CHAPTER 1

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK-
THE SPIRIT OF ORIENTAL POETRY

The book The Spirit of Oriental Poetry by Prof. Puran Singh has the following arrangement of chapters:

1. The Divine Poet
2. The Bhakta
3. As Bhaktas See things
   (i) Poetry of the West
   (ii) The Poetry of Japan
   (iii) The Poetry of Persia
   (iv) Modern Indian Poetry
4. Disciple Poetry
5. Shringar: The Blossom of Youth
6. The Gita Govinda: When Love is Prayer
7. Vairagam: The Sadness of the Great Illusion
8. The Philosophy of the Faithful
9. Home and Society

As with the other books of this series, Puran Singh possesses undoubted knowledge of his subject. And to that knowledge adds first, his own native thoughts, so frequently in harmony with the great ones of his own part of the world; second an interesting commentary on the great poets of the west; third a conviction that urges us to use his work in the light of textbook; and fourth, a distinctly poetic manner of writing which gives another touch of beauty to his book. The book begins with the chapter ‘The Divine Poet’.
According to this book, the highest order of poetry is the ‘Disciple poetry’, where God is the perennial and inspirational source and subject. Puran Singh includes himself in the category of Divine Poets saying, “Poetry is not simply a momentous pleasure, it is our very life.” (5) In this way, there does not remain much of a difference between a ‘poet’ and a ‘bhakta’ (disciple).

For Puran Singh ‘Poetry’ is devotion and a devotional tribute to his master with not merely thoughts and reasoning but also with feelings and emotions.

For the most part, Puran Singh is concerned with that particular Kind of Oriental Poetry known as Disciple Poetry. Not only does he devote an entire chapter to the understanding and appreciation of such poetry, but from cover to cover he is constantly, reminding us of the truth of Disciple poetry and again and again reverting to its power to “give life to the lifeless”, as compared with the feeble, transitory powers of all lesser poetry. But either in a relaxation of inconsistency or in the time spirit of a wealth of Oriental Poetry, he turns with a sign, a leap and a brilliant splash into the pages of love-songs. It is in these pages, fervid with the intensity and the youthfulness of passion, that we find the most beautiful quotations in a single reasoning that the poetry of passion is ‘only an object lesson to teach us how to love the Teacher, the Master, the Buddha’, when the book is read and thoughts flock around us like ghosts from the closed pages, we are haunted by the silvery thread of passion rather than by the motionless idolatory of the disciple.

‘Bhakta’ (disciple) in Chapter 2 believes in total submission to his master and this is expressed through a Child; the symbol of innocence. Bhakta sometimes behaves like a Child, sometimes, a Beloved and at other times like a Wanton. His last and only wish is to achieve God. Away from the materialistic world, the only way to unite with Him is to submit to Him, fully. The book, basically, deals with the divine voice and function of the poet and Oriental Poetry.

The book follows two typical divisions:
First part describes comparative poetic techniques and
Second part has translations of some of the works of high repute.
In the first part, the writer tries to analyze the actual and true standards/parameters of poetry according to his own experience and mind. He bestows ‘the poet’ with a very high position and says ‘The poet is not one of us. He is the messenger of God, His prophet; he is God in human clay.’ (2)

It seems that here Puran Singh separates the ordinary poets from those unearthly poets. He even adds ‘the poet (or, as we call him The Guru, The Master, The Buddha and Christ) fills the hungry soul, and enriches the poor…Poetry is a perennial stream that flows out of this fountain of life. It is the Samadhi of ages.” (3)

Puran Singh divides the world of poets into two categories - ‘Poetasters’ and ‘Real Poets/Heaven souled poets’ respectively. ‘Poetasters’ are mere ‘word-pointers’, ‘artists’, singers or dancers whereas the ‘Real Poet’, is a ‘Bhakta’ or ‘Disciple’ whose main task is to experience the spiritual bliss and share it with others. ‘Poetasters may have touched the water of life and drunk of the fountain, but they are not themselves fountains.’ (22) Puran Singh believes that those poets are privileged whom the God imparts his concern. In the Disciple Poetry, Puran Singh includes Sikh Gurus, Jayadeva (author of Gita Govinda); Persian Poets like Omar, Hafiz, Shamas Tabrez, Japanese Poets like Kamakura, Noguchi and Okakura; and Western Writers and Philosophers like Shakespeare, Tennyson, Burns, Wordsworth, Milton, Thomas a Kempis, Blake, Carpenter, Thoreau, Dante, Goethe, Keats, Swinburne, Browning, Carlyle, Victor Hugo; Walt Whitman and Tolstoy. Puran Singh’s discretion ensembles the powerful, thought-provoking remarks on each poet. He admires Dante, Milton, Goethe, and Thoreau, the most. Then, He allows some space to Modern Indian thinkers of Bengal like Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Swami Vivekananda, Tagore, Anand Acharya, and Sarojini Naidu, after introducing the style of writing of Tulsidas, Surdas, and Mira Bai.

Puran Singh flies high with Omar Khayyam who have depicted emotions, and intoxication in their poetry. Bulleh Shah and Nazir Akbarabadi hold a special position in his book because they are Sufis and mystics who have portrayed the distinct side of life in their poetry. He finds these qualities in American emotional realist Walt Whitman also.

The broad arena of literary expertise in ‘Chapter 3- As Bhaktas See Things’, of Puran Singh is worth observing. American, European and Asian along with Indian
Literature are tested on his spiritual evaluation criteria. After this, Puran Singh goes on to the literature of Japan. He is a great admirer of Japanese Writer Noguchi who in his poetry has dealt with intricate beauties of life. Further, he mentions Persian Poets where two different schools of thought seem to be juxtaposed together and there is mingling of ideas; Guru Nanak is mentioned along with Omar and Buddha. Later, Hafiz is also added. Puran Singh is all praises for Omar Khayyam. He quotes from certain poems of Shamas Tabrez showing good knowledge of Persian Poetry.

In the last section on Modern Indian Poetry he says, “There is a very little Modern Poetry coming from Indians educated on the English system; We must return to our ancient fountains, and get water from behind us.”(55-56) He appreciates the verses of Tulsidas’s Ramayana, Mira Bai, and Surdasa. Relating to Brij Bhasha, he mentions Krishna with his Gopikas and he says that Guru Gobind Singh created a lot of poetry in the same dialect. Where on one side he praises Bengali Poetry, ‘Modern Bengal is the scene of higher culture in India. It is a learned province, all kinds of wisdom being packed in the brain of the Bengali.’ (57) On the other hand he informs us that, in it, there’s ‘...a certain Anglo-Saxon air of superiority over people of the other Indian provinces and swamps them.’ (58) He feels that Bengal produced real disciple poets with absolute talent in the 14th century when National Poet, Chandi Das, and Lord Gauranga existed. Modern Bengal has but one real disciple only; and that is, Shri Ramakrishna Paramhansa. He is then followed by his preacher, Swami Vivekananda. Puran Singh considers Tagore as creator of poems and Vivekanand, of poets. He also feels that Tagore’s poetry cannot evoke life in his readers. He discusses Sarojini Naidu and Anand Acharya adding a lot of praise to the latter and highly appreciates his “Book Of Cave”.

Puran Singh’s inherent love for Sikhism makes him love Allama Iqbal who had the similar feelings for Islam. In his ecstasy and concern, he first considers Guru Grantha as the mentor of Disciple Poetry. This not only shows his true love and devotion for Guru Grantha but undoubtedly the inherent concern and emotions. The other contributors according to him, to the disciple poetry, are Bhai Gurdas, Bhai Nand Lal and Bhai Veer Singh, Bulleh Shah, Valmiki, Tulsidas and Shah Hussain. He has
given a translation of one ghazal of Bhai Nandlal and few nazams of Bhai Vir Singh. After these poets Valmiki, Tulsidas, Shah Hussain, and Bulleh Shah are referred to in the later half of this chapter. One kafi of Shah Hussain and five-six kafis of Bulleh Shah are presented in the same mood and style (technique).

From spiritual poetry, Puran Singh then shifts over to ‘Shringar, The Blossom of Youth’, in Chapter Fifth, where he quotes the folk songs of Punjab. He begins this chapter saying, “Following divine and devotional poetry we have Shringar or the poetry of passion.” Puran Singh has translated certain folk songs of the females of Punjab. This folklore has a dramatic touch. There is some coordination (like feelings and love) between this shringar poetry and spiritual poetry. He admires woman, her feelings, and emotions.

Carefully enough Puran Singh categorizes Chapter Six, ‘The Gita Govinda-when love is prayer’ after ‘Shringar-Poetry of Passion’. The English translation of the pastoral drama by Jayadeva is rendered in this book. Approving this title, Puran Singh says, ‘In Radha, Sita, evermore glorious than herself in her freedom of soul, is reborn, fulfilled and completed. Radha is unique personality in womanhood. After Radha, the brave Rajput Princess, Miran, leads Radha’s life.’ (164) “‘Gita Govinda’ describes the love of Krishna-Radha in the form of two illusive forms of male and female, two flames of life, two bodies in unison.” (162-163) ‘Gita Govinda’ is the gift to us of a highly lyrical genius that has boldly caught the fiercest flames of the human heart and dashed them in glory of divine frenzy back on the heavens to announce love on this earth.” (167-168)

The Gita Govinda of Jaideva is translated by Puran Singh and incorporated in its entirety. This beautiful poem is the portrait of love in colours of a strange, lyrical self-felicity. Through the heart of a man-god and soul of a woman, it speeds on to the grandeur that was their passion and the peace that was their love. For this one most beautiful translation alone, the book merits a place in every library that encompasses more than the meager literature that English affords.

Next, we have is Chapter Seven, ‘Vairagam-The sadness of the Great Illusion’ in which, the illusion of separation leads to sadness. In this sadness, the person searches
for the divine. Once the divine is achieved, there is self-illumination, Puran Singh believes, ‘Vairagam is our greatest preparation for serene contemplation. (230-231) Vairagam is actually a testing phase of love where, a person understands the true love only if he goes far from his loved one. So, it is again a form of ecstasy in love. Two instances are given here; one of a milk woman, Gujri, fighting but laughing at her destiny and the next one is Bharatari Hari’s play on Hira Mirg.

In the Eighth Chapter ‘Philosophy of the faithful’, Puran Singh presents the theory of one God- one Lover, one Beloved. The vision provides whole concentration and reverence resting on the feet of the Guru. One finds liberty in His name. Puran Singh suggests to his readers, ‘Let us be always as the sun-flower, turning our face in the direction of the sun, waiting, waiting both for light, rain from Him.’ (261)

Finally in the Last Chapter, Nine, ‘Home and Society’, Puran Singh says that ‘Grahasta Ashram is the seat of heavenly abode’. Having faith and devotion towards God will give you everything without wishing for. The ultimate truth of life is achieved by submitting oneself to one’s God because its He who knows our needs and fulfills them without even asking for them.

“We only think of Him and live. Life, death, youth, love, labour, rest, pain, or pleasure, whatsoever He sends is welcome!”
“Chant Hari Nama!” (279)\(^1\)

He advocates a life of a mendicant, a lover, a submitter, and above all a poet with a divine vision.

In the whole book, he appears to be a poet in the garb of a hermit waiting for His “immortal bliss.”

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\(^1\) All quotes are from Prof. Puran Singh’s “The Spirit Of Oriental Poetry”, (1931)