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## Inhabiting two planets

### I.

The history of the unequal relationship between English and Punjabi goes back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when William Carey, a shoe-maker turned Baptist, published a ninety-nine-page *A Grammar of Punjabi Language* in 1812 in Calcutta, then the capital of British India. In 1849 the East India Company's army occupied the sovereign state of the Punjab, the land of my ancestors. The Punjab came under the control of the British Crown government in 1858. Seven years earlier John Newton of the Ludhiana Christian Mission in eastern Punjab had published the first-ever Punjabi translation of *The New Testament* titled *Anjeel* [after French - évangile] along with a new *Grammar of the Punjabi Language*. The three-pronged process of politics, religion and linguistics was in full swing, though the African formula of the Bible and the Land had not been charted exactly in India. The religious conversion was negligible and the linguistic one was enormous. The British left India in 1947 dismembering the Punjab, but English still rules there; so much so that the Punjabi syntax, now mirroring the English sentence structure, is changed forever.

With the steam rail engine came the colonial locomotive that was full of a new class of western-oriented Indian gentlemen, better known as *baboos*. Careerists – the offspring of Lord Macaulay's agenda of educating Indians to craft a nation of petty clerks – soon learnt to take pride in attaining glibness in English. Lord Macaulay had said that 'a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India'. In that belief, Indian school children of future generations were made to cram Shakespeare's sonnet 'Let me not to the marriage of true minds...', Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' and Shelley's 'Ozymandias' ignoring their own linguistic and literary heritage. The loss was total.

There was a blessing in disguise, however. Thanks to English, a window on the world of knowledge opened. The Punjabis studying abroad in the universities of Oxford, Cambridge, London and California established contact and interaction with Western thought. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Puran Singh (1881-1931), the poet, was writing on Nietzsche in Punjabi; Kahan Singh (1861-1938), the great lexicographer, was collaborating with Macauliffe (1837-1913), on the English translation of the Sikh scriptures for his 6-volume magnum opus *The Sikh Religion*; Dharam Anant [Singh], the Greek and Sanskrit scholar, worked on Plato, and Santokh Singh (1892-1927) introduced Marx in Punjabi. Two collections of Puran Singh's poetry, and Dharam Anant's treatise on Plato and Sikhism were published in London by J.M. Dent and Luzac. Mulk Raj Anand moved in the Bloomsbury literary group. Khushwant Singh, Ved Mehta and Zulfikar Ghose made their mark on English literature in the later half of the last century.

### II.

On this sundry background of gain and loss, I started writing at the young age of 20 in my own language Punjabi, which I had learnt simultaneously with English. I cut my literary teeth in a real Punjabi milieu. My father - a carpenter turned photographer and communist trade unionist, wrote poetry as well. My mother was illiterate. So my home language remained unadulterated.

I rarely write poems in English. The ones I have written were for my loved ones who did not know my language. When I translate such poems into Punjabi, I put the appendage sheepishly – ‘translated from English’. Of course Punjabi is my mother language. I think, feel and dream in it. I live in it and I will die in it. No wonder, working with English poets, I could translate only one fourth of my original poems into English. Kundera, in his novel *Testaments Betrayed*, sympathises and bemoans Leoš Janáček’s determination to write his operas in Czech thus limiting his audience. I feel that I am of his tribe.

The word for ‘translation’ in Punjabi is *anuvaaad*. It is derived from Sanskrit. *Anu* meaning which follows, close, near, corresponding at the same time; and *vaad* is the idea behind a sound. The sound is uttered word. The written word is silent. The poetic creative process can be defined in so many ways. Maybe the idea underlying the word *anuvaaad* equally applies to the birth of a poem. Here an imagined reality takes shape into words.

Perhaps my most recent poem written in English could relate that experience.

#### *TO FATHER*

*As you taught me to write the first letter  
of Gurmukhi - the Punjabi script  
holding my nervous hand in yours  
You taught me to hold the camera  
to focus on faces in the pupil of the eye  
and to press the button holding my breath*

*As if it were a gun  
loaded with bullets of life.*

*Where are you now father?  
Can you take some time off from death?*

*I'd like to take my self-portrait sitting next to you  
with a glint in my eyes.  
Remember that photograph you took with the self-timer  
of us together many years ago  
You holding me cheek to cheek?*

*The photograph doesn't show the lump in your throat.*

*We'll exchange pictures I have taken  
of faces you haven't seen  
and of places you never visited  
and you can show me yours taken in the valley of the dead.*

I was at the launch of the book of poems *The Eastern Boroughs* by John Welch at his place in Hackney. John introduced me to Libby Hall, a close friend of John Berger, saying that I was the greatest fan of him. I could not agree and said - there must be many admirers like me. Unlike other gatherings I felt at ease and talked with Libby about John. She mentioned a recent unpublished essay of his about his father. I had never read any such essay on his father. Lost in my thoughts I picked up some words uttered by Libby like John whispering to the faded ink of his father's writing. It was too moving. I left early. On my way to Rectory Road Station the above poem was taking shape. I sat on the bench and started scribbling. While writing I was wondering why I was talking to my father in English? Maybe because Berger had inspired it; maybe because there were some words and images founded on my father's

skills in photography that may have sounded bizarre in Punjabi. I was breaking bread with the dead as Auden said about writing.

I sent the poem to Berger. He wrote back: ‘I find your poem so beautiful – like an avenue in a city I was wanting to reach. Thank you for it. And tell your father I thank him.’

Reading these words from my mentor, I felt reassured that it had worked in English – the *akhand sphota* – undivided intuitive perception of the whole meaning – as postulated by Bhartrihari, the great Sanskrit linguist of 5-6 century AD.



Amarjit with his father. Nairobi. 1952  
Photo by Swaran, Amarjit's older brother