

Classic Poetry Series

Harbhajan Singh

- poems -

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Harbhajan Singh(18 August 1920 – 21 October 2002)

Harbhajan Singh was a Punjabi poet, critic, cultural commentator, and translator. Along with [Amrita Pritam](http://www.poemhunter.com/amrita-pritam/), Harbhajan is credited with revolutionising the Punjabi poetry writing style. He published 17 collections of poems, including *Registan Vich Lakarhara*, 19 works of literary history and translated 14 pieces of literature of others including those of [Aristotle](http://www.poemhunter.com/aristotle/), [Sophocles](http://www.poemhunter.com/sophocles/), [Rabindranath Tagore](http://www.poemhunter.com/rabindranath-tagore/) and selections from the Rig Veda.

Early Life and Education

Harbhajan Singh was born in Lumding, Assam, on August 18, 1920 to Ganga Dei and Ganda Singh, his father, who was suffering from tuberculosis. The family had to move to Lahore where they bought two houses in Gawalmandi. His father died before he was one year old. Then his mother and two sisters died leaving him without a direct family by the time he was 4 years of age. He was brought up by his mother's younger sister who lived in Ichhra, Lahore. He was educated in the local DAV School and was a top student from a very early age. In his educational ventures, he was among the top three in Punjab but had to stop his studies for lack of money. He took up odd jobs as a sales-boy at a Homoeopathic Chemist Shop in Lahore, as a lower-division clerk with the Government of India in New Delhi and then as an Assistant Librarian in Khalsa School, New Delhi.

Singh completed his higher education without going to college, he had two degrees in English and Hindi Literature, both from the University of Delhi. His Ph. D. thesis discussed Hindi poetry in the Gurumukhi script.

One of his three sons Madan Gopal Singh is a well-known singer and scholar.

Career

He started his academic career as an English teacher before switching to Hindi and then to Punjabi. He worked at the University of Delhi as Professor Emeritus until he retired in 1984. He visited and gave lectures at many prestigious universities and institutions including the Indian Institute of Technology, Guru Nanak Dev University, Punjab University, Jammu University and Gauhati University.

He was invited to join the Department of Modern Indian Languages by a Board of anthropologists and linguists, including Professor Pritam Singh, who Singh supported greatly until his death.

Influences

He praised Ustad Reham Din, Lala Suraj Bhan, Dr Mohan Singh Diwana, and Dr Nagendra as his most preferred teachers throughout his education. The poets he most admired and rated highest were Guru Nanak Dev, Guru Arjan Dev, [Shah Hussain](http://www.poemhunter.com/shah-hussain/), [Waris Shah](http://www.poemhunter.com/waris-shah/), [Bulle Shah](http://www.poemhunter.com/bulleh-shah/), [Mir Taki Mir](http://www.poemhunter.com/mir-taqi-mir/), [Lorca](http://www.poemhunter.com/federico-garc-a-lorca/), [Rabindranath Tagore](http://www.poemhunter.com/rabindranath-tagore/), Noon Meem Rashid, and Puran Singh.

Many prolific poets and scholars did their PhDs under him including Attar Singh, Tirlok Singh Kanwar, Atamjit Singh, Mahinder Kaur Gill and Satinder Singh.

Honours

1970: Sahitya Akademi Award, Sahitya Akademi, India, for Na Dhuppe Na Chaanve

1987: Kabir Samman – one of the highest literary honours in India given by the Madhya Pradesh Government.

1994: Saraswati Samman – award for literary excellence in India, in

1994: Sahitya Akademi Fellowship, New Delhi – a title only one other Punjabi writer received; Sardar Gurbax Singh Preet Lari.

Soviet Land Nehru Award – a now extinct award highly coveted while it existed

2002: Dhaliwal Sanmaan – the highest award presented to him by the Punjabi Sahitya Akademi, Ludhiana.

Conversation Between Two Wells

Before being wife and husband, we had met
in our town like two suns we had sat together
in an alien home
We had melted in each other's glow
into each other we had leapt
like the boisterous bubbling rivers
In your forehead and mine,
a third eye had opened up
That was the day of our birth
Then one morning you sent a message
Asking for my head
And I had given away
(the head you were to place atop your torso
amidst public gaze)
Two suns sat on a bough one of whom we had
shooed away in tow
From this confluence we had maimed,
bobbed and uprooted a river
the rivers recoiled as shrunken wells
that was the day of our death-knells.
From that day to this we move around
Like a burning pyre of the dead
On the branches of this burning tree
never once did a bird alight
In the glowing shadow of a burning tree
wayfarers no longer found respite
Today, once again, I've received your message
And I cannot understand
how would the two well
engage in a conversation?

[English Translation by Dr. Madan Gopal Singh]

Harbhajan Singh

Geet

Harbhajan Singh

Ghazal

Harbhajan Singh

Ibn-E-Arabi

Shamsi I invoke your name
And spread out like fragrance
When I see your face - the sun
am drawn into moonlight, its abundance
As you unfurl your hair
The darkest night I become in the skies
Becoming the wondrous sun itself
I wash all the nights

Harbhajan Singh

May I Be Re-Born

That I may be reborn as a human
in Punjab,
to this very land I may return
To this hacked, chewed up earth,
in a modest home
Of a modest caste I may be known
On a leafless tree an unlucky bird
I may sing that very song of separation
On the moonless night I may visit His Pond of Nectar
On the full-moon night I may bathe in the river Chenab of love.

Harbhajan Singh

Mother In A Foundered Ship

Mother hadn't gone anywhere
From the early morn to the timed out dusk
She had worked herself to exhaustion
Having finished a long day's work
She opened the door to my room
And slept off without much ado
Her breathing danced in rhythm
With the wind playing across the house.

She stood up in slumber
Walked upto the gate
In the street she called out my name
Far away, somewhere, faraway, lost in the crowds
I couldn't hear my own voice
How could I hear hers?

Mother hadn't slept off fully
She would hear the footsteps of my return
Like the lonely passenger
On a foundered ship
Still alive
And in the basement of the foundered ship
Looking for his little children
Calling out their names
Calling out.

Harbhajan Singh

Sleep My Angel The Night Is Lost

Sleep my angel the darkness rules
The star-awaited dawn is drowned in gloom
The miasma of death hangs over the world
The mehfiles have dispersed
The desolate shadows've taken over
Life is still, have gone deaf
And the universe's passed out in distress.

The wells are awake with human rot
The neighbourhoods've slept off,
Lifeless, lonely, distraught
The fires've gone cold, the earth is faint
Still in the chests are blood and bayonets
The iron has slept off after a hard day's work.

Sleep, do not let your eyes taper off in tears
The star-awaited dawn would'nt be lost forever
Not forever would the men thirst for blood
Not forever would the blood trickle down the earth
Not forever would the night be lost.

Harbhajan Singh

The Sleeping Infant

A still settled night 'twas
You were, I was
and the fear there was

Between you and I
Asleep in the mud was an infant
Fear was
That lost in the musk of our bodies
We two may sleep off
And this little infant may wake up
From its muddy slumber
And set out to look for us.

[English Translation by Dr. Madan Gopal Singh]

Harbhajan Singh

The Tree And The Mendicant

When you sprout as grass
from the earth,
I'll be close by - a lot like you

Some cow
Will take take us together in a single bite
Together we shall be chewed and swallowed
Lost in the womb of the cow
dropp by dropp we shall become milk
Spotless, pure, white.

Even then you'll not be able to find me
We would have merged into each other so much
So much would have
The grass and milk merged
Where the grass ends
And the milk begins
In the cows belly
No one poses such queries
There the distance
between the tree and the mendicant
ends

[English Translation by Dr. Madan Gopal Singh]

Harbhajan Singh

Tumbler Of Glass

Take it my daughter
this tumbler of glass
fill it with the flame from the hearth
close to your being
in a tight clasp
Keep my daughter
this tumbler of glass

Even if its glow, tenderly
seeps out
let no one ever know what it was
the glass must'nt crack
your gait mustn't flag
filled to the brim
don't let it overflow
don't let your thirst
spill across

Take it my daughter
this tumbler of glass

Harbhajan Singh

Where Did The Sisters Go

Where did the sisters go
Where did the mothers depart?

The Sassis in deserts,
the Heers in plains
The Sohnis in rivers
forever lost.

Where did the streets
disappear,
the streets of innocence
Where I could go
to whichever house that I wished to

Each house had a special mark
Each living being had his name.

But all the faces now
made up the same
I may call them, by what name.

Calling them sisters
am made to explain
A preface to my intent
my sense of shame.

The whole world's become
Man and woman
The rest is shadows,
Simulacrum.

Where did the sisters go,
Where have the mothers gone?

[English Translation by Dr. Madan Gopal Singh]

Harbhajan Singh

Who Is This?

Who is it
Who's entered my heart
the flute's bitten the dark night
we've been caressed by a song
and in my blood a sun has dawned
radiant my heart my mind aglow
the birds are chirping in all my boughs
twittering praises in delight

[English Translation: Dr. Madan Gopal Singh]

Harbhajan Singh