

PANJABI LYRICS AND PROVERBS

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Panjabi Lyrics and Proverbs by C. F. Usborne

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C. F. USBORNE

**PANJABI LYRICS
AND PROVERBS**

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PROVERBS.

TRANSLATIONS IN VERSE AND PROSE

BY

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PREFACE.

"Owns a few bushes and talks of his head gardener." (*Panjabi Proverb*).

A few lines of introduction are necessary to explain this somewhat miscellaneous collection of translations from Panjabi Poetry. About six years ago I came across some interesting ballads in the Multan dialect. This led me to wonder whether there was any lyric poetry written in the spoken vernacular of the province which had any literary value. I looked up all the available literature on the subject, but could not find what I wanted. Captain B. C. Temple, who was for some time Cantonment Magistrate at Ambala, has written several articles on Panjab ballads and folklore in the *Calcutta Review* and *Indian Notes and Queries*; but the author is more interested in folklore than in literature, and the few lyrics he has collected are not of much value. There are some interesting specimens of Panjabi poetry in Mr. W. Wilson's Grammar of Western Panjabi, and there are a few lyrics in the Multani Grammar of Mr. O'Brien, lately revised by Mr. Wilson. Both these grammars also contain an excellent collection of vernacular proverbs and sayings. Fallon's Dictionary of Hindustani Proverbs is a mine of information about native thought in Northern India. Macnochie's Panjab Proverbs are mainly agricultural. There are also a few lyrics, proverbs and sayings embedded in the pages of the Settlement Reports and Gasetteers of the various districts in the Panjab. Mr. Swynnerton and Mrs. Steel have both translated fairy tales and stories current in the Panjab, but they have not collected many examples of lyric poetry, and it was mainly lyric poetry which I have been trying to discover.

The long, rambling romances of Ranjha and Hir, Sohni and Mahiwal, Majnun and Laila, Sassi and Punnu, Mirza and Sahiba, and the other heroes and heroines dear to the village bards of the Panjab are very

reading. This, at least, is my impression from the little I have read of them.

Some educated native, who knows his own literature and also English, should publish an English translation of selected pieces from these romances, and then the general public could see if they contained any thing worthy to be called literature. Hitherto they have only been studied by enthusiasts in folklore or philology.

The main difficulty which one encounters in trying to study Panjabi poetry is that the educated native affects to despise anything that is written in the spoken vernacular. He regards it with the same kind of cultivated shudder that a lady of fashion would feel if a lout from the country came into her drawing-room with muddy boots, an old blue smock and a drawing Gloucestershire accent.

It must be remembered that in the east for countless generations reading and writing have been the mark of the privileged few. To say a man can read and write is not a sarcasm but a compliment. It is easy to understand, then, how the language of literature has tended to become courtly, polished, refined, and far removed from the vulgar talk of the bazaar or the broad *patois* of the peasantry. What the poets of the cultivated few admire and what their readers expect is an elegant and rather far-fetched ode in Persian or Sanskrit, these languages being the literary languages of Northern India, just as French is the diplomatic language of Europe. To say a poem could be understood by every peasant from Delhi to Peshawar would be to condemn it, not to praise it. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that if a Panjabi Burns, Beranger or Mistral were to arise tomorrow he would get very little encouragement from the educated native of the Panjab.

I offered two prizes of Rs. 50 and Rs. 25 in one of the leading native newspapers of the Panjab for the best collection of Panjabi lyrics. I did not get a single answer to my offer.

With such apathy prevailing among the educated reading public, it is not hard to understand how difficult it has been to make any collection of lyrics. Although sheafs of vernacular poetry pass through the various presses year after year, nobody appears to have thought it worth while to make a representative collection of the best Panjabi poetry; indeed, nobody seems

to know or care anything about the subject. None of the natives could understand exactly what I wanted. Poems they thought good I thought intolerable. What I thought worth copying down and translating, they usually thought childish. I had no materials to start with at all; I therefore had to make my own collection as best I could wherever I went; consequently I cannot say whether this collection is really representative of Panjab poetry or not.

All that I can hope is that it may serve as a tentative and preliminary basis for a further authoritative collection of Panjab lyrics which I trust will be made some day by a more competent authority; and I also hope that it may give those who do not know the Panjab peasant a little glimpse into his life, thought and character.

Tall, erect, standing a clean six foot, dressed in plain white from his puggaree downwards—look him straight in the face; he will look you back as straight again, with clear frank eyes, equal to equal; for he is no slave; he is a man every inch of him.

In understanding, simple as a child, but a master farmer knowing all the secrets of the soil; he is a typical peasant with peasant virtues and peasant failings; hard headed in matters of giving and taking, a shrewd judge of character and with a keen eye for social pretensions of any sort. A man of simple tastes and frugal in ordinary life, living on a few farthings a day, but on occasions of marriages, when it is the custom of the country to make a brave show, he will mortgage his family acres with cheerful unconcern, as reckless of bankruptcy as an Irishman at a funeral. He is hospitable and does not love a stingy man. A tolerably pious devotee on saints days, birth-days and marriages, but too sturdy to be priest-ridden for long; with flashes of a Voltairian spirit when times are good, and a touch of Fatalism when times are bad; frank when you have gained his confidence, loving a joke if the point is fairly broad, and on the whole a genial fellow; indulgent to his women folk as long as they do their duty, bear him children and do not nag, but swift to anger when his passions are roused or when his women are unfaithful. He is a gentleman to the backbone and the finest soldier in India.

Turning now to the poems, one or two comments suggest themselves: artistically their workmanship is not high; very few of them are

the work of educated men; they have mostly been written by rustics for rustics. Some of them are simply children's songs made for the nursery and if the authors saw them invested with the dignity of print they would probably be considerably astonished.

Most of the love poems, all, in fact, except those of Garib Chand and those translated from the Pashtu, are from women to men. This is a striking feature of Panjabi poetry which I have discussed in my essay on Bullah Shah. I know of no satisfactory explanation of this curious literary tradition.

The poems of Garib Chand are the only exceptions to the rule which I have been able to find, and perhaps it is for this reason that they ring truer than the others and are of distinctly superior quality. Garib Chand was a subordinate Hindu Revenue Official, who was unfortunate enough to fall in love with the wife of one of his Muhammadan neighbours. I first came across one of his quatrains in Lahore, and subsequently, when in the Pindi district, I asked some of his friends and admirers to write me out all the poetry he had composed. During his lifetime he refused to let his verses be printed, saying that if they were worth anything they would live on the lips of men. Possibly also, though this may appear far fetched, he wished to save the object of his affections from unnecessary chatter. At any rate, it is noticeable in his poems that only the lady's village, Sahib Dhamial, is mentioned. Her name never appears. I crave pardon of the poet for reviving memories of a romance which he would willingly have let die, but as he wrote nothing to sully the reputation of the lady, I do not think I have been too indiscreet in revealing the history that underlie his poems.

The whole subject of the position of women in the East is beset with difficulties. The oriental does not care to lift the *zurdah* of the *senana* or to reveal its secrets to the gaze of the stranger. Men and women east of Suez may have their romances, but they do not publish them to the world like George Sand and De Musset; hence we are completely in the dark as to what sort of feelings the one sex inspires in the other.

A professor of Philosophy, who is also a young man and a poet, tells me roundly that the romance of love is unknown in respectable society, and that it is confined to quarters where marriage is unfashionable. Captain

Temple appears to be of the same opinion. On the other hand, all the popular romances of the Panjab are love stories and the tempestuous petticoat is the cause of more than half the murders. It is obvious, therefore, that if women do not inspire romance, they are at any rate capable of inspiring their lovers with passion and driving their husbands to wild revenge.

To understand the relations between men and women in India we must remember how women are brought up. Boys and girls are betrothed while in the cradle and married before they are out of the nursery. Their marriages are arranged entirely by their parents. The bride and bridegroom have no say in the matter. A woman is looked upon as a very necessary household acquisition, but as an inferior being and a chattel. She is taught to worship her husband as a god, but he never looks upon her as more than than the keeper of his cooking pots and the mother of his children.*

It is, therefore, easy to see that matrimony is likely to be unromantic and romance is certain to be dangerous.

We do not see eye to eye with the East in all matters. I showed one of the best poems in the *Garden of Kama* to a native and asked him what he thought of it. He replied that although it was beautiful poetry, the sentiment seemed to him entirely western. I asked him what he meant; for the critics in London are unanimously agreed that the book is thoroughly oriental. He replied that respectable women neither did these things nor said them, and that for a woman to make any display of affection towards a man was most indelicate. I suggested that a woman might kiss her husband. "No," said my friend, "it would be considered most immodest. She may be kissed, but she must not kiss." I do not know whether my friend was an authority on these subjects, but *prima facie* one would think that if such rules are conscientiously observed love making in the East must be a little dull.

It may be noticed that there is very little appreciation of nature in these lyrics. I do not know whether the reason is that the Panjabi finds his own feelings quite absorbing enough without bothering about the beauties

* It is probable that the Ancient Greeks held similar views.

of nature, or whether it is that nature, as revealed in the Panjab plains, is not conducive to poetical thoughts. The latter explanation is at any rate intelligible.

Perhaps I should apologise for having tried to turn some of the poems into verse. The fact is, prose translations always miss the swing of the original rhyme. It was this feeling which made me think it was worth while to try and translate some of them into verse.

I have to thank the Editors of the *Spectator*, the *Pioneer* and the *Civil and Military Gazette* for their courtesy in allowing me to reprint verses which have appeared in their columns.

C. F. USBORNE,
Lahore.