CHAPTER II

THE POETIC BACKGROUND

The poetry of the Dasam Granth is a brilliant, though apparently an isolated phenomenon in the literary history of the Punjab. The Tenth Guru of the Sikhs (1666-1708) with a century-old tradition of ‘Gurbani’ before him, took to Braji Poetry. In his darbar at Anandpur, he patronised poets of Braji and himself composed verses in the language of the east. In the Punjab itself, the Poets of Braji, if any, were few and far between and wooed the Muse in the blissful obscurity of their private lives or in the hills of the north. Some of them who were touched by the martyrdom of the Ninth Guru and admired the youthful ardour of Gobind Singh, sought his patronage and wrote verses under his inspiration. The impulse to write Braji appears, therefore, to have come from two sources. In the darbar of the Ninth Guru, there were according to Kahan Singh, the great Lexicographer, several poets who attempted verse in Braji. The poetry of the Guru himself is considerably, if not wholly, Braji in character as it is evident in the last verses of his in the holy Granth. The other source of inspiration must be the contemporary Braji poetry, the waves of which came to the Punjab like the waves of light or the waves of thought from the east, unlike the hordes of barbarians that came down upon it from the west. The poetry of Kabir and Sur, like that of Tulsi and other Bhaktas, had come in this way and spread over it like the sun-shine and flooded the parched hearts of the Punjabi Hindus. It may be, therefore, surmised or even presumed that some of the poets who enjoyed his patronage, hailed from the Braji region, bringing with them the gift of charming Braji verse of their day.

When the Dasam Granth was composed, the early Riti School of poetry was flourishing. When Guru Gobind Singh came of age, Chintamani was dead, Raja Jaswant Singh had recently, in 1681, been killed in action against the Afghans, and Satasai of Bihari Lal (1603-1663) had become a rage. The story of how these 700 dohas had come to be composed at the court of Jai Singh, the ruler of Jaipur, had gone abroad to each province and awakened a universal curiosity about it. Satasai had become the Bible of young poets and lovers. Mati Ram and Deva Datta were, however, his contemporaries, though the former was senior to him. Mati Ram’s Rasaraja treated rasas in general, and Nayika-bheda in an elaborate manner and is still regarded as one of the classics of Riti poetry. Deva Datta, too, a representative of his age, was keenly interested in love and feminine beauty.

All these were scholar poets, who had fully studied the art of poetry and its technique. They had led a new school of poetry, patronised by the court, the rich and the idle. It was secular, sensuous and lyrical. It combined in itself the various cults like Rasa, Alankara and Dhwani. The poets were not so much inspired by the passion of love, as

were concerned with *Nayika-bheda*, *Nakha-shikha*, the minute details or physical features of their object of passion or praise. Their method became, therefore, descriptive, elaborate and analytical. Its effect was rhetorical. Its use became, consequently, conventional.

The composition of the *Dasam Granth* bears evident marks of this influence of the *Riti* School. The composition of *Ras Mandal Varnan* and *Birah Natak* is a specimen of love poetry, the old motif of which is Radha-Krishna romance. The *Ras Mandal Varnan* contains an account of Krishna's stay at Kunj Gali, his sports with cowmaids and his intimacy with Radhika, and her *Maan Lila* (मानलीला). *Birah Natak* describes in two *Barah Mahas*¹ the pangs of separation felt by Radhika and her maids. The poet has not, however, indulged in any passion of his own. There are no love lyrics in the manner of Bihari, Mati Ram or Deva Datta. The wonderful effect of the *Riti* School can, however, be traced in the description of characters or portrait-painting, of which there are numerous instances in the *Granth*².

The other great tendency of Braji poetry which seems to have exercised considerable influence on the poetry of the *Dasam Granth*, and which must have made a greater appeal to the son of a martyr, was the poetry of *vir rasa* narrated in a long poem. The great exponent of this school of poetry was Bhushan (1613-1715) who is believed to have entered upon his career about 19 years before Guru Gobind Singh was born in Patna. He enjoyed the patronage of Shivaji and Chhatrasal of Panna, and paid homage to them in immortal verse. What Dr. Dwivedi says of him may aptly hold good in the case of Guru Gobind Singh also:

> "This great poet virtually ignored *sringara* and dedicated his great talents to other *rasas*, particularly *vira* and *raudra*. Thus the presence of Bhushan who floated the tendencies of his degenerate age is an agreeable surprise and a refreshing fact. His bold and clamant voice must have sounded like a clarion call, seeking to rally the down-trodden Hindus suffering from despair to a new effect at revival."²

The clarion-call, no doubt, echoed and re-echoed all over the country and had a rallying effect on the Sikhs of the Punjab. They heard it in the person of Guru Gobind Singh and answered it with the voice that has not died yet.

Speaking of Bhushan's popularity, Dr. Dwivedi adds:

> "Bhushan was not a mere court poet but had a large audience and touched the hearts of the common man of his times. Bhushan's name is a byword and his poetry is recited in all parts where Hindi is spoken."³

No wonder that Bhushan's heroic poetry might have been recited in the darbar of Guru Gobind Singh, and it stirred the hearts of the rebellious Punjabis. His *Shivaraj Bhushan*, *Shiva Bavani*, and *Chhatrasal Dasak* must have been read and recited while the

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¹ "Barah Mah is an account of the twelve months of the Punjabi year. The poet describes the pangs of......separation in each of these months".—P. S. P., XXIII.

² In Hindi it is known as Barah Masa (बारह मास)

³ See chapter on Art Value : *Art of Description*  4. *ibid.*
Moghul tyranny had made the Hindus sullen and sore. It would, therefore, be not unseemly to presume that Guru Gobind Singh drew inspiration from the revolt of Shivaji, particularly, from the Rajputs whose name-suffix Singh and saffron-coloured banner he adopted! His three versions of Chandi Charitra, two in Braji and one in Punjabi (Chandi-di-Var), bear an eloquent testimony to this suggestion. His descriptions of battle-scenes, skirmishes and duels, are numerous and met with in almost every part of the Dasam Granth. They are informed with vir and raudra rasas and are a thrilling fare for the audience which was called upon to wage an eternal war against political and religious tyranny of the foreign rulers.

In the Punjabi verse, the poetic tradition of the Sikh Gurus and Bhai Gurdas must have influenced the minds of Guru Gobind Singh, more deeply and intensely. The Dasam Granth itself is a compendium of verse in various metres, rags or forms, with a rich content on numerous themes, ranging from mysticism to satire. The main body of the verse is, no doubt, devotional but it is set off with the didactic on the one hand and the satirical on the other. Guru Gobind Singh was a profound scholar of the Adi Granth and is believed to have dictated orally the whole of it to Bhai Mani Singh at Damdama. It is, no wonder, therefore, that he should have been deeply influenced by the thought, the music, the sentiments and the style of the hymns of the Gurus, as well as those of the Bhaktas, the select pieces from whom in Braji have been included in the Granth in Gurmukhi script. It is, therefore, suggested that his devotional, didactic and satirical verse owes a great deal to the Gurbani of the Adi Granth.

The secular culture of the Punjab in the Mughal period cannot but have exercised a considerable influence on the young poet. Romances of love were very popular in those days and were sung on social or festive gatherings. It was probably these which provided, to some extent, the motif for Pakhian Charitra, popularly known as Triya Charitra. The Punjabi mind loved romance into which it escaped from the sordid realities of the political suppression and religious tyranny, from the despotism of the kings and the ever-haunting shadow of foreign invasions or eruptions. Humour and romance were, therefore, always welcomed, next to religion, as the saving grace of life. Once the story of Gopi Chand was recited in a gathering in the evening. Some of the Puritans objected to it for its secular exoteric character. Guru Gobind Singh, however, allowed it for its deep moral and spiritual significance. On another occasion he staged a skit at the expense of the Masands who had begun to tyrannise over his Sikhs as petty rulers and who exercised religious sway over them in his name. The young Guru had a keen sense of humour, satire and irony as well as of romance; and this may be detected in abundance in his secular verse.

The composition of the Bachitra Natak Granth in the Dasam Granth seems to bear ample marks of influence, both in subject-matter and style, of early popular Lila narratives which came into vogue as early as Nand Das's Ras Panchadhyayi, Maan Lila, Daan Lila, Virah Manjari, etc. This approach is supported by a passing remark in the Report of the Sodhak Committee Dasam Patshahi Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji that Hanumannatak was so dear to the Guru that he always kept it in his Gatat. Hanumannatak, it may be added in this connection, falls in the category of Lila narratives and is quoted side by side with the Bachitra Natak Granth.