

## Contemporary Idiom And Concerns In Recent Punjabi Poetry With Special Reference To Jaswant Deed

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When it comes to Punjabi poetry we can count the names of Bhai Vir Singh, Dhani Ram Chatrik (1876-1954), Puran Singh (1881-1931), Mohan Singh (1905-1978), Amrita Pritam (1919-2005) among the prominent poets of the first generation. To them goes the credit of re-inscribing the ideology and aesthetic of Punjabi poetry in the modern context. The trauma of Partition seems to be writ large in their poetry yet despite the thematic similarity there is diversity in their style. Each one of them has written in as varied an idiom and as distinct a voice as anyone could. Steeped in the Indian tradition of romance and conforming to the classical regimen, Chatrik used poetry to celebrate varied moods of nature, or occasionally to evoke an undying sense of patriotism through his nationalist verses. His poetry exudes patriotic fervour. Brought up on a heavy dose of English and American poetry, Puran Singh was definitely more liberal and direct than most of his predecessors, and his poetic expression always bristled with naked sensuousness and primal celebration of the human body. Most explicitly Freudian, he openly proclaims in one of his poems to be an animal again. Mohan Singh could be described as a “progressive modern” for it was he who liberated Punjabi poetry from the constraints of mysticism and/or revivalism. If there is anything specific that defines Amrita Pritam’s poetry, it is the boldness of her expression, pungency of her social criticism and relentless critique of the decadent morality that often works to the detriment of women.

When it comes to Jaswant Deed it was some three decades ago that the phenomenal Amrita Pritam played his mentor by initiating him on the poetic path by publishing a poem of his in her very prestigious and acclaimed Punjabi magazine *Nagmani*. Since then, there has been no looking back for Jaswant Deed, her distinguished acolyte. He has come a long way on the path of eminence as a Punjabi poet. Constant motivation from teachers like Dalip Kaur Tiwana was instrumental in further inspiring him. Having gifted us with five volumes of poems Jaswant Deed has endeared himself equally to the classes and masses by the variety of his themes and style and the distinctness of a new poetic voice at once profound and plebeian, apparently casual, but deeply and subtly charged to deliver the right nuances and reverberations.

The collections are titled as below:

1. *Bache Ton Dardi Kavita*
2. *Ghundi*
3. *Achanchet*
4. *Awaz Ayegi Aje*
5. *Kamandal* (Awarded Sahitya Akademi Award, Delhi)

Replete with personal experiences, Deed’s latest poetry book has many autobiographical touches. The poems delve into the conflict of three generations. He often explores the dilemmas that gnaw at the very existence of modern man who has no time to look back, even to attend to a mother’s call. The predicament of modern man who knows no rest is beautifully depicted in the poem *Tek* (translated as “Prop” by me). Let us read a part of it:

### Prop

No prop for me to lean anywhere;  
 Neither in this city nor that;  
 Now this town, now that village  
 No direction answers my purpose  
 I keep dissecting words  
 In profound silence  
 Concluding that it matters not  
 But find no prop

More than half of his poetry about human relationships deals with the man-woman relationship. And it is this very poetry about man-woman relationship that has given him self-confidence too. It has also given him smarter and more colourful relationships of opposition and love. It is in the process of expression of these very relationships that his new poetic diction also assumed a new sheen. The traditional idealistic model in Punjabi of “one man one woman” was disturbed perhaps for the first time by his poetry which tried to represent love as one of the multifarious relationships involving modern man.

He even dared to write love poems in Punjab’s dark days of terror. But all along he never endorsed the “till death do us apart” kind of love. He says without mincing words: “Love can happen more than once.” Deed’s poetry has many firsts to its credit. It has been instrumental in bidding adieu to the hitherto much beaten and trodden paths and so it exudes oodles of freshness of experiments in form. Moreover, Deed has successfully managed to question the basis of patriarchal society. The tour de force of his poetry are his candid confessions vis-à-vis his personal life which is generally kept in a closet by Punjabi writers. His fearless autobiographical confessions regarding his personal life excel in their singularity. His attitude is not of any goody-goody puritan. This facet of the poet’s life had been kept well guarded by traditional Punjabi writers. Jaswant Deed’s poetry is a far cry from the mainstream Punjabi poetry. He does not glorify the ideal of faithfulness in the man-woman relationship. His poem “Receive” reminds us of W.H. Auden’s “Lay Your Sleeping Head” with which it bears a marked similarity. Both the love poems acknowledge the transience of life and love. The love object is ephemeral and not ethereal. Parting is not something untoward and painful. Lovers are fully aware about their limitations and accept what life offers them. They indeed want to make the most of the opportunities offered to them. Permanence and immortality of love are not the cherished ideals. Moreover both the poets make an effort to reiterate that there is nothing Platonic about their love relationship. Let us read a part of each poem to see that both the poets are very clear about the short-lived nature of love:

#### Lay Your Sleeping Head

Lay your sleeping head, my love,  
 Human on my faithless arm;  
 Time and fevers burn away  
 Individual beauty from  
 Thoughtful children, and the grave  
 Proves the child ephemeral:  
 But in my arms till break of day  
 Let the living creature lie,  
 Mortal, guilty, but to me  
 The entirely beautiful.

Now Deed’s poem

### Receive

Clench me in such a tight embrace  
 That even after parting  
 My arms should remain open for ever,  
 And lips remain parched,  
 With the dry wind coming from you,  
 Remain open,  
 Thirsting for that lake  
 Which freezes one evening  
 And then, all of a sudden,  
 Melts up all, another evening.

Indeed what a close affinity between the two poems!

The Punjabi literature following 1990s is probably not that socially and politically oriented as the literary output in the preceding years. But undeniably it deals with the modern individual-personal, intra-personal and inter-personal conflicts. After decades, Punjabi literature in general and Punjabi poetry in particular has started acquiring a metaphysical tinge. Deed is in the forefront of those writers who are creating this literature of ‘different strokes’. (Sidhu Damdami, *Breaking the Mould*, Tribune; Spectrum Jan. 6, 2008)

By his diction and form of treatment, he paves the way for Punjabi poetry to make a much desired departure from the pre established mode and mould. He also draws heavily from local myths, customs and beliefs but he reframes folk metaphors and similes in such a way that they give fresh interpretations to the experiences of modern Punjabi being stretched between village and city, between Punjab and green pastures in foreign lands, between his/her spouse and ‘other’ relations.

Inverting the proverbial concept of romance, Deed’s poetry depicts the romance which is darkly lonely, edgy, bitter, unreliable, avenging, killing and punctuated by cold reality bites.

The social relevance of Deed’s poetry is debatable but his poetry is not run-of-the-mill poetry wedded to political ideologies and movements. Not only shattering many a taboo in Punjabi poetry goes to Deed’s credit but also the freshness of experiments in form. Being professionally related to television, Deed has, consciously or unconsciously, structured his poems like short and intense films. “Some of his poems read like tightly written movie scripts wherein one can sense the presence of close, medium and long shots blended well with the change of camera angles and frames. His poems, mostly, have a visible or invisible story thread passing through them. He effortlessly constructs his poems with audio and video files rendered in text.” (Sidhu Damdami *Breaking the Mould*, Tribune; Spectrum Jan. 6, 2008)

Focusing on the tension between spiritual and material modes of life, the past and the present, the country life and the city life, the East and the West, making and failing of relationships, the autobiographical poems dyed in imagination plunge the readers into deep thoughts. It is interesting to see how the poet presents the themes of universal significance as profoundly personal and vice versa. The witty, ironic, poignant lyrics are a picture of many conflicts and tussles that inhabit modern man’s soul.

Coming to *Kamandal* it is a collection rich in complex, experimental and cerebral poems. *Kamandal* portrays the contrapuntal juxtaposition of the country life and city life, spiritual and material life, past and the present, making and breaking of relationships. Deed is adroit in projecting the themes of universal significance as profoundly personal and vice versa.

The poet draws his subjects primarily from his own life and surroundings. A nostalgia for his rural roots and the consequent melancholy colour the poems “Family”, “Mint”, “The

Village Revisited” and “Message from My Village”. His completely transparent honesty in terms of dialect is striking.

Being related to television, Deed uses visual details adroitly and abundantly in his poems. The poet ironically celebrates the elemental greed, craftiness, cunningness and slyness of cats and snakes (the recurrent images) to describe the nitty-gritty of modern life.

The rugged style and ironic portrayal of the vicissitudes of modern life make *Kamandal* a must for those interested in modern poetry.

On the occasion of the bestowal of Sahitya Academi Award on him on Feb. 21, 2008 in Delhi Auditorium, Delhi Jaswant Deed threw light on his poetic process.

While I am in the act of writing poetry, storms blow within me and shrieking winds. Like shining sharp swords were cutting down the darkness. Like exercises of martial arts were going on and on. None could dare to come near. The swish of the naked sword strikes the air. And from within the swish blooms the flower of creation. This madness of his puts off his family, friends and acquaintances. But what can he do, given this mulish temper? This very temper transports him to the dark corners of poetry where he encounters genuine creation. For reaching these secret nooks I fight with every breath of mine. In this voyage he takes along even those breaths which he is destined to take in future.

It seems to him that whatever piece of art one considers embodies a particular glimmer, a flash which makes it art. Like the mythological jewel in the snake’s head, shining in darkness. This is the root of every creation. Perhaps first of all that flash came to the creator of the universe. A miracle. The same flash comes to every creator. This very flash becomes a story. The same becomes a poem, a painting, a film, a sculpture or a piece of any other art.

This very flash awakened him at midnight. This very flash would transform him from a man into a poet. Like a *jogi* he kept wandering in semi-darkness. With a *kamandal* in his hand the *jogi* has launched his ordained peregrination. The world takes notice of the *kamandal* in his hand. The One at whose feet the *jogi* has to place his *kamandal* beckons from millions of miles away. But the *jogi* has to reach there. A glint plays in the *jogi*’s eyes. Who has forgotten the *kamandal* within the breaths? Has got to reach Him. And the earth is receding and receding. . . This is poetry. This is the power of poetry. Poetry gets created like this. Without one’s awareness things happen of themselves. Creation comes by itself, unexpected. Nothing is premeditated before the act of writing. [ Deed’s words are reminiscent of Croce’s Expressionism]

I believe in the power of poetry. Restrictive limits of principles don’t exist for me. It is exactly here where my opposition begins. It is exactly here where the point raised by Hegel and Karl Marx comes to my assistance, namely, “Opposition is a sign of progress.” I have always drawn strength from rebellious ideas. My poetry takes on a special glow when one idea collides with another. When one is writing a poem, one is chased by a flood of myriad ideas; as if the priceless pearls of were raining from the clouds. The gleaner of these pearls is wonder-struck. *Sarswati* continues to shower her boons even as the poet continues with his tiny hands to arrange the pieces in a proper order.” (The speech originally in Punjabi has been translated by me into English)

His poetry is under the influence of no other poet. But he confesses of a close affinity with the works of Bertolt Brecht. Deed maintains that good poetry leaves no effect on anybody; only descends into one's blood-stream and keeps speaking softly in one's blood.

Much of his poetry is autobiographical. Whatever he does in his routine life surreptitiously like thieves gets caught in his poetry. But the thief- -caught red-handed- - manages to slip away, though only to be caught again in the next poem. He tells all his secrets to his poetry. This is his unflinching honesty to his poetry.

About one quarter of his poetic output comprises poems which he has somehow written about his wife, family and relations. Another quarter consists of poems which he was permitted by his wife to write - - permitted he doesn't know how or why.

He was born and brought up in Shahkot- -a town-like village. In his poems his small village continues calling him. Keeps him connected to his roots. Lets him keep standing his ground. His nostalgia and his ego come to light in this village and this very village snuffs them out. Poems like "Message from My Village", "The Village Revisited" and "Family" being some. The poet draws his subjects primarily from his own life and surroundings. His completely transparent honesty in terms of dialect is striking. Let us read one:

### **Message from My Village**

Have to discuss a few things  
 When may we arrive?  
 I've no time. . .!?  
 "What, have I no time?"  
 My silence questions me.  
 And this time  
 I was again going to say:  
 "Not now. . .kids are writing their exams"  
 When mother seizes the phone from father  
 And softly calling me "son" takes my name  
 And starts to weep. . .  
 And sigh.  
 Father takes the phone back from her  
 Clears the sob stuck in his throat with a hawk:  
 "Son, we need nothing from you-  
 We only. . ."  
 A sob escapes from mother standing nearby  
 Papa has fallen silent  
 Or perhaps not. . .  
 The phone has become silent  
 Voices keep flying within the disconnected phone.

How thought-provoking! It is the mouthpiece of the poet reflecting the predicament of the multitudes who have bid a tearful adieu to the rural havens in search for the greener pastures. In the bargain they have entered a no man's land and have snapped all ties with mother nature and mother per se. The disintegration and dispossession has led to degeneration. The universal trend of urbanization has led the likes of him to say goodbye to their rural abodes and settle in the ever-burgeoning cities.

Deed is quite experimental has already been mentioned. Let us see a specimen. This one line short poem of Deed speaks volumes to bear testimony to this.

### The Parting

I breathe again. . .

Obviously brevity and compression must be the very *differentiae* of this poem. It instantaneously makes us recollect Wordsworth's *The Prelude* "And I breathe."

Deed's themes are also varied. See his poem titled "The Prostitute"

### The Prostitute

Lodged in a lofty room  
She kept waiting for me alone.

And I, a mendicant in rags,  
Leaving  
All forests, deserts, streets,  
Houses and inns,  
Would climb the stairs.

Braving rebukes,  
Pining for the touch,  
Would fret at my own life,  
Swearing  
Not to climb the stairs again.

The tart would only laugh and pay:  
"Mean one!  
How the hell will you ever stick to your oath?"

Poems about tarts and hookers always run the risk of becoming more or less sentimental. More often than not, a stark, cynical kind of realism is oddly complemented by a lachrymotic kind of sentimentalism evoked by the plight of poor, helpless, exploited women commodified by the male-dominated society. To intensify the reader's sympathy, a poet often succumbs to the temptation of crediting a fallen woman with a heart of gold, an exceptionally noble character. That ploy accounts for the overdose of sentimentalism. But Deed aschews such mushy sentimentalism. The prostitute in the poem of the same title is a seamstress, an enchantress who exercises a strong pull on the mendicant who has perceptibly renounced life with all its temptations. But he grows weak in the knees in front of the prostitute. The mystical loses before the mundane it seems. The mendicant is as fallible as the prostitute and vice versa.

In *Kamandal* - his award-winning collection of poems - his love, his relationships, his ancestors, inherited values, middle-class life, woman-man relationship, family and himself are all lying tangled in a huddle trying to find expression. This quest for expression takes him from village to city, from city to state, from state to country, and then he begins his odyssey covering several countries. All this is part of poetry - - an effort to understand the concept of salvation.

In *Kamandal* he touches the hazy doors of spirituality, but his expression remains caught within the traditional values, the prevailing social situation, and his desires and cravings. "*Haath kamandal kaparia man trishna upji bhari.*" "Mendicant", "Meditation", "An Evening with Babaji" and "Victory Be to Bhola" being some examples. These centuries-old words of Baba Nanak start glowing in the title of the collection of his poems. This is exactly what his poetry is. Plunging through all the secrets and obscurities it goes on uttering lies and truths all the time.

### END NOTES

1. Auden, W.H. “Lay Your Sleeping Head”, *W.H. Auden: Selected Poems*. Ed. Edward Mendelson. New York: Vintage.1989.
2. Damdami, Sidhu. *Breaking the Mould*. Tribune; Spectrum Jan. 6, 2008.
3. Deed, Jaswant. *Kamandal*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi (in the pipeline).
4. Deed, Jaswant. “Message from My Village”, *Kamandal*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi (in the pipeline).
5. Deed, Jaswant. “Prop”, *Kamandal*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi. (in the pipeline).
6. Deed, Jaswant. “The Prostitute”, *Kamandal*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi. (in the pipeline).
7. Deed, Jaswant. “The Parting”, *Kamandal*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi. (in the pipeline).
8. Wordsworth, William. *The Prelude*, 1890.
9. **The present writer has had the honour of having been commissioned by the SAHITYA AKADEMI, NATIONAL ACADEMI OF LETTERS, NEW DELHI to translate into English Deed’s latest collection of poems- *Kamandal*. All quotations from *Kamandal* are parts of my effort in executing a task both challenging and exhilarating in an equal measure.**