ e tīr birahoṇ vālṇe.</i>	Began to suffer longing's shafts.	
<i>ṭarak savere jāg kar lyā māuṇ ne</i>	At crack of dawn the mother rose	40
<i>nitt-nem dā pāṭh nāl parem de.</i>	To say her morning prayers with love.	
<i>nau das ghaṛiān tik baṭhe uḍīkdī</i>	For several hours she sat in wait,	
<i>'rāj kaur huṇ āi, huṇ hai āṇvdī'</i>	'Rāj Kaur has come, see, now she comes.'	
<i>roṭī ho gai tyār, langar vāliān</i>	The food was cooked, the kitchen staff	
<i>dittā ā sandeś 'langar tyār hai.'</i>	Brought word to say, 'It's ready now.'	45
<i>huṇ akulāī māuṇ dhī nūn tāṅghdī:</i>	Distraught, the mother wants her child:	
<i>apṇe kamre vicc bacṛī hai nahīn,</i>	No daughter is there in her room,	
<i>jo sī khās dīvān uh bhī sakkṇā,</i>	The private chamber empty lies,	
<i>pāṭh karan dā ṭhaṇ khālī hai piā; ...</i>	The prayer-room is also bare; ...	

Attention may be particularly drawn to two obvious general characteristics of this passage, both entirely typical of *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* as a whole. The first is the skilful combination of a generalized description of nature (1-32) less reminiscent of pre-modern Panjabi poetry than, say, Wordsworth — compare the style of the poet's consciously manipulative interjection *ultā sundar khel*: (14) — with the very traditional image of the agonies of separation (32-39), the symbol of the arrow (*tīr*) serving as a

natural link between the absence of the divisive force. Even though clauses ter clause-linking provided participles in the modern

Whatever the bathos of style maintained through Panjabi vocabulary, some or parallel concrete objects only the most sparing effects of alliteration, a poetry in favour of a new is consequently able to background of twentieth folksiness only with the appearing a rather clumsy

The narrative now continues (129). Not the least of Indian poets to make natural

*dittā sāph javāb sārē bā*  
*kannān nūn hath lāi bū*

The effect of the same personalization of abstract

19 As contrasted with normal Urdu, with their increasing Hindi and Urdu since 1800

20 Cf. the fondness of Urdu buildings with the power *bait-e hamrā kī goyā zabā* on the Alhambra's tongue to be explained simply a rhetorical figure of *takalluf*

sit in it,  
 above 25  
 spread on earth,  
 cooled,  
 named the world, —  
 burned;  
 trees and land. 30  
 arose,  
 to sit.  
 shafts had struck  
 their loves;  
 snapped within 35  
 heat before:  
 suffered now,  
 queen,  
 shafts.  
 rose 40  
 with love.  
 in wait,  
 now she comes.  
 kitchen staff  
 ready now.' 45  
 her child:  
 room,  
 lies,  
 are; ...

characteristics of this  
 The first is the skilful  
 reminiscent of pre-  
 style of the poet's  
 the very traditional  
 (tīr) serving as a

natural link between the two (4, 33, 37, 39). The second is the way in which the absence of the divisive force of end-stopped rhyming lines allows the narrative to flow. Even though clauses tend to be co-terminous with the verses, the natural facility in clause-linking provided by the characteristic adjectival and adverbial use of the participles in the modern Indo-Aryan languages is fully exploited (1-5, 6-9).<sup>19</sup>

Whatever the bathos felt with the descent into concrete narrative (44-5), the unity of style maintained throughout is remarkable. Relying almost exclusively upon *theṭh* Panjabi vocabulary, sometimes deliberately flaunted in sets of near-synonyms (5, 18) or parallel concrete objects (20), including fully naturalized Persian loans, but with only the most sparing use of *tatsama* words, this style shuns the obvious verbal effects of alliteration, assonance and word-play so prominent in traditional Panjabi poetry in favour of a neatly punctuated clarity. The grand simplicity which Vīr Singh is consequently able to maintain is the more to be admired against the general background of twentieth century Panjabi poetic language, which escapes from folksiness only with the greatest difficulty, and then often only at the cost of appearing a rather clumsy country cousin of English, Hindi, or Urdu.

The narrative now continues the description of Cand Kaur's desperate search (50-129). Not the least of the achievements of English romantic poetry was to induce Indian poets to make nature speak,<sup>20</sup> as the garden does to the desperate mother (60-1):

*ditā sāph javāb sārē bāg ne,*      The garden answered 'No' straight out,  
*kannān nūn hath lāi būṭe ākhde —*      And sadly too the trees replied...

The effect of the same literary imagination is also to be seen in the frequent personalization of abstract feelings, which can then be invested with extended images,

<sup>19</sup> As contrasted with norms of formal Panjabi prose which almost exactly copy those of Hindi and Urdu, with their increasingly obvious debt to English syntactic patterns, cf. C. Shackle and R. Snell, *Hindi and Urdu since 1800: a common reader* (London 1990), pp. 77-8 *et passim*.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. the fondness of Urdu poets of the period, writing in a similarly grand style, for investing even buildings with the power of speech, e.g. Hālī (in the sort of passage that later recurs in Iqbāl): *ye hai bait-e hamrā ki goyā zabān par / ki the āl-e 'adnān se mere bānī...* (*Musaddas*, 82) 'This, as it were, is on the Alhambra's tongue: "My founders were of the tribe of 'Adnān..."' Such passages are hardly to be explained simply as developments internal to the Perso-Urdu literary tradition, e.g. from the rhetorical figure of *takallum-e sāmit* (lit. 'the speech of the mute').

or addressed in extended asides. Vir Singh of course loses no opportunity to use these for the sort of didactic passage so typical of his age (82, 85-9):

*hāi nirāsā daiṇ! dhāras khāṇīe!...* Despair, ah, witch and spirit-breaker!...

*hirde deveṇ ghol muhrā aikurāṇ* You rot the heart like arsenic  
*sabh kujh lagge vikkh ammrit ho cahe,* And poison all that should be fair,  
*jadoṇ nirāsā āi dil nūn nappdī* If by despair the heart is seized,  
*pahile jīv udās hundā jagg toṇ,* At first one wearies of the world,  
*apṇe āpoṇ pher dhove hatth hai.* And then turns hopeless of oneself.

However fully exploited, such literary devices cannot indefinitely sustain much narrative interest. This is now re-injected by Cand Kaur's summoning the commander of the state forces, who is ordered first to check that the Rajah of Kahlur has not abducted Rāj Kaur, then to conduct a general search, all to no avail (130-210).

Cand Kaur herself is thus driven to undertake another agonized search for her daughter. This is described at very considerable length (211-510), and coming as it does after so many similar passages devoted to Rāj Kaur's undying search for the dead Sūrat Singh, it is not always easy to repress the memory of that Aldous Huxley character who likened the almost static progress of the slow movement of the late Beethoven A minor quartet to that of a man seeing how slowly he could ride a bicycle without falling off; but it is of course more appropriate to remember the underlying basis of Indian poetic tradition beneath the modern overlay, and to admire the leisurely artistry which Vir Singh brings to his creation within the frenzied mood dictated by the *rasa*.

This artistry may be seen in the beautiful description of a mountain stream (252-66), a very favourite theme of Vir Singh's, and Cand Kaur's vow to drown herself therein, as tears similarly stream from her eyes (267-351). During the course of her outburst, she rails against her fate, hurling at God a torrent of semi-philosophical word-spinning, of the kind which so abounds in Indian poetry of the period, but which can only increase admiration for the conciseness of Shakespeare's most famous line (306-17):

*'hoṇā' labbhaṇ lok, mangaṇ 'hovṇā',* 'Folk search for 'being', beg for it,  
*'par 'hoṇe' de dang tikkhe sapp toṇ.* 'But 'being's' sting outdoes the snake's.

*'je 'anhoṇi' hoi c*  
*'khabre isde dang*  
*'kis bidh ho chutk*  
*'rastā koī nāhiṇ p*  
*'main hoīān aṇcāh*  
*'hoṇ' dātiā! sānbh*  
*'jad tuṭṭhe se āp ē*  
*'main mangiā ih 'i*  
*'par khādhī main l*  
*'dukkhoṇ khālī 'ho*

After the stream  
 she asks them for  
 foolish (381-2, 42  
 extremely effective  
 Rāṇā Sūrat Singh  
 alliteration,<sup>21</sup> met

*hārī har thān bhāl*  
*gir tole sabh s*  
*dāvān dōl dālān p*  
*patā na koī dā*

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'je 'anhoṇī' hoi chuṭṭān 'hoṇ' toṇ,	'If 'being' left me 'not to be',
'khabre isde dang laggaṇ pher nā,	'Perhaps its stings would hurt no more.
'kis bidh ho chuṭkār merā 'hoṇd' toṇ?' 'From 'being' how can I be freed?	
'rastā koī nāhiṇ phasī kuthāuṇ hān.	'I see no way, but am stuck fast.
'maiṇ hoīān aṇcāh is huṇ 'hoṇd' toṇ.	'I've ceased to crave this 'being' now.
'hoṇ'dātiā! sānbh aṇṇī dāt e.	'O 'being'-Giver! Take this gift,
'jad tuṭṭhe se āp ākhyā 'mang lai!'	'For which You graciously said, 'Ask!'
'maiṇ mangiā ih 'hoṇ' ditiā tuṭṭh taiṇ!	'I asked, You gave this 'being' gift!
'par khādhī maiṇ bhull e na mangiā, —	'But I was wrong, not this I asked —
'dukkhoṇ khālī 'hoṇd' bakhśiṇ dātiā!'	'O Giver! Pain-free 'being' grant!'

After the stream, the silent mountains become the target of Cand Kaur's anger, as she asks them for directions, while at intervals the poet sadly tells her not to be so foolish (381-2, 424-6). This somewhat tedious poetic game is rounded off with an extremely effective literary device. For the only time throughout the whole course of *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh*, Vīr Singh inserts a short lament (*vikham pad*), which uses the alliteration,<sup>21</sup> metre and rhyme of the folk song to very touching effect (440 ff.):

<i>hārī har thān bhāl kareṇḍī,</i>	Everywhere hopelessly looking,
<i>gir tole sabh śahir girāiṇ</i>	Through town and through village I sought
<i>ḍāvān ḍol ḍālīān patte</i>	I wander, but branches and leaves
<i>patā na koī dae batāi...</i>	Can lend me no clue or report...

In the final section of this extended monothematic passage (447-510), night gives way to dawn, and yet there is another monologue from the grieving mother in the guise of a dialogue with a personified dawn aroused by her complaint. Here it is almost

<sup>21</sup> There are occasional instances of extended alliteration in the text of *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* proper: but given the general context of Vīr Singh's deliberately unadorned style, these tend to make a decidedly awkward impression, e.g. the metrically faulty *ḍhalak ḍhalak ḍhal jāṇ ḍigde dharā te* '[Her tears'] water wells up and wets the ground' (3:16). Cf. the artificially sustained assonance (also from the early part of the poem) in: *'jholī rahiān pāi' golī ākhdī: / bholī rāṇī rāj labbhī hai nahīn / toli heṭh jolī sārre...*, etc. (4:69-84).

as if<sup>22</sup> the poet himself feels he has, at least for the moment, exhausted the credibility of this particular device (469-73):

<i>pahu suṅke ih bain mānoṅ boldī</i>	It seemed as if the dawn replied
<i>— lagī na kai jībh, isdī cupp hī</i>	To her complaint — though tongueless, still
<i>deve ih vakhyān cupp cupāṭrī,</i>	Its very silence quietly spoke,
<i>jyōṅ kudrat hai gung par hai boldī —</i>	As nature speaks, though it is dumb —
<i>kahindī: ...</i>	It said: ...

At last, however, the poet takes leave of the weeping mother and describes the general consternation caused by the loss of their dear princess to the inhabitants of the city, who have so far hardly figured in the story (511-44). The rumour that she may have been abducted by the Rajah of Kahlur arouses their anger, and they vow to bring her back, if necessary at the cost of their lives. This affords Vir Singh a rare opportunity to provide a political comment with patent contemporary reference (545-55):

<i>ih sī acaraj bāt dhaṭṭhe lok bī,</i>	How strange it was that humbled folk
<i>bīrān vāṅgū bol bolāṅ joṣ de.</i>	Should utter such heroic words.
<i>‘deś-bhagat’ dī gandhi kidhre sī nahīn</i>	No trace was there of patriotism,
<i>turkān ne bhan dhaṅṅ dīttī khūb sī;</i>	So crushed had they been by the Turks.
<i>svārth apnā mukkh hindī rakkhde,</i>	Self-interest ruled the Indians,
<i>‘deś-pyār’ ke ‘kaum- pyār’ na mūl sī,</i>	Not any patriotic love.
<i>tāhyōṅ tān sī deś picche pai giā,</i>	The country backward thus remained.
<i>par pichle mahārāj sikkhī pāike,</i>	Their former king, though, once a Sikh,
<i>kar karke updeś parjā āpaṇī,</i>	Had taught and taught his subjects well,
<i>kar kar cange kamm deś piār de</i>	And by his patriotic deeds,
<i>dittā sig jagāi dīvā pyār dā;</i>	Had lit the lamp of love in them.

<sup>22</sup> Panjabi *māno(n)* can be, like Urdu *goyā*, an all too handy syntactic tool for the clumsy poet: cf. the following quotation, and note 20 above.

This naturally leads to the Sikh ruler (556-73), and his politically conservative stance. The closing verses of Cand Kaur, which have a splendid opening describing whose final note returns

*nīlī pahin puṣāk kudrat*  
*jaṛī tāriān nāl cunnī a*  
*cār pahir de bād tāre*  
*— sūraj caṛhe guāc j*  
*jinhān toldī rāt magr*  
*labbh pae huṅ, dekh*  
*mand bhāg, par māun*  
*cār pahir gae bit labb*  
*tārā akkhīn es, dil dā*  
*vicchuṛ sārē lok han*  
*vacche mil gae gān p*  
*bhartā miliā nār, mā*  
*bhaiṇān mil gae vīr p*  
*ik mili nahīn dhīa vic*

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<sup>23</sup> Which is of course not the Sikh critic may be all one generation of Sikh spiritual appeals at all.

This naturally leads to the praise of his successor Sūrat Singh as the paragon of a Sikh ruler (556-73), at the time of writing still a viable ideal for Sikhs of Vir Singh's politically conservative persuasion.

The closing verses (574-602) appropriately return to the sad figure of the bereft Cand Kaur, which has dominated the canto throughout. As night falls again, the splendid opening descriptive passage is echoed in the minor key of a suitably brief coda, whose final note returns to the mother-tonic (589-602):

*nīlī pahīn puṣāk kudrat nikkharī  
jaṛī tāriān nāl cunnī oḍh ke.  
cār pahir de bād tāre sabbh hī  
— sūraj caṛhe guāc jihre se gae  
jinhān toldī rāt magre sī gāi —  
labbh pae huṇ, dekh khiṛ pyī rāt hai,  
mand bhāg, par māuṇ disse roṇvdī.  
cār pahir gae bīt labbhī nā aje  
tārā akkhīn es, dil dā cānaṇā:  
vicchuṛ sāre lok han huṇ ā mile:  
vacche mil gae gān panchī māpiān  
bhartā miliā nār, mātā putt nūn,  
bhaiṇān mil gae vīr pyāre pyāriān,  
ik mili nahīn dhīa vicchuṛī māuṇ nūn.*

Then nature, dressed in clear dark blue,  
Again put on its starry shawl.  
The day was done, and all the stars  
— Which since the sunrise had been lost  
And which the night had come to seek —  
Were now restored to happy night;  
The mother, though, still sadly wept.  
The day was done, yet still unfound  
Remained the star which lit her heart.  
Now others found the ones they'd lost:  
The cow her calves, the birds their young,  
And women husbands, or lost sons,  
Or brothers, or the ones they loved;  
This mother, though, still lacked her child.

Rāṇā Sūrat Singh: *an early modern classic*

Enough has certainly now been quoted from *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh*, enough too perhaps said about it to make clear both why and how it deserves its unquestioned status as a classic of modern Panjabi literature; or, more precisely of modern Sikh Panjabi literature, since its theme and language effectively confine its appeal to a readership defined as much by religious as by linguistic allegiance.<sup>23</sup> It should now be sufficient

<sup>23</sup> Which is of course not to say that it appeals to all Sikh readers. The following remarks by a leading Sikh critic may be allowed to speak for themselves: 'It was a great educative influence to more than one generation of Sikhs. Its power and appeal is still unabated, except to those to whom nothing spiritual appeals at all.' (G.S. Talib, 'Rana Surat Singh' (see note 9 above), p. 128).

to conclude with a brief drawing together of the points made during the course of this paper, which may serve to suggest wider comparative issues.

Since a poem of this size and internal richness could only receive the fully critical consideration it deserves in a monograph, this paper has deliberately left many important aspects of *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* untreated. The most important is, of course, the hugely prominent doctrinal element, since the focus of the paper has been literary rather than theological.<sup>24</sup> But even within the literary context, a number of questions immediately suggest themselves. Since Vir Singh was such a conspicuously bookish poet, the degree to which he was directly familiar with English romantic poetry is an obvious one. An equally obvious area for further investigation would be the extent and character of the changes made to the successive editions of the poem.<sup>25</sup>

Then, too, the general Indian literary context has deliberately been sketched in only the vaguest terms. Parallels with the modern Hindi *mahākāvya* may be apparent to readers familiar with that genre,<sup>26</sup> although here the long-delayed ousting of Brajbhāṣā by Kharī Bolī for once ensures a rather longer continuous tradition for Panjabi. In a broader context, there are certainly generic parallels with the great long poems which played so influential a role in the formation of modern South Asian Muslim identity. These notably include the Urdu *Musaddas* (1879) on the flow and ebb of Islam by Altāf Husain Hālī (1837-1914), deliberately cast in the sort of unadorned 'natural' (*necral*)

style equally aimed for elaborately fixed poet fellow-Panjabi Muhammad Asrār-e *khudī* (1915) and the fact that these are 'firsts'. In Panjabi i dinosaur, an epic who the subsequent history readers looking for a elsewhere.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> For an interesting treatment from a Sikh feminist viewpoint, see the chapter 'Rāṇī Rāj Kaur: the mystical journey', in Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *The feminine principle in the Sikh vision of the transcendent* (Cambridge 1993), pp. 205-41.

<sup>25</sup> Both these and other questions may have already been answered in the extensive Panjabi critical literature on Vir Singh, to which I have had very limited access. In the introductory note to *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh*, p. vi, Vir Singh draws particular attention to the changes made to the later sections ('*antle hisse vadhere saral te saphā kar ditte gae han, is tarhān karan vic aksar kaī ik tabdiliān, vadhāu te ghaṭāu hoe han*'), a passage to which my attention was drawn in connection with an edition of Hālī's *Musaddas*, where a detailed comparison between the original text of 1879 and the revised standard version of 1886 has revealed many interesting detailed changes of both doctrinal and literary presentation.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. the interesting brief discussion of Jayaśankar Prasād's *Kāmāyanī* (1936) in P. Gaeffke, *Hindi literature in the twentieth century* (Wiesbaden 1978), p. 31, which attributes the 'extraordinary preference for epic in 20th century India' to nineteenth century English example, while underlining the quite different aims and inspirations of the two genres.

<sup>27</sup> Both available in Eng 1920), and A.J. Arber

<sup>28</sup> Eleven later titles, end in 1969, are listed in Is mahā-kāvi paramparā. fresh subjects in Paki Dīn, *Khūn diān nadīān*

<sup>29</sup> In the first instance to drama in *Lūpā* (1963) 'passionate singer' (Ne Shiv Kumar was the been similarly honou provides a striking il century.



style equally aimed for by Vir Singh in a language less encumbered than Urdu with an elaborately fixed poetic idiom; and the long poems by Vir Singh's contemporary and fellow-Panjabi Muhammad Iqbāl (1877-1938), beginning with the religio-philosophical *Asrār-e khudī* (1915) and culminating with the Dantesque *Jāved-nāma* (1932),<sup>27</sup> even if the fact that these are written in Persian entails their being rated as 'lasts' rather than 'firsts'. In Panjabi itself, *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* stands as something of a pioneering dinosaur, an epic whose tale is partially paralysed by the weight of its homiletic tail: the subsequent history of the Panjabi *mahā-kāvī* is hardly a distinguished one,<sup>28</sup> and readers looking for a long Panjabi poem of superb literary quality are better directed elsewhere.<sup>29</sup>

Like so many other classics of the early modern era of Indian literature to which it so clearly belongs, *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* has many features disagreeable to present-day taste: the characters are very imperfectly determined, being blurred by the generalized nature of their symbolic functions; the story-line, with its triply repeated journeys by the heroine, is not particularly gripping; and even in its own terms as a narrative poem with a message, its structure is severely imbalanced by the heavy flatness of its extended end.

There is no denying these weaknesses, to some extent to be regarded as inevitable manifestations of that characteristically touching naivety common to most masterworks of early modern South Asian literatures. But *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* is

<sup>27</sup> Both available in English translation, as R.A. Nicholson, trans., *The secrets of the self* (London 1920), and A.J. Arberry, trans., *Javid-nama* (London 1966).

<sup>28</sup> Eleven later titles, ending with Mohan Singh's *Nānkāṇī* produced for the Gurū Nānak quincenary in 1969, are listed in Ishar S. Tangh, *Panjābī sāhit dā itihās* (Patiala 1976), part 2, app. 1, 'Panjābī mahā-kāvī paramparā', pp. 85-7. The old Muslim tradition of verse narrative has been adapted to fresh subjects in Pakistan, as in the quasi-epic account in popular style of the Partition by Chirāgh Dīn, *Khūn dī ān nadiān*, 8 vols. (Lahore, c. 1960?).

<sup>29</sup> In the first instance to the brilliant inversion of the traditional Pūran Bhagat legend as a lyric verse-drama in *Lūṇā* (1963) by Shiv Kumar Batalvi (1937-73), cf. O.P. Sharma, *Shiv Batalvi, a solitary and passionate singer* (New Delhi 1979), pp. 57-72. When *Lūṇā* received a Sahitya Akademi award, Shiv Kumar was the youngest author ever to have been so honoured: the fact that Vir Singh had been similarly honoured in extreme old age for *Mere sālān jīo* less than two decades previously provides a striking illustration of the telescoped progress of Panjabi literature in the twentieth century.

certainly more than the sum of its flaws. Its unique place in Panjabi literature apart, not to speak of its substantial contribution to the development of Panjabi as a literary language, and to the religious literature of a community somewhat onesidedly preoccupied by its history of heroic martyrdom, *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* ultimately stands by virtue of the sheer poetic quality of its finest passages, and the scale on which it is conceived and executed, in terms not merely of its physical length but also of the range of Vir Singh's emotional and intellectual imagination.

All kinds of further thoughts may be suggested by *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh*'s striking range. At a quite elementary level, for instance, its hill-setting is itself a novelty in Panjabi poetry, which is traditionally centred in the village and the riverain grazing-grounds (*belā*), and is seldom driven even by extreme romantic or spiritual passion beyond the flat territory of the uplands (*bār*) or the equally level desert (*thal*). How much, one wonders, did Vir Singh's choice owe to a conscious desire to break new ground or to reclaim symbolically for the Sikhs those hills politically lost to them through the failure of Gurū Gobind Singh's struggles with the local rajahs two centuries before; and how far was the way to this desire opened imaginatively by English or by non-Panjabi Indian literary example, or practically by the new ease of communication that had come to exist between the Panjab, its hill-stations and Kashmir?

If such questions are thought liable to make mountains of criticism out of hills moulded by poetic imagination, there is — at a more complex level — no honest escaping literary issues more central to the poem's overall character. Pre-modern Panjabi literature may be regarded as falling into a number of fairly well defined categories, e.g. lyrical, narrative, or didactic, each with their well-established genres and associated imagery, although these naturally differ in the dominant Muslim literature from those established by Gurū Nānāk and his successors. The latter lyric-didactic mix of course figures prominently within *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh*, thanks to the numerous scriptural quotations inserted therein; but Vir Singh's own style is a blend of a very different kind, a huge lyrical-narrative-didactic mix cast in a rather neutral register of language which can be adapted to any of the three, more through blurring the traditional boundaries between them than by achieving their fully satisfactory integration. Though indications of possible approaches have been sketched at intervals in the earlier discussion here, it cannot be pretended that these are fully satisfactory either.

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One of the main reasons that the early classics of the modern literatures of South Asia so repay critical examination is, however, after all precisely because they so evidently combine literary elements of different origin. The combination may seldom be totally satisfying, but the effort to account for our feelings of aesthetic dissatisfaction should stimulate the rewarding process of re-examining our own critical categories. We Western professional scholars of South Asian literatures may feel we have the equipment to deal with European literature as our birthright, and our long-term professional commitment to the study and teaching of medieval Indian literature is bound to result in our devising for ourselves and our students a handy set of parallel tools. Modern South Asian literatures, however, particularly in their crucial formative phases, demand that we work simultaneously with instruments calibrated in imperial and in *desī* measurements. It is perhaps no wonder that so few of us seem to find the task very easy.