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QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY IN AMARJIT CHANDAN'S POETRY

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All of us face the questions of identity. These come to us in different ways, at different phases of our lives. In our quest for finding some in our lives, we endeavour to feel and experience ourselves as a moment linking our past, present and future. In every society, conjunctures offer a whole range of existing constructs for identity. Some of these, whether we like it or not, come to us as initial ascriptions from others, who are "ours" - to whom we "belong" and who belong to us. We embrace many of such ascriptions, make them as own. Living our choices, many a times we even modify the received constructs to adjust them and ourselves in our search for fulfillment, security and safety. Such modifications and adjustments are an integral part of our lives. It is rare that these occasions generate critical moments of fundamental doubt and uncertainty. But there are individuals who feel so much at odds with their times who undertake the project of what may be called 'contemplative self-questioning', asking sort of questions: how did I reach here? Where do I go from here? Where does the endless road lead? I know what I am not; then how do now what I am?

We seem to enter history through the door of time. The nature and extent of our willingness to associate our selves with the past, present and future time is determined by our own impulse for personal security and conscious or unconscious ambitions and desires. Any vision of history is thus both an index of- and a primary factor in - the spiritual makeup of a person or a group. But an artist's approach to history is always different from a historian's or an economist's approach. The artist has little use for chronology. For the past is not made up of events but experience and experience lives when events are dead and for a communion with experience he does not go to events; he goes to his own consciousness - which contains the past in a living form and which contains the seed of future too. For Amarjit Chandan writing poetry and joining the Maoist movement were part of the same complex desire.

who would not desire?..
fire at the clocks
which chime to those in power and spare not a second for us
who would not desire this life's stagnant pool should
break again
into oceanic waves
who would not desire?...¹

During those days his self-image was that of an impatient and ideologically pure revolutionary. Such an ideal image is always a heady brew of reason,

¹ *Kaun Nahin Chahega*, p22, 1975.

revolution and romanticism. Later on he was to discover, and that too not without a sense of shock, that his revolutionary vision was in fact - an act of wishful thinking and day dreaming, a vision which wished well for the oppressed, but which was not a vision of the oppressed. It is not always easy to become a contemporary of one's own times. It requires lot of moral and intellectual hard work before one's personal identity becomes overwhelmingly mapped out on to the broader group and class identities in society thereby getting implicated in the creation of powerful mass movements or significant shifts in existing consciousness. Time and History are not what they appear to be. They are perfectly capable of enacting tragedies and farces. They both can play tricks with human beings making them look like Don Quixote. They can intrude dramatically and give a strange twist to the tale of destinies. Human beings could ignore their power at their own peril. This gave rise to a new set of questions: why did one feel such a compelling need to be a revolutionary? It was understandable that revolution was a need of the oppressed. But in what way it was the need of an individual who was in a position to make other choices? How could both the needs be reconciled and to what extent? And above all, what were these mysterious and elemental forces - History and Time - with capitals. What sort of zealous gods were they? Have not human beings always taken note of them by creating myths, totems and taboos? By fighting for an imaginary revolution was not one dying for nothing - a nothingness - which the leaders could later on easily dub as a wrong political line? How could one be so naive? Was not surviving the consequence of a 'wrong political line' a sheer matter of luck or another opportunity for a different destiny? This could not but lead to a multi-layered crisis requiring an honest re-examination of the web of beliefs called self by undertaking a risky *antrayatra* ਅੰਤਰਯਾਤ੍ਰਾ (internal journey) which the less courageous among the contemporaries would tend to avoid for the fear of losing face or getting lost in the unknown.

The point which I want to make is not that poetry of the Maoist period is not good poetry; some marvelous poems were written during this period. What I want to emphasise is the point that the only nurturing source of this poetry was the above referred imaginary vision. With the dawning of impoverished and distortive character of this vision, particularly with the failures of revolutionary movement, and the collapse of revolution, the power of the utopian transformative metaphors exhausted their potential. From the point of view of interrogating identities, calling such a commitment a wrong political line in retrospect does not tell us anything either about those who had died in the process or about those whom something pulled back or saved from this act of suicide? Sartre has said: dying is not enough, one must die in time. When is the right time for dying? Could one ever know that even if one is determined to find out? Was one betraying revolution or diluting one's commitment by asking such questions? Those who were aware of the depth of their own commitment and the resultant crisis began to write less and less poetry and were faced with what is normally known as the writer's block.

Chandan's first book of poetry, rather booklet *Kaun nahin Chahega* ਕੌਣ ਨਹੀਂ ਚਾਹੇਗਾ (Who wouldn't like) was published in 1975 while his second book *Kavitavan* ਕਵਿਤਾਵਾਂ (Poems) was published in 1985. During this long period he wrote very few but meaningful poems. These poems seem to emerge from some tortuous process, from the dark depths of proverbial - *annha khooh* ਅੰਨ੍ਹਾ ਖੂਹ - the blind well of Punjabi folklore. At this stage the act of writing became an act of coming to terms with one's loneliness, a loneliness which tended to impose an unbearable silence and could lead to the abyss of madness, if it did not become a source of creativity. It is a strange

paradox that one is truly creative when one is truly alone, alone like a *bhakta* भक्त or in the words of Rajinder Singh Bedi, the time when the pen is face to face with God. It is an intense struggle within but can not be contained within without serious consequences. This seems to be the edge of an intense creativity across cultures. In the words of Ibsen: writing means fighting with yourself/ the shadow of dark ghosts//writing means putting on trial /your innermost self.

But the self of a survivor is no ordinary self. To emphasise this point let us quote Kafka's comment which Chandan uses as an epigram in *Kavitavan* कवितावंतः : "Any one who can not cope with life while he is alive needs one hand to ward off a little his despair over his fate...but with his other hand he can not jot down what he sees among the ruins for he sees different and more things than others; after all, he is dead in his own life time and the real survivor". The second epigram is from Kabir and runs as following:

ham sabh may, sabh hai ham may
ham hai bahuri akela
(I am in all, all are in me; yet, I am terribly lonely)

In fact the mental state of silence seems to be janus-faced as is clear from these two quotations:

Silence is the perfectest herald of joy; I were but little happy, if I could say
how much. - Shakespeare

Speech is civilisation itself. The word, even the most contradictory word, preserves contact. It is silence which isolates, said Thomas Mann.²

Chandan experiences joy perhaps only when he empties out his silence into words trying to maintain his contact with the world around him by objectifying the struggle within. Also for him poetry seems to be the mode of reducing uncertainty about one's self *vis-à-vis* the world.

A survivor is always faced with two mutually exclusive choices: to lead a life of - *bhatkan* भटकने - superficial worthless wandering or charting a new destiny by asking fundamental questions about life, its meaning and its worth. That is why there is a sense in what Walter Benjamin, him self a victim of fascism, says: "only a beaten hero becomes a good thinker". But the perception of being beaten by history and being beaten merely by a particular government of the times could lead individuals in different directions with very differing consequences. A firm conviction of being beaten by history could be a very confusing though rich and a contradictory experience at, emotional and intellectual levels. The years 1971 to 1973 in Chandan's life, were the years spent in prison in solitary confinement, in lonely contemplation and meditation on the sort of questions listed above. They were years of acquiring a perspective which later on was to reveal itself as one tinged with irony and disenchantment, pessimism of intellect and optimism of will, assertions and doubts. There was also something totally new and palpable - a quest for spirituality as an act of recognition of the powers and mysteries of History and Time. And who had explored these themes better than Nanak and Farid, Kabir and Sufi poets of the Punjab? The poet in Chandan could not but return to them for his personal salvation

² Quoted in Charles R. Burger and James J. Bradac, *Language and Social Knowledge*, Edward Arnold, London, p112, 1982.

and through them to the eternal problems of man and society, to the rich cultural heritage existing in his language. The poet could speak to them by speaking the words uttered by them, by living with these words, by continuously having a dialogue with them and by endlessly exploring the sense in which they were uttered. Such a relationship could not but be rich in limitless possibilities.

I watch my reflection
mirrored in water
the eyes, nose and mouth are the same
but the thoughts
that form and fragment
are unreflected³

The poet, though still calling him self a creator of dreams, could not choose a tree as a confidant - the banyan tree - the sage tree of our culture and a moment of new reflection suddenly sprouts challenging the earlier arrogant dismissal of his tradition. This is how another well known revolutionary Punjabi poet whom, in the beginning, Chandan had promoted through his underground paper, *Dastavez ਦਸਤਾਵੇਜ਼* (The Document) beautifully summed up the revolutionary arrogance of his generation:

I say -
there is yet a great deal to be said a great deal to be decided
words alone cannot communicate

steps alone cannot reach
they say
there is nothing left to be said there is nothing left to be decided
words are dry
and steps are purposeless
I say -
stop talking of the Journey
and the history
give me room for my next step⁴

Without entertaining a tremendous sense of arrogance how else a youthful person could have imagined changing the world according to his cherished dreams? And this is where Marxism comes into the picture. Whatever else it may or may not be, it certainly is an ideology of arrogance par excellence and that constitutes its powerful appeal to the young who are deeply dissatisfied and are angry with the way things are around them. But the world is not as malleable as it some times appears to be. This is a lesson which individuals learn less from books and more from their personal experiences. Was the poet now willing to assimilate the lesson - a lesson as old as the hills - and enunciated by Farid as: *darweshawn noo lorhiae rukhan di jirandh ਦਰਵੇਸ਼ਾਂ ਨੇ ਲੋੜੀਐ ਰੁਖਾਂ ਦੀ ਜੀਰਾਂਦਿ* - noble beings need endurance of trees (to realise their dreams). The arduous path of history could not be treaded without perseverance. Now at last, he feels the need to talk to a banyan tree in the prison courtyard, with a newly born feeling of warmth and connectedness: "Nothing is hidden from you. /You are like my dream with a long life. /The cool shadows of tomorrow are visibly throbbing in your leaves. /The roots of this dream are buried in millenniums and

³ *Kaun Nahin Chahega*, p30.

⁴ *Loh Katha* by Pash, p38, 1970.

nobody could uproot them." But who would undertake the Promethean task of fetching the pearls for the life-imprisoned (*jind-kaidan* ਜਿੰਦ ਕੈਦਣ)? In symbolic terms, the poet was beginning to grasp the birth of his new vision in terms of the need for recasting a mythical hero - a new self and a new subject of history.

into the fiery sea
of blood afire
today he must plunge in the hope of finding
the tears of a hundred eyes that trapped
in the shells of time turned into pearls.
diving through the storm at sea he must bring up those pearls and
garland this imprisoned life.⁵

Suddenly this sense of resolve is followed by a nagging doubt pointing to the fact that the world of old certainties was being replaced by a new world of probability:

this long dive into
the unknown depths who knows where it will take him
will he ever return
or be lost in millenniums?
that is unknown
this also he knows⁶

Interestingly the poem is entitled as *marjivrha* ਮਰਜੀਵੜਾ - a diver and someone who is willing to sacrifice himself with the hope that the sacrifice would possibly achieve its objective. In symbolic terms it was the cremation of an old self and the possibility of a new incarnation. In other words, weaving a new self by willingly rejecting and recasting some of the old beliefs.

PUNJABILAND

Given this background his third book of poetry *Jarhan* ਜੜਾਂ - The Roots - seems to me a journey back home - a home which he had carried all along with him without being aware of it. Chandan has a notion of the land of his birth but his "homeland" is not a particular place with artificial boundaries, it is *Des Punjabi* - Punjabiland - a cultural linguistic habitat, which can exist any where and every where. In poet's perspective there seems to be a clear distinction between history and myth. History for him is more a memory of geography and all the atrocities and bloodshed to acquire power to guard and lord over this space within the boundaries. By myth he means the original project of Farid and Nanak of mutual co-existence and co-operation in a multi-cultural society designed and realised by a critique of formalism, fanaticism, intolerance and dogmatism of their respective traditions. Inspired by this myth or utopia they had underlined the futility of the power of the Prince to transform human nature by the forcible imposition of beliefs and practices. History of the powerful has always contested this myth and continues to do so. But the myth has the power to take hold of history and use it as its instrument. "This epic struggle is revealed through myriad coloured metaphors, symbols and images in *Jarhan* (1995) and *Beejak* ਬੀਜਕ (The Seed, 1996). The cultural world of his - *ma boli* ਮਾਂ ਬੋਲੀ - the mother language -

⁵ *Kaun Nahin Chahega*, p33.

⁶ *Ibid*

transcends all geographical boundaries. It is through this *boli* that he recognises his limits and possibilities.

All those who speak or understand this language are part of his poetic universe irrespective of time and space. Yet one can not completely forsake the land where one was born, after all one could never choose the land of one's birth. It is and it is not a matter of chance where Time opens its door to history. Migration could never change this fact. Instead, it could become an unforgettable source of pain, and perhaps could be escaped partially only through one's retreat to *ma boli*.

the unknowing man who leaves
tortures himself with thoughts of his deserted land
where every petal plucked showed him the way
now the petals fall silently
to the ground revealing nothing
the moon of id loses its way home
the polestar loses its fixity and then one day waiting on a lonely bench for
the train to come
his heart slips away the fate of any man
who leaves the land of his birth.⁷

This is a moment when I should observe silence and let the poet him self speak to you:

I think, feel and dream in Punjabi. My language is my real home, my last retreat. Freud says it's not possible to return to the womb. In another context John Berger talks about the myth of return. I still have associations with some Punjabi words and the word *ma boli*, mother language, is very close to me. My poems bear witness that the return is possible; and in *ma boli* I feel most secure and at one with my own self. By contrast, just one English word, 'telephone', is very close to me. I was mortified to realise one day that the language in which my beloved children converse with me and the language which gives me my bread and butter is so strange to me. This came as a shock. The loss of my language has been the most severe blow to me.⁸

This comment of Chandan allows me to imagine the coming into being of a new community of people with serious identity implications whose parents or ancestors, once upon a time, were Punjabis. Imagine people who would never be in a position to read or listen to and enjoy Bulleh Shah, Shah Hussain, Waris Shah, Peelu, Qadaryar and many others. Can one visualise a future where communities and their languages would cease to exist or would be marginalised? This future history is like the scream of a peacock and it is front nowhere that this beautiful bird has appeared in the Walpole Park Ealing. His appearance in such an alien environment is not a good *shagun* मंगल omen and cannot but give the poet a strange feeling:

The heart sinks when the peacock screams
The night bleeds pierced with its cries

The heart sinks when the peacock screams
The colour laughs and then wails

The heart sinks when the peacock screams
It yearns for mango flowers lost long ago

⁷ Jarhan, p80.

⁸ Being Here, p18.

The heart sinks when the peacock screams
It rains incessantly, it never stops

The heart sinks when the peacock screams
trying to slake the thirst burning in its chest

The heart sinks when the peacock screams
Weighing its wings in the sweet prison

Everybody saw it dancing in its cage
moaning and dancing.⁹

It is obvious that it is not the same peacock which dances in the monsoon, in sawan ਸਾਵਣ, when the melancholy mood disappears and the self begins to celebrate the enchanted universe - the universe of *barahmah* ਬਾਰਾਮਾਹ¹⁰. It is definitely something else that has disguised itself as a peacock. What is it?

In alien environments sometimes images and objects are not only capable of disguising themselves but even the words - the words with which one has grown up, which are always there at hand in everyday life, even such words could be so misleading. Is it believable that the word *Lasan* ਲਸਣ, yes garlic, could be a misleading one. Imagine if all the words of one's language, one day, suddenly begin to mean something entirely different than what they have always meant since childhood.

In a distant country
When you come across a compatriot
You are thrilled to the bones
Your eyes and your hands reach out to him
And a chain of words is formed
I came on it once, the Punjabi world ਲਸਣ *Lasan*
Written up on a huge billboard
For woman farm workers
In a far-flung corner of California
and I felt
My language had welcomed me
Shaken my hand
Embraced me
Wished me good luck

For a moment the taste of the word *Lasan* was like
A sugar lump on my tongue
Only words die
As a fish dies out of water
They lose their meanings
and gather new ones
Here the word *Lasan* means -
Fifteen dollars a day
Bricks of the house
Ticks of the clock
A crane left behind in anguish
Gold ornaments
Dresses and rings
The deep troubled waters of greed and indulgence

⁹ *Jarhan* p77; *Being Here*, p9.

¹⁰ 'Twelve months', a poetic form in which the author reflects feelings through the changing aspects of nature as portrayed in the twelve month cycle. Gurus Nanak and Arjan each composed a *barah-maha*. McLeod, W.H., *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism*. OUP. 1995

And very few fish escape that net¹¹

In search of a wider audience and recognition many exiled or self-exiled writers begin to write in the language which is not their mother language. For example, Brodsky began to write poetry in English and now Milan Kundera has written his first novel in French. Of the many pages Kundera devotes, in *Testaments Betrayed*, to the Czech composer he so admires, Leoš Janáček, none are more thought provoking than those in which he simultaneously sympathises with and bemoans his compatriot's determination to write his operas in Czech, so ensuring that his work be incomprehensible in ninety-nine percent of the theatres in the world. Chandan seems to be writing in Punjabi with a similar determination knowing fully well that he would be read only by a very small number of people.

The myth of roots embodies within itself several cultural assumptions. Probably, without this there would be no notion of a past, of a sense of time's beginning, and the way it renders itself into pastness. At a surface level it is an expression of the firm belief that human beings also grow like trees and ideally ought to follow the cycle set by nature. A sense of roots also provides a sense of places, situations and moments which, later on, memory can visit. Memory plays a significant role in the making of his poetry. Reading some of the poems creates the semblance of getting on to a time-machine which takes one to various places in the distant past. One could even say with Akira Kurosawa that all creativity was an act of memory - to create is to remember. Coming to terms with memory does not mean that Chandan succumbs to nostalgia. He is nostalgic in the way that he would like to feel certain things; the feeling of love, the time spent in the company of friends, strange incidents, etc. His memory operates in a nostalgic mode but he is never looking to the past. The constants of disaffection, escape and entrapment are eternally at work in the last volume - his fourth book of poetry. The poems of this volume constantly remind the reader/listener of the tangled through which the poet is linked to the Creator whom he conceptualises as a potter wielding the most powerful wheel symbolising the cyclical order in the cosmos. Fashioned with this conviction many of the poems in this volume convey a sense of spiritual warmth generated by the acceptance of human limitations and finitude.

The relation between the Creator and man is no doubt primary concern with Chandan in *Jarhan* as well as *Beejak*. But for him this relation is not, an esoteric preoccupation with after life. His Creator is a vital Principle, moral as well as spiritual, social as well as individual, giving meaning to his everyday life. Oneness with him - an expression that through usage has lost whatever meaning it had and is now sometimes used ironically - is in fact a symbolisation of man's oneness with the creative forces of life. "The poet's concern with the ultimate and the eternal is not an indulgence in abstract speculation. It is a search for perspective through which to interpret everyday experience. The search arises out of the belief in life's potentiality for some satisfying meaningfulness. The poet's concern with the ultimate and the eternal is thus essentially his concern with the temporal and the transient; it is an affirmation of the fact that he is intensely alive to the urgency and seriousness of the questions of this life."¹² The poet has borrowed the title *Beejak* from Kabir. This word carries many possible meanings: Kartapurkh ਕਰਤਾ ਪੁਰਖ (God), the seed, one who sows the seed, semen, sprout, etc. It is through this mode that he finally breaks the circle of

¹¹ *Jarhan*, p82; *Being Here*, p10.

¹² Najm Hosain Syed, *Recurrent Patterns in Punjabi Poetry*, Punjab Adbi Markaz, Lahore, 1976, p 11.

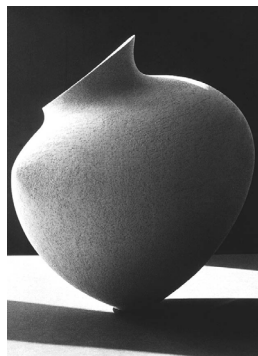
loneliness and being eternally exiled and comes to terms with the pain of loss which first generation immigrants and families go through.

CULTURAL VISIBILITY

The question of cultural visibility and identity is a very complicated question, especially for someone born in a Sikh family, where it is primarily the visibility which defines one's identity for one self and for others. Over a period, in the process of growing in a Sikh family, the symbols of visibility come to structure one's deeper recognition of oneself and the world. Embodied within this recognition are not only the myth and history but also the loves and concerns of dear and near ones; of one's family relations, especially the relationship with mother and father. In the language of the Sikh family- and one must add here - a family with strong convictions, the hair is never cut. If in some circumstances, the hair *kes* केश (derived from the Sanskrit word *kesha*) especially on the head, are cut, they are 'slaughtered', symbolising an act of suicide. In the 'underground' naxalite terrorist movement many individuals coming from the Sikh background were put in a situation where they had to 'slaughter' their *kes* in order to change their 'look' i.e. become clean-shaven - in itself a strange phrase - and thus become 'invisible' to the police. The Sikh naxalite youth had a role model in a clean-shaven, hat-wearing and gun-wielding Bhagat Singh (1907-1931).

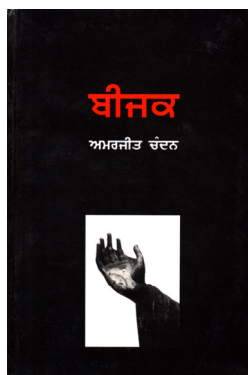
Chandan grapples the question of his inner attachment with *kes* in a poem with the same title. In the poem the poet's memory revisits the moment of 'slaughtering the kes' in the past and recuperates the traumatic pain of the unanticipated sudden loss of cultural visibility. This in turn, evokes a web of many forgotten family memories. The voice of a grief-laden self could now, in retrospect, go through the process of mourning its metaphorical fellowmen while at the same time trying to construct an angry isolationist identity - a sort of wishful solitary confinement by disclaiming tradition and family. But after his arrest when he was actually condemned to solitary confinement, Chandan immediately recognised the dark side of the truth of his desire for a completely autonomous self. In actuality, the solitariness was the pre-condition for losing sanity i.e. the very sense of one's being in this world. Once face to face with madness it is as if the poet pulls himself back from the brink and begins to shift tracks. I have tried to locate the questions of identity in Chandan's poetry in the context of these respective trajectories.

At the end, for an over reaching perspective, I would like to say something about the covers of the last two volumes of poetry i.e. *Jarhan* and *Beejak*. They have been very carefully designed by the poet himself as he chooses his words to convey his sense of diction, meanings and style. In a way they form an inseparable part of the poetic text. First, let us look at *Jarhan*.



The story of pot is the story of the, beginnings of human civilisation - man's successes and failures in the art of living. Probably it was the discovery of women and is linked to their fate since time immemorial. Also pot is a symbol of an archaeological imagination always curious about the past: man's past in general and one's own ancestry in particular. There are a number of poems in *Jarhan* and *Beejak*, where the poet explores certain specific experiences of his ancestor Dhareja who, according to the Pundits of Haridwar, lived in the seventeenth century. Through the poetic text Dhareja is transformed into the archetype of primeval man. Also, there is a beautiful poem about his mother with which many readers can easily identify. From the womb, the poet sees his mother, half asleep, grinding grain, wailing and crying. He wonders why is she crying? Was it a painful song of separation? How did she get a thorn in her soul?

The pot could also suggest a gesture indicating excavations in the ruins of the imaginary cities of one's childhood, of youthful romance and passions. For the author, it is *kumbh* कुंभ - an earthen pot filled with water - symbolising life itself. But its slightly displaced position immediately reminds one of the truth of this world, its transitory nature and the inevitability of death. The folk song goes: *jo gharhia so bhajana* ਜੋ ਘੜਿਆ ਸੋ ਭੱਜਣਾ. (Every object which has been created will break one day). It takes us to the notion of *kach/kacha* ਕੱਚ/ਕੱਚਾ and *pucc/pucca* ਪੱਕ/ਪੱਕਾ in multiple directions linked to the wheel of time and the fire of sorrow, pain and suffering which, like earthen pots, transforms human beings.



But how does one explain the choice of Buddha's hand on the cover of *Beejak*? It is from a fourth century bronze statue in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. *Jarhan* ends with a poster poem in which the poet reiterates some of his earlier convictions but with a sense of restrained passion and of intimate warmth. It is a poem about the wooden hand of one of the leaders of the Ghadar movement, Harnam Singh, who from then onwards acquired a surname - Tundilaat - one-armed. In the process of making bomb one of his hands was blown up. He was fitted with a wooden hand. The revolutionary died but leaving behind in this world his wooden hand. It is this hand kept in a glass case which the poet saw in the Ghadar Museum in San Francisco. He imagines its intimate relation with another hand - the hand of the Statue of Liberty. Suddenly for a moment the poet felt that he himself was an embodiment of a hand - a limb left behind by his revolutionary ancestors. We have a poem where one hand is speaking to another hand - a wooden hand: Grand old man, how can I shake hand with you? /Allow me to kiss your hand with my eyes./Years

ago, the way you said good bye to this hand /the same way this hand said good bye to you... It is a long poem and at one stage, the living hand tells the wooden hand to bless him by touching his head and with his finger pointing the path of history.



The Wooden Hand. Yugantar Ashram. San Francisco. Photo by Amarjit Chandan

from this open hand of yours a flower had fallen
a moment had slipped away
this hand of yours
is still waiting for that flower
still waiting to grasp that moment this hand should remain open
till the Time
does not blossom like a flower till the Time
does not scatter like seeds
till the Time
does not become fragrance to fill the three worlds.¹³

A certain philosophical-literary debate makes a distinction between texts and lumps, texts of understanding/explanation and lumps of raw/physical reality - a division which corresponds roughly to things made and things found. Non-linguistic artefacts, such as pots, are borderline cases of texts. A pot is made but the earth of which it is made is discovered. Human life and destiny are only partly created while partly are controlled or created from outside forces - what Sartre calls counter-finality. The pot is also indicative of strivings towards occupying a middle ground by seeking to overcome the earlier dualism in life created by absorbing of the vision of modernity in its extreme form - Marxism. These dualisms were between old and new, emotion and intellect/reason, spirituality, religion and materialism. Instead of curing the religious addiction of the gullible masses the poet is willing to face the questions regarding pain, suffering, sorrow and above all death - one's own and that of dear ones. For him, I guess, God is the name of solace which all human beings need irrespective of ideology and class. Thus the earlier Marxist self is not rejected but drastically transformed moving towards a way of thinking where the "dialectical materialism" could

¹³ *Jarhan*, pp 104-5


co-exist with the new quest for spirituality. (The Dalai Lama describes himself as "a half-marxist".)¹⁴

This seems to suggest a certain vision, a sort of philosophical mood the clues of which are scattered in some of the poems of *Jarhan*, but become explicit in *Beejak*. For want of a better word I would like to call it, using Oakshott's words - "a mood of graceful reconciliation" - a state of mind where the pact is left with the realisation that there are questions to which there are no answers and one must learn to live with them. Silence now must be less alienating and more joyous. After all, has Kafka not said that impatience is the root of all the problems. This realisation cannot but become the seed of another journey - equally unknown and mysterious. In the Metropolitan Museum once the poet is face to face with the Buddha's statue, his attention is concentrated on his hand extended in space asking for *Bheeksha* बीक़्शा – begging – (of life without suffering, sorrow and pain) and *Deeksha* दीक़्शा – initiation – (indicating the path of knowledge and wisdom). Here was a magical moment, when "three hands" - the wooden hand, the raised hand of the Statue of Liberty and poet's self-conception of himself as a hand fused with the cosmic hand making the different pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of the self fall into their respective places. In a moment of insight through this hand the poet had the *darshan* दारशन– vision – of the entire cosmos.

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NOTE: Some of the poetry quoted in the text has been translated by Shashi Joshi.

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¹⁴ The Dalai Lama interviewed by Renuka Singh, *Arsee* (Punjabi Monthly), January 1997.