



**“Spirituality can go in any direction”**

**Akshaya Kumar in Conversation with Sarabjeet  
Garcha**

(This is an edited version of the conversation that took place between the poet Sarabjeet Garcha and Prof. Akshaya Kumar in Mulk Raj Anand Auditorium of the Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh)

**Akshaya Kumar:** All these years poetry has undergone many transformations and avant-garde experimentations. At times such experiments overtake the poetic emotion. The excessive experimentation in a way distances and distracts the potential reader from the charms of poetry. My first encounter with Sarabjeet Garcha’s poems has been through journals and anthologies, wherein he features often with conspicuous regularity. The reading of his stray poems always left an embalmed calmness in my mind, and made me crave for his full-length collections. Only recently did I manage to get hold of his three collections, namely, *Lullaby of the Ever-Retuning*, *A Clock in the Far Past*, and *All We Have*. One lingering impression after reading these collections has been that Garcha’s poetry retains the charisma of poetry, its intimate cadence and inherent lyricism. He brings poetry back home, a form of literature that has been in some kind of an exile. The faintest stirrings send him into a poetic frenzy as he seeks to:

be a raindrop to learn to glide  
like a lyric on a leaf

be a shiver in the skin of squirrel  
to know what it is to touch a tree ...

(“Lines from a Lost Leaf”, *A Clock in the Far Past*, 32)

As a seeker, Garcha clamours to dig deep into the drama of life. This perhaps is the mandate of poetry. But what redeems his poetry from over-dramatization is its delicate tension. His poetry hovers in and around an interstitial space – even as it aims to dive deep, it is acutely aware of the limitations of such an overreach. The ending of his poem “Interface” in a way sums up the predicament of his inward plunge: “He turns around but trips/ .../ marooned between dream and deep dream” (*A Clock in the Far Past*, 7). The enlightened in-betweenness, acquired in the process is suggested in the poem “Iteration” thus: “... it’s impossible to know/ wakefulness from sleep” (*All We Have*, 11). He resides inside the layers formed by one blanket over another blanket:

Someone spreads another blanket  
over me and in my sleep I see  
that everything you wanted to tell me  
is cushioned between these two layers  
warmed by a prayer.

(“Wordless”, *All We Have*, 13)

But Garcha in his early poetry, particularly written in Hindi in his collection *Vaani Phir Bhi Shunyamanaa*, comes across as a poet who is under the spell of some vague *chhayavadi* impulse. Strangely enough in the very first collection, the destination is *shunya*, which to me is rather too an audacious a beginning:

*Mann ke saghan gagan barsaun*  
*Tann ke taral surya chhalkaun*  
*Pranaya pran ki aahuti dekar*  
*Sarvayapt surbhi ban jaun*

Nirala’s grit, Pant’s grace, and Prasad’s mysticism – all mixed together – seem to find some echo in this collection, but the poetry remains more performative than experiential. In later collections, which are written in English, Garcha’s idiom, however, is much more calibrated. It is slow-paced, the time runs very slow, and instead of

the destination, the journey and the travails of the passage are traced through a very frugal kind of poetic narrative.

After this slightly longish introductory remarks, let me begin the conversation with Sarabjeet Garcha. My first question relates to your initial uncertainty about the preferred medium of your poetic journey. You begin in Hindi and switch to English poetry. The choice of language is always a problem with a multilingual writer, particularly with one who has competence in more than two to three languages. But is it just a switch from one language to another? Or is it a switch from one kind of attitude to another? When you write English poetry I come across a very different Garcha. Garcha who calibrates, who treads slowly and who unveils the reality in measured ways. There is no such impatience to jump and dive headlong into the abyss of the infinite.

**Sarabjeet Garcha:** First and foremost, I would like to make a minor correction to what you said. I actually began with English poetry, but my first book is out of print now. It was published a few months before I got married at the age of twenty-six, and I never wanted to publish it. My friend published it for me because one day he saw my diaries and poems and said that he wanted to publish them. So, I said, “Okay, let me at least revise them.” I revised and published the poems and just forgot about the book. And I thought, *I am done with poetry; I don’t think I can write anymore*. But then, once poetry takes hold of you, you are taken for life. It will never leave you. I did not realize that. I was penning something in my diary then. The poems collected in the second manuscript were again published by the same person, about seven or eight years later, when I was in my early thirties. And that too happened because he wanted to publish the book. I said, “Look, these are reconstructions of the *advaita* philosophy that I have got from you.” I haven’t read any philosophy as such, but I have hobnobbed with persons who have been disciples of well-known spiritual gurus. This person was one of them, but he did not have any guru. So maybe that was one kind of acquisition that I wanted to bring across. I was experimenting; I was enjoying the feel of language. And this book is all about it. I am playing with language – that is what I

feel. There is a lot of repetition, and the rhythm that I picked up in this book, the rhyme and meter, where I got it from is again all serendipity. One day, one afternoon at Dyal Singh Library in Delhi I picked up a book. I had never heard the name of the author before. His name was Kanhaiya Lal Sethia. One thing I learned that day is, never go by the name. It sounds like some Marwari seth's name. I picked up the book and read one poem, and I was blown away. I mean, it was a very simple poem, but the rhythm never left me. The poem was about death and I thought, *Okay, let me take this book home*. Then I started reading it. There were about forty-two poems in the book. And I still remember that poem. There were many poems there and I said that okay maybe I can also write like this. And I started experimenting with my own Hindi vocabulary and the vocabulary that I had picked up from my friends. My friends were very well versed in Hindi. I was educated in an English medium school so I did not have that kind of Hindi, but I acquired it from them. So, your company actually influences your language a lot and that is how it all began. After that book at the same time in 2011, my second book in English, *Lullaby of the Ever-Returning*, appeared. It appeared after a gap of almost eight years, I think. That's the longest gap between my books. And as I said, I had never planned that I would have a book out, but I had been writing regularly. And I also dumped a lot of my work, which means I revised compulsively. That is why you will see that my first book is very different from my second book. So, in the second book I wanted to bring alive the Punjab I had in my imagination because I have never lived in Punjab. The Punjab that I think and dream about has come from my grandparents actually, so I tried to reconstruct some bit of it in the book, apart from the many love poems that I included in it.

**AK:** Good that you referred to the genetic pull of Punjab on your creative unconscious, but as I go through your poems only one kind of Punjab emerges. And that is the Punjab of its love lore, of its romance, its *qissas*. Of course, love has its two shades and two distinct registers – love bordering on metaphysics and spirituality, and love which is not more than a carnal desire. And you also navigate across these two shades. But still, I feel that in your *Lullaby*

*of the Ever-Returning*, you are soft-peddalling Punjab so much? You do refer to “the rugged raspiness of Punjab’s waters” (18) and its “rinsing wounds [that] time has left unhealed” (19), but the volatility of Punjab’s recent past is underplayed. Punjab has seen so much of turmoil post-Green Revolution, and the simmers of discontent among the youth are too palpable to be missed out.

**SG:** Well, again, the kind of poems I include are romantic. But that is the Punjab I dream about. So maybe you can give me some bit of license there. The Punjab that you’ll see now in my other books – and it might not be a book of poems – will be something different. Because I feel I am also physically more acquainted with Punjab now than I was fifteen or twenty years ago. However, intermittent visits aren’t enough to slake my thirst for feeling the place in my bones. I yearn to be there for a longer stretch of time. Thankfully, I now have friends who can take me into the heart of rural Punjab. I am not yet done with Punjab. There’s much more to follow.

**AK:** Just look at the use of your language. It is an uncanny, gothic language of lullabies, rustles, ruins, and midnight vigils that you exploit the most. In couplets such as these – “Although you soothsay the continuity of souls, / Is there anyone who can foretell of the vanishing?” (“Ghazal for the Vanishing”, *Lullaby of the Ever-Returning*, 12) – you create a mood of eeriness. Take up your poem “A Rustle in the Ruins”, which you dedicate to the famous Punjabi poet Shiv Kumar Batalavi, who is known for his pathos and is heralded as *biraha da sultan*. You lyricize “the kiss of calamity”. You foreground his melancholic predilections, but let us not forget that even as he recasts Luna as a young stepmother who has sexual desires, the social aspects of her being a low-caste hilly woman are very significantly hinted at. How do you relate to Shiv Kumar Batalvi? Can you explain the impulse behind the poem “A Rustle in the Ruins?”

**SG:** Yeah, certainly. I have already mentioned it in the notes that the images in that poem have been picked up from Shiv Kumar Batalvi’s poems, so you can say it has been written after him. In the early 2000s

I was obsessed with Batalvi's poetry, and of course I have also read *Luna*, and it has had a deep impact on me. But I could never let go of the lover boy Shiv, you see. He really influenced me like no other poet. Of course, I also liked other poets such as Mohan Singh and Puran Singh. I have read them. And Nanak also refers to love in his own way when he talks of *baramaha*, but Shiv was something else ... First, I wanted to translate him, and then I saw that I was failing in the endeavour, because he cannot be translated. He can be reimagined in another language, because his poetry is so woven into Punjabi that it cannot really be translated. I have seen many other translations, including of *Luna*, but they are not adequate translations. I would say that they fail. So, I was definitely trying to reconstruct some bit of Shiv in maybe some of these poems, but not all of them. As I said, maybe it was my nostalgia for Punjab, a Punjab I have never lived in.

**AK:** When I read "A Rustle in the Ruins", I found that you were more or less translating various images of Batalvi into English. Can I generalize and say that modern Indian English poetry is a by-product of failed translational efforts of poets?

**SG:** No, not really. As I said, it is dedicated to Shiv Kumar Batalvi, and I made it very clear in the notes that some images have been taken from his poems, but I converted many of his poems into one poem. So, there is a lot of creative intensity involved in dovetailing various images of Shiv Kumar Batalvi into one running poem.

**AK:** Yes, that is what translators can always do. I know that this poem is a series of images you picked up from Batalvi and then put them together in a sequence. Tell me about your journey from Batalvi to Baba Nanak. I mean, Nanak features a lot later on. There are many poems on and around Guru Nanak in your later collections. In *All We Have*, the entire last section (V) is devoted to what can be called as "Nanak poems". What I find very interesting is that even as you deal with these semi-spiritual kinds of poems, you create a narrative. Spirituality, otherwise, is a blackhole; it can suck you up. And writing poems under that kind of spiritual blight, if I am not wrong, can

actually smother the poetic prowess. But then how do you maintain the poetic balance, and how do you bring poetics into the narrative of spirituality?

**SG:** First, I will begin with my obsession with Nanak. It began when I was seven or eight years old. I lived in a building which was earlier a rest house and it was converted into a building because the people who came there as pilgrims became permanent residents. And they paid a rent to the landlord, who belonged to the Nirmala sect. His name was Pandit Narhari Narayan Singh. He died when I was eight and he was 103. I still have vivid memories about him, the kind of person he was. He really fascinated me, with his long beard and everything. I knew that he was some special person, but I did not know anything about spiritualism. And my only tryst with poetry... at that time I would go to the gurudwara in the afternoon when there was nobody and I would just touch the Guru Granth Sahib. I only knew that it is something very special, you see. It has something, but is beyond my reach. I did not even know that it has poetry. I would sit where the granthi sits and take the ceremonial fly whisk and play with it. There was a photograph of Nanak, a common photograph we see everywhere. That was unusual, because normally you don't see any photographs in gurudwaras. But as I said, the landlord belonged to the Nirmala sect. And there was also a bell. It never struck me that there's no bell in a gurudwara. At the back of my mind, Nanak was being played to me morning and evening by my mama in Bhai Tarlochan Singh's voice. She had an audio cassette—T-Series. I think many of us know about it; it's very famous. She would play it in the morning and again in the evening, and I was unconsciously listening to Nanak all the time. Only in my early teens did I become aware of it without understanding anything. I would then make an effort to understand, ask questions about him, and find out more about him. Back then, we did not have the benefit of the Internet, so it was all question and answer. Simple. If I had a question, I would approach my elders or my friends. My friends of course did not know anything about him, so I would approach my elders and ask them. Some of them would answer, and others would say, "No, no, beta, *paath karo*." I was like, "I am ready to do it, but only if I understand it." I could

not understand it. So, there the fascination began and then, of course, we know that Baba Nanak is an egalitarian and his poetry has great logic to it if you read it. He is a pragmatist. So, despite being called a Bhakti poet, if we see that he is referring to an unknown entity, it is not necessarily someone invisible sitting seven skies above us. He is talking of an ideal which is inside you. That is how I interpret it.

As you said, spirituality can go in any direction. I feel that when I start writing a poem, I have a vague sense of where it can go, but I don't know the path I will take or where the poem will take me. So, I try to maintain that element of mystery and allow the poem to work itself upon me, rather than resisting it and making my own interventions, because then it becomes artificial. Maybe that is why you see that it will not really be spiritual and mystical in the typical sense of the word. Does that answer your question?

**AK:** It takes me to another question. We have seen most of the modern English poets do go back to the Bhakti reservoir, and they fashion themselves as modern *bhaktas*. I am happy that I could find somebody who is in a way rewriting Nanak, but your rewriting stops short of being playful. It remains very reverential. This is how you end your poem "First Light":

.... For days, they've been  
dusting their little house, stocking up  
the kitchen. Who knows  
what he loves to eat? All they know is  
he loves. And that is enough  
for them to recognise Nanak. (83)

This is poetry of surrender, without qualification.

**SG:** I think reverence is something that a poet can't do without. That's what I feel, you see. And that reverence starts with language. So, you begin with that veneration. Unless you have it, I don't think you can become a poet. It is impossible. But the object of reverence can shift. It can be a person. It can be your lover, mother, anybody. It



can be an ideal. Maybe for me it is Nanak, who has spoken deeply to me through word and action. He's the one who has also shown me that it isn't enough to be an armchair poet.

**AK:** Just pushing you more on this because reverence could be very intimidating, and reverence actually inhibits you to be free in the sense that it pre-empts you to be intimate with Guru Nanak. When I read your poems in that orbit of the semi-sacred, they read really well. But then the whole opportunity of rediscovering Nanak in a very intimate, friendly, and perhaps non-reverential way somehow remains untapped. What do you say?

**SG:** Again, you see, it begins with reverence, but it does not end there. There are many instances. I look upon Baba Nanak as a person, and a very vulnerable person at that. Should I read "Stopover?" We all know that Nanak's companion was not really averse to the idiosyncrasies that you have to deal with when you are travelling without planning. So, Mardana—somebody asked me why is he shown hungry in all the stories? I told them that the hunger is actually for something else. It's not just for food.

Nanak in the ruins outside a village.  
The word *come* is dearer to him  
than *go*, so instead of Go, *Mardana*, he says  
Come, *Mardana*. *Make yourself* at home.

The night a wordless companion  
they both take in cicada song,  
a music much older than the walls  
gnawed off by that fiend called time.

Give the *rabab* a rest, he hears Nanak say.  
Mardana nestles the instrument into  
what must have once been an alcove  
for toy, bangle, turban and diya alike.

A fallen roofbeam for a pillow, the dirt floor  
for a bed and the still air for a blanket

was much more than the pupil spurned  
by a whole village could have asked for,

He tries, but can't take his eyes  
off the cold mud stove in the corner.  
His lips remember the taste of a river,  
his hands the clasp of the master

Who can let go of the whole world  
but never of those who choose to rise.  
His only wish tonight is to find  
a ruse to forgive, a means to fill  
his eyes with the sleep of the guru,  
to see that which never sleeps,  
his ears awake to the one voice  
repeating, Come, *Mardana*.  
*Dream time's over. Arise.*

(*All We Have*, 84-85)

So, I think that here I have not really shown Nanak as a very spiritual person, you see. It can be somebody else in his place who is your companion. Travelling without planning sometimes also changes your perspective. I know that from first-hand experience, because last year during winter I took my car and drove straight from Delhi to Assam. I was driving for four days, three nights. I had a companion with me and our stops were not planned. We just had an inkling that we might stop at such-and-such place. When you travel like that, you see things which you might not have seen or experienced before. And then I began to think about Nanak again, because we at least have all these facilities: you can book a hotel, you have apps and everything. Think about a person who did not perhaps even have a map and who set out on a journey not even knowing the next destination. The village, the person he would come across. That, I feel, is very inspiring for me. I need to develop the same kind of thirst which the Internet has taken away from me.

**AK:** It's true that one has this fascination for the unseen and an expectation of the unprecedented also. But you say in your poem "Calibrations": "It's time / to find solace in proverbs / ... / to lay all verbs to rest ..." (*All We Have*, 44) So, is this quest without action? What do you say?

**SG:** It is a means to reach a silence that is your own. That is why I say, "Lay all verbs to rest," because verbs can be dangerous. And maybe that is why—I don't know to what extent I have succeeded in it—I feel I have taken to poetry to express something that has been unsayable for me. It can be something as simple as the changing colour of daylight every day. I have noticed that difference from when I was six years old till now, when I am in my forties. I can see and feel that difference inside me, but when I want to convey or articulate the feeling, I am totally transported into another world because of a simple question that a child asks. Or not even a question. Just by the look in his or her eyes. There are so many things that I get blown over by, so I try to express them through poetry. But I don't know. Even now I don't have a blueprint or template for writing a poem. I just go by instinct, and sometimes it fails me. Fails me miserably. And that is why I have many failed poems in a cold storage box that I maintain, you see. I say to myself, "Well, it is not ready to be published." It is okay to write junk, but it is not okay to continue writing junk alone.

**AK:** There is this Indian critic V.K. Chari who has written a very good book on Walt Whitman's poetry. And he says that in the poetry of Walt Whitman you come across two registers. One is that in which you have that high-octane *upanishadic* flight. But he says that there is also very significantly the register of the *New York Times*. I find a lot of Nanak in your poetry. I find even a lot of Batalvi here. But where is *Punjab Kesari*?

**SG:** You will not see *Punjab Kesari*, but you will come across oblique references. There is one poem, a very simple one. It talks of the current times: "Arrival."

Come. I am standing  
on Platform No. 2.

The morning paper's talking  
to itself. I overhear it saying,  
*The times are dark.*

In a space cloven  
by arrivals and departures  
an unseen bird is singing  
so I don't believe the paper anymore

But only wait to see  
my own sunlight  
alight from the carriage  
and bloom in my arms,

The departing train's heartbeat  
thrumming up four free feet.

**AK:** So, there is a reference to a platform and a paper too. But there is also a reference to an unseen bird which you keep overhearing. And the very existence of paper or platform becomes just incidental, and not instrumental. My point is that your poetry is all about things which are half-seen, unseen. You prefer half-lights, dark nights, and more often you are in a dream land, that too at the time of the night. Is poetry a discourse of the night? Or can there be poetry of daylight, broad daylight also?

**SG:** Yes. I have several poems about daylight—for instance, “A Glowing Day”. By the way, it has nothing to do with Shiv Kumar Batalvi's “Ajj Din Chadheya”.

The avid eye hoards luminous days  
to irradiate the universe  
expanding inside the head,  
and you naively think  
mornings never tire of you.

If it weren't for the erratic,

breathing iridescence of dreams, all  
the brightness treasured behind  
daydreaming eyes that spills  
into the waking hours

would remain unrequited.  
Not heat nor haze nor  
the frosty ways of deep winters  
can muffle the stray unruly day  
that has decided to glow:  
the lone luminous day

hard bent upon burrowing the silt  
over which the river  
drunk with your dreams flows.

*(A Clock in the Far Past, 47)*

**AK:** So, as I said, you are talking about a patch of sunlight. As I said, somehow there is this plaintive lyricism in your poetry. It is shy of a full-throttle celebration of life. There is some kind of withdrawal from that kind of full plunge into life.

**SG:** There is no withdrawal. I am still approaching it, maybe.

**AK:** You were referring to silence. I got a little alarmed because poetry is all about exfoliation of silence rather than a lapse into silence. Is all poetry kind of a build-up to silence?

**SG:** Maybe. For me at least it is a way of approaching my inner silence. Someday I will definitely go silent. I am sure of that. It can be a build-up to a silence which can lead to something else. Who knows.

**AK:** Is there something after silence?

**SG:** Yes, there is.

**AK:** Because when you say that silence is what enamours you and that is maybe your last poem. How do you see in this kind of an

outreach for the future of the narrative? Because in some of the poems I could see that you use mathematics and then you talk about a building where the ground floor comes to the first floor and the first floor goes to the top. There is a struggle to create a narrative. I am just curious to know whether there can be an architecture of silence?

**SG:** I think there can be, yes. And everybody's architecture will be different.

**AK:** I mean through your poems. You have the poem "Well Grounded." How can somebody be well grounded and yet be silent? I would like for you to explain to me the architecture of that poem because it reminds me a lot of Kabir.

**SG:** No, I don't think so. I have never read him consciously. I have never read a book by him separately. If you live in a high-rise, the architecture that I have in mind is that when you step out you should not step out into the corridor. No matter which floor you live on, you should step out into the garden. So how does that happen? It's what you call a wild dream. It's like science fiction.

**AK:** Is this a movement forward or backward?

**SG:** Whatever it is. I don't really limit myself there. When an idea grips me, I like to chase it to its culmination. So, this poem is a result of that. Let me read it:

He wants architectural inventors to go beyond optics  
to make his lush illusion seem more real and everlasting:

Irrespective of which floor one lives on in a building,  
one should get the opportunity to step out—fully

and truly out—into, say, an arbour, and not into a corridor.  
The stairs and the balconies must vanish, so too all of the  
other

apartments on the floor. For this, neo-architects will have to  
play with the principle of pulleys, converting the whole  
building

into a gigantic elevator which operates by thought alone  
so someone living on even the top floor would automatically

step out into the ground-level outdoors on just opening  
the apartment's main door. By the time the thought  
consumes

itself, the building, within milliseconds, will have thrust  
itself  
below ground into a deep well, quickly aligning the floor

under the near-future wanderer's feet with the ground,  
the windowpanes of the other, temporarily buried dwellings

telecasting, to those inside them, the actual skyline in real  
time.

As for making the next-door units disappear, invisibility  
cloaks

alone won't do, as the roamer wants them to become  
imperceptible

to one another for ever, so that all those residing in the  
building

will not bother about the simultaneity of each other's desire  
to open the door and walk out into a world

that still places faith in the woods.

Here I imagine an entire building as a lift "which operates by  
thought alone". For instance, if you live on the ninth floor and want  
to step out of your flat, your wish alone will start operating the  
mechanism that pulls the building into a "deep well" till the ninth  
floor aligns with the ground level before you open the door and step  
out. Now, when that happens, all the floors below yours will sink into  
darkness, and all residents below your floor will only see darkness  
outside their windows. However, during that time, a screen on the  
interior wall of the well will telecast the outdoors so that those gone  
down don't even realise that the building has sunk. But what if

several persons on different floors simultaneously get the thought of stepping out? The poem plays with this idea of simultaneity.

**AK:** As I said that this is a surprising kind of coexistence that you clamour for the silence and at the same time you lay out its blueprint. And there is a journey step by step. But there is this poem called “Frugal Narrative” also. That’s what I am saying: you want to speak but yet you are very reticent. Why is this reticence? Is this reticence poetry? Why should a poet necessarily be a reticent one?

**SG:** I am not fully in favour of reticence, but maybe frugality, yeah, that is the keyword for me—to be as concise as possible because saying too much can spoil things and it can definitely spoil a poem. I have seen many poems being ruined by saying too much or not stopping where one should have. A poem which should have ended at the fourth line goes up to forty lines, and that kills the poem. It is overdone. So, yeah, I have tried to reach that kind of thrift. And I see my own mistakes as I began developing as a poet. I see where I have erred, and made mistakes. I try to learn from them and at least not repeat them.

**AK:** It’s true that a poem has to have its own organic kind of a closure, but then I have seen that in your earlier poems the images stretch, they tend to be become relentlessly multi-scopic. In your poem “A Drunkard’s Rituals”, the images stretch. The very opening stanza is breathless:

On falling down  
he would kiss loose dirt,  
taste its texture,  
gulp its grammar so that  
by the time his legs could  
give him back his dignity,  
he would hush-hush  
chronicles of lost civilizations  
swirl in the solitude



of his mouth.

(*Lullaby of the Ever-Returning*, 45)

Don't you think that this series of verbs—fall, kiss, taste, gulp, give, swirl—tests the attention of prospective reader of your poetry?

**SG:** Yes, it is relentless in *Lullaby*, but you will see that this fascination for images is declining towards the third book. *A Clock in the Far Past* is quite restrained in that sense.

**AK:** In your latest book *All We Have* the imagery becomes very abstract and the length of the poems also goes down. For instance, the title itself suggests lack of trust in the capability of words to carry the burden of emotion. Words are the only source to articulate the unsayable. But if you look at the titles of some of the poems—such as “Almost”, “Light”, “Exist”, “Dilemma”, and “Arrival”—they are minimalistic, and bare. All these are philosophical titles. How do you look at it? Is it an evolution of the poet or devolution of the poet?

**SG:** Maybe. I don't look at them as philosophical. For me they are very utilitarian. The book grew organically, so did the titles of the poems.

**AK:** A poem like “Handkerchief” suddenly surprises in this semi-spiritual, quasi-philosophical drift of your poetic idiom. The little handkerchief with “every inch of it” “embroidered with lover's name” (*All We Have*, 22) breaks the dry spell. The poem provides flashes of your abiding interest in the emotion of love. In another poem, “Blink”, you concretize an abstract idea of infinity with rare intimacy: “the symbol of infinity is handcuffs, / each loop a permanent ornament / on my wrist that remembers the touch ...” (*All We Have*, 21).

**SG:** Actually, you will see that this book is divided into five parts. I divided my first book into four parts, where the final part consisted of prose poems. I don't even know whether I should call them prose poems because at the time I knew I was writing something that was

poetic and it could be called a prose poem. Now I definitely know what a prose poem is. And then even *Lullaby* was divided into sections. When I started collecting my poems, I saw that there was a thread connecting some of them. Then there is a whole section on love poems. So, they are not really planted. They have been extracted from my diary, or they are a part of my journey. There is nothing deliberate about it.

**AK:** You have recycled many folk tales and motifs. That brings me to another question. Either you go back to Batalvi, or to Nanak, or to folk tales. It is true that a poet has a cultural reservoir and he has to use or harness these things to his advantage. But does that not really suggest that instead of encountering reality firsthand, you approach it through the mediation of a tale already in circulation?

**SG:** There was someone who said that as a child you start with folktales and as you grow up, you start reading folktales again. I am not really reading them, but I have been trying to make sense of them in my mind. That is why they come up. It's not that I am trying to be regressive. It's not just a play in retelling. It has a resonance with some of the emotions that I am going through at a particular time, and that particular folktale conveys it the best.

There is a whole section on Punjab. I have three poems on Nanak, maybe a couple of folktales retold. One thing I want to say is that many poems come to me in dreams and, you see, when you are dreaming it is a different poem, and when you wake up it becomes a different poem. And sometimes you forget all about it. You just know that you dreamt of it; that's the only memory you have. So, that nostalgia for the lost is also something that makes me write or reconstruct what I might have dreamt about. That is why you sense that kind of dreaminess in some of my poems.

**AK:** Dreaminess and a bit of mistiness, and a bit of fuzziness.

**SG:** And also glimpses of light. So, it's not only about closed windows.

**AK:** Never closed. It used to be in *chhayavad* also that you actually mystify the sounds, the sights, and bring some kind of a deliberate fuzziness about it.

**SG:** Yes, again, fuzziness can be a result. But as I said, the adjective “deliberate” is not correct for me.

**AK:** Okay, I can understand. Somewhere in the poems, I come across references that you are fascinated by the tantric practices. I may be wrong, but at times you refer to cinema as some kind of semi-spiritual sight. Where do you bring in cinema here? You refer to *aghoris* and all those things.

**SG:** (*Laughing*) There is one poem, yes. I have read some bit of *tantra*. As I said, I have hobnobbed with people who are really invested into these things and these practices. So, my acquaintance with this stuff is not just limited to books, but is owed to my interactions with people who have undergone those experiences. I am still in touch with some individuals who I know are not into these practices, but follow different kinds of spiritual methods, mostly to do with meditation. Not really tantra as such. They tell me about their experiences. I don’t really set out time for myself to meditate, but I have done it occasionally.

**AK:** I only regret that I don’t have friends enough who could be my ready resource for writing poems. Where is the role of personal experience in writing poetry?

**SG:** I think any piece of writing can be interpreted in multiple ways. That’s also true for poetry. As regards my own experience, there is definitely a bit of me in all the poems. So, for me, even a poem on Nanak is autobiographical to some extent because I see myself as an observer there sometimes. They are part and parcel of my personal experience. A dream is also your experience. But the effort to say the unsayable is what has been pushing me to write.

**AK:** What about your poetic craft? Because except for one ghazal there is no particular form that you stick to.

**SG:** I do stick to form once in a while. Using off rhymes, assonance, working on the stanza—the appearance of the poem, not just visual—eye rhymes. I do that. For instance, I have this short poem:

There is a life beyond  
will. If not a mountain  
climb a hill. Never found  
one? Undo what's certain.

You are the moment  
time chose to become—  
not a random arrow  
shot by the bowman

you think invented time,  
hill and mountain.

*(All We Have, 6)*

It uses slant rhymes such as “beyond/found”, “mountain/certain”, and “moment/bowman”. Besides, I also work on the rhythm a lot.

**AK:** This poem “Two Lives” says a lot about your poetic craft. Can you explain that poem to us?

**SG:** Certainly. It is a prose poem. Let me read it out first.

The surgeon tried his best, but he couldn't save the subject's life. When an illness is arcane, medicine is but subterfuge. The progression of disease was asymptomatic. The vitals showed no anomaly, but the breathing was erratic, threatening to stop any moment. Experts attributed this systemic disturbance to a neurological source. Friends felt the soul had been smothered. Others recommended the intervention of an exorcist to wipe clean the evil shadow oppressing the very being of the subject. The possibility of multiple organ failure wasn't ruled out. Even the significant other was at the end of what remained of his wit. Euthanasia was the only alternative.

The editor tried his best, but couldn't save the poem's essence. When prosody is profane, poetry is but chicanery. The progression of thought was defective. The metaphors showed no lacunae, but the rhythm was spasmodic, threatening to fall flat any moment. Reviewers attributed this overall breakdown to a neurological tic. Friends felt the soul had been subdued. Others recommended the intervention of a linguist to wipe clean the primeval clichés oppressing the very texture of the poem. The possibility of multiple phoneme failure wasn't ruled out. Even the celebrated poet was at the end of what remained of his grit. Deletion was the only alternative.

That explains how I also delete many of my poems. But then even if I delete a poem, it is not really deleted because it lingers in the mind somewhere and then comes out in some other form.

**AK:** Any poem in these collections which you think has staged a comeback from those junk files? Let us see how deletion is brought back to life.

**SG:** "Charged" is one such poem. From its previous drafts, I could rescue only one line—the first: "Someday, I'll get to it". Then came the next two lines as a single line, which I knew had to be broken to preserve the form the poem had chosen for itself. Then, slowly, I built it further, without knowing how it would end. This is how it reads:

Someday, I'll get to it—  
get to my oracular bit revolving  
in the ionospheric orbit.

Up there, I'll unburden your soul  
of all earthly information,  
buff up the silence

Of cosmic bodies twinkling  
away into eternity, and  
soothsay the evolution

Of a world not governed by  
if-this-then-that. Save  
your words till then. Climb

Out of planetary plans to be  
embowered by desires  
which have achieved  
escape velocity.

*(A Clock in the Far Past, 26)*

**AK:** This whole idea of escape velocity is very interesting. Escape is one thing you seem to long for. You adore a wasp as an ‘escape artist’. It is interesting that you seek the possibility of spiritual emancipation even in the wayward movements of a wasp that enters your bathroom through the exhaust fan. Keats at least needed a nightingale, or Yeats the bird linnet for an escape into fantasy.

**SG:** No, no. Epiphanies can come to you in any form. So even at that time the wasp will not know what it is doing to your mind, but as you say, you are the world, the world is inside you. So a wasp can be a medium to transform you to some extent—at least to bring you that epiphany and to help you make sense of things. That is the idea behind taking it as an escape artist. It escapes, it manages to move out. And that gives you hope, and also tells you that you are not just governed by circumstances.

**AK:** You dedicate your poems to poets and gurus from Punjab. Normally we have seen that in English, poets have their foreign gods too. Can you expand upon your pantheon of artist gods?

**SG:** There are two poets I love the most. One is W.S. Merwin and the other is John Haines. Both American poets. The kind of silence I have been talking about is something I have seen in Merwin’s work also. He uses simple language, but his poems are very complex if you try to interpret them, and they transform you when you have read them. He has never disappointed me. He is one poet who really does think with very simple, quotidian words and does magic with them. Then, I admire John Haines because he lived in the Alaskan landscape for

twenty-five years, building his house with his own hands. He trapped animals because he could not buy any food. Off and on, he came to universities to teach. But if you look at his poetry, it is hundred percent authentic. It comes from direct experience. That is something very difficult to achieve, and I feel that very few poets can do that throughout their career.

**AK:** You have referred to your fondness for Mangalesh Dabral. In fact, you have dedicated your latest collection to him. Your poem “Scripture” is a kind of elegy that you have written in memory of Mangalesh. His relationship with his native mountainous landscape is very intimately portrayed in lines such as these:

The mountain looks at you  
as if to disclose the cave  
in which all stories are strewn  
like cowries in a fakir’s lap

*(All We Have, 45)*

In what ways has Mangalesh Dabral informed you?

**SG:** Mangalesh Dabral fascinated me because of his authenticity of experience, the simplicity of his language. He was a wizard of editing. He paid a lot of attention to form. He is, I think, one of the most significant poets India has known in the last fifty years.

**AK:** Thank you, Garcha, for this very animating session with us. (*Addressing the audience*) Of course, there are many aspects of his poetry, and his contribution to poetry as publisher to be covered in one session. Yet, I hope within the limits of time, we could zero in on Garcha’s art of poetry specifically, and the overall mandate of poetry in general.