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Sahitya Akademi

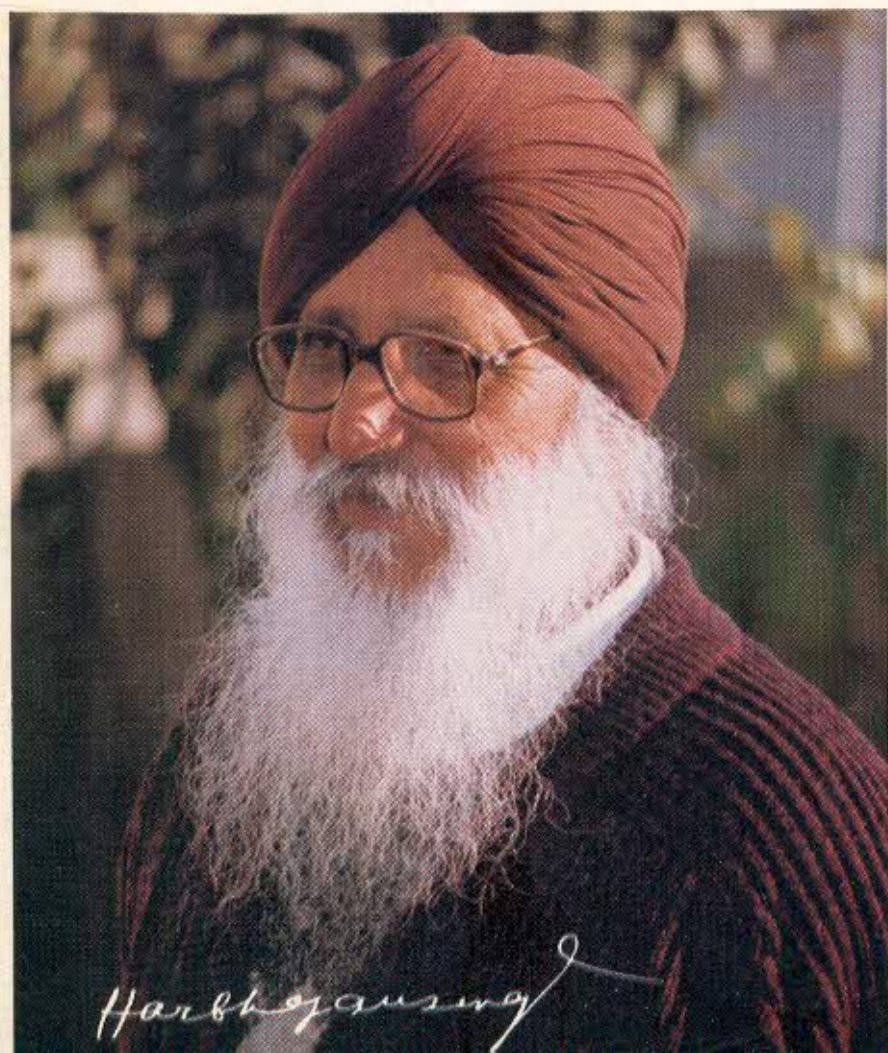


India International Centre

invite you to

# meet the author

**Harbhajan Singh**





Dr. Harbhajan Singh was born in 1919 in Lumding, a small town in Assam, where his father Ganda Singh was employed in a construction company. The untimely death of his father compelled his mother to bring him back to a village near Lahore. It was not long before he lost his mother too. Orphaned as a young boy, he led a very lonely life: it was in this period that he began writing verses.

Dr. Harbhajan Singh had his early education at DAV High School in Lahore. After leaving school he was first employed as an English teacher in a school and later as a Hindi teacher in a college. However, he continued to pursue higher studies, obtaining masters degrees in English and Hindi and later a Ph.D for a critical study of medieval Hindi poetry preserved in Gurmukhi script. This research took him close to his roots in Punjabi.

Dr. Harbhajan Singh began his literary career writing religious and political verses for recitation in Punjabi *mushairas*. His first poetry collection *Lasan* (Weals) was brought out in 1956. His poetry during this phase reflects the socialist current of the post-independence era. Many of the poems express

his revulsion against capitalism. In a poem from *Lasan*, Dr. Harbhajan Singh expresses the plight of the worker thus:

*You have made my body starve  
So that it has become a beam eaten  
by white ants  
And my rich soul  
Of which I was proud  
Goes every night to sleep in it,  
"Kohlu Da Bald" (Lasan)*

In his long dramatic poem *Tar Tupka* (Drop on a Wire, 1957), Dr. Harbhajan Singh deals with the predicament created by the accumulation of nuclear warheads. Commenting on our times in this poem, he says :

*The king is bitterly against the  
subject  
The subject against the King  
Mothers are annoyed with their  
children for being always hungry  
The children are always annoyed  
because there is no milk in  
mother's breasts  
Beauty spits at lust, but gets sold  
to it  
Lust having tasted of Beauty  
throws it away.*

Introducing a fresh lyricism in Punjabi poetry, Dr. Harbhajan Singh expresses his rebellion without any show of aggression. His protests have often an emotive, romantic appeal, as in the following call for revolution:

*I am fragrance filled wind beloved  
at your door  
Look for once, beloved  
Who has come to your door  
My raw youth wants your company  
My pure, untouched limbs, my  
uncombed hair  
A first time fancy smouldering in  
my breast and  
Red are my garments.*

In the latter phase of his poetic career, Dr. Harbhajan Singh breaks away from romanticism. But even so, his verse retains its lyrical appeal. His inherent instinct is to avoid even a single discordant note. Later on he adopts a structuralist viewpoint regarding

poetic composition, probably stemming from his fondness for Russian formalism. Most of Dr. Harbhajan Singh's poems are a kind of dramatic monologue that present many layers of reality one after the other.

In the collection *Na Dhuppe Na Chhaven*, which received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1969, Dr. Harbhajan Singh affirms the new spirit of experiment in Punjabi poetry. Most of the poems in this collection depict his inner crises and conflicts, the knots of life that baffle our mind and consciousness. He presents his position with a powerful and penetrating satire and a deep sense of irony.

Dr. Harbhajan Singh refers to his poetic creation as an attempt to transcend his body: "*Apne pirde ton par jan da jatan*". Every new creation is seen by him as a new sin: "*Har navan sirjan har navan gunah hai*." In the creative act every genuine poet is bound to break something and while breaking he feels he is committing a sin; literature is stylised society and style is a deviation from the norm.

A poet's insight into the human psyche makes him believe that a potential criminal lies in wait in every human being. Two of his poems on this subject are "Apara" (Without Feet) and "Ek Sulagtha Hath" (A Burning Hand). The poem "Apara" touches upon the possibility of crime. Most of his poems are based on personal experience but there are some based on imaginary or even extra-sensory experience.

"Hijrat", a well-known poem of Dr. Harbhajan Singh was written after the Bangla Desh War. It is included in the collection *Alif Dopaihr* (The Hottest Noon). Here he equates the flight of the refugees who fled from East Pakistan and subsequently returned to their homeland, with Prophet Mohammad's migration to Medina and his eventual return to Mecca:

*The city asked me at the time of my  
migration 'Oh my Prophet  
Tell me before you leave  
Shall I continue burning till you  
return  
Or be extinguished'.*

The poem became so popular



Receiving Soviet Land Nehru Award from the former President Sri R. Venkataraman



With his wife and grandchildren

that it was published several times even in Pakistan. The poems in this collection give full expression to the horrors of war—the atrocities perpetrated on women, children and old people.

Dr. Harbhajan Singh has also contributed a great deal to literary criticism in Punjab,

though he entered this field late in his literary career. His critical works are refreshingly original. He has brought into Punjabi criticism the concepts of structure and texture. He seeks to strike a balance between a non-evaluative structuralist interpretation and an evaluative ideological interpretation.

## A Select Bibliography

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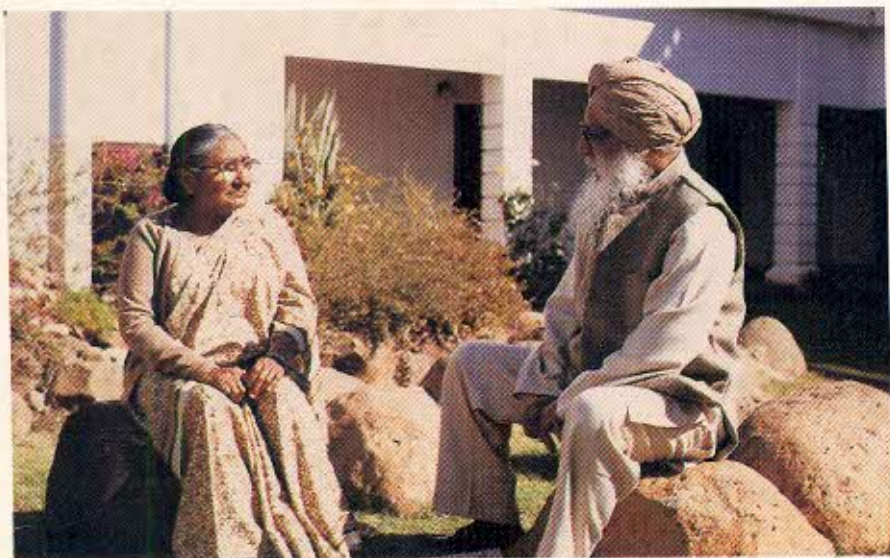
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With his wife

## A Chronology

- 1919: Birth
- 1951:- Head of Hindi Department,  
57 Guru Tegh Bahadur Khalsa College, Delhi
- 1963: Panjab State Prize for *Rig Bani*
- 1969: Sahitya Akademi Award
- 1973: Sahitya Kala Parishad Award; Visited Czechoslovakia & the U.K.
- 1975: Punjab State Shiromani Award; Bhai Vir Singh Award
- 1976: Soviet Land Nehru Award; Visited Canada
- 1977: Visiting Professor, Punjabi University, Patiala
- 1978: Gurbaksh Singh Essay Prize; Punjab State Prize
- 1982: Gyani Gurmukh Singh Award
- 1983: Mahamati Prannath Mission Award; Third World Hindi Conference Award; Third World Panjabi Conference Award
- 1985: Delhi University Professor Emeritus
- 1986: Kartar Singh Dhaliwal Award
- 1987: P.S. Gill & S.R. Sandhu Memorial Antar Rashtari Shiromani Sahitkar Award, Canada; U.P. Sansthan Sauhardya Award; Fellow Emeritus, Government of India.
- 1988: Kabir Samman
- 1992: Waris Shah Award; Fellow, Panjabi Sahitya Akademi



Speaking at the Kabir Samman award function