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Nanak Singh's *Khooni Vaisakhi*: The Poet and the Poem

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Abstract

This paper provides insight into key aspects of the Punjabi poem, *Khooni Vaisakhi*, written by Nanak Singh, who was present at the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of 13 April, 1919, in Amritsar, Punjab. The poem was published in 1920, banned soon after, and was essentially lost for the next 60 years. The current author translated the poem into English, and published it in 2019. This paper uses family history and excerpts of his translation to discuss Nanak Singh's motivation in writing the poem, the events leading up to the massacre, and themes of nationalism and communal amity. It describes Nanak Singh's evolution as a novelist, and his transformation into a nationalist after the massacre. Some brief comments on the poem's relevance for the present are also included.

Keywords: Nanak Singh, *Khooni Vaisakhi*, Jallianwala Bagh, Indian nationalism

Introduction

22-year old Nanak Singh was present at Jallianwala Bagh, in the city of Amritsar, during the infamous massacre on 13 April 1919.¹ He lost two close friends who were killed in the shooting, and he was knocked unconscious in the ensuing chaos, but survived, and wrote a searing long poem called *Khooni Vaisakhi*² that was first published in May 1920. Apart from providing a vivid account of the massacre, it offers a window into that tumultuous first fortnight of April 1919, captures the mood of the people of Punjab and delivers a scathing indictment into the brutality and hypocrisy of British rule in India. Nanak Singh, the paternal grandfather of the author, went on to write over 50 acclaimed books and came to be regarded as the Father of the Punjabi novel.

¹ Briefly, several hundred unarmed men, women and children in a peaceful, but illegal assembly, were killed by firing (without warning) by troops led by a British general, Reginald Dyer. The crowd was protesting the Rowlatt Act (officially, the Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act of 1919), passed by the Imperial Legislative Council in Delhi on 18 March 1919. This Act extended wartime emergency measures of preventive indefinite detention and, imprisonment without trial, as a response to a perceived threat from revolutionary nationalists.

² "*Khooni*" means "bloody, whereas *Vaisakhi* is a harvest festival in mid-April, as well as having major significance in Sikh tradition as the date of the founding of the Khalsa order by Guru Gobind Singh. This is most exactly transliterated as "*Visakhi*" from the original Punjabi, but we will use the more common spelling throughout this paper.

Khooni Vaisakhi was banned and virtually all copies were confiscated. It was lost for the next 60 years until it was rediscovered by the family in 1979 and published again by the author's father in 1980. The author translated the poem from Gurmukhi into English and published it along with additional material to mark the centenary of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre (Singh and Suri, 2019).^{3,4} In this paper, the author attempts to provide an insight into some of the key aspects of the poem. He also offers a personal profile of his famous grandfather.

The Poet

My grandfather Nanak Singh, Bauji to all of us, was born on 4th July 1897 in Chak Hamid, a small hamlet in the Daadan Khan tehsil of Jhelum district. The oldest of four children born to Bahadur Chand Suri and Lacchmi Devi, he was named Hans Raj. His father owned a small shop in Peshawar and Hans Raj was barely eight when he was asked to leave their home in Jhelum to help his father in Peshawar. The rest of the family moved a year later, but the joy of a reunion was short-lived. Bahadur Chand died of pneumonia within a year of their arrival and at the tender age of 10, Hans Raj found himself responsible for the family store, an ailing mother and three siblings. There was little possibility of continuing with school and later in life, he often faced questions about his formal education. He would offer a wry smile and respond, 'I don't know if I should say 4th grade pass or 5th grade fail. You decide.' The lack of a formal education was no deterrent for a literary genius who went on to produce an enormous body of work that has spawned over 50 doctoral dissertations.

He lived in Peshawar for the next 10 years or so, discovering a passion for music and revealing an early talent for stringing rhymes and verses together into rudimentary poetry. '*Seeharfi Hans Raj*' an 8-page booklet of his verses was published in 1909 when he was barely 12. But he showed little interest in running the shop, preferring to leave it in the more capable hands of his younger brother. As he explains in his autobiographical work '*Meri Duniya*', (Nanak

³ The full poem is too long to reproduce in this article, but is available in the reference given. A Punjabi version is also available through <https://www.amazon.in/dp/B07QYLWJ74/>

⁴ This paper will not provide detailed background on the people and events mentioned here, as that is substantially beyond its scope. Extensive information is available online. The centenary of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre produced an outpouring of fresh analysis, including Desai (2018) and Wagner (2019), which incorporated analysis of contemporary documents and relatively untapped contemporary accounts to provide a reassessment of the event. Wagner's analysis is not uncontested, and a review and analysis of multiple historical and political analyses is provided by Lawrence (2020), including imperialist revisionism such as Lloyd (2011). A collection of shorter literary responses from the time of the massacre that can be compared to Nanak Singh's major poem is in Jalil (2019). The collection has eleven poems and eleven prose pieces in just over 200 pages.

Singh, 2014 [1949])⁵ his penchant for music and poetry earned him a set of disreputable friends who sought his company to provide free entertainment at their parties.

He acknowledges leading a purposeless life during these early years in Peshawar until he came under the influence of Giani Bagh Singh, a pious and scholarly figure at the local gurudwara. It was a momentous period for him as he decided to convert to Sikhism at the age of 18. Hans Raj became Nanak Singh in 1915 and displaying all the zeal of the recent convert, he proceeded to apply his poetic talents towards writing hymns in praise of the Sikh gurus. His Satguru Mehma, first published in Amritsar in 1918, became a household name and sold over a hundred thousand copies. He earned the titles Nanak Singh ‘Kavishar’ or poet and Bhai Nanak Singh – the prefix ‘Bhai’ being normally reserved for a person who has made a significant contribution to the Sikh faith. *Khooni Vaisakhi*, in contrast, was a mere blip – written in the aftermath of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, published in 1920 and lost for the rest of his life.

But Jallianwala Bagh was also an important milestone in his life in other ways. He became a staunch supporter of the nationalist cause and a fervent opponent of British rule, joining the Guru ka Bagh movement launched by the Akalis in 1922, getting arrested and spending several months in the infamous Borstal jail in Lahore. He writes about this in the foreword of his novel *Adh Khidya Phul* (1940; published as *A Life Incomplete* in English; Nanak Singh, 2012) and describes it as a transformational period for him as an individual and in his evolution as a writer.

His stint in prison brought him into contact with Pandit Jagan Nath, a Congress party activist who had made good use of his influence to bring a trunk-load of books to his cell. The collection included several novels of Munshi Prem Chand which Bauji eagerly devoured despite a very rudimentary knowledge of Hindi language or Devanagari script. It dawned on him that he had finally discovered his true calling – to write novels that would seek to reform society and make the country a better place. Without wasting any time, he got some paper and started to write his first novel while he was still in prison – only to have it seized and destroyed during a search by prison officials.

Bauji was released from jail as part of the general amnesty to some 5000 prisoners who had been arrested for unlawful protests during the Guru ka Bagh movement. Soon after release, he published *Zakhmi Dil* (1923; in English, *A*

⁵ The two dates indicate the current edition and the date of original publication. *Meri Duniya* was one of the first autobiographies written in Punjabi.

Wounded Heart), his next pamphlet in verse. *Zakhmi Dil* was quite clever in deploying simple fables to carry the message about the devious and rapacious nature of the Raj. The poems had innocuous titles like *The Traveller and the Djinn*; *The Lion and the Lamb*; *The Cat and the Monkeys*, etc. He also used Urdu in some of the poems to deliver a searing account of the violence used by police forces in countering the *Guru ka Bagh* protests. The short poem ‘*Mind your Tongue*,’ goes a step further to warn of the consequences of speaking out because of Dyer and the Rowlatt Act.

The Raj had no appetite for this kind of ‘seditious’ literature and like *Khooni Vaisakhi*, *Zakhmi Dil* was also banned soon after being published in 1923. Like *Khooni Vaisakhi*, it was also lost to the world until 1982 when my father found a copy with a dealer in old books. He again approached Dr. Gupta to provide a detailed foreword and the new edition was published almost six decades after the original, in November 1980.

The government of the day kept a close watch on the media even after the Rowlatt Act was repealed in 1922 and the 1920s were a difficult time to be a writer, printer or publisher. To print or publish anything tinged with nationalist or patriotic sentiment invited the label ‘seditious’ and led to raids by the police and the punishment often included three years in jail along with hefty fines. Bauji recounts in *Meri Duniya* an interesting anecdote of his own experience in setting up a printing press in Amritsar soon after his release from jail. He took a Rs. 3000 loan from Ram Singh – a close friend from his childhood in Peshawar. The venture between the two partners worked but the portfolio of the press included a couple of publications that might invite the wrath of the government. Some other printers had found a nifty little solution to get around the jeopardy. Not wanting to risk a jail term, the owner of the press would get a proxy – usually an unemployed youth who would sign up to become the proxy owner for a monthly salary of about Rs. 25. Bauji wasn’t too keen on this practice but Ram Singh insisted, arguing that their struggling business would collapse if Bauji were to go to jail for a second time. Bauji reluctantly agreed and they found a young man – Inder Singh – who signs up to be the proxy owner so that he can make some extra money. Barely 10 weeks had elapsed and the police arrived at their doorstep with warrants against their press. Poor Inder Singh, as the notional owner, was sentenced to three years’ rigorous imprisonment. Visiting him in jail, Bauji was deeply moved by his plight. Ram Singh wasn’t too happy and in the ensuing argument, Bauji offered to sell the press and give the proceeds to Ram Singh with a promissory note that he would refund the remaining amount soon. He also kept his promise to Inder Singh and went on paying Rs. 25 each month to his family for the duration of his jail sentence.

Although he had lost his printing press, the flame of writing socially relevant novels was burning bright. *Matrayi Maa* (The Step-mother) received widespread public acclaim as his first novel in 1924 (Nanak Singh, 1989). There was no turning back after that. The next five decades saw him produce a new book every year – mostly novels, interspersed with some theatre, short stories and even a translation or two. His major works included *Adh Khidya Phul*, based around the aborted novel that he had started writing in Borstal jail in 1922 and was eventually published in 1940. I had the privilege of translating it as *A Life Incomplete* in 2012. *Ik Mian Do Talwaran* (*Two Swords in a Sheath*) (Nanak Singh, 2012) revolved around the life of Kartar Singh Sarabha and the Ghadar movement and won the Sahitya Akademi award in 1962. Living in Amritsar through the horrors of the Partition in 1947 had a traumatic effect and he produced a series of novels including *Khoon de Sohile* (Hymns in Blood), *Agg di Khed* (A Game of Fire) and *Manjdhaar* (Midstream) that provide a superb contemporary history into the tumultuous events in Punjab on the eve of India's independence.⁶

The Poem

Khooni Vaisakhi is a fascinating poem, both from a literary and a historical perspective. Over the course of the hundred years since it was first published, much has been written about the Jallianwala Bagh massacre that provides both a historical narrative and an insight into some of the key characters. That also leaves us the possibility of interpreting *Khooni Vaisakhi* in a variety of different ways. From my perspective, the following are some of the facets that stood out as I was translating the poem to mark the centenary of the massacre.

Writing for posterity

Nanak Singh was not quite 23 years old when the poem was published. He would not have known that the Jallianwala Bagh massacre would become such an important milestone in India's struggle for independence, nor that it would mark the beginning of the end of British rule in India. But he recognizes the salience of the event and has a sense that he is writing for posterity. As he says in the opening verse titled 'Prayer to Guru Gobind Singh':

*To pen a portrait of those departed ones,
Grant me the strength, my Divine Guru.
To remind my people across India,*

⁶ All three novels were originally published in the years after Partition. Publication dates for currently available editions are provided in the reference list.

*Lest we forget their sacrifice, my Divine Guru.
To write the saga of our heroes such,
Your disciple is ready, my Divine Guru.
Do help me complete this mission of mine,
Nanak Singh beseeches, O my Divine Guru.*

He also seems to have a premonition of our tendency to forget our heroes and martyrs. He wants us to remember their sacrifices and to build a memorial to commemorate their valor. It is another matter that the Flame of Liberty memorial at Jallianwala Bagh did not actually come up till 1951. In the verse titled Voices of Martyrs, he writes:

*Make time to visit this Bagh of ours,
Echoing tales of our gallant souls, O friends.
With a heavy heart, they mock our nation
Thanks so much for your love, O friends!...*

*No plaque, no bust, no monument built
To mark where we died, O friends?*

He clearly sees the ones who laid down their lives at Jallianwala Bagh as a beacon for future generations:

*Be a man, prepared to serve the nation
Dare not forget this promise, O friends.
Says Nanak Singh, One day you'll die for sure
Why not die for nation's sake, O friends.*

Chronicle of first fortnight of April 1919

The poem is quite remarkable in the manner in which it not only chronicles the dramatic developments in Amritsar during the first two weeks of April 1919 but also for giving readers a remarkable glimpse into the mood of the city during that period, capturing the defiance before the Rowlatt Act was passed and the despair after it is enacted.

*Our cries, our pleas, our calls for compassion
On deaf ears fell, all in vain
With a push and heave, the Bill was passed
Our deeds and hopes went down the drain.*

It also draws a stark contrast between the jubilation amongst the British and their Indian lackeys and the gloom in the nationalist camp.

*But a scene so different on the other side
Friends gather at homes, to celebrate.
A mission accomplished, the Act is done
'Tis time for wine and feast ornate.
Their quislings, turncoats and traitors all
Come laden with gossip and tales narrate...
And a smirk of delight it brings upon the rulers
Who divide and rule, planting seeds of hate*

And he captures the pain of Punjab in these lines:

*A funereal spirit pervades the air
A stifled wail, a silent dirge and a pain innate.
Says Nanak Singh Ah! The pain of Punjab!
Words choke as I speak, they suffocate.*

Spirit of communal amity

The Jallianwala Bagh massacre took place barely three decades prior to the holocaust of sectarian violence unleashed by the Partition of India in 1947. But the people of Amritsar portrayed in Khooni Vaisakhi are a picture of communal amity. The city's two tallest leaders are Saifuddin Kitchlew, a Muslim barrister and Dr. Satyapal, a Hindu surgeon are able to unite the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh populations in their opposition to British rule and the poem has a dramatic portrayal of the Ram Navmi festival being celebrated just four days before the massacre.

*Hindus and Muslims they gathered together
To rejoice at a festival, O my friends
Brotherhood conveyed by Muslims that day
Beyond incredible it was my friends.
A festival of Hindus though it was
Muslims made it just their own, my friends...*

*Doctors Saifuddin and Satyapal together
Tread on a path united, my friends.
Feted with garlands, our stalwart duo
Sent out a message clear, my friends.
Their friendship displayed a bond so strong
Hindu Muslim were the same, my friends.*

There is a specific reference to Muslims and Hindus breaking bread and drinking water from the same glass, a show of amity that caught the attention of British officials, including Deputy Commissioner Miles Irving. In his testimony at the Hunter Commission of Inquiry, Irving was asked about the communal amity at display during the celebrations. He replied, *'I saw that they were using religious organizations to serve political ends, which always in the long run means mischief.'* On the specific question that *'Hindus were drinking water touched by Muhammadans and were joining the religious procession'* Irving reiterates that the motives underlying the unity had a 'sinister purpose.' The poem recounts:

*Discord and difference seemed to vanish
Each saw the other as brother, my friends.
Shared the same glass to drink their water,
Sat down for meals together, my friends.*

The shared grief of the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities is also captured in these lines about the funeral processions after the violence on April 11.

*Funeral processions joined by thousands more
Walked angrily, dazed and distraught, my friends.
Hindu, Sikh and Muslim strode side by side
Hearts pierced by arrows sharp, my friends.
Then a sight most wondrous was seen
It left us amazed and awed, my friends.
'Ya Hussain!' cried out the Hindus and Sikhs
As Muslims echoed 'Ram, Ram!' my friends.
And thus they reached the graveyard together
Hindu, Muslim and also the Sikh, my friends.
Funeral pyres flamed for Hindus and Sikhs
With Muslims buried alongside, my friends.*

Visual imagery

Although the poem is written in simple verse, it brings out the brutality of the massacre with some truly vivid imagery. The descriptions of the firing by Dyer's Gurkha troops and of bodies collapsing in heaps make the scenes come alive:

*At Dyer's command, those Gurkha troops
Gathered in a formation tight, my friends.
Under tyrant's orders, they opened fire
Straight into innocent hearts, my friends.*

*And fire and fire and fire they did
Some thousands of bullets were shot, my friends.
Like searing hail, they felled our youth
A tempest not seen before my friends...*

*Some ran with bullets ripping their chest
Stumbling to their painful end, my friends.
Others caught the bullet while running away
Dropping lifeless in awkward heaps, my friends.
In minutes, the Bagh so strewn with corpses
None knew just who was who, my friends.
Many of them did look like Sikhs
Amid Hindus and Muslims plenty, my friends.*

There is a particularly poignant description of people sifting through the corpses and searching for their loved ones in the aftermath of the massacre:

*Clutching lifeless bodies of precious sons
Parents mourn the abject horrors of the day.
My child, oh! Wake up just once more
What makes you sleep in a place so grey...*

*If Time indeed had come to part
Your parents could join, without delay.
Says Nanak Singh, You can't fight Fate
When the Master orders, you just obey.*

Transformation as a staunch nationalist

Khooni Vaisakhi also marks Nanak Singh's own transition from a young poet known essentially for his compilations of popular religious verse into an uncompromising advocate of India's freedom struggle. *Khooni Vaisakhi* is replete with references to a shackled Mother India and the brutality being inflicted upon her. In the verse titled 'Protests and Martial Law' following the passage of the Rowlatt Act, he writes:

*Dispirited and despondent by turn of events
They lamented, aghast at miserable fate.
With sinking hearths, they then witnessed
A shadow spread across a nation great.
All comforts and pleasures now sadly gone
Leaving gloom and grief to stalk the state...*

*Strikes called in every city and town
Sobs muffled, they roam in a sorry state.
Those valiant sons of Bharat Mata
Shedding tears, dismayed and desolate*

Nanak Singh's own courage is on display as he bluntly describes Dyer as a bloodthirsty murderer who will surely face the torment of Hell. The fact that he dared to write and publish *Khooni Vaisakhi* at a time when the Rowlatt Act was still in force shows the spirit of nationalist fervor that was prevailing at the time. In the verse titled 'The Martyrs' Certificate to Dyer', he starts with the lines:

*Shame on you, you merciless Dyer
What brought you to Punjab, O Dyer?
Not a sign of mercy unleashing such horror
How badly were you drunk, O Dyer.*

And he goes on:

*Just as you riddled our bodies with bullets
You too will pay the price, O Dyer.
You'll die and head straight for Hell
Ah! Such torment awaits you there, O Dyer.
Coming face to face on that Judgement Day
What answers do you plan to give, O Dyer?
You Tyrant! Until the end of time you'll be called
The Murderer that you are, O Dyer.*

Conclusion

Khooni Vaisakhi is an unusual poem, not just because of it comes from a survivor of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre but also because it provides a contemporaneous view into the mood of the city of Amritsar in 1919. Written in simple verse, it offers an insight into the man who would go on to become a colossus of Punjabi literature. It reveals Nanak Singh's transition from a writer of religious verse into a passionate nationalist who feels the pain of Amritsar, of Punjab and of Mother India. His trenchant criticism of British rule and of powerful figures like Brig. Dyer and Governor Michael O' Dwyer during a time when the Rowlatt Act was still in force reflect the courage of a fearless generation that fought for India's independence.

A hundred years after it was published, some of the poem's themes still remain relevant in India. Sedition laws of the kind propagated by the Rowlatt Act are

alive and well and continue to be used by various government agencies to stifle dissent. Fomenting sectarian dissent continues to remain an active part of the toolkit of various political actors, imparting a special resonance to Nanak Singh's message from the Ram Navmi of 1919.

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