

**THE SISTERS OF THE
SPINNING WHEEL, AND
OTHER SIKH POEMS**

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The sisters of the spinning wheel, and other Sikh poems by Puran Singh

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PURAN SINGH

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of the
SPINNING WHEEL

and other Sikh Poems
Original and Translated

By
PURAN SINGH



With an Introduction
by
ERNEST & GRACE RHYS

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INTRODUCTION

I

THIS book of Puran Singh's poems is the latest offspring from a famous old root. It is founded on the *Granth Sabib*, and most of the songs that follow are in one way or another derived from that inspired book, which has sometimes been called the Sikh Bible. But as that is the youngest of the bibles, so these songs and lyrics are re-charged, we shall find, by the spirit of youth in poesy. It may be that the ideas, images and figurative expressions in these poems are often openly borrowed, and a fairly close transcript of certain passages may even at times be given. But whether the rendering be close or free, the religious emotion is always in essence the same, and it is always authentic. It runs right through the songs from beginning to end, and no reader can fail to be touched by its sincerity, grace and fervour.

English versions of the *Granth Sabib* have already been given to the public in the six volumes of Mr. M. A. Macauliffe's remarkable work on *The Sikh Religion*, and with his versions any reader who likes can compare Mr. Puran Singh's poems, and will find the comparison most interesting. In *The Sisters of the Spinning Wheel* we have a living emotional verse that conveys the ecstatic mood of the original, while it

adds a new impulse to the old one. In the other work we have a series of careful scholarly translations, faithfully rendering the Indian texts.

It was Rabindranath Tagore who carried over into the English tongue with a new power and melody the first convincing strains of Bengali poetry. Puran Singh has fortunately something of the same gift, and his music too freely naturalises itself in the English medium and makes good its accent, and one soon becomes aware of its living charm. Later, the spirit of his poetry is seen to involve a rare sense of delight in devotion, and the closer thought one brings to bear upon it the profounder its effect. All the evidences of a high spiritual ancestry are joined to the fine pageantry of the Eastern world that glows in the page.

The figured reality in this pageant carries us far, and uses vivid symbolism, to interpret the region of its imagination. The set symbol is the key to an ever widening world. The songs that open this fair region to us we may call parable, or picture, poems; and we shall find in reading them, that their mode often recalls that of other parable-makers. It was the method of many Eastern teachers; nay, was it not the method consecrated by Christ himself?

In other poems like "Simran," on the other hand, the thought, the inner ecstasy, is directly expressed without any aid to the imagination, without any ascent from the real to prepare the approach. And these we may term songs of worship.

No doubt some unevenness of workmanship was bound to result from this double method. It was at first thought it might be wiser to divide the poems

into two definite groups; but afterwards it was felt that the very irregularity lent a certain charm to the sequence: something like that which we find in a necklace of gems of different values, colours, shapes and sizes, strung on the one golden thread.

Perhaps the only serious difficulty that will be felt by the Western reader in understanding Puran Singh's book is the obscurity caused by the identification of the Guru, the earthly Master or teacher with the Almighty Father, the Guru Who is above all. The same word is often used for both. The passion of love for the Master who in himself unites God and man is expressed in a hundred ways throughout the book—most memorably in the remarkable poem, "A Turbanned Man."

This passion melts by degrees into the adoration of the Eternal One, and bound up with the worship of the spirit of God incarnate in the Guru, the Master and Teacher, is the worship of the Name of God. It is believed that an entrance into the presence and the heart of God can be made by the use of the symbol of his Name—the key, as it were, that admits us into his kingdom. This is that *NÂM*, which will be found throughout the book. *Nâm* stands both for the name of God, and for the union with God, to be attained by the devout repetition of His name. It is akin to the "calling upon God" mentioned in our own Bible. The word *Nâm* is an old Sanskrit word and is actually the same as our "name"; the Latin *nomen* and the Greek *ὄνομα* come from the same root. All through the book *Nâm*, the Name, is used as the Symbol of God, exactly as *Λόγος*, the Word, occurs in the Gospel of St. John. "And the Word was with God, and the Word

was God." In the poem called "Guru Nanak" we find it written: "It is true for us for ever, God himself cometh to man in the shape of Man who spells Him for us: this is Nâm. He is the sign and symbol."

The poem called "Nâm, the Name of the Infinite" needs to be specially studied in relation to this divine invocation. Also the poem "Guru Nanak" already mentioned, for that touches another difficulty that may affect Western readers—the passing of Spirit from one Guru or Prophet-Teacher of the Sikhs to another. This poem reminds one (though with a difference) of the Hebrew pedigree chants. It is a poetic recital of the descent of prophetic inspiration through the great leaders of the Sikh religion. So the Christian plenary inspiration, we may recall, was supposed to descend through the apostles. In the case of the Sikhs, however, the succession depended not on any direct election, but on a sort of spiritual elective fatherhood in each succeeding Guru, very much as, in our Bible, the Mantle of Elijah fell upon Elisha. Into each new Guru passed the spirit of him that was gone; each Guru in turn added to the Scriptures, if that special gift were his.

II

Until recent years, when Mr. Macauliffe's work appeared, most of us were ignorant of the life and literature of the Sikhs. They were a people welded together by no community of blood or race, but were at first solely a religious community: afterwards a