CHAPTER VI
LOOKING BACKWARD AND FORWARD

The Dasam Granth is a monumental work, an encyclopaedia, as it were, in which all the possible themes and forms of verse are treated with the skill of a virtuoso. It represents all the traditions and currents of literature, devotional as well as secular, side by side with new experiments that a true poetic genius would love to make out of sheer exuberance of its creative energy. It reflects the spirit of the times, when the saint and the hero were the natural leaders of the society and the state; when religious intolerance and political insecurity affected deeply the minds of the people in the reign of incompetent or irresponsible rulers; when men and women were, as a rule, interested more in activities that sustained life rather than in politics; and when the rhythm of life was rather slow and leisurely.

That age is gone; its natural leaders are gone; its milieu, too, is gone. The state has forged new powers and new values. The society has forged a new consciousness. The poets respond with new sensibilities. The milieu inspires new themes. And the past has been relegated into neglected books.

II

Before attempting the literary significance of the work, it is necessary to gather up the threads into a pattern which seems to suggest itself in the survey.

1. The Dasam Granth enshrines the literary traditions of devotional and didactic verse found in the Adi Granth as well as in Kabir and other bhaktas, in Panjabi as well as in Braji. The Jap is an example of the one, and Shabad Hazare of the other, while Akal Ustat and Sri Mukhibak Swaiya, are examples of the both. In a part of the Akal Ustat, there is a vein of satire to which the saints occasionally gave vent, when they grew impatient of the slow-awakening of the social conscience against tyranny of caste, or of the superstition and ignorance of the mass mind.

There is also in the Shabad Hazare a short lyric quivering with tragic pathos, the anguished cry of a dedicated heart. It strikes the note of humanism which emerges from the poetry of bhaktas who appeal to God in the name of humanity.

2. The Gian Parbodh Granth, which appears to be an incomplete treatise, is an exposition, in the form of a dialogue, of practical philosophy or Dharma (Raj, Daan, Bhog and Mokhsh), on which Bhishma Pitamaha discoursed before he passed away in the field of Kurukshetra. Evidently, it is an attempt at the revival of the epic philosophy illustrated with incidents from the reigns of kings like Parikshit, Janmejaya, and of rishis like Kashyap, Uttank and Austik.
3. The *Bachitra Natak Granth* follows the Puranic tradition of legend, history or both, and retells the deeds of valour performed by Chandi, Chaubis Avtars, Brahma, Rudra and still others. It, further, gives an account of battles fought by Guru Gobind Singh himself in fulfilment of the mission with which he thought he had come into the world. In this heroic verse numerous actions charged with the thrill of *Vir rasa*, are described with a verve and zest that only a soldier-poet is capable of. The heroic poetry of Bhushan (1613-1715? A.D.), the war balladry of the Rajputana echoing over the sands of Bhatinda, would have thrilled the soldiers of Faith into re-living the ancient scenes again. On the communal plane, life had become a constant struggle for existence. The Mahrattas and the Rajputs had taken up the challenge and had resolved not to submit any longer to political tyranny. Poetry became an echo of their spirit.

The heroic exploits of Chandi have been rendered into verse three times, twice in Braj and once again in Panjabi. Before the readers are called upon to imagine or witness the scenes of action, the horrors of war and engines of destruction in play, they are introduced to the heroes like Datta, Paras Nath, Rama, Krishna, etc., and to heroines like Sati Ansuya, Durga, Sita, Radha, etc.

Together with a pageant of allegorical figures like Kamdev, Basant, Hulas, Anand, Bharam, Kalah, Bair, etc., in the story of *Paras Nath Avtar*, the sketches of the heroes form an excellent gallery of portraits. The art of portrait-painting reveals a skill that improves upon the conventional technique of *Nayikabhed* and *Nakh-Shikh* which the Riti school introduced into the seventeenth century and specimens of which we possess in *Birah Natak* in the *Krisanavtar* and elsewhere.

Contemporary influences are hard to shake off. One adopts them as one adopts the climate into which one is born. The art evolves itself in conformity with the technique as in the *Krisanavtar* on the one hand and in the *Jap* and *Sastra Nam Mala* on the other; but transcends its weaknesses in the hands of a master, and achieves refreshing effects in portrait-painting.

4. Romance was the breath of life in the Panjab of those days, with hills in the north and the west, deep impenetrable jungles along the rivers and a desert in the south. Every village had a watch-tower; and every town, a fort. People in adversity migrated by the hundred, and travelled in caravans. The sight of a stranger spread an alarm, and one village gave a signal to another by the beat of a huge drum. The folklore of such a life could not but be romantic, tales of hair-breadth escapes, deeds of chivalry, thrilling adventures, magic, ghosts and news of abduction or clannish fight over a woman. The *Pakhyan Charitra* drew upon such a stuff; and one finds in it the romantic tales from varied resources: the Panjabi as well as the Persian, the Pathanic or Mughal as well as the ancient, floating scandals of neighbourhood as well as the infiltrated ones of Rajasthan. These form a body of purely secular form of literature that carries on the native tradition of story-telling which was then primarily oral.
5. The poetry of the Dasam Granth like the Hindi poetry of the day has several elements of conventionality in it. This conventionality consists in the traditional use of themes, plot, imagery, form and metre. Form and metre are traditional modes of musical speech, that have been forged by the regional genius after generations of experimentation; but the same cannot be said of theme, plot and imagery. While it is left to geniuses to invent new forms or metres, even the trio can introduce fresh imagery and variety of themes. In the Hindi poetry of the middle ages, the stories of Ram and Krishna have been told over and over again. Guru Gobind Singh has, however, extracted the element of heroism from them without projecting the attitude of a worshipper.

In plot constructions also certain conventional devices have found their way into the Dasam Granth, viz., a step-mother being enamoured of her step-son and on his refusal to gratify her desires her anxiety to put him to death; a minister relating a series of stories to the king to enlighten him; the introduction of Barahmasa or Shatritu to depict pangs of separation; seeing of lover in a dream; falling in love with a person at the sight of a picture; change of form; change of sex; etc. The use of such conventions in the Granth is well-planned. They have been employed to start the story or give it a turn in the character-narratives.

"Conventionality", says Keay, "in the use of metaphors is another feature of Hindi poetry. Some of these metaphors do not correspond with the fact of nature, but the Hindi poets are never tired of repeating them. The separation of chakva bird from its mate at night; the eager waiting of the chatrak bird, who is supposed to drink only raindrops, for the beginning of the rainy season; the chakor bird, that is never happy except when gazing on the moon; the swan that knows how to separate milk from the water with which it has been mixed—these and many other stock metaphors are continually recurring in Hindi poets”. The same may be said of the poetry of the Dasam Granth.

Apart from conventional symbolism there is in the Dasam Granth as in Hindi poetry of the Ritikal, much of other imagery which is not only conventional but also commonplace. In the description of beauty we have in this Granth certain comparisons as the, moon-faced, deer-eyed, cuckoo-voiced, with an elephant-gait, etc., which are found in abundance as the common stock of poets of the period. But many beautiful similes, drawn from a true observation of nature at first hand, are, also, found in the poetry of the Dasam Granth.

The literary genre, the acrostic, in which every verse begins with the letters of the alphabet in a strictly serial order, is not new. It is said to have its origin in the Aphuhransha period of the Hindi literature. In the Adi-Granth a similar composition of Kabir appears under the name of Painti Akhri. Jayasi also wrote a composition like this under the name of Akhravat. The saint poets like Rajjab, Haridas, Sundardas, etc., attempted this kind of composition under the name of Bawan Akshri. In the Dasam Granth, too, we find similar compositions. It is, however, interesting to note that of the four
acrostics found in the Dasam Granth, one is conventional, and the others are of a rare type in the Hindi literature in that the verses end with the letters of alphabet in serial order, though of course, terminating in vowel which is unavoidable.

Another conventional feature of the Dasam Granth which brings it into line with the literature of the Ritiaka, is its encyclopaedic nature. It covers a wide range of human knowledge including ayurved, astrology, human psychology, geography, hunting warfare, music, etc., and in fact all the sciences and arts to which references have been made in it. There is a long list of diseases of diverse nature—diseases that have come down to us in the wake of life. They are not only physical ailments but include mental worries as well. The common astrological beliefs, such as the conjunction of the moon and mars that augurs well, also find expression. A psychological touch is imparted to the well-known prescription of medical treatment that a wound or cut is healed by fomentation. Indelible pictures of the various places in the country are drawn in a string of well-chosen similes. Intimate knowledge of the habits and ways of various games and birds of prey is displayed. Long lists of various kinds of missiles and weapons of warfare in the descriptions of wars are frequently drawn. Mention of different rags and enumerations of various musical instruments and presentation of word pictures of the strain flowing from them are also there.

The Dasam Granth, appears from this summing-up, to be a monument to the genius of the Medieval India raised at Anandpur in the Panjab. Its importance is three-fold:

(a) It is a source of material for students of history who turn over the pages of the Bachitra Natak for the account of battles that the soldier-writer gives, and those of the Jafarnama that Guru Gobind Singh wrote to Aurangzeb as a letter of protest against the royal breach of the royal word. Historian after historian from Cunningham downwards, has drawn upon the material for its authenticity and clarity.

(b) In the history of Braji literature, as in that of the Panjabi, the Dasam Granth has carved a niche for itself, next in order, perhaps, to that of the Adi Granth. Chadi di Var in Panjabi possesses a place of pride in the Panjabi literature as the first and finest specimen of poetry of Vir rasa written in Sirkhandi Chhand for the first time. The Panjabi genius at Anandpur accepted and maintained the literary traditions and conventions of the Braji verse, and at the same time put on them its native stamp of devotion and valour. It went still further. It re-orientated the art of autobiography in the Bachitra Natak, and the art of fiction in the Pakhyan Charitra,—probably the reflexes of a greater ego and a greater tendency towards escapism dominating in Punjabi character.

(c) Apart from the historical value of the content and of the new experiments made in art forms, the poetry of the Dasam Granth has its intrinsic literary value: (1) lyricism (2) portrait-painting and (3) heroic as well as narrative verse, which have made a refreshing appeal to the modern generation. In any selection of the medieval Braji verse, the Dasam Granth would yield a rich harvest.
Passages of lyric beauty are found in every form of verse, devotional, heroic or erotic, rich in imagery and music and instinct with emotion. In the Akal Ustat, and Shabad Hazare, however, we find short lyrics like 'gems of purest ray'. Some of them are poignant like the cry of a soul in anguish.

In portrait-painting or even in description of nature, the verse of the Dasam Granth attains a high water-mark in achieving effects of beauty or passion in shringar rasa.

The heroic verse of the soldier-poet is charged with sentiments of valour and martial music, and gives a thrill of the war balladry of the oral tradition. Even the devotional verse of the Jap seems to have caught something of the declamatory or recitative rhythm of the heroic verse, for God is Sarab Loh; and Durga, the incarnation of the Primal Shakti. The swift and sonorous verse tries to echo the hurry and din of action, and the words seem to act for the strokes of weapons, the volleys of bullets, the neighing of steeds and trumpeting of elephants, the shouts of fighters and the groans of the dying. The reader is transported to the very scenes of battle as those of the Mahabharat described by Sanjaya.

IV

A survey and study of the Dasam Granth in these pages, and a brief summing-up of the whole at the end of this work tempt one to estimate the place of the Dasam Granth in the Hindi literature. Apart from the large variety of themes and metres found in it, on the basis of the number of verses (16,237, excluding those of Persian and Panjabi compositions) alone, this Granth stands as the biggest work in Braj, surpassing even the Sur Sagar which has only 4,936 available verses. Moreover, like the Sur Sagar it is not confined only to Muktak Kavya; it constitutes both the Prabandh and Muktak types of poetry.

In war poetry, Bhushan's Shivraj Bhushan, Shiva Bavani and Chhatarsal Dasak get the precedence of the Dasam Granth in time as well as in epic quality; and it may be suggested, as already mentioned elsewhere in this volume, the author of the Dasam Granth drew inspiration from his illustrious predecessor with a common cause, Shivaji, but in var and war balladry of the Ritikal, the Dasam Granth in Braji as well as Panjabi verse may be said to bear the palm in the person of our soldier-poet who regarded sword as a symbol of Sarablah (All-steel) God. In autobiographical poetry, we find a pioneer in a Jain poet Banarsidas (1586-1641) of Jaunpur. But it was left to Guru Gobind Singh to make a fresh experiment in this field in his world of medieval poetry. In the Nirgun school of devotional poetry the Dasam Granth offers a fine blend of purely devotional poetry and satirical or didactic verse of the school of Kabir and Guru Nanak. To fiction, the Pakhyan Charitra contributes the largest collection of Upakhyan (tales) in the Hindi literature and further marks a stage in the evolution of short story, in which character dominates. Coming to the Panjab, one may observe that the Dasam Granth comes next to the Adi-Granth in bulk of composition as well as in literary importance. In its secular character, however, the Dasam Granth is the greatest contribution to the Braji literature.
monument to the versatile genius of Guru Gobind Singh. Further, the Dasam Granth in a way, is a great step towards rescuing much of the old Indian thought and culture from becoming stagnant in the ancient language of the country, which had become inaccessible to the general public, and transmitting it into the language of the people.

In the variety of metres, the Dasam Granth ranks next only to the works of Keshavdas, but in the broadness of canvas and poetic forms and moulds, it surpasses the latter.

The Alankars used in the Dasam Granth are not only myriad but apt and striking. They have been pressed into the service of sentiment, emotion and motive very deftly. They impart potency to the manifestation of a suggested sense. With the poet of the Dasam Granth, as emotion increases, expression swells and figures of speech foam forth with the result that we have the cumulative enjoyment of sound, idea and emotion, all in one relish. The emotion expressed by these Alankars may be found elsewhere for these are long-established poetic conventions but in many places a new flight is shown, that is sometimes marvellous.

The poet's genius (Pratibha) presents ever fresh aspects in the domain of Dhwani. The same thought, when made to glow by the poet's imagination, appears new.

Whatever the merits of good poetry, be it Rasa, Guna, Alankar, Dhwani or Riti or even metre or musical form, in the Dasam Granth all these merits of good poetry combine to give it a unique position as a work of great poetical value in the Hindi and Panjabi literatures. We may, therefore, justifiably conclude that the Dasam Granth is one of the major glories of the Hindi literature.

V

The Dasam Granth has been lying in obscurity for decades and decades. The educated Panjabis have turned their mind to western literatures. The pious have recited the Jap for their devotion. The Nirmala scholars have given their preference to the Adi-Granth and Vedant over its secular verse. While the holy Granth has won wider publicity by being transliterated into Devnagari script by the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, Amritsar, the privilege has not yet been extended to the Dasam Granth for its secular character. Consequently, it has, with the exceptions of the Jap, Akal Ustat and Bachitra Natak, remained a sealed book to the world of Braji or Hindi. It is still waiting for a literary enterprise in the Punjab, that would rescue it from its age-old silence and solemnity, and publish some parts of it, at least, in Devnagari to give it due publicity in the world of literature, which it richly deserves.