



The Mingling of Philosophy and Prayer in Puran Singh's *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry*

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Abstract

This article explores the philosophical dimensions of Puran Singh's *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry*, examining his integration of mysticism, spirituality, and poetic expression. Singh perceives poetry as a divine revelation, distinguishing Eastern poetry's transcendental essence from the materialistic tendencies of Western literature. Through his discussions on poets like Whitman, Blake, Rumi, Guru Nanak, and Kabir, Singh underscores poetry's role in spiritual awakening. His critique of Western rationalism highlights the erosion of poetic intuition, advocating for a return to poetry as a means of divine communion. By positioning poetry as a bridge between the human and the divine, Singh reaffirms its metaphysical significance. This study contextualizes Singh's work within comparative literature and mystical philosophy.

Keywords: Puran Singh, mysticism, spirituality, poetry, Eastern vs. Western poetry, poetic intuition, transcendence, *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry*

Sometimes it seems that the whole academic world has entered into a conspiracy of silence in denying Puran Singh his due place in the history of Indian Writing in English. In spite of his prodigious contribution in both verse and prose, he has hardly ever been taken note of by any worthwhile literary chronicler, although his writings are of high merit. It is, therefore, imperative to study and evaluate his books and to make an earnest effort to undo, as far as possible, the injustice done to him. This article offers insights into life, literature and philosophy of Puran Singh who in spite of his voluminous writings in English, has often been denied his rightful place in Indian English literature. Indeed, there is hardly any account of English Literature produced in India which makes a mention of Puran Singh and his more than a score of books of poetry, fiction, drama and essays, besides his literary criticism and philosophical writings. He was a multi-generic author. There are few writers of his calibre who have written in such great measure and have made so variegated a contribution to the sphere of Indo-English literature.

His literature is multi-dimensional. Besides poetry, he wrote fiction, biographies and autobiography; epical drama, literary criticism and Sikh philosophies. In addition to that, he

translated both from English to Punjabi and Punjabi to English. Puran Singh translated Tolstoy's *Resurrection* and quite a few poems from the Sikh sacred text *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*. He also translated some of Bhai Vir Singh's poems (*Nargis*) in English. Puran Singh's at least three different translations of Guru Nanak's magna carta *Japuji* are available. Many of his articles were lost because he hardly ever cared to keep copies of them. Almost a century ago, he was composing and creating in English such exhilarating poetry and prose as has rarely been written earlier or since. In those hoary days when there were barely a handful of writers of English in India, his books were published by prestigious publishers in England and were very well received by the reading public. By virtue of his contribution - both stupendous and profound - he can easily be regarded as one of the doyens of English Literature in North India. Ernest and Grace Rhys in the "Introduction" to *The Sisters of The Spinning Wheel* state:

It was Rabindranath Tagore in India who carried over into the English tongue with a new power and melody the first convincing strains of Bengali poetry. In the Punjab, Puran Singh has something of the same gift, and his music also freely naturalises itself in the English medium and makes good its accent and one soon becomes aware of its living charm. Later, the spirit of his poetry is seen to involve a rare sense of delight in devotion, and the closer the thought one brings to bear upon it the profounder its effect. All the evidences of a highly spiritual ancestry are joined to the fine pageantry of the Eastern world that glows on the page. (vii-viii)

Although Puran Singh is a contemporary of such literary titans as Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghosh and Sarojini Naidu, all, who chose to make English the vehicle of their literary creation, both in content and style, he stands apart as

Hours spent with the Beloved in sweet calm mingling our breath with His, are diviner by far than the chant of His songs without His presence. In Exuberance of inspiration, nothing suffices but His person; touching His Lotus feet brings the honey of eternity.
(Singh, *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry*, 2nd ed., 1969)

These words capture the essence of Puran Singh's exploration of the intimate relationship between the devotee and the divine in *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry*. Prof. Puran Singh's *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry* is a profound meditation on the essence of Eastern poetic tradition, merging aesthetics with spiritual philosophy.

Puran Singh was a visionary, a mystic and an idealist who created in his poetry a world entirely his own: philosophic, spiritual, infinite, inimitable and everlasting. His is a world of thoughts, ideas and visions. Love and devotion are the governing emotions in his verse. His work is, in essence, a fusion of literature and philosophy. For all art is an expression of artist's mind and thought, his vision of life, men and manners, his ethos and ethics.

A thorough perusal of his works makes it clear that he was a man of vision and a particular philosophy permeates his works. Besides being himself a poet of first order, Singh was also a connoisseur of poetry. That he had read almost all great poets of the East and the West is evident

in his critique-*The Spirit of Oriental Poetry*. This book provides a fascinating study of the poetry of the *Bhaktas*, of the Sikh Gurus, of *Jaidev*; the author of *Gita Govinda*, of Persian poets like *Omar, Hafiz and Shamas Tabriz* and many others. Singh also admires the Japanese nature poetry. He also provides an interesting commentary on the great poets of the West including Shakespeare, Tennyson, Burns, Wordsworth, Milton, William Blake, Edward Carpenter, Thoreau, Dante and Goethe. Shakespeare's imagination, he believes, would not go beyond the lower spirit world, and he was not able to piece Reality beyond the surface movements of an ego fettered by its own desires. He feels the perfume of God in the poetry of William Blake. He admires Dante, Milton, Goethe and Thoreau. According to him, Wordsworth is more a preacher than a poet. Singh's literary opinions are forthright, candid and bold and are based on his own readings and ruminations.

The Spirit of Oriental Poetry as it is the first and, perhaps, so far the only book of its kind which evaluates many major poets of the world, each in a few lines. Its scope is wide and sweep broad. Its subject is spread over continents and centuries. This book speaks volumes about its author's erudition, his knowledge of world literature and his extensive range of readings. If only we could have literary critics of his timber. On the basis of this book, Puran Singh may be termed as a doyen of the study of comparative literature in India.

M.S. Randhawa, paying a tribute to Puran Singh, in his *Puran Singh, Jeevni Ate Kavita* writes: "He is a mystic, who, in the madness of his ecstasy, lifts his head among the stars and dances with the sun and the moon. His poetry is like an adventure into a strange land: a mystical autobiography of the poet. Puran Singh is a spiritual mystic" (9).

Singh's discourse extends beyond poetry as mere artistic expression; he elevates it to a spiritual experience, one that captures the ineffable essence of existence as can be sensed from the epigraph.

The present research article essays to critically deliberate upon Puran Singh's ideas on poetry, explore his views on the distinction between Eastern and Western literary traditions, his critique of Western materialism, and his recognition of certain Western poets as spiritually aligned with Eastern mysticism. Through his contemplation on the works and philosophical understanding of Omar Khayyam, Rumi, Guru Har Rai, Bullah Shah, Sakya Muni, Shamas Tabrez, Walt Whitman, Leo Tolstoy, Robert Burns, Nazir, Hafiz, Rabindranath Tagore and other literary and philosophical figures, Singh creates a rich dialogue that reveals the transcendental core of poetry. This piece explores the intellectual dimensions of *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry*, focusing on its metaphysical underpinnings, its critique of materialism, and its vision of poetic intuition as a form of higher knowledge.

Puran Singh perceives the poet as a seer, someone who transcends mundane reality and taps into a higher, divine consciousness. He aligns this notion with the Eastern concept of the inspired sage whose verses are not composed but received as sacred revelations. Singh elaborates, “Our idea of the poet is that of a man who can, by the mere opening of his own eyes, enable others to see the Divine; whose one glance can be our whole knowledge” (Singh 1). This idea finds resonance in the works of Walt Whitman, whose *Leaves of Grass* embodies an expansive, cosmic consciousness. Singh admires Whitman’s celebration of the human soul and the infinite, seeing in him a Western counterpart to the Eastern mystic.

Puran Singh’s *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry* is a profound exploration of the soul-stirring and otherworldly dimensions embedded in Eastern poetry. The text delves into the philosophy of mysticism, where the poetic forms are not merely artistic expressions but gateways to higher truths and ultimate realities. Mysticism, as portrayed in Singh’s work, transcends mere symbolism; it is the very essence of existence, expressed through the lens of poetic imagery. This text explores how Singh’s view of mysticism shapes the understanding of Eastern poetry and its philosophical implications.

The poet’s true inspiration comes from a deep, mystical union with the divine, making his poetry not merely words but a manifestation of Eternal Truth. At the core of Singh’s analysis lies the belief that Eastern poets, especially those in, India and Persia, with the cosmos on a spiritual level, blend the human experience with divine understanding. He says,

“The poet reveals to our souls his own self-realization, and in an instant, we undergo the growth of centuries. The power of giving peace to the life-beaten man we see only in our poet; he is as the banyan tree which affords shade to the sun-beaten wayfarer. The poet is not one of us, he is the messenger of God, His Prophet; he is God in human clay” (Singh 2)

“The supreme quality of the divine poetry of the Eastern scriptures in general lies in their power of giving life to the lifeless.” (Singh 96) Throughout history, poetry has served as a medium to articulate the ineffable, capturing the mysticism of the divine and the human condition. In the East, poetry has been a conduit for spiritual experience, a means of reaching beyond the material world and into the eternal. In contrast, Western poetry has evolved in various directions, often focusing on the material and intellectual realms, detached from the sacred origins of poetic expression. Prof. Puran Singh, a philosopher, poet, and mystic, explores these contrasts and advocates for a spiritual revival of poetry through his influential work, *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry*.

Puran Singh’s work is more than just a theoretical exploration of the differences between Eastern and Western poetic traditions; it is a call for a return to poetry as a spiritual practice.

His central argument is that true poetry is not the product of intellect or artistic skill, but the outpouring of divine revelation—an expression of direct communion with the Absolute. According to Singh, Eastern poetry, whether from the traditions of Sikhism, Sufism, or Bhakti, emerges from a state of heightened spiritual consciousness and represents a path to self-realisation. While he critiques the materialism that has pervaded Western literary traditions, Singh also identifies certain Western poets—such as Walt Whitman, and William Blake, as embodying the same transcendental spirit found in Eastern poetry. He refers to these poets as "Sikhs" in spirit, arguing that their work mirrors the holistic, divine nature of Eastern poetic traditions.

Puran Singh's view of poetry is deeply rooted in the spiritual traditions of the East. He believes that poetry is not a mere intellectual pursuit but a divine process, a state of transcendence in which the poet becomes a conduit for the divine. This concept aligns with the teachings of Eastern mystics and saints, such as Guru Nanak, Kabir, and Rumi, whose poetry is regarded not as a crafted work but as a revelation—a spontaneous outpouring of divine wisdom.

For Puran Singh, true poetry is not created by human will but is a divine revelation, an unfolding of the spirit that transcends personal authorship. This idea is central to his philosophy, as he contrasts the spontaneous, revelatory nature of Eastern poetry with the more structured and intellectual approach often found in the West.

In his work, Puran Singh draws on the examples of poets from various Eastern traditions who view their poetry as the outpouring of divine grace. Guru Nanak's hymns, for instance, are considered direct expressions of divine wisdom, not authored by the Guru but received in a state of spiritual revelation. Similarly, Kabir's poetry is born from his intense personal experience of God, which transcends the need for formal structure or intellectual craft. Kabir's work is spontaneous, raw, and deeply mystical, expressing the intimacy of his relationship with the Divine.

This notion of poetry as divine revelation is also evident in the work of Rumi, whose *Masnavi* is considered a guide to spiritual enlightenment. Rumi's ecstatic verses are seen as expressions of divine love, transcending the boundaries of language and form.

Puran Singh emphasises that Eastern poetry is not about the external act of writing, but the internal experience of surrender to the Divine. In the Sikh tradition, the *Shabad* (divine word) is considered the essence of all reality, and the poetry of the Gurus is seen as a direct connection to this divine reality. The *Guru Granth Sahib*, a compilation of hymns, is revered as the living Guru, embodying divine wisdom and spiritual insight. He says, "*Guru Granth* is but one song, one idea, one life" (Singh 97).

Eastern poetry, according to Puran Singh, is not merely for artistic enjoyment or intellectual analysis; it is meant to serve a higher, sacred function. He contrasts the role of poetry in the East with its increasingly secularized role in the West. He writes, "In the East, poetry is sung, breathed, and lived. It is not confined to books but is woven into the fabric of daily life, a constant reminder of the divine presence. In the West, poetry is often dissected and analysed in academic settings, divorced from its deeper, spiritual roots" (Singh 78).

In the *Bhakta*, the second chapter of the book, Singh delves into the lives and poetry of the *Bhaktas*, mystical poets whose works express profound devotion to the divine. Whosoever treads on the path of his Beloved, is a *Bhakta* in his eyes, "He is always wending towards the shrine of the Beloved" (Singh 11). The *Bhaktas* Singh refers to figures like Omar Khayyam, Rumi, Kabir, Guru Nanak, Mirabai, and others, who represent the highest form of mystical devotion in Sikhism, Hinduism, and Sufism. These poets are seen as being entirely immersed in divine love, and their poetry is the direct outpouring of their spiritual experiences. For Singh, the *Bhaktas* experience a direct, personal connection with God, which is evident in their poetry. Their devotion transcends ritual or doctrine; they are driven by a pure and ecstatic love for the divine. The *Bhaktas* have a feeling of 'Faqiri of the East' (Singh 16) and are those who seek eternity through their intimate relationship with the Beloved, as their poetry comes from this union. The *Bhaktas* like Kabir and Guru Nanak, whom Singh discusses, serve as embodiments of this intimate, spiritual devotion.

Singh compares the worldview of the *Bhaktas* with that of the Western tradition, noting that the *Bhaktas* perceive the divine in all aspects of life. To them, every moment is an opportunity to connect with the divine. Singh contrasts this worldview with Western poetry, which often lacks the same mystical depth and connection to the divine. His emphasis on mingling our breath with His and 'touching His Lotus feet' reflects the devotional lens through which the *Bhaktas* see the world—a view where the divine is not distant but omnipresent, found in the sacredness of every act. Taking into consideration some poets like Keats, Swinburne, Shakespeare, and their works, he believes that

"Perhaps we of the East can never catch the tunes of the Western poets, but viewed broadly, from our stand-point, they are strange, very strange, in as much as they strike us as the voices of mighty geniuses who forget themselves, and find so much childish joy in playing with coloured toys! It were better to go on repeating the Bible rather than keep writing our so-called poetry. Only when the songs of the Western poets resemble the poetry of the Bible, are they in any degree truly poetic" (Singh 24)

But some poets like Dante, Burns, Milton, William Blake, Carlyle, Victor Hugo, Goethe and above all, Walt Whitman are considered by him to be lost in the Divine. Edward Carpenter,

Thoreau, Thomas a Kempis were all true disciples of the Bible. While discussing the poetry of Japan, where Buddhism permeates the art and poetry, he concludes that Okakura, although did not write any poetry, yet his flesh was made glorious by its spirit of self-realisation (Singh 37). Omar Khayyam, he considers, one of the most lovable saints of the East; the transcendental one like Hafiz.

Puran Singh's critique of the intellectualisation of poetry in the West highlights the growing divide between the sacred and the secular in literary traditions. While Western poets such as T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats are acknowledged for their literary contributions, Puran Singh feels their works often reflect a sense of existential despair or intellectualisation rather than spiritual illumination. He contrasts their work with the mystical, visionary poetry of Eastern traditions, where poetry serves not to analyse or critique the world but to transcend it.

In Eastern traditions, poets like Mirabai and Surdas were not concerned with creating aesthetically pleasing works; their poetry was an expression of pure, unadulterated devotion to God. Mirabai's devotional songs, for instance, were born from her intense love and longing for the Divine, and they reflect a surrender of the self to the Beloved. Similarly, Sufi poets like Hafiz were not simply creating literary masterpieces—they were channelling the ecstatic joy of divine union. Their poetry serves as a path to spiritual awakening, inviting the reader to partake in the bliss of communion with the Divine.

One of the most powerful elements of *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry* is Puran Singh's critique of Western materialism and its impact on both the human soul and poetic expression. He argues that the West's obsession with rationalism, industrial progress, and material success has led to a disconnection from the spiritual dimension of life. In his view, Western poetry, while rich in artistic achievement, often reflects this materialistic worldview, focusing on the intellectual and emotional turmoil of modern existence.

Puran Singh observes that much of modern Western poetry, especially that of the 20th century, has become increasingly secular and intellectualized. Poets like T.S. Eliot, for example, grapple with existential questions and the fragmentation of modern life, but their works are often marked by a profound sense of alienation and despair. *The Waste Land* is filled with images of a world devoid of spiritual direction or meaning, echoing the disillusionment of a civilization that has lost its connection to the divine.

For Puran Singh, this secularisation of Western poetry is symptomatic of a deeper cultural crisis. He contrasts the fragmented, despairing tone of Eliot's work with the harmonious and integrative nature of Eastern poetry, which seeks to reunite the soul with the divine and the

natural world. In Eastern traditions, poetry is not about analysing or lamenting the state of the world but about transcending it. It offers a vision of unity, peace, and divine connection.

However, Puran Singh does not dismiss all Western poets as spiritually deficient. He recognises that certain poets transcend the secular framework of Western literature and embody the same mystical vision found in the East. These poets, whom he calls 'Sikhs' in spirit, are those who, despite their geographical and cultural distance from the East, share the same transcendent outlook on life.

Puran Singh holds Walt Whitman in high regard for his expansive vision of human and cosmic unity. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* reflects a spirituality that transcends the boundaries of culture and nation. Puran Singh compares Whitman's poetic vision to the mystical teachings of Sikhism, and Sufism, where the individual self dissolves into the cosmic self. In his famous lines, Whitman expresses this idea.

This sense of unity with all existence reflects the Sikh doctrine of *Ik Onkar* (the oneness of all), as well as the Sufi idea of *fanah*, the annihilation of the ego in God. Puran Singh sees Whitman as embodying the same spiritual essence found in Eastern poetry, a poet whose work seeks to unite the individual with the infinite.

Puran Singh also praises William Blake, whose visionary poetry and symbolic language resonate deeply with Eastern mystical traditions. Blake's belief in the divine vision and the power of the imagination aligns with the spiritual principles of Sikhism and Sufism. In his poems like *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, Blake speaks to the possibility of seeing the divine in everyday life:

"To see a World in a Grain of Sand,
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And Eternity in an hour."
(Blake 78)

These lines, according to Puran Singh, echo the Sikh and Sufi traditions, where the finite world is seen as a reflection of the infinite. Blake's vision of the divine is not confined to the abstract but is found in the material world, suggesting that everything in creation is a manifestation of the divine.

Puran Singh's *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry* is a profound meditation on the sacred nature of poetry and its power to connect humanity with the divine. By contrasting Eastern poetry with its Western counterpart, Singh highlights the deeply spiritual essence of poetry that transcends intellectual analysis. He calls for a return to poetry as a means of divine communion, rather than as an aesthetic or intellectual exercise.

In recognising poets like Walt Whitman, William Blake, Mira Bai, and Nazir as “Sikhs” in spirit, Singh emphasises that true poetry is universal—it is not bound by geography, culture, or religion, but speaks to the eternal human longing for union with the Divine. These poets, despite their Western heritage, embody the same mystical and transcendent vision found in the poetry of the East, proving that the spirit of poetry knows no boundaries.

Puran Singh’s *The Spirit of Oriental Poetry* is not merely a study of poetic traditions but a philosophical treatise on the nature of reality itself. By engaging with thinkers like Whitman, Tolstoy, Burns, and others, Singh weaves a vision of poetry as a sacred act, a means of connecting with the infinite. His critique of materialism, his championing of poetic intuition, and his embrace of universal aesthetics place his work within the broader philosophical discourse on art and existence. Ultimately, Singh’s work reminds us that poetry is not just an ornament of civilisation—it is the very breath of the soul.

The Spirit of Oriental Poetry provides an insightful and thought-provoking exploration of the role of mysticism in Eastern poetry. By examining the philosophical underpinnings of mystical thought and its influence on poetry, Singh reveals how these poetic traditions serve not just as artistic expressions but as avenues to spiritual awakening. Through their use of metaphor and imagery, Eastern poets invite the reader to look beyond the surface of existence and into the deeper, transcendent truths of the cosmos. For Singh, the essence of Eastern poetry lies in its ability to connect the individual soul to the greater cosmic soul, offering a path to enlightenment through the very act of poetic creation.

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