

# Pash: Man and Poet

○ Tejwant Singh Gill

**D**URING his short life Pash (1950–1988) embodied the image of a revolutionary poet. On the basis of the influence he imbibed from Pablo Neruda and Bertolt Brecht, he was credited with starting the movement ‘Poetry from Below’ in Punjabi. However, despite these influences his poetry did not sound subaltern; after all, a great deal of dexterity had gone into the negotiating of it and by the time of his untimely death, their influence on his poetry had become almost invisible.

Pash was the pen-name of this highly gifted and deeply innovative poet; his real name was Avtar Singh Sandhu, a name he appended in the early stages of his career to only a couple of his poems. All his poetry in the three books that appeared during his lifetime and in another after his death bore only his pen-name. For all its religious and ethnic associations, his real name did not touch his creative core. In the Farsi language, from which it originally comes, his pen name ‘Pash’ denotes ‘fragrance.’

Various factors like his rural background, political adventures, journalistic activity and revolutionary ideology helped mould his poetic art. Situated on the southern fringe of the Doaba region, Pash’s native village Salem stood in sharp contrast to the neighbouring areas. Part and parcel of a region hailed for its high rate of literacy and prosperity, this village, however, was notable for its poverty and illiteracy. The family in which Pash was born was of modest means; his

father owned 10 acres of land, but it was not adequate to ensure a self-sufficient livelihood for the family. So his father, Sohan Singh Sandhu, joined the army. He ultimately retired as an honorary captain. His long absences left Pash’s mother, Nasib Kaur, basically alone to bring up four children, and Pash grew up a somewhat wayward child. He was put to school in a neighbouring village at the age of six. After getting through the middle examination, he

joined a training centre in vocational education. Before completing training, however, he left to join the Border Security Force. However, he soon sought early discharge and went back to the village.

From then on, he embarked upon self-education, as much for ideological reasons as for creative anchorage. He launched *Rohle Baan* (*Raging Arrows*) and *Siar* (*Furrow*), Punjabi journals which were eagerly received but were shortlived due to lack of monetary support.

While editing *Rohle Baan*, Pash got involved with the Naxalite movement. Its ideology of armed insurrection, city versus countryside, and pristine revolutionism cast a spell on him. The jail-term he suffered for a murder committed by some Naxalites and the torture he was subjected to while in custody left their mark on him. However, he was soon to grow out of his Naxalite spell.

The poems in his first collection, *Loh Katha* (*Iron’s Tale*) published in 1970, articulates the anguished voices of people being exploited with impunity. His poem “Bharat” in this collection draws



a picture of people that illiteracy, backwardness and deprivation have reduced to a mere vegetative existence. Their ancient traditions, mythology and cultural ethos do not hold any charm for them or for their exploiters. This saddens the poet so much that in “Two and Two Make Three” he loses all faith in logic and reason:

*If all this you believe  
Then two and two makes three,  
Present can be mythical past,  
And the human face can resemble a spoon\*.*

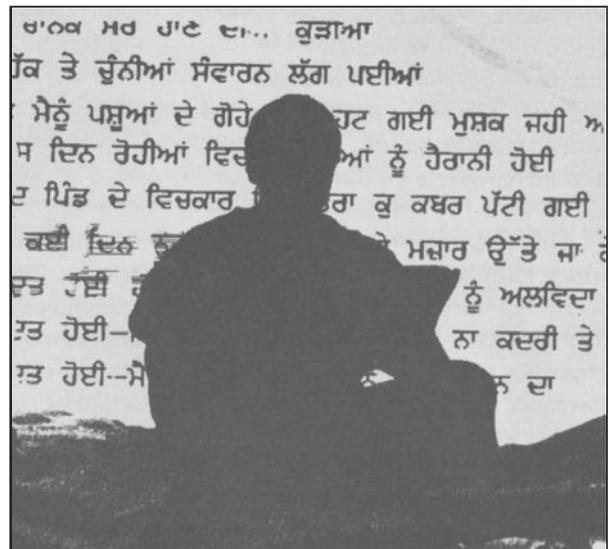
In these poems the exploited people are largely from the countryside. The rich inhabitants of the city have driven them to the verge of loss of their status as human beings. In the poem “For Withered Flowers,” the people in the countryside are shown deprived of even the bare necessities of life, while the inhabitants of the city are laden with superfluous amenities. As a result escape lies only in extinction of their exploiters:

*Watch out now!  
Those chewing dry roti with just an onion  
Have arrived to swallow  
Your dining table and even your serving trays.*

When Pash outgrew the Naxalite spell, his poems became different. He composed three types of poems: in the first, the interlocutor internalises the whole disruption and distortion of life, in the second he searches for historical antecedents to legitimise his revolt, and in the third, internment is portrayed as his essential dispensation.

In “The Time Is Come” the naivete of the village-girl is shown to be as much at fault as her maturity. While young she calls the interlocutor handsome though the perplexities of life have disfigured him beyond measure. No wonder he decodes a squint in her eye. Years later, when the exigencies of life have driven that girl desperate, he again decodes that same defect in her eye when she calls her darling son ugly. Convinced of the fact that filial or fraternal as well as sensuous and erotic feelings have become disenfranchised from life, he feels that there is a need to wage a battle of ideas. Only by daring the devil in his den can something be reclaimed for life:

\* The word used in Punjabi is *chamcha* (literal meaning spoon) which is a slang term for a sycophant.



*The time has come to wade  
Through our own river of blood  
To save the sun from remorse*

Pash's second collection was *Udhde Bajan Magar (In Pursuit of Flying Eagles)*, 1974. The poems in this collection raised his poetic art to the level of a revolutionary project. The new tone was in part a consequence of his internment, physical torture and related mental suffering. Other sources included his study, after his release from jail, of Leon Trotsky, the votary of permanent revolution who held to the autonomous role of culture, literature, language and philosophy. Trotsky renewed Pash's view of revolutionary poetry. It was now Pablo Neruda with his autochthonous poetry who embodied for him the image of a revolutionary poet.

The opening poem “In Pursuit of Eagles” is the leitmotif of the collection. For the popular mind it signifies flight towards the centre of the sun. To get on with this flight the interlocutor urges himself to dispense with all factors restraining or constraining human initiative and will. Family ties, political compulsions, ideological affiliations, even literary tropes likely to win the admiration of orthodox critics should be dispensed with:

*Eagles have flown aloft  
Taking in their beaks our desire  
For a moment of peace.  
Friends, let us indeed go  
In pursuit of flying eagles.*

For realising his project, a nexus between theory and practice was urgently required. This urgency was powerfully articulated in the poem “Hands”:

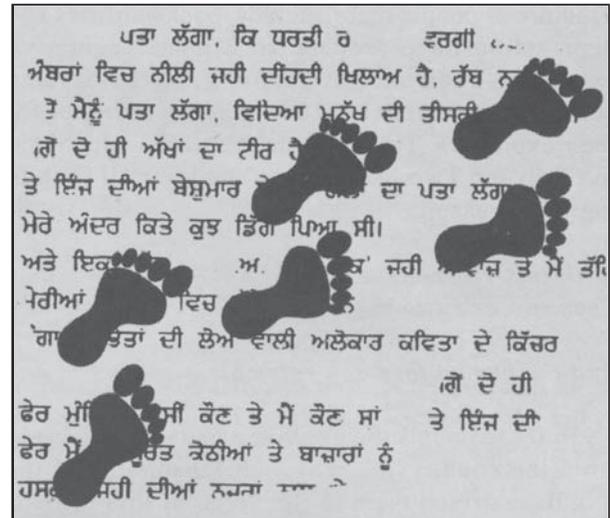
*No one can snatch from me  
The play of these hands.  
Inside or outside my pockets,  
In handcuffs or on the trigger of a rifle,  
Hands remain hands  
And have their own dharma.*

This poem is the culmination of several others in which Pash sought to unravel his jail experience. The poem "Jail" records the illusion that the authorities nurture that they can deprive a prisoner of his impulses by imposing upon him rigours of all sorts. Rather than surrender his impulses, the prisoner, as "Portion of the Sky" so well attests, preserves himself by seeking solace from connecting with random objects of nature. By safeguarding him, such objects not only help him to maintain his vital impulses but also enable him to renegotiate his priorities. This secures him against deprivation:

*That piece of the sky is my very life.  
It comes to view from the ventilator above  
And doesn't respect thick walls and prison bars.  
If they want me dependent on this bit of sky  
Why don't they ask it to freeze at a single point  
And not change to ever new hues.*

The semiotic mode in which these poems are written holds in counterpoint the symbolic correlative that Faiz Ahmed Faiz, for example, employed to compose his ghazals on jail experience. Available in his celebrated collection *Naksh-i-Fariadi (Appellant's Contours)*, 1954, they take a leap from jail-experience and engage in a dialogue with Ghalib, the greatest of all ghazal writers. The figural connection provides the interlocutor relief from the rigours of jail life. Pash's poems undermine the rigours of jail life with his immanent lucidity. That this lucidity negotiates relief on its own is a factor of revolutionary importance.

Pash's over-arching ambition at this stage was to write poetry from below much in the way Neruda had written in Spanish. His poem "The Wound of the Thorn" makes this evident, particularly when read with Neruda's "To the Dead Poor Man" and "The People". Awed by the nature of Neruda's poetry and the range of its effect, Pash had perceived in his poems the inner recesses of death, darkness, silence and beauty. Eager to write in the vein of the master, he sought to direct his poetic art towards the materiality of ordinary objects, their random impurity, flawed and fraught signification, and staggering gesticulation. "The Wound of the Thorn" is indeed a remarkable amalgam



of these poetic factors.

The leitmotif of the poem, as in those of Neruda, is the life-long routine of an anonymous villager standing for the whole of subaltern humanity. He can hardly lay claim to some prospective ideal. With quasi-deaf ears and half-closed eyes he has covered the distance daily from the village to his field at sunrise and back again at sunset. This routine has never become an experience of cultural rebirth after biological birth. With no new explanations or perspectives to provide, it has remained symptomatic of subaltern humanity's animal-like existence and their tragedy is laced with a sense of irony:

*The path leading from his house to the well  
Is in use even today.  
In his footprints  
Buried under countless others  
The wound of a thorn laughs even today.*

In Pash's third book of poems *Saade Samian Vich* (In Our Times) 1978, motifs drawn from all walks of life flow into them to unravel the role in life of economics, politics, history, religion and ideology. The following lines of the poem "Commitment" bring into focus the crux of his whole effort:

*Just as sun, wind and clouds remain close to us  
Both in our homes and our fields  
We want our rulers, convictions and joys  
As close to us.*

Surpassing its fashionable meaning, commitment here transfigures itself as alignment that delves deep

to recognise that human beings are constituted by heritage, kinship, social and physical environment, mode of education, political system, religious teaching and ideological orientation. At the same time, it visualises people in terms of what they can reconstitute themselves to be by hegemonising each of these factors of life. It is this double perspective in these poems that Pash brings to bear upon marital, political, religious and ideological contours. The three poems, “Refusal”, “Where Poetry Does not End” and “I Take Leave of You” are programmatic. The first rejects the naive perception that discounts backwardness, illiteracy and crudity, preferring to view them as simplicity, innocence and goodness. The second finds the remedy for these ills in literacy, knowledge and progress. The third defies disruptions and distortions that pose a mortal danger to life. His defiance does not cancel out his intense longing to live and his devotion to emotional and intellectual fecundity:

*My love you drop all this from your mind  
Except this—  
I had an intense longing to live.  
Neck-deep I wanted to delve into life.  
My love, you live my share of life  
Live my share of life as well.*

“Flock of Sparrows” and “It Is So Strange!” unravel the fate of women before and after marriage. Focusing upon this theme, the first underlines the arduous life that girls have to lead in their natal homes. In contrast to the joy, freedom, leisure and affection that they receive in abundance in folklore, in the actual world they have to pass their time under affliction, oppression and suppression. The second poem recalls all the beatings, reprimands, commands and curses which await them after marriage. They exchange the covert violence of courtship for the overt one of conjugal life.

*It is only against lovers  
That objections are raised.  
A legally wedded husband uses a staff  
Or a kick with his boot.*

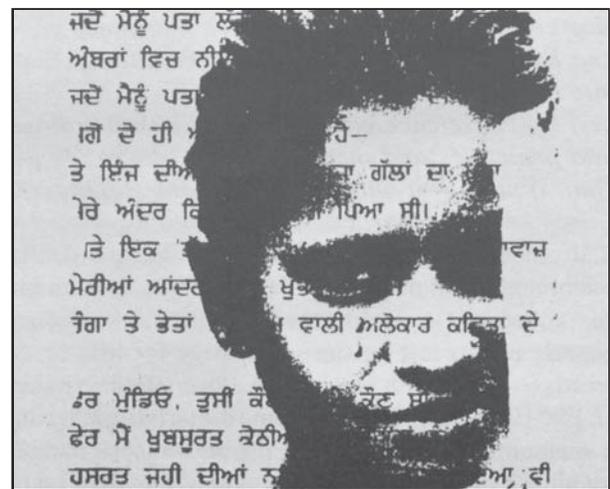
“Mirza’s Utterance” and “Joga Singh’s Self-analysis” bring out the motifs of erotic love and divine sacrifice which go a long way to define the popular ethos of the Punjabi people. The first has Mirza as its interlocutor who, unlike his counterpart in the legend, is not driven by any erotic instinct. It is the fear of economic insecurity that lurks in his mind so as to make him doubtful of everything except his death. In the

second the interlocutor is Joga Singh, a disciple of Guru Gobind Singh. At the behest of the Guru he left his half-solemnised marriage and rode to the battlefield to lay down his life. By now he has returned to his pristine self. Along the way he fails to resolve whether his religious ethos is transhumanising or if it also dehumanises. For Pash, the interlocutor is a modern Sikh whom the Guru oriented prospectively, with the result that his orientation went in a different direction. Now he too will also wager on the battlefield to insure his wholeness—but at the same time he will also be profoundly doubtful.

“The Risk that One’s Insecurity Poses”, “After the Emergency Was Imposed” and “In Our Times” project this dilemma through the problems of the nation and nationalism posed at the times they were written. Usually the nation is visualised as a sacrosanct community of a vast multitude of people. Its security is perceived in the power and authority it can bring to bear within and without its boundaries. For the interlocutor of the first poem, all this security ascertained through power centres such as the military, judiciary, police force and bureaucracy make a people more insecure. They are the real essence of any nation:

*If ‘National Security’ means that a life without  
conscience is the price for living,  
And anything that is not a blind ‘yes’ to its dictates  
is considered obscene,  
And the mind learns to prostrate before adversity,  
Then we are all endangered by ‘National Security’.*

“Talking to a Comrade” persistently questions the devaluation Marxism suffered in India. In the third of its six sections, Pash brings to bear the life experiences he has waded through. On the basis of



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the brutality he has faced he concludes that its explication in the writings of Karl Marx and Lenin is no match for a taste of it at the hands of the police and the judiciary:

*If only I had not witnessed the  
Frightening callousness dripping  
From the faces of court officials  
As they riffled through their files.  
If only I had no idea of the nature of  
The slumber the judges float in  
Before and after their lunch.*

At a crucial moment, the reader comprehends that the poet's companion, under the garb of carrying on the class-struggle, has actually deserted the side of the people. He has become one with the collaborationists, including those intellectuals who attempt to diffuse clichéd thinking through their confused writings. For Pash they include literary idealogues as well as those who play games with terminology like the red professors so pejoratively mentioned by Trotsky. This critique mounted in the fourth section unnerves the addressee. He resorts to a cacophony of slogans but to no effect at all. The fifth section reaches a crescendo of revolution and fervour in his wish to see the event repeat itself:

*For a moment I wish that from somewhere  
May come that seer with Newton's Diamond  
And hurl once again the burning candle  
Into the crevices of my conscience  
Lest my conscience convert its half baked notions  
Into principles and theories  
That, if not burnt out, will prove catastrophic*

Ironically enough, the realignment he so ardently celebrated could not enable Pash to come up with his next collection. Apart from personal difficulties several historic events left no time and space for him to do creative writing with persistence. From the beginning of the 1980s, the Punjab turmoil started gathering momentum. Terrorists started posing a mortal danger for him. Even before the demolition of the Akal Takht

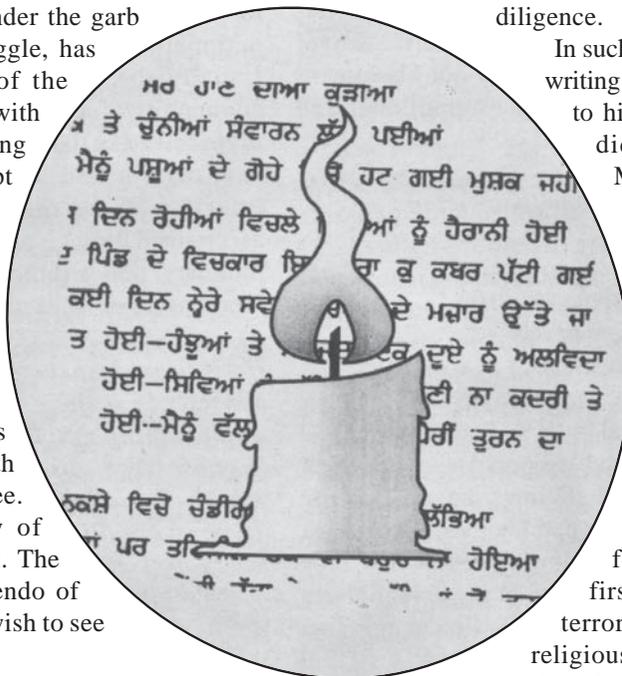
and the Delhi massacre, he was targeted for elimination. In such ominous times, with death stalking him, writing was difficult, sometimes impossible.

There were other privations. More than 30 years old, married and with a daughter, he was without any assured source of income. Though he was a graduate and possessed a diploma in teaching, no teaching job came his way. He was considered too dangerous, particularly by the custodians of private institutions. He started his own school in which he took part in all the tasks, ranging from the most menial to that of teaching. As a target of terrorism he found it difficult to manage the school and thus slipped away the source of livelihood he had generated with his diligence.

In such an ominous situation his writing could hardly flourish. It is to his credit, however, that it did not totally wither. Miscellaneous poems, posthumously published as *Khilre Hoi Verke* (Scattered Leaves), 1989 appeared during these trying times. They are brief, with a few exceptions. The poems of this period that come to mind are "Begging for Alms of Faith" and "Application for Disinheritance." The first eloquently voices the terror that under the garb of religious confrontation came to mark the life of the common people. It

has as its interlocutor a helpless and hapless village woman whose husband and son have already been eliminated. Her remaining son lives under the same death threats and she begs for his reprieve. For that she is willing to repose faith in the lord of faith who in actuality is the messenger of death. The second poem expresses the feeling of outrage evoked by the massacre of ordinary Sikhs in Delhi subsequent to the assassination of Indira Gandhi. So outraged does the interlocutor feel at this genocide that he regards disenfranchisement as more honourable than citizenship in a nation where the polity authorises such a horrible massacre.

He also wrote a group of brief poems in the form of letters: "A Letter", "Waiting", "Only a Few Moments More", "To you", "You" and "Trust" are worthy of mention. A heart-revealing intimacy, chiselled expression



and depth-delving confession so characteristic of his letters seem to frame their structure and texture. The first and the last convey the obvious impression of the altered locale, the foreign country from where they written to those back home. Unlike most writing to come from abroad, they are neither nostalgic for their native land nor cynical about it under the lure of the novelties available in a foreign land. They put forward alternatives that are fragmentary and fraught with anxiety. As the interlocutor suggests to the loved one back home:

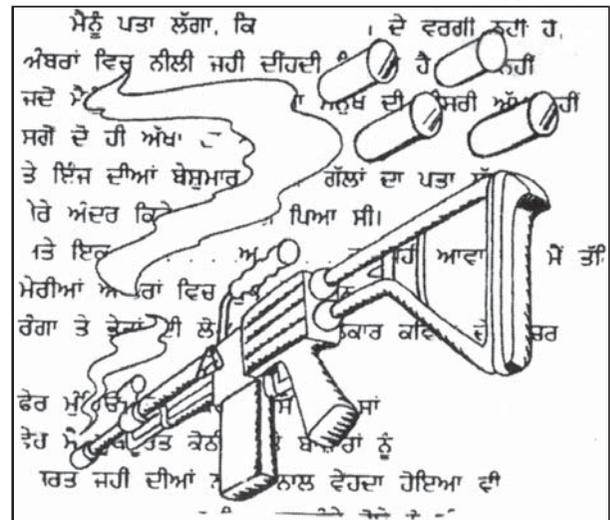
*You stay in the motherland.  
Some day to its boundaries I will return as a victor.  
Either I retrace this step or I will cease to be.*

This poem clearly suggests that for Pash to migrate abroad did not mean he desired to settle there permanently. His was a complex attempt to become less visible to those who sought to kill him, rather than a desire to be absent from his terror-filled native land. He had gone to the USA in 1986 as a visitor. There he brought out *Anti-1947*, a hard hitting journal that had an impact in Punjab.

He also wrote “Most Dangerous” while there. Through sober and subtle reflection it portrays human sympathy as the arbiter of a person’s destiny. For him all the discursive means state apparatuses and educational methods employ are dangerous. However, the danger they pose get ominous only when, as a result, human beings are deprived of their feelings and emotions, visions and dreams:

*Being looted of one’s labour is not the worst thing.  
Nor is police torture.  
Even betrayal out of greed  
And arrest without warning  
Are not the most terrible.  
To be frightened into silence is bad  
But not really dangerous.  
To be drowned in the noise of corruption  
Even when one knows one is right is no doubt bad.  
Reading in the feeble light of a glow worm  
Going through life with a frown are also no doubt bad.  
But they are not the worst.  
Most harmful to oneself is to reduce life to passivity  
To lack intensity of desire  
To bear everything  
To become a creature of routine.  
Most dangerous of all is the death of our dreams.*

However problematic his stay abroad, it opened his poetic art to those aspects of life like rationalisation and professionalisation that are crucial in the first



world. As a result, his poetry, originally under influences ranging from Neruda’s to that of Brecht, was getting responsive to post-modern issues as well. This trajectory, however, could not proceed. In the beginning of 1988 he came back to India for the renewal of his visa. Refused in the first instance, he was able to manage it after some time. However, he was not destined to board the plane. A day before leaving for Delhi for that purpose, he was gunned down and died on March 23, 1988 in the vicinity of the village that had played so crucial a role in the making of his poetic art. On this same day, over half a century before, the great martyr Bhagat Singh was hanged to the consternation of all those who love the motherland. Pash’s murder, when he was not yet 38, saddens all of us who have concern for the people, their joys and sorrows. After all, is it not this concern that he had wanted to be his heritage to friends, fellow-poets and writers?

*I have no face, no voice of my own  
Blind passion for the earth is mine.  
That is why it seems  
I shall pass through it all  
Like the rustling wind.  
Friends!  
Hold on to my concerns  
After I have passed by.* □

**Note:** MANUSHI has either adapted Gill’s original translations or re-translated the Pash poetry in this article from the original Punjabi.

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