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A Poet of the Sikhs: Aesthetic Embodiment in the Poetry of a Young and Elderly Bhai Vir Singh

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A Poet of the Sikhs:
Aesthetic Embodiment in the Poetry of a Young and Elderly
Bhai Vir Singh

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Colby College
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Abstract

Bhai Vir Singh, famous 19th and 20th century Sikh poet, writer, and scholar is remembered for his great literary achievements and proliferation of the Punjabi language. Raised in the Punjab, India after the fall of the Sikh kingdom to the British, Vir Singh grew up in a time of religious turmoil due to Western influence. Joining the Singh Sabha reformation movement, he dedicated his life wholeheartedly to return contemporary Sikh identity to its foundational roots as present in the Sikh holy book, the Guru Granth.

Despite his desire to return to a fundamental Sikh identity, Bhai Vir Singh has been criticized by modern scholars such as Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, head of the Sikh Studies department of the University of Michigan, for the appearance of Western influence in his theology and in an attempt to create Sikh identity as uniquely separate from Hinduism.

In my paper, I argue that these criticisms of Bhai Vir Singh are not valid. In his poetry, there is no mention of the Hindu other or a Sikh identity that is specifically separate from Hinduism. Vir Singh’s poetry also closely emulates the Guru Granth and shows no signs of Western theological influence, confirming Vir Singh’s desire to return to an original Sikh identity.

I chose to examine two collections of Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry: his first, Dew Drops (1921) and his last, My Beloved (1953). I focus on the aesthetic element in his poetry and evaluate how it relates to the aesthetic element of the Guru Granth.
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Introduction

The Sikh poet Bhai Vir Singh has been hugely influential in the development of the Punjabi literary language and Sikh reformations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He was a key member of the Singh Sabha movement, which came into being as a response to Western British influence following the fall of the Sikh kingdom in 1849. As Christian missionaries came to the Punjab, they established missionary schools and began converting the local populace, introducing not only Western modes of thought but also Western religion. The Sikhs especially were hit hard with a realization of Western encroachment when Dalip Singh, the former Sikh Maharaja, was converted to Christianity in 1852. Also, with the mandate that Urdu become the official language of the Punjab, strong religious divisions manifested on the basis of language – Muslims adopted Urdu with pride, while Hindus gravitated towards Hindi, and Sikhs retained Punjabi, which had been the national language of all of the Punjab up until that point.

Seeing such divisions and fearing the growing influence of the West, the Singh Sabha movement sought to reform Sikhism into a stronger, purer, more unified version of itself that would resist Western religious influence. They aimed to do so mainly though literary means; they edited and published historical and religious books on Sikhism, and propagated current knowledge through magazines and newspapers in Punjabi (H. Singh 1972, p. 16). Punjabi became the focus of their efforts and became closely associated with Sikh identity. Bhai Vir Singh himself noticed the close relationship between culture and language, and so put great efforts into a literary revolution of Punjabi. He brought significance to the language artistically through the first Punjabi novels, prose, and play; and he also contributed to Punjabi’s academic weight through scholarship, editorials, essays, commentaries, etc. He was concerned with social issues, but most of his writings were focused on Sikhism; his creative works especially were meant to explore Sikh philosophy, metaphysics, etc. in narrative or aesthetic frameworks that one could enjoy and from which one could also gain insight.
Ironically, despite their focus on Punjabi and the concretization of a true Sikh identity in line with the fundamental beliefs of Sikhism, and their work to proliferate knowledge of Sikh history and the teachings of Sikh Gurus, Bhai Vir Singh and other members of the Singh Sabha movement have been criticized for the appearance of Western influence in their theology. Leading Sikh scholar Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, head of the Sikh Studies department of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, states his critique in terms of the appearance of the distinctly Western ontological argument in Bhai Vir Singh’s exegetical commentaries.

In the history of Western thought the ontological argument for God’s existence has – paradoxically, through its failure to prove the existence of God – also established the conditions of modernity itself, of modern critical thought. In Brayton Polka’s words, it comprises the “unconscious hermeneutic” of modernity, a hermeneutic whose critical principle is a specific form of ontology in which God’s identity (Eternal Being) serves as a measure of difference between God and world, and the separation between God and world in turn is a surrogate for self versus other. Moreover, insofar as the ontological argument implies a desire for the universal, it is intrinsically connected to all political thought. Indeed, within the Western tradition any and every transition from particular to universal, and therefore political theory, has been underpinned by this ontological argument (e.g. Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Marx). As I have shown in this chapter it is precisely this unconscious hermeneutic of modernity that Bhai Vir Singh and his colleagues appropriated and internalized, even though it remains antithetical to Indian devotional and philosophical tradition. (Mandair 2009, p. 238).

Having “unconsciously” absorbed a Western hermeneutic, Mandair argues that Bhai Vir Singh has developed a theology “antithetical to Indian devotional and philosophical tradition;” which would be contrary to the goals of the Singh Sabha movement to bring Sikhism to a purer, more historically resonant level. The disparity between Vir Singh and Sikh tradition would therefore be “a specific form of ontology in which God’s identity (Eternal Being) serves as a measure of difference between God and the world, and the separation between God and world in turn is a surrogate for self versus other.” Mandair argues that Bhai Vir Singh has adopted a stance that the Divine is somehow separate from the world intrinsically, and so can be defined by the distinction between the two.

In the case of believers, the credibility of the proposition gurmat = ‘Sikh theology’ hinges on the ability of the commentaries to prove that God exists and that the nature of this existence is an eternally existing identity: a static immutable One. Though rarely considered, this static immutable One constitutes the hermeneutic basis of the modern Sikh imaginary. Its invocation underpins the demarcation of the boundary between Sikh self in relation to its Hindu other. From one end of the Sikh social spectrum to the other the invocation of this static immutable One binds the very structure of personal belief to the representation of identity in the public domain. (Mandair 2005, p. 273)
The Singh Sabha movement certainly was trying to strengthen the Sikh identity religiously through reformation, and culturally through the proliferation of Punjabi. Mandair believes that members of the movement were affecting their commentaries about gurmat (the teachings of the Gurus) with a Western theological perspective that created a “static immutable One” that “underpins the demarcation of the boundary between Sikh self in relation to its Hindu other.” In effect, the need to create a strong Sikh identity meant Sabha Singh members had to distinguish themselves clearly from Hindus, and that this influenced their writings on Sikhism, which started to look like Western theological writings. According to Bhai Vir Singh’s critics, this creation of a “Sikh theology” is therefore the result of Western influence and marks a departure from traditionally held Sikh beliefs about the Divine’s identity.

I do not believe this criticism of Bhai Vir Singh is justified; it does not hold when one analyzes his poetry, which I argue is a deeper and more revealing medium for Vir Singh’s beliefs. Vir Singh’s focus is not to create a new Sikh identity separate from others, but to return to the essential Sikh identity that exists in the words of the Gurus. Bhai Vir Singh may have been motivated politically by Western influence, but his methods and beliefs are distinctly and traditionally Sikh. In his poetry, there is no separation between the Divine and the world - the Divine is both transcendent and immanent. There is also no focus on divisions between religions in his poetry; Bhai Vir Singh is almost always talking to a universal audience, and never spends time distinguishing between Hinduism or Sikhism. Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry is concerned completely about the desire to unite with the Divine, and to share that connection and the means of that connection with his fellow Sikhs, instructing them in the same manner of the original Sikh Gurus.

I have chosen to examine and compare two collections of Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry: his first collection of short poems, Dew Drops, published in 1921, and My Beloved, his last collection, published in 1953 when Vir Singh was 81. By looking at the first and last poetic expressions of Vir Singh, I will be
able to show that his beliefs about the Divine were in line with the Sikh Gurus over the course of his entire life instead of just one point in time.

The decision to study Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry came from a desire to study the poet’s religious beliefs at their most fundamental level. Poetry, I will argue, is able to reveal a poet’s deepest and most profound statements about the human condition. The Sikh holy book, the Guru Granth, was written entirely in poetry because the founding Gurus believed that there was no more meaningful way to express the nature of the Divine and the universe than through the aesthetic splendor of the poetic word. Having studied the Guru Granth from the age of eight, Bhai Vir Singh lived his life infused with the powerful poetry of the Gurus, and it had a profound effect on the poetry he would grow up to create. In Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry, we see a clear and overwhelming influence from the Guru Granth; his themes, style, ethical structures, imagery, and even the subjects of his poems are all inspired by the Gurus’ poems. Vir Singh is concerned mostly with expressing his faith and love in the Divine and contemplating the nature of the Divine. There is no notion of Western theology in his joyous and stirring images of the Sikh Divine. He never once gives off a sense of differentiation between Sikhs, Hindus, or Muslims; his poetry is not concerned with divisions between any kinds of people at all. In entering the poetic mode, Bhai Vir Singh has reached as deeply into himself as possible to express his truest feelings about Sikhism and the Divine, and the images he evokes have deep, resounding resonances with the scripture he holds dear. Bhai Vir Singh’s goal in the Singh Sabha movement was to bring contemporary Sikh identity back to the original words of the Gurus, and it is clear through his own poetry that this is what he really believed, unadulterated by Western influences.

I have chosen to further focus my examination through the lens of the five senses. Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry, as an art form, is a definitively aesthetic experience; it evokes all of the senses in an attempt to express Bhai Vir Singh’s emotions and ideas. Vir Singh wants to communicate his profound revelations and deep feelings about the Divine in a way that is basic to the human experience. By
presenting us with a sensual experience, the poet hopes to convey his message as sincerely as possible to our most rudimentary faculties. This approach is therefore a more accurate display of Bhai Vir Singh’s theological beliefs than his commentaries, as Vir Singh must simplify his verbiage to produce easily discernible sensual images. Poetic words carry much deeper significance and power to convey emotions than the words of exegetical essays, even though they may communicate the same subject.

Bhai Vir Singh’s decision to focus his poetic message through the five senses represents his desire to disclose his authentically Sikh philosophy. The aesthetic element is extremely important in Sikhism; for “a heightened sensuous experience is a requirement for metaphysical knowledge.” (Sikhism 74) From the very first Guru, Sikhism has been a sensorially experienced religion, and this is seen throughout the Guru Granth. In accordance with the scriptures he has lived and believed, Bhai Vir Singh emulates the Granthian’s aesthetic import by focusing many of his poems on the sensual experience of the Divine. Unity with the Divine is desired and realized through all of the senses in euphoric and joyous states. The strong aesthetic element in Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry underscores the Divine’s presence as part of the physical world, creating a strong link between the natural world and the formless One; essentially, they are the same. There is no Western notion of a Divine removed from the world and inhabiting some external plane of existence outside the human realm anywhere in Vir Singh’s poetry. On the contrary, there is a deep intimacy between this world, the Divine, and the poet. Whenever it is mentioned, separation from the Divine is used to amplify the joy from times of unity; but the Divine is never removed from the world itself – separation from the Divine comes from a failing of the poet to correctly recognize the Divine that permeates the natural world around him.

In the following section, I will further motivate my choice to analyze Bhai Vir Singh’s aesthetic poetry. I will first explore the nature of art and the aesthetic experience to demonstrate their ability to embody the values, meanings, and beliefs of humanity. I will then focus specifically on the nature of poetry as a form of art that is able to provide the deepest insights into the realm of human thought and
emotion. With such a grounding, I will then analyze Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry as his purest form of Sikh beliefs, and I will show how his poetry resonates with and emulates the Guru Granth. By looking at all five senses individually, I will be able to show how Mandair’s critique of Western influence and religious division is not present in the totality of Bhai Vir Singh’s aesthetic experience.
Poetic Formulation and the Aesthetic Experience

“Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it.” – Percy Shelley, A Defence of Poetry

We must start our examination of poetry by realizing that it is part of the larger horizon of “art.” As art can take many forms, the designation of what types of things can be considered art is very subjective. “Some believe that art is too varied and disparate a phenomenon to admit of any single definition at all; others believe that there is a common creative impulse that produces artifacts in all societies, and that despite differences they bear enough similarities all to merit the label ’art.’” (Korsmeyer 1998, Introduction p. 2)

It is important to realize that art is a creation – it is necessarily something new. A collection of words cannot be considered a poem unless they were crafted uniquely and with purpose. While accidents and natural occurrences such as a waterfall can be considered beautiful and fill the mind with wonder, only the painting or the poem about such a waterfall is considered a work of art. There is an essential drive, a desire, of the creator that bestows upon art its nature. The waterfall does not choose to sparkle wondrously, but the poet and the painter choose to express this beauty and focus on the feelings it inspires. Art is essentially emotional and human – it is one step removed from the natural world. It is a representation of something else, and through this representation it brings new meaning to the original object. However, all art is deeply tied to aesthetic experience; art is something that is experienced in some aesthetic manner.

Aesthetic experience is as important to human life as sex, hunger, aggression, love, and hate. Although we may rarely be conscious of it, aesthetic experience gives form, meaning, and, most important, value to everything we are and everything we do. Theoretically without it, life would be a shapeless, meaningless, and colorless series of sensations, events, and reactions. (Hagman 2005, p. 1)
Aesthetic experience lies at the heart of being human, and it “achieves its most refined form in art” (Hagman 2005, p. 1). Art exists to invoke contemplation upon our aesthetic experience, and therefore our deepest meanings and values. It seeks to comment on the nature of our existence in a completely experiential way. According to David Hume, “art, as opposed to natural sources of beauty, expressed certain associated feelings in refined and highly valued ways.” (Hagman 2005, p. 14) Art is distinct from beauty that arises from nature, even though it may represent natural beauty, in that it is refined by the artist. The artist spends time to create a work of art, and chooses distinctly which elements of the piece of art to emphasize. The process of refinement is the process of imbuing a work of art with the personal feelings of the artist, giving it a value and meaning beyond just a random collection of matter. There is a separation between art and the natural world which allows the artist to present a message to the audience; by distinguishing themselves from nature, artists are allowed to contemplate distinctly human thoughts and values.

Art and natural beauty have always been subjects of deep contemplation among philosophers and famous thinkers, which always ties in with consideration of the aesthetic experience. “Plato argued that the aesthetic experience involved the apprehension of the good in nature. The non-sensuous pleasure, perhaps awe, of aesthetic feeling resulted from the reflection of an ideal form in the object (a flower, a mountain glade, a beautiful face, a painting) that only hinted at the profound perfection and beauty of its higher model. For Plato, it was the apperception of this hint, the glimpse of the ideal, which was the source of aesthetic experience.” (Hagman 2005, p. 13) The aesthetic experience is always deeply linked to some subjective definition of quality; it exists through feelings and emotions. “Pleasure” and “awe” are considered positive emotions, so Plato linked the height of aesthetic experience with the greatest good he could think of – an abstract ideal of perfection. Therefore, aesthetic experience came from something ideally profound that was beyond normal human experience, and was a manifestation
of this otherworldly perfection in daily life. Aesthetically enjoying a beautiful song meant receiving the slightest “glimpse” of the abstract, ideal song, which is the source of enjoyment for all human songs.

Contemplation of the aesthetic experience occurred naturally in the world of religion as well. “[Western] religious thinkers believed that the aesthetic experience was linked to the revelation of divinity in the world, the sense of worldly beauty being a reflection of the eternal beauty of God. Similar to Plato’s views was the belief that some objects, most especially art, expressed God’s love and perfection more than others.” (Hagman 2005, p. 13) Once again, the enjoyment gained from the aesthetic experience is linked directly with something that is supremely or ultimately good and beyond normal human experience – God. For these religious thinkers, it was not the abstract, ideal form of something they were experiencing through aesthetics, but God’s inherent beauty that could be manifest in anything.

Poetry is one of many types of art from which we can derive significance from the aesthetic experience. In order to show that poetic words are able to capture the deepest level of human meaning and value, I will now present a definition of poetry unto itself, not just as one of the many forms of art.
The Poetic Word – Representational Signs

“A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth.” (Shelley, Sec. 9)

In order to understand Bhai Vir Singh’s art, we must analyze the words of his poems. At its core, a poem is simply a collection of words, carefully chosen, following a certain rhythm or form that someone has created. Yet, words are interesting unto themselves. A word is always a representation of something else; it is a symbol that signifies an object, idea, emotion, thought, etc. A word derives its meaning from the object to which it is pointing: the word “rabbit” is only meaningful because it represents the four-legged animal with two large ears and a tail. Words are tools that allow us to communicate with each other, and indeed all language is meant for human expression between people.

In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry; and to be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful, in a word, the good which exists in the relation, subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression (Shelley, Sec. 3).

Poetry is intrinsically tied up with the nature of words and language. Indeed, Shelley believes that “language itself is poetry,” as they both function in exactly the same way. Language has been created as a way to relate what we have experienced to others. The units of language, its constituents – the words – all are defined by something else. They relate, from the speaker to the listener, a natural phenomenon, so that the speaker and listener are easily able to communicate and share. As languages evolve, words are able to become more nuanced and complex, and are able to refer to concepts, as opposed to just singular objects, such as a “tree.” Suddenly, discourse and development of ideas is possible over topics such as the “Divine.” Words become immensely powerful; how would one identify a conception such as God or the Divine without language? By representing ideas, rather than just things
that appear in the physical world around us to which we can point, words deepen their meaning and usefulness.

A poem is rife with symbolic gestures and metaphorical meaning. A single poem can represent the deepest and most cosmic of thoughts and feelings, even with the simplest of words. There is an essential quality in poetry that brings much deeper meaning to the words it uses than they could produce on their own. They do not merely tell facts or reproduce a story, but hold hidden meaning and significance. Just as atoms, when placed together, can form a human who is capable of much more than the atoms are by themselves—thought, feeling, love, devotion, ideology—a poem holds much more complex ideas and evokes much more complicated emotions than an individual word. A poem is a step of sophistication above a word.

But how does a poem achieve this? A poem is representational in nature, similar to the word. But while a word necessarily points to something else to derive its meaning, a poem’s meaning is self-contained. In a sense, a poem’s meaning is contained within itself—its specific combination of words hold deep significance in their own being. A poem suffuses the words of which it is constituted with life, emotion, and purpose. When a word is used inside the structure of a poem, it is transformed into something new: the poetic word.

Clearly, the distinctive character of the poetic word is exactly that it does not refer to something in such a manner that one is directed away from it, in order to arrive somewhere else... In poetry, when one is directed away from the word, one is also at the same time directed back to it; it is the word itself which guarantees that about which it speaks. That is the experience which we all have with the poetic word. The more intimate one is with poetic conjoining, the richer in meaning and more present the word becomes. The distinctive characteristic of the poetic word lies in the manner in which it presents itself by presenting something (Gadamer 1992, p. 73).

As Gadamer expresses, a word inside a poem does not lose its function as a word; it still refers to something else. However, inside the power of poetry, it gains a deeper significance and a new ability to refer back to itself in the context of the poem. This opportunity presents the word an incredible potential for depth and breadth of meaning. And Gadamer brings forth a motivation for the study or even just the appreciation of poetry— if a word can become richer in meaning for us by becoming
familiar with its particular place inside a poem, then we can steal a glance at the awesome power poetry can hold.

Although the common word is limited in its significance by referring to something else, the poetic word holds infinity beneath its trembling brow. To a person, a single poem can represent the entire meaning of life, death, the universe, or the divine. The more one reads and delves into a poem, the more meaning one is able to find. A poem is an inexhaustible resource for the discovery of the nature of everything that humans hold dear. In this way, a poem can be thought to hold immense weight – a single point of potentially infinite density. Yet it is not a black hole that will continually draw others in; a poem would be better represented by a shining star. It is a source of continual light that burns ever more brightly the closer we come to it.

For the poet, it is always an anxious question whether from the deep spring of human experience, sedimented in language, the radiant word which illuminates all will arise and endure—that is: become a poem, which we repeat until it completely sounds in our inner ear and from whose rhythms we may live for half a life (Gadamer 1992, p. 77).

The function of poetic words is to be those objects which literally bring everything to light. Their goal is to elucidate the nature of being to the human mind. The words themselves are actors – they “arise and endure” and have incredible power. These are not mere signifiers of something else – they have not only meaning but a fundamental purpose, and life of their own. These are words that allow human beings to “live for half a life” simply from their rhythms. Just by being conceived in the form of a poem, the poetic word is given a stronger purpose than the ordinary word. It has the potential to bring value and meaning to the ideas of the poem, and therefore bring importance to itself as a part of that meaning. The same word used inside and outside of a poem can have radically different significances even if they have the same definition, and this is attributed to the form of poetry itself.
The Poetic Form

“Poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be “the expression of the imagination”: and poetry is connate with the origin of man.” (Shelley, Sec. 2)

Existing as a refined art under the aesthetic experience, poetry is able to comment on the deepest and most essential nature of humanity, and its values and meanings. The depth of the poem ever lends itself to describe the nature of things, and as humans we are often very concerned with our own nature and the nature of humanity. So we will often have more than one current in our understanding of poetry – the more concrete, such as “the expression of the imagination,” and the more deeply symbolic and abstract, such as “the origin of man.” Poetry is at once an aesthetic experience and an emotional and philosophical one, so one type of description would never be able to cover all of its aspects. Poetry is a generic category that includes each and every poem made and to be made. And though each poem is unique, and the structure of poems may vary wildly from each other, they are all connected in a sense under the general category of poetry. So defining poetry becomes a question of finding that which is central to all poems, regardless of their form.

The nature of poetry as an art that is created is intimately linked with the notion of time. As all poems are connected under the title of poetry, they relate to one another in unconscious ways. In order for a new creation to be considered a poem, it must conform to the structure of poetry and relate to every other poem that has so far been created. But “to conform merely would be for the new work not really to conform at all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art” (Eliot 1934, p. 50). A poem essentially has to present to us something that no poem before it has, but what it brings cannot be something so alien that it is no longer considered poetry. Poetry is like a complex web of
poems, where each point on the web is a poem connected to the points around it, so that there is a path from each point to any other point in the web. There is no point in the web that is unconnected to another point, and there is no group of poems that is so disconnected from the rest it forms its own secluded area.

And so to fit into this web, a poem must traverse the line between originality and conformity, the past and the present. Even though it must evoke the past and present, it cannot be wholly a copy of something that is past; for the past is no longer here, and we cannot live in it. And just as we cannot live in the past, poetry cannot live in or bring back the past. Because it represents the timeless essence of humanity – it cannot be cast into a specific time and place; it must make sense regardless of when or where it is read.

The difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past’s awareness of itself cannot show (Eliot 1934, p. 52).

The present time is one step further along some abstract ultimate timeline towards the future from the past. As we are no longer in the past, we cannot experience the past in the same way that we experience the present. Therefore, while we know what it is like to live our lives right now, we cannot imagine exactly what it would be like to live in another time. But a key to the present time is that we can view the past with a different eye. We can observe our present in the same way we can observe the past, because we are still living in the present. The past has been completed and is unchanging – while the present is constantly filled with change as it shifts us towards the future and slowly recedes into the past. We can reflect on the past now that it is unchanging without fear of our conclusions being nullified by a constant sense of moving time.

Poetry inhabits a special place in the realm of time – it is both outside it and present in it. Poems are written inside the realm of passing time – a poet is born, lives, and dies, and somewhere in there writes his or her poetry. Poets experience their lives in their current time – Homer wrote about the myths of his current culture; he was not influenced by our 21st century ideology or philosophy. But
even though the poet lives in his or her current time and space, when writing the poem, something special is produced. Poetry, in its highly symbolic nature, represents the deepest meaning of humanity and human experience in the cosmos. It comments on the essential characteristics of our being, and in doing so it transcends time and place. The meaning of a poem holds true no matter when or where it is read, because it is looking at something deeper than the specific language used to write it.

The grammatical forms which express the moods of time, and the difference of person, and the distinction of place, are convertible with respect to the highest poetry without injuring it as poetry. (Shelley, Sec. 4)

Shelley adroitly addresses the timeless nature of poetry and its ability to transcend the formalities of language. To Shelley, language is poetry, and all modern language has come out of the symbolic and representational nature of poetry. Due to poetry being a basis for all language, its messages are more fundamental than current expressions or phrases in any language. If we can delve past the grammar and specificities of the language in which a poem is written, we can arrive at its essential meaning, and its statements about the human condition, or the purity of human emotion.

Regardless of society, it is clear we all experience the same kinds of emotions and the importance that these emotions play in our lives. Poetry is a way to tap into these emotions and explore them in a symbolic and abstract way. The timeless nature of poetry is such because our human emotions have not changed in our recorded history – we still love, hate, suffer, care, etc. just as much now as we have in the past, and in the same essential ways.

Time, which destroys the beauty and the use of the story of particular facts, stripped of the poetry which should invest them, augments that of poetry, and forever develops new and wonderful applications of the eternal truth which it contains. (Shelley, Sec. 9)

Shelley continues by allowing us another aspect to poetry’s dual nature of being in time and timeless. Poetry has messages which transcend time, but the interpretation of poetry may not. Hearkening back to what Gadamer said about the poetic word, and how we can find richer meaning in it the more we become comfortable with it and delve into its secrets, we have the same sense of deepening appreciation happening here. The longer a poem exists in society, the more time there is for
humans to ruminate upon it and find its deeper meanings and significances. And just as the present is different from the past and something which builds upon it, so too may our interpretations build upon those of the poems currently in existence. We are able to start with the thoughts of those who came before us on certain poems, and understand the meaning they have found there. But as poems are a well of infinite depth of meaning, we are able to delve deeper than our predecessors in a search for something valuable, even if this is in a totally new direction. For the meaning of poetry is not discovered in a linear descent, but in a diffuse submersion of our being and mind into the world of the poem.

Being a form of art, poetry is very deeply tied to the aesthetic experience, and its enjoyment.

Poetry is ever accompanied with pleasure: all spirits on which it falls open themselves to receive the wisdom which is mingled with its delight. (Shelley, Sec. 12)

Poetry ever communicates all the pleasures which men are capable of receiving: it is ever still the light of life; the source of whatever of beautiful or generous or true can have place in an evil time. (Shelley, Sec. 20)

The “wisdom” contained within the poem is ever “mingled with its delight.” This delight comes from the presentation of poetry as an aesthetic experience – it is pleasing to hear, read, or speak a poem. But this is not a meaningless joy, as with it there is always tied a wisdom which we can acquire. This is very resonant of the Sikh Gurus who believe that Divine knowledge can only be obtained through enjoyable aesthetic experiences – wisdom and knowledge are not obtained exclusively through intellect, but are available through enjoyable poetic words. Indeed, its nature as a pleasurable aesthetic experience gives it meaning and value, and this should not be overlooked. For poetry has a revelatory nature that creates a supremely positive effect on the reader:

[Poetry] awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar. (Shelley, Sec. 13)

Just like the poetic word, poetry as a whole is an elucidating medium. A poem can be the spark that starts a fire of contemplation in the mind. Poetry is naturally incredibly complex because each of a poem’s words can have incredible depth of meaning, and so the combination between words can produce limitless meanings to each and every reader. Every poem has the potential to be interpreted in
each reader’s own way, and each reader can interpret the same poem over and over again in different ways, finding different and deeper meanings. Poetry inspires continual shifts in perception – it brings us out of our common mode of thinking and forces us to contemplate critically and from different perspectives. It has the potential to be the greatest unifier of all, for it allows the reader to not only consider different perspectives but also their meaning – it “makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar.” In a world marked by the interplay of many different kinds of people, the form of poetry is essential for combating ignorance. As “poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world,” people will be able to understand what is truly important and essential to humanity as a whole, and how superficial differences simply hide true beauty.

Therefore, the poem is an expression of us all. When we have verses, so to speak, present within us, we all, everyone of us, enter into a relationship where each one of us has his [or her] part to do for its completion. (Gadamer 1992, p. 78)

The true nature of poetry lies in its expression of humanity. Poetry represents the entire human experience through its words. The poetic word reaches deep below its primary definition to find a significance that can resonate unanimously. Life, through the aesthetic experience, is the subject of its lines. Poetry is a universal expression of the meaning and value that we find through our lives’ experiences.

The poet is the archetype of human being... Therefore, the word, which the poet catches and causes to endure, does not mean just that artistic accomplishment through which one becomes or is a poet, but it also represents the essence of possible human experience. This allows the reader to be the I of the poet because the poet is the I which we all are. (Gadamer 1992, p. 77)
The Aesthetic Experience in Bhai Vir Singh’s Poetry

The aesthetic experience in Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry is a representation of his fundamental Sikh beliefs. It expresses a Sikh identity completely in line with the words of the Guru Granth; showing Vir Singh’s desire to return Sikhism to its metaphysical roots through a deep connection to scripture. The poems of the Guru Granth are infused within Bhai Vir Singh, and have completely colored his own poetic expression – Vir Singh often uses the same imagery, style, flow, ethical and ecological concerns present in the Granth. By emulating the Granthian poets, Vir Singh aims to resonate more deeply with the original message of the Gurus and explore Sikh principles and the elements of Sikh faith that arise from his scripture.

The medium of poetry allows Bhai Vir Singh to examine universal truths in the most profound manner, and he has consciously chosen to contemplate matters related to the Divine. There is no difference in the Gurus’ conception of the Divine and Bhai Vir Singh’s, even across Dew Drops and My Beloved. There are differences between the two collections in regards to the poet’s feelings toward the Divine, but the nature of the Divine is always in line with the Granthian formless, ubiquitous, infinite One. Much of Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry is devotional, and deals with the poet’s desire to connect with the Divine.

The strong aesthetic element of Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry comes right from the Guru Granth itself, which clearly establishes aesthetics as a necessity for understanding the Divine. The Sikh Gurus drew deep connection between the aesthetic experience and the Divine. “The Sikh Gurus fostered esthetics as the approach to knowledge and spirituality. The opposite of anesthetic (the deadening of the senses), esthetics is the heightening of hearing, seeing, touching, smelling, tasting. In short, esthetics is feeling and experiencing the Divine immediately and intensely.” (N. Singh, Sikhism p. 74) In Sikhism, aesthetics is not just the realization and appreciation of divine presence in the world, but “an approach to
knowledge and spirituality.” “The complex process of recognition (pachanai) requires a physical act as well as a cognitive realization. Therefore, a heightened sensuous experience becomes necessary for metaphysical knowledge.” (N. Singh, Sikhism p. 74) In order to understand the nature of the Divine, aesthetic experience becomes absolutely essential. The Sikh Gurus viewed aesthetics as necessary to find meaning and value in regards to what they considered the most important aspect of the universe – the Divine. Conforming to this belief, the aesthetic experience becomes especially important in Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry, and shows up in a majority of the poems in both Dew Drops and My Beloved.

The Sikh focus on aesthetic experience became manifest in the presentation of their beliefs. The Guru Granth, the Sikh holy book, is written entirely in poetic verse, much of it from the words of the Gurus themselves, who taught in poetry. Guru Arjan, the fifth Guru, created the ragas system that set the poetry of the Guru Granth to popular folk music that could be sung, played, and enjoyed. “He ensured that the text of love and devotion was to be approached with reverent wonder; it could not be pried into with mere intellect. The revealed Word (bani), empowered by the ragas, in turn serves as a melodious instrument for stimulating the senses and the mind into intuiting the Infinite One.” (N. Singh, Sikhism p. 75) The Gurus wanted to present Sikhism as a religious aesthetic experience through the medium of art – the Divine is something to be enjoyed aesthetically and understood through that aesthetic enjoyment. The ultimate goal of union with the singular Divine is achieved through physical and emotional experience, not “mere intellect.” The Gurus realized the deeply significant nature of art, and so chose to disclose their beliefs through it about the most intimate nature of the world – the Divine.

Their primary form of artistic expression is through the medium of poetry due to its power to speak about the fundamentals of the human condition and the essence of human meaning. The Guru Granth is written solely in poetic verse, and after the passing of the tenth Guru, the book itself became the sole authoritative Guru. This means that the poetry itself has become the authoritative teacher of Sikhism, and that all Sikhs learn from the Guru Granth. Placing such importance on a book over humans
who might be able to teach speaks to the transcendent weight of the poetic words transcribed within it. Being a Sikh, Bhai Vir Singh naturally would have held the same significance in his heart for the Guru Granth that the last human Guru intended. From the age of 8, Bhai Vir Singh had been studying the book and absorbing its powerful poetry. It is for this reason that we must consider Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry the most indicative of his true beliefs in regards to Sikhism; as poetry is the mode of his faith and understanding of the Divine; the Gurus’ words have always been presented to him in a poetic manner, so the association between the true nature and the Divine is incredibly strong for Vir Singh.
Dew Drops and My Beloved

From Dew Drops, Bhai Vir Singh’s earliest collection of poems, to My Beloved, his last, the poet expresses some of the most resonant images from Sikh scripture of the nature of the Divine and the world. By comparing themes across both works of poetry, we are able to see how the beauty within Bhai Vir Singh’s essence has evolved over a lifetime of devotion and love for the Divine.

The most obvious difference between the two collections would have to be the structure of the poems themselves. All of the 47 poems in Dew Drops follow exactly the same structure of three couplets followed by two final lines except for seven, and those seven simply have two stanzas with this structure. By constructing his poems this way, Bhai Vir Singh presents the reader with a very simple and easily digestible message: each poem is self contained and very short. Each one feels like a small dew drop of insight in his field of poems at dawn; every drop is unique, even if some drops tell similar messages, yet they all belong in the same world – Bhai Vir Singh’s Sikh perspective is present in all of them. The goal of the poems in Dew Drops is to be brief and sweet, like a small chocolate presented to a lover at random. They are meant to give just a brief image or thought to the reader so that he or she may think further upon the issue. There is a distinctive motivational focus behind the poetry – as little insights are often the sparks of great catharsis or revelation.

The style and structure of Bhai Vir Singh’s poems greatly changed in My Beloved. There are only 11 eight-line poems in this collection of 72, and only 3 of those follow the same structure as the first section. Of the remaining 61, only 19 poems are 14 or fewer lines. This collection clearly has a focus on longer, more prolific pieces that express more complex ideas and thoughts; the average number of lines per poem is a little over 22, compared to the almost uniform eight lines from Dew Drops. Nineteen of the poems have explicitly defined multiple parts, where there are breaks demarked by asterisks between them. Instead of a simple flow from start to finish, the reader is interrupted intentionally at
stopping points, making messages with multiple important culminating points. This requires much more work on the part of the reader to interpret and digest, as there can now be multiple different significant foci to take away from a single poem.

There is also no uniform structure for any of the poems. Poems of similar length may have completely different line lengths and pacing. Unlike in Dew Drops where the number of words/syllables per line was fairly consistent, that is not often the case in My Beloved, where they differ poem to poem and even within individual poems. What we are seeing is the confidence in multiple poetic structures developed over a lifetime of writing and having had such works well received. In his elder years, Bhai Vir Singh is now completely comfortable with his poetic expression and is able to express himself without conforming to a unifying structure. Each poem is self contained not only in its meaning but its structure as well. This gives many of his poems an exceptionally personal feel in comparison to the others.

All of Bhai Vir Singh’s youthful dew drops have swelled into rivulets of every shape and size, and they all flow together into the collection that is My Beloved. No longer concerned with structural perfection, the poet lets his glorious words flow fully until he is satisfied with the outcome. And just as rivers do not maintain constant size and shape, nor too do his poems – they are broken into parts of varying sizes, using differing poetic techniques. Vir Singh’s words are no longer containable, and so they burst forth as they will in the form he chose at the time.

The tone of My Beloved is also markedly different from Dew Drops. While in Dew Drops there is a pervasive sense of joy and youthful vigor, the excitement of his youth is mostly absent from My Beloved. There is still wonderful imagery and deep love for the Divine, but it has shifted to a less kinetic level. In his old age, Bhai Vir Singh was seeking comfort, warmth and support more than passion and ecstasy as in his youth. There is also a great sense of sadness that can be found in many of the poems of
My Beloved. Just as union with the Divine produces great joy for Bhai Vir Singh, separation from the Divine produces great sorrow, and this is the subject of many of his poems.

As for the criticism that Western influence has created an emergence of divisions between Hinduism and Sikhism in Sikh identity, this is totally absent from Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry. The words “Hindu,” “Muslim,” “Sikh,” and their variations never once show up in any of Vir Singh’s poems. Bhai Vir Singh does not focus on the differences between people; his poetry is a universal message about love and the Divine which transcends religious identifications. He does this in spite of the presence of passages from the Guru Granth which he could have used to highlight a difference between Sikhs and others. From the words of Guru Arjan (N. Singh 2012, p. 52):

I do not keep fasts
    Nor Ramadan.
I serve the One
    Who defends till the end.
I have one Gosain,
    I have one Allah.
Hindus and Muslim
    Both receive justice from this one.
I do not go on Hajj to the Ka’ba
    I do not go for Puja on Tiratha(s)
I serve the One
    And no other.
I do not perform Puja
    I do not recite the Namaz
I have taken up the formless One –
    Whom I exalt in my heart.
I am not Hindu
    I am not Muslim,
I am the body and breath
    Of Allah and Ram.
As Kabir has said,
Meeting Guru or Pir
    I discover my husband myself.

The Guru’s words are both inclusive and exclusive. He clearly identifies himself, and therefore all Sikhs, as “not Hindu” and “not Muslim,” but at the same time as “the body and breath of Allah and Ram.”
Guru Arjan integrates aspects of Hinduism and Islam into his being, but also distinguishes himself as a person who “serves the One and no other.” It would have been easy for Bhai Vir Singh to mimic Granthian poetry such as this and focus solely on the separation between Sikhs and other religions, but he chose not to do so. He even styled some of his poems after non-Sikh authors included in the Guru Granth, such as the Muslim poet Sheikh Farid. “Sheikh Farid’s West Asian sensibilities enlarge and spice up Guru Arjan’s poetic platter. Even more so, their incorporation in the Sikh sacred text reveals profound respect for the faith of others. Sheikh Farid’s religious prescriptions, his rigorous asceticism, his intense anxiety in this world, his fear of judgement, his eschatological perspectives are all so different from that of the Sikh Gurus. Yet, they are all consciously included in the Sikh sacred book with full acknowledgement of their distinctiveness and difference.” (N. Singh 2012, p. 26) By choosing to emulate a Muslim poet from the Sikh holy text, Bhai Vir Singh is consciously reinforcing the Granthian spirit of respect for diversity.

There is also evidence against the criticism that Bhai Vir Singh’s theological beliefs have been influenced by Western culture. Instead of a new creation, Bhai Vir Singh’s notion of a Sikh identity is a complete return to the Granthian Sikh identity. Bhai Vir Singh’s conception of the Divine is the same in both collections of poetry and is equivalent to the Formless One found in the Guru Granth – It has the same ubiquitous, infinite, timeless nature as the Gurus’ perception of the Divine. The image of the Sikh Divine is considerably different from Western Christianity. Bhai Vir Singh and Granthian poets focus on the Divine’s loving nature as opposed to the authoritative God of the Ten Commandments. Unlike the Christian God who exists above and beyond the human realm, the Sikh Divine is both transcendent and immanent; It exists beyond human comprehension but also everywhere inside and around every person. The notion of Divine knowledge being derived from the aesthetic experience of joyous events is distinctly Sikh, and this is what Bhai Vir Singh focuses upon. Vir Singh’s main desire is to unite with the Divine so he may experience the incredible wonders of that union through the five senses. His goals
well represent Shelley’s statement that “poetry ever communicates all the pleasures which men are capable of receiving.” (Shelley, Sec. 20) There is a strong emphasis on the body – everything is experienced here on earth and at this very moment, as opposed to an eternal life after death where only the soul matters. The poet’s eyes see the marvels of the Divine’s world; his ears hear the melodious Divine music; his mouth tastes the delicious ambrosial Word of the Divine; his nose smells the fragrances of nature’s beautiful flowers; and his body is able to embrace and enjoy physical and sexual union with the Divine. All of Bhai Vir Singh’s sensual experiences of the Divine are drawn right from the Granthian source material; Vir Singh wanted to use poetry to express his own authentically Sikh vision.
Hearing – The Divine Melody

The auditory sense has a large presence in Sikhism due to the musical *ragas* system instituted by Guru Arjan, which created musical accompaniment for the entire Guru Granth. Every poem suddenly became a joyous, melodious experience to which all Sikhs could sing along. Guru Arjan wanted to underscore the importance of the auditory aesthetic experience, as hearing has had significant importance in Sikhism right from the start; it is paid much attention by Guru Nanak, founder of the Sikh religion. The sense of hearing often manifests as listening to the Divine: “it is the first step toward awakening to the transcendent Core of the universe. Hearing is the sense that connects the conscious and the unconscious realms most directly.” (N. Singh, Sikhism p. 71) It is so important that in Guru Nanak’s Japu, the introduction to the Guru Granth which establishes all fundamental Sikh metaphysics, Nanak spends four of the Japu’s 39 stanzas talking solely about hearing and its power (N. Singh 2012, p. 37-38):

8:
By hearing we become like the saints and gods,
By hearing we fathom the earth, the underworld, and skies,
By hearing we know the nine continents, the many worlds, and underworlds,
By hearing we are freed from the clutches of death;
Says Nanak, the devout enjoy eternal bliss forever,
Hearing banishes suffering and evil.

9:
Hearing makes us like Shiva, Brahma, and Indra,
Hearing makes the impious praise.
Hearing reveals ways of meditation and mysteries of the body,
Hearing illuminates all treatises and scriptures.
Says Nanak, the devout enjoy eternal bliss forever,
Hearing banishes suffering and evil.

10:
Hearing leads to truth, contentment, and knowledge,
Hearing bathes us in the sixty-eight sacred spots,
Hearing wins scholarly repute,
Hearing inspires peaceful contemplation;
Says Nanak, the devout enjoy eternal bliss forever,
Hearing banishes all suffering and evil.

11:
By hearing we plumb the depths of virtues,
By hearing we rise to the status of sages and kings,
By hearing the blind find their way,
By hearing the unfathomable is fathomed;
Says Nanak, the devout enjoy eternal bliss forever,
Hearing banishes all suffering and evil.

The vital role of hearing is pervasive and paramount: by listening to the Divine, one can become “like the saints and gods,” even the mighty gods “Shiva, Brahma, and Indra.” One also gains total geographical knowledge, not only of this world and the sky, but “many worlds, and underworlds.” More than just geographical knowledge, one may also attain knowledge of the body, understand all religious “treatises and scriptures,” and scholarly knowledge. Hearing is a great tool that allows the user to even fathom the “unfathomable,” and free one “from the clutches of death.” We see that hearing is also a substitute for seeing, as the “blind find their way” through the auditory sense alone. The poetic refrain repeated in each of the four stanzas summarizes and provides the primary motivation for hearing: it “banishes all suffering and evil,” which allows “the devout” to “enjoy eternal bliss forever.” The sense of hearing is ultimate in its power; by listening to the Divine, one is able to understand and connect to the Divine, which results in “eternal bliss forever.” The only prescription to partake in this eternal bliss is for one to be devout, and this is accomplished simply by listening.

Listening to the Divine is achieved through the medium of music in the Guru Granth. Music, as a greatly enjoyable aesthetic experience, was a perfect way for the Gurus to describe an auditory experience of the Divine – the analogy was easily understood, and it encouraged contemplating the Divine in a distinctly aesthetic manner. So a popular image in the Guru Granth became Divine music, and appears in the Japu (N. Singh 2012, p. 45):

29:
With knowledge as the banquet, and compassion as the hostess,
let the divine music resonate in every heart.
The One is supreme, the whole cosmos under Its sway,  
why revere feats and miracles which lead you astray?  
Meeting and parting are the rhythm of the universe,  
to all is given what is written.  
Salutations!  
Salutations to That One Who is primal, immaculate, immortal, immutable,  
Ever constant through the ages!

Guru Nanak sets the stage for this stanza as a “banquet” of “knowledge.” Divine knowledge is obtained in a very aesthetic sense – while one is enjoying themselves at a banquet. This brings to the mind notions of delectable food, music and dancing, which Nanak then presents to us in the next line: “let the divine music resonate in every heart.” Guru Nanak simultaneously paints the Divine as ubiquitous and intimate when realized through Its music: everyone is able to hear it, but it “resonates in every heart,” causing a deep emotional reaction from the listener. Nanak wants to impart that experiencing the Divine is a personal but also involved experience. He then moves on to tell us what kind of knowledge about the Divine one can hope to attain by listening to Divine music: “The One is supreme, the whole cosmos under Its sway.” The infinite nature of the Divine is expressed through Its grandeur over even “the whole cosmos,” and we see that the Divine’s music is responsible for “the rhythm of the universe.”

In order to reinforce the wonder of the Divine’s magnitude, Nanak ends the stanza by offering salutations to the Divine, expressing his joy over the nature of the Divine revealed to him through music. The poet then reiterates the superlative qualities of the Divine: “Salutations to That One Who is primal, immaculate, immortal, immutable, ever constant through the ages!” By ending the stanza with a description of the Divine overlaid with the joy associated with a salutation, Guru Nanak hopes to impress upon his reader just how powerful Divine music is – for it can cause a revelation of the Divine’s wondrous magnitude that makes one want to shout out felicitations.

Bhai Vir Singh replays in his auditory poems the Divine music mentioned by Guru Nanak. The image of Divine music is taken directly from the Guru Granth, and the joy that was associated with Guru Nanak’s salutations is often the focus of Bhai Vir Singh’s poetic expression. In Dew Drops, Vir Singh’s
earliest collection of poems, we see a more youthful and exuberant treatment of music – it is a way for Bhai Vir Singh to revel in the wonders of the Divine. In My Beloved, music is still a wonderful and joyous event – for it represents a connection to the Divine. However, as is consistent throughout My Beloved, many of Bhai Vir Singh's poems have become sadder and show a distinct sense of longing. In his old age, Bhai Vir Singh feels that there is often distance between himself and the Divine, and is desperately seeking for a way to close that distance and connect again with the Divine. For the auditory sense, this comes in a desire to hear Divine music once again.

In Dew Drops, the sense of joy brought about by the Divine through music is always a very physical experience. Bhai Vir Singh mingles the auditory sense with the kinetic, striving to bring out the liveliness of music through jostling activities. In Yaad (Memory) (N. Singh 2008, p. 25), we see

My lover’s constant memory
Is etched deep inside;
Like the music in the wave,
It has become a divine melody;
It inebriates like wine,
It vibrates like string.
Pulling and shooting rhythmic spasms
It still feels delightful.

The Divine (referred to as the poet’s lover) is constantly present in Bhai Vir Singh’s memory “like the music in the wave.” And more so, this memory has become the poet’s very own “divine melody.” The Divine stays inside the poet’s heart and psyche in the form of a wonderful melody, which has incredible physical presence and the power to manipulate emotions. The Divine, in the form of music, becomes the actor in the poem, as it “inebriates like wine” and “vibrates like string.” The physical sensation of inebriation is accompanied by the physical movements of the music inside the poet, as it is “pulling and shooting rhythmic spasms.” And though these actions seem exuberant almost to the point of being violent, our poet then clarifies that these actions are good, as they “feel delightful.” The intensity of the actions up to the culmination in the last line is used to heighten its importance – this “divine melody” is
truly a wonderful feeling to behold. Bhai Vir Singh echoes the Granthian “banquet of knowledge” by expressing the infinite nature of the Divine subtly in his vocabulary – The Divine is not only present “constantly” in the current moment, but in the past as well, by the mention of the Divine’s presence in the poet’s “memory.” We see in the very last line that the Divine music “still” feels delightful – indicating that the joy received from the Divine has not waned, and since there is no closure to this idea at the end of the poem, we can assume it persists forever more.

Bhai Vir Singh continues to mingle others senses with hearing to bring a powerful sense of wonder about the Divine. While a “divine melody” may be extremely pleasant to hear on its own, the emotions and feelings that the Divine creates inside the poet are far beyond the description of enjoyment from merely one sense. By merging the joy of multiple senses in one short poem, the poet can bring more liveliness to the verdurous bliss he is trying to convey. From Sangeet (Music) (N. Singh 2008, p. 28):

Lofty emotions, lovely ideas,
— Imbued in subtle colors,
When they meet this frigid world
They congeal into ice.
Your melody warms them up,
It brings them back to life.
That is why musicians call it—
A stairway to heaven.

We hear the poet talk about his “lofty emotions” and “lovely ideas” about the divine directly “imbued in subtle colors.” The beautiful visual image given to us is then quickly attacked and altered by the physical sensations of a “frigid world” which “congeals” it “into ice.” The interplay of the senses here is used to heighten the drama of the poem. The visually beautiful emotions about the Divine are frozen in an uncaring, harsh world. Surely the poet has experienced many hardships and trying times in life that have brought him low in spirits and made him forget the “lofty emotions” of the Divine. But to anyone who truly believes in the Divine, this sad state is temporary indeed, and Bhai Vir Singh shows a return to happiness in a very sensually comforting way. The Divine’s “melody warms them up,” and literally
“brings them back to life.” Now the interplay of senses - warmth and sound - has produced a restorative and magical effect, to counteract the loss before. We then see that music, the Divine’s “melody” is literally a “stairway to heaven;” one is able to connect directly to the Divine through music.

The final poem in Dew Drops that mentions music also uses a very kinesthetic presentation of music, and mingles this with other senses to again produce a sense of ecstatic jubilation. From Rag Di Sur (Tune of the Melody) (N. Singh 2008, p. 36):

A tender tune arose,
    And stood beside me;
Tremulous and vibrating, it shot
    A wave of ferocious velocity.
I vibrated into ecstasy —
    Dreaming in transcendent colors;
Joyous waves from the heavens above,
Drowned me in a timeless zone!

This time, we see the paradoxical nature of the Divine expressed by a “tune” that is both “tender” and caring, and holding immense physical energy and power – while “tremulous and vibrating,” it shoots “a wave of ferocious velocity.” The physical imagery is strong and violent, just like in Memory, and serves the same purpose of heightening the intensity of the good feelings that follow. The poet then becomes our actor, influenced by the music of the Divine, he then physically reacts by “vibrating into ecstasy.” Then, to describe to us this feeling of ecstasy, his words change to incorporate the ethereal nature of the Divine. He now uses the sense of sight within a dream to tell us of “transcendent colors,” which are like “joyous waves from the heavens above.” This tender and ferocious tune of the Divine is also a glorious wave of transcendent colors, which brings joy straight to the heart of the poet, and drowns him “in a timeless zone!” The Divine is beyond temporality and the concrete nature of the senses, so it is able to be experienced by the poet in the form of many different senses at once, in an emotionally rational manner, and also an impossibly irrational manner – “a timeless zone” beyond normal human experience.
The main purpose of music representing the Divine in *Dew Drops* is to elicit the sense of wonder the poet feels about the Divine. The Divine brings him great and overwhelming joy. The sensation of overflowing with happiness can only be conveyed by trying to explain it from multiple different senses. In order to describe a totally consummate feeling, many different perspectives are needed to give the reader a sense of just how massive the joy in Bhai Vir Singh’s heart must be. The Divine here is surely the source of absolute wonders and pleasure, and Vir Singh vigorously welcomes the Divine into himself through music.

In *My Beloved*, we are presented with a consistent but totally different view of music. Music is still one of the ways for experiencing and connecting with the Divine, but now it is no longer surrounded with simply happiness. Bhai Vir Singh’s desire to connect with the Divine is as strong as ever, except now there is a much more desperate tone to it. There now exists distance between the Divine and Bhai Vir Singh, and many of the poems in this collection express the poet’s burning desire to be reunited with the Divine. One of the main ways this is possible is through music, as was present in *Dew Drops*. Right from the very start of the collection, we see the importance of music. It is not only more prevalent than in *Dew Drops*, but it also starts off the very first poem in the collection. We must pay careful consideration to the first poem, as Bhai Vir Singh consciously chose it to be first to set the tone and represent the body of work. From *Prarambh (Introduction)* (N. Singh 2008, p. 53):

My songs!
My songs, my Beloved!
Songs sung for you, where do they go?
You secretly walked away, alas, why?
The vigor of my heart-veena stopped still, why?
Its tender tremors, its lovely vibrations,
Why do they lie arrested in silence?
Now, my Beloved! What should I offer you?
Who could I send to your musical concerts
To perform childlike wonders for you?

The first words we see of this older Bhai Vir Singh are immediately understandable – the poet has lost connection to the Divine and wants to know why. This questioning tone, where the poet asks strong
rhetorical questions he is unable to answer, not seen in *Dew Drops*, is prevalent throughout *My Beloved*, and reinforces the sense of loss and sorrow that the poet feels during these moments of separation from the Divine. In this instance, the Divine literally “secretly walked away” from him. This not only shows distance but also presents the notion that the poet was not aware of just when the Divine left him. We then see this distance manifested through a musical metaphor – the poet’s “heart-veena stopped still.” His heart’s own instrument is not playing without the Divine’s presence, and lies solemnly “arrested in silence.” To make the point more somber still, the tremors and vibrations that used to be so violently kinesthetic in *Dew Drops* are now “tender” and “lovely.” The vigor of the youthful melody has been replaced by calm and caring. Bhai Vir Singh no longer seeks ecstasy and excitement from the Divine, but comfort. But the poet is plagued with confusion, for he does not know *how* to connect with the Divine, and so asks imploringly “what should I offer you?” The second part of the poem expands further:

My songs—

“Songs of praise” for my Beloved!
Yes! Come back, come back my handsome!
Tighten the strings and currents of my heart-veena.
Perform your wonders on its taught strings,
Let loose those enchanting tunes
And heart-wrenching songs;
Pierce my mind again with your pulsations!
May waves rise like breeze from the ocean,
— My silent voice surge like a nightingale singing.
Yes, may the faltering sounds from a child’s throat,
Those whimpering tones reach forth
— To your presence,
My Beloved!

We see the poet ask the Divine directly to “come back” to him, and then he goes on to explain what will happen to him if his request is successful – he will once again experience the musical wonders of the Divine. Now the imagery is more complex, as the longer length of the poem allows for longer exposition. The joy, however, is still less violent and explosive than it was in *Dew Drops* – the vocabulary is still suggesting strong physical actions, but “tighten,” “currents,” “taught strings,” “heart-wrenching,” “pierce,”
and “pulsations” are more benign than the “ferocious velocity” and “shooting rhythmic spasms” from before. Music has now taken on a much more soothing and comforting tone, with harmonious nature imagery replacing the ebullient exuberance from the poet’s youth. Now “waves rise like breeze from the ocean,” and his “silent voice surges like a nightingale singing” – beautiful images of a warm and caring world. The excitement for joy has truly turned into a desire for companionship and warmth.

While this represents a phase shift in the focus on Bhai Vir Singh’s relationship with the Divine, it does not however change the level of intimacy between the two. Connection with the Divine is still Vir Singh’s primary desire, and the Divine’s music is the source of Bhai Vir Singh’s happiness.

The distance between the Divine and the poet is further expanded upon in *Vans Di Tori* (*Bamboo Flute*) (N. Singh 2008, p. 61):

When I sing your songs, my Beloved,  
I dwell in your presence;  
It is in your absence  
That I realize, you  
Yes, you were the singer of my songs.  
I was but a lifeless bit of bamboo  
Empty, full of holes  
You fill me with songs!  
— A mere bit of bamboo  
In a flash you come and exalt me.

Now the distance comes with a heavy realization – that without the Divine, the poet is “empty, full of holes.” This is picked up through a musical medium – the Divine has literally always been the “singer” of the poet’s songs. More extremely, without the song of the Divine, the poet is literally “lifeless.” Bhai Vir Singh then ends with praise for the Divine: by filling an empty, lifeless bit of bamboo with songs, the Divine is able to make someone fully human; with just Its presence, the Divine can exalt anyone and bring them happiness. Bhai Vir Singh is closely in line with the Guru Granth here, as this poems follows a similar structure of the banquet stanza from the Japu: there is an introduction that gives the setting (here in the Divine’s presence), followed by the subject of the Divine’s music, then a revelation about
the nature of the Divine and how it relates to the poet, and finally an exultation detailing the wonders of the Divine.

Continuing the same metaphor of animating objects into humans through music, we have *Ras, Rasia, Rasal (Joy, Enjoyer, Enjoyment)* (N. Singh 2008, p. 62):

The veena says to its player:
“I add color to your songs.”

The player put it away having
Wrapped it in its covers.
That’s when the veena realized:
I was all wood, strands, and strings
My body had no life
This is my Beloved’s immutable magic
That filled me with music.
Every fiber turned into a chord,
So I recited out loud, love love;
My Beloved then sang along,
Enchanted by my song.
Yes, my Beloved sang, played the music as well
— Ecstatically he swayed from side to side
The enjoyer fully enjoying himself.

Here, the poet is portrayed as a veena that the Divine plays to fill with joy. Like in *Dew Drops*, we see a mingling of the senses, with color being added to songs to make them livelier. And as in *Bamboo Flute*, we see a distinct realization from the poet that before the Divine filled him with music, his “body had no life.” But as soon as the Divine’s presence is felt, “every fiber turned into a chord,” and the poet “recited out loud, love, love.” The poet is filled with love for the Divine, and this love is so strong it cannot be contained whenever he feels the Divine’s presence. And Bhai Vir Singh shows us that this is all that matters to the Divine, because as soon as the poet-veena sings of his love, his “Beloved then sang along, enchanted.” The Divine’s music does not simply fill the poet with joy, but the poet also is able to bring joy to the Divine Itself – “ecstatically he swayed from side to side, the enjoyer fully enjoying himself.” There is a mutual, loving relationship between the Divine and poet – they sing together, and therefore experience each other, and are brought great happiness by their union. Now that the reader
is cognizant of such a deep connection between poet and Divine, Bhai Vir Singh offers his praise to the Divine for allowing him such:

Wondrous, wondrous are your feats, my Beloved!  
Felicitations to you on the beauty of your songs,  
You are the song, the music, and the taste,  
You are the joy, the enjoyer, and the enjoyment itself.

He then clearly reiterates the Divine’s nature as song, music, and taste, all things that the poet might experience aesthetically, and then states the Divine’s complex role as joy, enjoyer, and enjoyment. Bhai Vir Singh leads from his metaphor of the Divine as music to a statement on the transcendent nature of the Divine, being complete in and of Itself.

The veena and player metaphor continues again in *Pyar-Tarban (Tremors of Love)* (N. Singh 2008, p. 113):

O veena player,  
Come play your veena  
Stir some of its sleeping chords.  
Its strings of love  
Are lying loose  
Come over  
Stretch them tight.  
O’  
Instill some life  
In this dead heart  
Stir it so  
That it begins to beat  
Start up  
Some songs of love —  
Songs that will  
Pierce hearts!  
I will bring out trays of pearls  
I will pile your lap with riches.

We have again loose strings that need to be stretched by the Divine player. The normal state of existence therefore seems to be a disconnect from the Divine – as the poems always start with the poet in a distraught or empty state, wanting to be filled. The Divine here once again has power to “instill life” into the “dead heart” of the poet, showing Its mastery over the poet’s metaphoric emotional life and
death, i.e. his happiness. An important difference to note in this poem is the ending, which shows the desperation the poet is facing in his quest for connection to the Divine. He asks sincerely for the veena player to play songs that will “pierce hearts.” But then he offers “trays of pearls” and “riches.” The material wealth of success that was not present in _Dew Drops_ shows up now in the later years of his life, but these material things hold no great place in Bhai Vir Singh’s heart. He is gladly willing to give it all away to be able to connect with the Divine. This offering highlights the desperation in the poet’s heart and shows the sincerity of his desire.

The very next poem in the collection continues the same plea to a different music player, this time a drummer. From _Chan Ackhian (All of a Sudden)_ (N. Singh 2008, p. 114):

O drummer, beating your drums,
Play the tune of meeting with our Love.
Strike a melody so intense,
That it will uproot all my pain.
Now don’t unfold anything sad,
Just play rhythms of joy;
With the beating of your drum
May my Beloved suddenly come!
I’ll fill your empty bag to the brim—
As soon as I hear “Beloved is here!”

Now, we start from an even worse place – the poet needs the drummer to “uproot all [his] pain.” Not only that, but he needs a “melody so intense” that it is able to do that – signifying that the poet’s pain is so great that it would require an amazing amount to overcome it. He then further clarifies this by saying “don’t unfold anything sad, just play rhythms of joy.” He laments his distance from the Divine so much that he prohibits anything that might make him sadder. Yet this task is also a very simple one to achieve for the drummer. He simply needs to beat his drum for the Divine to come. The simplicity here is reminiscent of the four stanzas from the Guru Granth, where we learn that so much can be obtained simply “by hearing.” Bhai Vir Singh is ready and willing to listen to the Divine melody played out through the drummer, in order to achieve his “eternal bliss.” Vir Singh’s poetry is proof of his devotion, and shows us the perspective of one of the “devout” who are listening intently for the Divine.
The poet then offers to fill the drummer’s “empty bag to the brim;” once again offering his material wealth for the ability to connect with the Divine. This poem also shows the pitiful state the poet is in – no matter how great his desire is, the only way he can connect with the Divine is to have someone else, a drummer, connect him with the Divine. The pain of distance is striking when viewed from this angle – to so desperately want a connection but not be able to make one himself – it is no wonder that he would willingly offer any riches he has.

The last poem in the collection that mentions music deals with the poet’s wonder at how beneficent the Divine is. From An-Sangeetak Sangeet (Unmusical Music) (N. Singh 2008, p. 131):

My melody is out of tune,
O my musically refined Beloved!
How could you enjoy my music?
I am amazed when I see you
At the break of dawn
Enter my hut and secretly sit down —
Listening to my dissonant song
So rapt in music so unmusical!

This poem seeks to praise the amazing capabilities of the Divine and show wonderment at them. The poet simultaneously diminishes himself and exalts the Divine in the same category – music: while the poet’s “melody is out of tune,” the Divine is “musically refined.” But even though the poet sings with a “dissonant song,” the Divine is “rapt in music so unmusical.” Bhai Vir Singh wants to show and praise the Divine for being able to love someone based solely on that person’s intentions, not on his or her capabilities. It is a marvel to the poet that even though he feels so unworthy, the Divine finds pleasure just in his attempts. This same idea is also found in the poem Shabash! (Well Done) (N. Singh 2008, p. 74), where the poet similarly sings for the Divine though he has “not yet mastered any tune or notes.” But the Divine “listens rapt” and is able to enjoy the song, and even whispers “shabash” (well done) into the poet’s ears. Truly, the Divine’s capacity for love far exceeds the poet’s ability to comprehend it, a message common in the Guru Granth. From stanza 24 of the Japu (N. Singh 2012, p. 42):

The end eludes all:
The more it is expressed, the farther it extends.  
The Sovereign is great and high in station,  
Yet higher still is the Name.  
If we could ever reach that height  
Only then would we know the Highest of the high!  
Expansive as It is, It alone can know Itself.

The Sikh Divine exists beyond the limits of human comprehension. One can gain Divine knowledge and understand the Divine in some ways, but there is always more to be understood about the Divine, but “It alone can know Itself.” In these poems, Bhai Vir Singh is commenting on this part of the Divine’s nature – he is unable to fathom how the Divine can love his music even though it is so “unmusical.” The image of the Divine in Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry is exactly the same as the Granthian image – a Being beyond the comprehension of the poet, but It is a wonderful Being full of joy. The poet may not know how the Divine is capable of doing what It does, but he loves and appreciates It even without that knowledge.

The auditory sense in Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry is very similar to the sonorous modality permeating the Guru Granth. It is essential for Divine connection and knowledge, and by hearing, one is able to enjoy great joy and happiness. In Dew Drops, there is great physical and active exuberance displayed by the poet whenever Divine music is present. Contrastingly, Bhai Vir Singh expresses that when there is distance between one and the Divine, represented by an absence of Divine music, there is great sadness and a desperate longing to reestablish a connection to the Divine. My Beloved, which explores the sorrow of disconnection from the Divine, deeply explores and extends the Granthian words on the subject: “if we forget our beloved for an instant, we suffer terribly.” (N. Singh 2012, p. 51) Despite the shift in focus from exuberant joy to desperate longing, Bhai Vir Singh’s conception of the Divine through the auditory sense is constant and consistent with the Guru Granth. There is no sense that Bhai Vir Singh’s auditory experience of the Divine is any different from the Granthian Divine melody. The idea that one receives Divine love and understanding through music is a genuine Sikh perspective, and its
presence intimates Vir Singh’s closeness with his Sikh source material. Bhai Vir Singh’s Divine is primarily a source of great joy and happiness, That inspires love and devotion aurally through Divine music. It is a Divine that interacts intimately with humans in the earthly realm, without the separation present of western divinity.
Sight – The Gift of Eyes

Similar to hearing, in the Sikh tradition the sense of sight is well used to describe the nature of the Divine and the ways one can understand It. However, the Sikh Divine is formless, so it can never be contained in a physical image that one could see with their eyes. “The Divine is not understood as actually residing within, or encapsulated inside a form, for then it would only become substantialized and reified. The One is everywhere without being contained in anything as such... The One is never reduced to any particular form; it is transcendent, and transcendent it illuminates every shape and form.” (N. Singh, Sikhism p. 63) Because of Its formlessness, sight is used to describe the Divine indirectly. The beauties of the natural world are often presented with praise, as they are creations of the Divine. The visual image of light is often used as a metaphor for illumination of the mind, or an acquisition of Divine knowledge. “There is a light in all, and that light is you; by your light we are lit. Light sparkles from knowledge.” (N. Singh 2012, p. 49) Though the Divine itself is not visible, light created by the Divine is, and it is this light which is able to bring Divine knowledge to everyone. This light is also inside each individual, so it would need to be seen by some kind of metaphorical “inner eye,” which would represent a journey of understanding into oneself. Seeing becomes intimately tied with understanding, and from stanza 16 of the Japu we see that “All who see, live the life of truth.” (N. Singh 2012, p. 39) The sense of sight is extremely important; it allows one to “live the life of truth,” and find understanding of the Divine.

In the Guru Granth there is also the notion of the Divine’s own “Gaze,” which It has the power to cast on or overlook humans. (N. Singh 2012, p. 36)

In the ambrosial hour, exalt and reflect upon the True Name.
Through actions each is dressed in body;
but liberation comes only from Its Gaze.
Says Nanak, know the Absolute thus.

The Divine’s Gaze has the power to grant moksha, or liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth, and indeed it is the “only” way to attain liberation. Being inside the Gaze of the Divine represents having a


connection to the Divine, which comes about through knowledge. This is why the last line of the stanza tells us to “know the Absolute thus;” by acquiring Divine knowledge, one will come under the Gaze of the Divine. To further stress that Divine knowledge is the only way to achieve liberation, Guru Nanak expounded more: (N. Singh 2012, p. 37)

If we were to live four ages, or even ten times four,
If we were known in the nine continents, and hailed as a leader by all;
If we were to win good name, glory, and fame throughout the world,
But were denied the loving Gaze, we would be cast out,
Treated as the lowest of worms, accused as criminals.

“The loving Gaze” of the Divine is truly important, and no social status or wisdom of old age matters.

Without the Gaze, even the most famous, wizened leader of the world would be “treated as the lowest of worms.”

In both Dew Drops and My Beloved, there is a strong visual sensory presence in many of Bhai Vir Singh’s poems. Vir Singh presents us not only with beautiful visual imagery but also a deeply meaningful dichotomy between an inner and outer eye, inspired by the Guru Granth. The outer eye is our visual connection to the physical world, which allows us to take in our natural surroundings and appreciate the aesthetic beauty created by the Divine. The inner eye is Bhai Vir Singh’s metaphor for comprehension of the Divine and Its true nature through an exploration into the self. Bhai Vir Singh explores the Granthian notion that the Divine’s light is inside every one of us, and that in order to acquire Divine knowledge and therefore come under the Divine’s Gaze, one must seek to understand the inner workings of oneself. By contrasting images obtained through both the inner and outer eyes, the poet presents to us the wonder and beauty of the Divine in a multidimensional way, reinforcing the complex and awesome way that one can perceive It.

In Dew Drops, there is a markedly more excited and revelatory nature to the mention of sight. It is as if Bhai Vir Singh had just come to many of these insights about the Divine and was eager to tell the
world. The very first poem of the collection is solely about eyes and sight, and sets up the inner/outer eye dichotomy right away. The title of the poem is even *Didar (Vision)* (N. Singh 2008, p. 3):

O Reality of this scene,  
Do not cast us aside!  
Deep in your centre somewhere,  
Lie our honor and pride!  
If you keep us tucked in your interstices,  
You’d bloom and rejoice;  
You have given us the gift of eyes  
May we never lose you from our sight.

The whole collection starts with a plea to the Divine to not “cast us aside,” outside of the Gaze of the Divine, for Bhai Vir Singh understands from the Guru Granth that would spell a horrible fate for him. Being close to the Divine is at the heart of Bhai Vir Singh’s desires, and so he makes this feeling about the Divine clear from the beginning. But even before we get to the contents of the plea, we are given a setting for *Dew Drops*, defined by the Divine Itself. “O Reality of this scene” sets us in a distinctly visual realm, and this realm is made up of the Divine – the poet is bringing us to his inner world of grand perception, and wants to share with us the knowledge he has attained. He then expands upon our setting, placing us “deep” in the “centre” of the Divine Itself! And where our “honor and pride” lie is not only a good place for us, but it is good for the Divine as well if we are allowed to remain there because humans have the power to make the Divine “bloom and rejoice;” there is a mutual relationship of gain and happiness. The miraculous nature that the Divine would receive and allow such happiness is not lost on Bhai Vir Singh, and he wishes for everyone else to realize this and appreciate it as well. He is revealing to the reader that the Divine has “given *us* the gift of eyes,” and expresses the hope that “we” may never lose the Divine “from our sight.” Bhai Vir Singh is including everyone in his joyous celebration for the gift of eyes, expanding the Granthian notion that the Divine’s light is in every single person.

The second poem in the collection is also on the subject of eyes and seeks to clarify their deep significance further. From *Akbian (Eyes)* (N. Singh 2008, p. 4):

Eyes formed from
The pain to see the formless
Forged in front of our faces
Fashioned in form exterior —
They see exquisite scenes
And steep in their joy. But
The hunger for the formless doesn't go:
Flitting on forms, they famish for more.

Bhai Vir Singh here shows us the origination of eyes in an ethereal manner. He recognizes the desire to understand the Divine as “pain to see the formless,” which is the reason our eyes have been “formed.”

Bhai Vir Singh here carefully maintains the Granthian notion of a formless Divine even when talking specifically about eyes and sight – though there is a strong “hunger for the formless” Divine, there is no desire to have a physical form of the Divine created. Indeed it is quite the opposite – the desire is to experience further the “formless,” to a point where our eyes “famish for more.” And though these eyes may be a “gift” given to us by the Divine, it was not without effort on our part – they had to be “forged in front of our faces,” something that one could see being made. Understanding of the Divine takes time and contemplation, and is deeply connected to the physical world – eyes are “fashioned in form exterior.” An inner eye indeed is similar to an outer one, and so must first start outside the self before it can start looking deep inside. But once one starts looking through these eyes, “they see exquisite scenes and steep in their joy.” Because inner eyes can “see” the Divine, in that they represent an acquisition of Divine knowledge, the poet is able to experience the joy from a connection to the Divine.

The formless Divine is a joy to behold once one is able to see It with one’s inner eyes, and indeed It is addicting as well. From *Vichurian Ahkian (Sundered Eyes)* (N. Singh 2008, p. 6):

As the evening slowly sinks
My ache to see you grows,
Full of pain my hungry eyes
Lower and lower go.

The joy of seeing the Divine is so great that when the Divine is not in view, there is an aching pain to see It again. Bhai Vir Singh here mixes the inner and outer eyes seamlessly – by presenting us with an image of “the evening slowly sink[ing],” we can imagine the darkness of night descending upon us, and our
physical outer eyes becoming less useful. As if understanding that his outer eyes are now less
stimulated by the physical world, the poet suddenly remembers that he has inner eyes to see the Divine,
and immediately his “ache” to see the Divine “grows.” Now his “hungry eyes” are “full of pain” and
“lower and lower go,” just like the descending nightfall. His inner eyes mimic the physical movement
that his outer eyes perceive, which shows the difference between them but also stresses their
connection.

Young Bhai Vir Singh continues his exploration of the inner eye in the poem Jitt Wal Nazar Utte
Wal Sajjan (Wherever I See There is My Beloved) (N. Singh 2008, p. 37):

In my eyes my beloved is seated.
   He begins to slide down
Sliding deeper and deeper
   He is trapped deep within.
With my eyes closed,
   I see my beloved inside;
And when they open,
   My beloved is right in front.
Wherever I turn there is my beloved:
Here in a blade of grass, there in that big forest.

We now see the eyes take on an even more elevated level of importance – they are literally the seat of
the Divine. But eyes are not simply sedentary, they actively look out in a direction, and Bhai Vir Singh
captures this by showing the path that the inner eyes follow – “He is trapped deep within” the self. To
further distinguish these as inner eyes, the poet tells us that he can see the Divine inside when his eyes
are closed. This comprehension of the Divine can not happen with physical outer eyes. One must look
deep inside oneself in order to see the Divine. But once this has been accomplished, one is able to then
open their eyes, and then the Divine “is right in front.” Not only that, but “wherever I turn there is my
beloved;” the Divine becomes ubiquitous once you start looking for It with the right eyes – once you
understand that the Divine is deep inside yourself, you will be able to see It “here in a blade of grass,
there in that big forest.” Bhai Vir Singh uses nature imagery here to show us that the Divine is
connected to us through the natural world, and therefore validates everything around us. Even in his
youth, Bhai Vir Singh was able to take the complex Granthian notion of inner knowledge leading to Divine knowledge and explore it concisely through the medium of poetry.

Bhai Vir Singh also uses the inner/outer eye dichotomy to express the Sikh aversion to asceticism in Duvalli Jhak (Double Gaze) (N. Singh 2008, p. 33):

By the river sat an ascetic
Gazing at the dividing line —
First at the land then water
Again at the land then water, he gazed.
One was grimy the other wet
How would he keep pure?
Eventually evading food and water,
He wasted away and split in two.

We are immediately introduced to the setting of the ascetic as a physical place - “by the river.” Unlike the inward journeys we have seen thus far, the motion here is sedentary and monotonous. The ascetic is not using his eyes in a perceptive way, but merely “gazing,” a passive type of seeing. For the object of his gaze is nothing deep or interesting, it is merely the “dividing line” between some land and water. To express the monotony and drabness of the scene, the poet uses sequential words such as “first” and “next,” and then describes exactly the same action twice, and reiterates the passive “he gazed.” In strong contrast to the beauty of the Divine seen with inner eyes, what the ascetic is gazing at is “grimy” and “wet.” We then find out that he is wondering how he would “keep pure” amongst these two unappealing physical places. By framing the religious idea of purity with such boring imagery, the poet rejects the notion of purity. Because the ascetic was so worried about this silly notion of purity from the physical world that could be seen with the outer eyes, he evaded “food and water” and eventually “wasted away and split in two.” The divide between the water and land that he had created in his mind literally caused him to split in two. The poet wants to tell us that superficial concerns are meaningless and divisive, and that if you only look with your outer eyes you will never be able to see anything meaningful. This is not only joyless; it is also dangerous – as asceticism can lead to the total waste of one’s life. Bhai Vir Singh wants to express the necessity of Sikh aesthetics – only by engaging in the
world and experiencing it actively through the five senses is one able to attain true knowledge and live happily.

In *Dew Drops*, Bhai Vir Singh’s exuberance is often seen in his desire to reveal to others the true nature of the world, especially how things relate to the Divine. In *Arshan Wal Nazar (Looking Towards the Skies)* (N. Singh 2008, p. 38), we see Bhai Vir Singh talk about how people use their eyes, and how they should be using them:

If the potter had put eyes
On top of my head
I promise I’d always be
Looking towards the skies.
Now placed below my forehead,
Their trend is downwards;
What lies below my face,
That’s what I have power over.

It’s true, at the beginning of time,
Your eyes were not put on your head;
But the tendons of your neck
Are made exquisitely supple.
You are free to see, so do it
Up, down, all around;
Now only if you’d look up,
All praise would be yours!

This poem is one of the few in the collection to use two stanzas, and so it gives the poet more room to develop his message. Bhai Vir Singh starts by telling us about the current state of the world and how different it would be with a significant change. “If the potter had put eyes on top of my head I promise I’d always be looking towards the skies.” We see the Divine emerge here as a potter – the One who has made humans the way they are. If the Divine had so wanted, It could have put humans eyes on top of our heads so we would always be looking “towards the skies,” which is one place where the Divine can be. But the poet tells us this is not so, as ours have been placed below our foreheads and thus “their trend is downward.” Humans naturally look downward because our eyes are positioned so in our heads, and Bhai Vir Singh tells us that because we are so focused on what is below us, that is what
we “have power over.” This idea simultaneously praises the Divine’s power and humbles humanity – humans are quite short, and there is not much that “lies below” our faces except the ground and some plants and animals. But the Divine, Which has the power to look down from the sky, would therefore have sovereignty over everything.

Bhai Vir Singh further mystifies the Divine by bringing in Its extemporality: “at the beginning of time, your eyes were not put on your head.” The Divine made a conscious decision not to have humans looking at the sky all day. What we see is that the Divine gave humans the freedom of choice: “the tendons of your neck are made exquisitely supple. You are free to see, so do it up, down, all around.” This Divine is not One that forces people to do anything; it is up to the individual whether he or she shall look to the Divine or elsewhere. But believing in the Divine and loving It, Bhai Vir Singh has a natural disposition and pushes us to choose the Divine, through an offer of incentive: “now only if you’d look up, all praise would be yours!” By choosing to look for the Divine, the Divine would give “all praise” to the seeker. Bhai Vir Singh’s early poems are meant to be inspirational and offer joy to the reader if she or he follows the poet’s revelatory words.

In My Beloved, Bhai Vir Singh has changed his use of the visual aspect away from solely joy and beauty of the Divine, to have a sense of sadness and longing. The wonders of the Divine that only the eye can behold are still there, but they are now less prominent, and often they are juxtaposed next to feelings of strong pain due to the distance between the Divine and the poet. Now much older, Bhai Vir Singh is seeking the same sense of visual splendor he received from the Divine so voluminously in his youth. However, the inner/outer eye dichotomy present in Dew Drops has not been lost over the years of his life, and the poet again teaches those of us who would listen about the Divine’s nature seen only by the inner eye.

In the first poem of the collection dealing with sight, we see that Bhai Vir Singh now experiences the Divine only momentarily, in brief flashes. From Vadmulli Dat (Priceless Gift) (N. Singh 2008, p. 59):
I heard someone say:
“Your Love has come today,
Has gone to the temple.”
I took off in a rush
I had barely reached the station
When I heard a musical echo —
Of bells around the neck of chariot horses.
I stood glued on the path thinking —
I will have a glimpse, my divine vision
My Beloved will be looking out the chariot
With those lovely eyes — will look at me once.

****     ****   ****
Along with my thoughts the chariot arrived
A wonderful vision was right in front:
“My Beloved!”
Yes, I had the vision,
“My Beloved!”

In *My Beloved*, Bhai Vir Singh uses much longer and more complex structures for his poems, and this allows him to elaborate in ways differently from *Dew Drops*. In this poem, its longer length compared to other poems gives it a sense of greater time — the reader feels that more time is elapsing and thus expects more events to occur or for them to happen in greater detail. Bhai Vir Singh here excellently contrasts the length of the poem with his desire for instantaneous glimpses of the Divine. He explicitly says he will “have a glimpse” of his “divine vision” — which simultaneously tells us that he currently is not seeing the Divine, and that when he is able to see It, it will only last a moment. This brevity is further amplified by the movement of the Divine in a chariot, from which he will be looking out “with those lovely eyes,” casting the Divine Gaze on those who have Divine knowledge. At this point in his life, experiences of the Divine are very transient and momentary; indeed, the Divine will only look at the poet “once.” However, this one look is enough to fill the poet with joy, enough to exclaim “My Beloved!” twice, for he knows that liberation comes inside the Divine’s Gaze. He comments that he had a “wonderful vision,” and then he reiterates this to the reader, as if in a way convincing himself. The Divine is only visible to Bhai Vir Singh for such brief periods of time that if one only blinked, he might
miss it. This can often give off the incredulous feeling of “did that really happen?” which the poet
perfectly captures.

In the last section of the poem, we see the departure of the Divine and the aftermath:

But those horses faster than the wind
Off they flew with the chariot
In a flash!
Yes, their tracks were in the middle of the dirt road.
So by the lines on the road
On my feet
Yes on my feet
I sat—
I picked up a bit of dust with my right hand
I raised it to my forehead, yes,
I put the speck of glorious dust on my forehead.
I told my mind: think about it
This too is a gift—
Eyes were brimming full
Dust stuck to my forehead
Voice broke into words:
This is a gift beyond price.
Yes, it was a miracle
Receiving the gift of dust
Along with the visionary flash
This priceless gift!
This priceless gift!

Bhai Vir Singh reiterates the instantaneity of the Divine’s vision, as It is already gone “in a flash!” But the
Divine left behind tracks and dust, and the poet has to “think about it” for a while before he comes to a
conclusion that “this too is a gift.” Even though the Divine appeared for only a moment, the image
remains in Bhai Vir Singh’s memory, symbolized as dust left by a chariot. The dust here is a mostly visual
phenomenon; when one thinks of dust, one can imagine it spread across an old table or as a cloud in the
air kicked up by horses. And the “dust stuck to [the poet’s] forehead,” right above his eyes which had
just witnessed a vision of the Divine. And even though this is just dust, something ordinarily unwanted
and a bother, here it takes on an emotionally magnificent role. Because this dust comes from the Divine,
it can remind the poet of Its vision, and is therefore “a gift beyond price.” We can see just how
important a fleeting image of the Divine is to Bhai Vir Singh now, as even the dust It leaves behind is a
“miracle,” and a “priceless gift.” The ending to the poem is so overly joyous that it brings with it a strong realization of sadness. Bhai Vir Singh so desperately wants to see and experience the Divine that just one glimpse and the dust of memory it leaves is enough to elate him.

Bhai Vir Singh further explores the pain of not seeing the Divine in *Attik Nain (Unflinching Eyes)* (N. Singh 2008, p. 96):

I spent the night in agony,
   I waited weeping through the night,
Howling, “Beloved” “Beloved”
   Counting each and every second.
At the break of dawn you came, but
   Misfortune has its mysterious ways:
The eyes that waited unflinching all night,
   Relaxed their vigilance for a second.

Now we see the drama of the poet’s pain expressed quite clearly through the mode of time – he has “spent the night in agony.” We see the duration of his pain as “all night” mentioned three times throughout this short poem – providing the same effect as *Vadmulli Dat (Priceless Gift)* but this time in the opposite direction. By having such a short poem, we do not expect a great amount of time to elapse or many events to occur, but here the long duration of the entire night is mentioned three times in only eight lines. This creates an effect of drawing out the great pain, literally the “agony,” mentioned right in the beginning. The poet then uses this extreme duration to dramatize his separation from the Divine – he waits all night “weeping” and “howling” the Divine’s name. His devotion is utmost and unquestioning – his eyes had literally “waited unflinching all night,” an astonishing feet for a human that must blink every few seconds. So great is the poet’s pain from not being able to see the Divine because his love and desire to connect with the Divine is so powerful. But Bhai Vir Singh wants to teach us that no matter how much you love and how devoutly you wait, you may not be able to see the Divine. In this poem, the ironic tragedy is completed when the poet’s eyes “relaxed their vigilance for a second,” and missed their only opportunity to behold the Divine. Life is not always fair, and sometimes we are not able to receive what we desire, no matter how intensely we try or how vigilantly we wait. The poet
does not encourage suffering or any kind of penitential pain, as suffering for the Divine will not bring
knowledge of the Divine. Rather, we connect to the Divine in times of happiness and joy, living our lives.

Bhai Vir Singh only ever successfully connects to the Divine during joyous occasions, and when he loses
himself in mourning over their disconnect, he never achieves the Divine vision he seeks.

A good example of joy leading to connection with the Divine through the inner eye can be seen

Having hugged the snows above,
A sweet breeze sweeps through;
Freezing cold, it sends out its chills
But stays silent and serene.

Sunshine squeezes out that chill!
Sliding quickly from the sunny skies,
All those shivering she wraps up in her lap
With a mother’s love and coziness.

A free and vast expanse
Pours from the celestial world —
Pure silence, silence, silence!
This halo of my Beloved
Overflowing like fragrant joy—
So serene and beautiful it is.

Eyes close, and inward they go,
My face begins to face itself;
That land of my Beloved,
I am easily able to enter.

The poet presents to us a visually striking image of a beautiful natural landscape. The natural forces at
play in the first half are both welcoming and pleasant. The breeze is “sweet” and “serene,” and has
“hugged the snows above,” showing softness and caring. Its only negative side is that it is “freezing cold,”
but this is then immediately ameliorated by the sunshine “sliding quickly from the sunny skies.” She
then “wraps up in her lap” any who were chilled by the pleasant breeze “with a mother’s love and
coziness.” The natural world here is beautiful and loving, with a great amount of comforting qualities.

Having realized these visual images, the poet then brings us into the entirety of the world itself – “a free
and vast expanse pours from the celestial world.” The beauty that we just witnessed becomes a spatially wide expanse, and the poet then tells us that these wonders come from the celestial world – straight from the Divine. This natural scene is literally the “halo” of the Divine, and is “overflowing with fragrant joy.” The poet even explicitly states that it is “so serene and beautiful,” in case the imagery had not already given that away. And amidst all this visual splendor and joyous feelings, “eyes close, and inward they go.” The poet begins to use his inner eyes to see the Divine, as his “face begins to face itself.” This imagery tells us that in order to use our inner eye, we must look deeply inside ourselves. But once we do so, we can “easily enter” the land of the Divine. The ease of this entrance is here due to the wondrousness of the scene before the poet, and the joy that fills his heart. Without these, the poet cannot connect with the Divine, and tragedy occurs. But immersed in such great joy, it is easy to look inside oneself and see that the Divine is present.

Just as in *Dew Drops*, Bhai Vir Singh explores the inner/outer eye dichotomy in *My Beloved*, using the same metaphor of inner knowledge. The outer eye represents the normal eyes that we are used to, and can see the physical world around us only. The inner eye represents comprehension of the Divine and looks inside the self to “see,” or understand the connection between the self and the Divine. Both of these eyes are used to see, and so both are described using visual imagery. But the outer eyes are not able to see the Divine, and by using the metaphor of the inner eyes, Bhai Vir Singh teaches us how Sikhs must view the Divine – by looking deep into themselves, they must understand the self and then they will be able to see the connection between their selves and the Divine.

Bhai Vir Singh presents the joy received from witnessing the Divine as motivation for opening one’s inner eyes in *Andarle Nain (Inner Eyes)* (N. Singh 2008, p. 75):

Eye—

The human eye
Could not see you
My Beloved!
Darkness had overtaken
Its knowledge and intelligence.
It still cannot see you,
The brilliance is too dazzling—
Yes, the strong light of intellect is blinding.

Do cast a favorable glance:
Open those inner eyes,
Which would recognize you—
In light or dark or dazzle,
You, my Beloved! Beloved!
In every place, in every color, in every direction
Playing everywhere, yet remaining apart
Handsome, you are the zenith of beauty.

The poet structures the poem in a very visually telling way – the sole word “eye” is the only word on the left side of the page, with all other lines indented thereafter, clearly indicating the subject. We are then immediately told that “the human eye could not see” the Divine; the physical outer eye was not enough to comprehend it – “darkness had overtaken its knowledge and intelligence.” There is a metaphorical veil of ignorance covering the outer eyes, which is what man originally only had. We then see that even now, the outer eyes “still cannot see” the Divine, because Its “brilliance is too dazzling.” This directly contrasts the darkness veiling the outer eyes, as we see “the strong light of intellect in blinding.” There is a strong message that comprehension is what our physical outer eyes are lacking, as a lack of intellect is the problem. The poet then tells us the solution to our problem: “open those inner eyes.” It is interesting to note that the poet first asks the Divine to “cast a favorable glance” on humanity first – the Divine’s acceptance of people is the original key that opens the door to connection and understanding. And we see that the inner eyes are able to “recognize” the Divine “in light or dark or dazzle.” The limitations of the outer eyes do not restrict the inner eyes in the slightest, for they represent an understanding of the Divine’s nature that cannot be seen superficially. And once we have opened our inner eyes and comprehend the Divine’s true nature, we are able to see it visually “in every place, in every color, in every direction.” A connection with the Divine comes with the realization that the Divine is ubiquitous, “yet remaining apart.” It is the “zenith of beauty,” but it is not able to be seen with outer eyes. Bhai Vir Singh wants to tell us here that the Divine is always everywhere, but that a connection
with the Divine is not always present. And it is this fact which makes opening one’s inner eyes and seeing the Divine so important – for when you make that connection, you see the most beautiful One imaginable.

Inner eyes are so important to Bhai Vir Singh because it allows the connection to the Divine that he so desires. For this connection is filled with the greatest emotion of all: love. Bhai Vir Singh titled this collection of poems *My Beloved* in reference to the Divine he loves so much. He expresses this love in myriad ways, and one of these is through the visual sense with eyes. From *Dil Vatandra (Exchange of Hearts)* (N. Singh 2008, p. 106):

Your radiance strikes arrows at my heart,
No, my dear, I should say love abides in my eyes;
Will your eyes carry away the flow of my love?
No my dear, no, let them irrigate my inner recesses.
My love for you my dear hides deep in my heart
Delicate is the tenderness of my castle.
How can eyes reach its interior space?
How can I have a vision? So delicate is that handsome one.
I have heard it is impossible to get there, seductive love.
Do give me some advice my beautiful dear friends.
A heart can only chime with another heart, my dear.
We get by giving ours — this is the name of love.
When we give away some of our heart full of love
We get even more! There is no other way.
This we call the exchange of hearts, my dear:
One heart shared by the lover and the beloved
Their hearts beating together is the ancient way
So let our two hearts unite in a single body.

The poet starts by introducing the Divine visually in the form of “radiance” that “strikes arrows” at his heart; the love that the poet feels for the Divine is so strong it is as painful as being struck by an arrow.

But then the poet tells us that thinking about his love in this way is wrong, for “love abides in [his] eyes,” not his heart! The eyes have become so powerful that they now are the residence for the poet’s love.

The poet then gives love a motive dimension, wondering if the Divine’s eyes will “carry away the flow” of his love. As one by definition casts out his gaze and receives images in return, it is natural to associate some motion with sight, and Bhai Vir Singh wants to firmly show that this motion is not
superficial. Love does not flow out of his eyes, like an ordinary gaze would flow from one’s outer eyes, but love resides in the inner eyes, and flows inward - The Divine’s eyes “irrigate [the poet’s] inner recesses,” moving inward to “hide deep in [his] heart.” The poet then intimates the wonder he feels about this love by asking questions about the possibility of such love. The Divine is so marvelous and beyond human comprehension that Bhai Vir Singh cannot help but ponder Its love. “How can eyes reach its interior space? How can I have a vision?” “I have heard it is impossible to get there.” Without the Divine’s help, humans are unable to see inside themselves. Bhai Vir Singh here echoes the notion he gave us in the first of his poems in Dew Drops, that the Divine has “given us the gift of sight.” But now in My Beloved, Bhai Vir Singh is no longer satisfied with just such a revelation about the nature of our inner sight; he wants to tie it directly with a deep and warm love.

The vocabulary the poet uses expresses a very intimate and loving relationship with the Divine. The poet calls the Divine “my dear” five times throughout the poem. He also calls It “handsome one” and “seductive love.” The intimacy here is in the utmost, and is further enhanced by the romantic imagery: “delicate is the tenderness of my castle.” By using such warm and loving words, the poet creates an incredibly soft and caring tone for the whole poem, which allows him to express his emotions of love to us aesthetically. Bhai Vir Singh has carefully created a world we can enter in these 18 lines that immerses us in the warm sentiments of his heart. This world immersion is perhaps a poet’s greatest tool for explaining a concept or feeling osmotically. The heart of this poem comes about half way through when Bhai Vir Singh begins describing the nature of love itself, having used the visual nature of the eyes to set a context of his personal love, which he could later generalize to all love. Love here is essentially a mutual experience: “a heart can only chime with another heart.” The poet then tells us clearly how we can receive love: “we get by giving ours – this is the name of love.” As if to allay fears that giving some of your love would leave you with less, the poet reaffirms the mutual nature of love: “when we give away some of our heart full of love we get even more!” The poet then completely denies
any other method of loving, saying “there is no other way.” Bhai Vir Singh is presenting to us his
definition of love, and giving us clear instructions on how to attain it. He even gives love a name: “this
we call the exchange of hearts.” It is important to note that for his definition of love, Bhai Vir Singh
constantly uses “we” and not “I;” this tells us that the poet is bringing us a universal definition of love –
one that is accepted by others.

The poet then redefines his newly named term for love as “one heart shared by the lover and
beloved” – exchanging hearts has literally created a union of hearts – the lover and the beloved now
share just one. Bhai Vir Singh gives even more validity to his claims, saying this has always been what
love is: “their hearts beating together is the ancient way.” The goal of this poem was not simply to
inform us of the nature of love, or that it resides in the inner eyes. Bhai Vir Singh wants to share the
love for the Divine, and allow others to experience it as he has. He ends with just one simple line, a
romantic call to action: “so let our two hearts unite in a single body.” This is not only a plea for himself
to unite with the Divine, but an invitation for all the world.

The visual sense in Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry is infused with Granthian imagery and notions of the
Divine. The idea that the Divine’s Gaze is necessary for liberation is present in both collections of poetry,
as is the formless notion of the Divine; nowhere in his poetry does Bhai Vir Singh ever attempt to
describe what the Divine looks like. The Divine can only be “seen” metaphorically through the inner
eyes – which represent a journey of inward self-discovery which leads to Divine knowledge, as the Guru
Granth tells us that the Divine’s light is in each and every one of us. Both Dew Drops and My Beloved
are united on the necessity of using the inner eye to understand the Divine and on the Divine’s
conception as formless and a source of wondrous joy. But as with the auditory sense, the main
difference between the two works comes from a manifestation of distance between the Divine and Bhai
Vir Singh in the poetry. In Dew Drops, the young Vir Singh is buoyant and full of life, describing the
beautiful wonders of the Divine’s natural world and showing an eagerness to reveal how one should use
one’s inner eyes. By the time of My Beloved, Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry reflected a less active lifestyle, and one where sorrow caused by separation from the Divine became a greater part of his life.

Bhai Vir Singh’s intimate portrayal of the Divine demonstrates his faithful interpretation of Sikh scripture. The lens of sight creates an aesthetic space where Bhai Vir Singh can draw himself and the Divine into an extremely close amorous relationship. This sense of romantic affection is alien to Western theological notions of divinity, where the divine would never be considered a lover. It is always removed from close, personal moments to a transcendent realm where it holds power over humanity, and acts more like a protector. Bhai Vir Singh’s Divine is quite different, even capable of “seductive love” and uniting Its heart with the poet in a single body. This conception of the Divine is totally natural for Vir Singh, however, as the image of the Divine as a lover is quite common in the Guru Granth.
The sense of touch is important in that it connects us physically to the world around us. It allows us to physically interact with objects and other people in the world around us; without it, we would neither be able to feel the pain from a thorn’s prick or the warmth of an embrace from our dearest loved ones. For this reason, physical union often becomes associated with emotional union – a hug becomes a physical manifestation of a loving union; its emotional warmth is associated with its physical warmth. In Sikhism, “the goal of Sikh moral life is union with the Divine. This union liberates the individual from the cycle of birth and death. When individuals merge with the spaceless and timeless One, they become infinite themselves. Thus confinements are shattered and the person never returns to any finite form. However, this freedom (moksha or mukti) is attained while participating vibrantly in daily life.” (N. Singh, Sikhism p. 65-66) When ultimate Sikh union with the Divine occurs, Sikhs leave their normal physical existence and enter the realm of the Divine. The confinements of a physical form disappear, and union occurs in an infinite manner – beyond the realm of normal human experience.

Because the Divine is formless, physical union with the Divine is impossible. However, physical and sexual union with the Divine is often used as a metaphor for true union with the Divine in Sikh scripture. A popular image in the Guru Granth is that of the bride enjoying her Divine groom, which expresses the intensity of Divine union through positive sexuality of the female and her body. (N. Singh 2012, p. 51)

With our light merged in yours –
Our consciousness tuned in with yours,
Violence and selfishness slip away;
There is no more doubt or sorrow.
Those whose hearts hold the One,
The Guru leads them to their Divine union.

If we make our body like that of a bride,
The Enjoyer will take pleasure in us;
Do not fall in love with anything
That is fleeting.  
The virtuous are like an auspicious wife:  
   She enjoys the divine spouse on her bed.

The four fires are extinguished  
   By the waters from the divine font;  
A lotus blooms wide inside,  
   Thirst is quenched by an ambrosial flow.  
Says Nanak, befriend the Guru,  
   So you will receive truth at the divine door.

Union with the Divine is described in different ways – visually through a merging of the individual’s light with the Divine’s, which represents a tuning of one’s “consciousness” to the Divine; and physically through the “holding” of the Divine through the “hearts” of those who love the Divine. Then the Guru refers to himself and all Sikhs as a bride, and tells us “If we make our body like that of a bride, the Enjoyer will take pleasure in us.” Sexual union with the Divine will not only succeed in bringing us “truth” but also bring pleasure to the Divine – union between the Divine and the individual is intimate and pleasurable. We are then told “The virtuous are like an auspicious wife: she enjoys the divine spouse on her bed,” reiterating the importance of sexual union with the Divine by making it a necessity for virtuosity.

In Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry, the sense of touch is much less prevalent than sight or hearing. It is also rare to see the sense of touch as the only sense present in a poem; it is often accompanied by one or more of the other senses. Just as in the Guru Granth, Bhai Vir Singh uses physical touch to represent union with the Divine; the desire to unite with the Divine is represented by the desire to physically embrace It. And when there is a metaphorical physical distance between the Divine and Bhai Vir Singh, Vir Singh feels disconnected from the Divine and experiences the sorrow associated with that disconnect.

In Dew Drops, physical actions and sensations are often mediated by strong, sometimes polar emotions – exuberance and depression are manifested physically and can usually be directly linked to distance from the Divine. From Ucchi Mati (High Wisdom) (N. Singh 2008, p. 19):
With my heart clutched tight, I spiral down,
Depression has hit me low;
That laughter, those smiling faces,
The more I want, the farther they go.
How do I jump on the swing of oblivion
To catch some peace and calm?
These brakes pulling me down
Won’t let go!

Clutches of your heart will release
If you hang on to the high One;
Its pull will spring you up.
With your strong hands
Steal its beauty, and
Tie it to your heart.
Thus you’ll be freed from depression:
Those choking chains will break open.

We see here the physical effects that depression has on the young Bhai Vir Singh; it has “hit [him] low” and he “spirals down” with his “heart clutched tight” - his negative emotions are manifested into painful physical activities. We then see that the things he desires – “that laughter, those smiling faces” – are physically distant from him with an inverse relationship: “the more I want, the farther they go.” The poet then asks how to be rid of his depression in dramatic fashion using physical imagery: “how do I jump on the swing of oblivion to catch some peace and calm?” The poet then tells us that his plight is from an embrace of depression: “these brakes pulling me down won’t let go!” Unlike the Divine which brings love when It embraces, depression is something that keeps the poet down and refuses to loosen its hold. But the poet is here to tell us the remedy to the problem, using the same physical embracing he had just used, but now with the Divine: “clutches of your heart will release if you hang on to the high One.” The physical pain that was taking hold on the poet’s heart can be relieved by hanging onto the Divine. And even though depression pulls one down and won’t let go, the Divine’s “pull will spring you up.” There is not even a contest between the negative pull of depression and the positive pull of the Divine – the Divine merely removes the depression without thought or mention – “you’ll be freed from depression: those choking chains will break open.” It is important to note here the shift in actor
between the first and second stanza: in the first, the poet is the actor and describes his own depression, whereas in the second the reader becomes the actor and is given the potential to escape the depression mentioned previously. Bhai Vir Singh here is expressing in his youthful revelatory way how one should live one’s life in light of the Divine; if depression is pulling you down, you must simply “with your strong hands steal [the Divine’s pull’s] beauty, and tie it to your heart.” In order to escape the pull of depression, one must embrace the pull of the Divine with their physically strong bodies, and literally tie it to one’s heart – creating a physical union.

The notion of union with and separation from the Divine is also explored through the juxtaposition of sexual union and physical distance in Kiven Na Fadinda (Somehow Not Caught) (N. Singh 2008, p. 35):

Appearing with those seductive eyes
  Strapping your suspenders tight,
You fire sensations I cannot bear
  Again and again in my mind!
Sometime you come and stay on my lips —
  Smiling, sipping, savoring;
Entering inside, you set off tremors
A jolt, my heart is snatched away!

Enchanted, ecstatic, and in joy
  I jump to catch but you run away;
Slipping away from my hands,
  You elude us all!
My tender love and reverent lips
  How come they cannot catch you?
For a moment it’s almost as though—
But how quickly from my arms you go!

We see here that associated with the physical sense of touch is sexuality. Physically embracing the Divine is not just achieved through a loving hug but also through passionate sexual union, just as the bride with her Divine groom in the Guru Granth. The poem is addressed directly to the Divine, creating the same sense of intimacy and romanticism. The Divine is at the start described as alluring: “appearing with those seductive eyes, strapping your suspenders tight,” and immediately afterwards we see the
passion of the Divine: “your fire sensations I cannot bear again and again.” We then see the physical sensation of “kissing” mixed with imagery normally reserved for “tasting,” highlighting the joy of the act: “sometimes you come and stay on my lips – smiling, sipping, savoring.” The physical act of kissing here is not a quick sensation but an action that brings continued enjoyment. Bhai Vir Singh uses the image of lips to refer back to the Guru Granth, where: “thirst is quenched by an ambrosial flow.” Kissing the Divine is like receiving the ambrosial Word of the Divine directly through physical contact instead of through the sense of taste. Vir Singh uses tasting imagery to further strengthen his allusion through “sipping, savoring” the kiss of the Divine. The sexual activity then climaxes at the end of the stanza, signaling to the reader a completed event: “enter inside, you set off tremors.” Since the structure of all the poems in Dew Drops is the same, the reader at this point will feel that the message of this poem is completed, seeing the sexual union between the poet and the Divine culminated and the poet’s heart “snatched away.”

However, this is one of the few poems in the collection that uses two stanzas, and so Bhai Vir Singh uses the context he establishes in the first stanza to segue into the brief nature of his connection with the Divine. In the first, we see the passion of sexual union with the Divine, and in the second, the immediate aftermath: “enchanted, ecstatic, and in joy I jump to catch you but you run away.” Being filled with joy from his coupling with the Divine, the poet seeks to hold onto the Divine for a longer period of time, and keep It with him. But the Divine’s presence is transient, and we see the distance between the Divine and the poet exist as a physical separation. The Divine “runs away” and “slips away” from the poet’s hands - the loss of the connection with the Divine is represented by a break from physical contact. We then see that this situation is true for everyone, as the Divine “elude[s] us all” in this manner. The poet, having found such great joy and excitement from their union, wonders why he is not good enough to keep the Divine in his arms: “my tender love and reverent lips how come they cannot catch you?” Bhai Vir Singh here wants to reveal to us the nature of connection with the Divine –
it comes in brief, passionate spurts that cannot be held onto even with “tender love.” The Divine’s presence can leave so quickly that it can interrupt a thought before it finishes, which is exactly how Bhai Vir Singh ends the poem: “for a moment it’s almost as though – but how quickly from my arms you go!” The physical break from the embrace signifies the end of the connection, and is abrupt. The poet does not have time to dwell on it or express any misery; this is merely the natural state of affairs. Union with the Divine is passionate, wonderful, and ends quickly, but it can be repeated “again and again” and so is not something to lament.

Bhai Vir Singh also uses the physical sense more abstractly to explain the happiness that comes from union with the Divine. From *Ape Da Uchhal (Exulting Self)* (N. Singh 2008, p. 44):

When we jump out of our egoistic self,
That is when we savor joy;
If we divide our self from the Other,
How could we ever delight?
Recognize that your joy
Comes from the Other
So know, hold, and leap high —
Your self will never splinter.

Here we literally have a physical divide between abstract parts of our self. Praising humility, the poet tells us that “we savor joy” when we physically “jump out of our egoistic self.” This notion comes right from the Sikh aversion to *haumai*. “*Haumai* is the selfish investment of oneself with pride and arrogance. By constantly centering on the ‘I’, ‘me’ and ‘mine’, the self is circumscribed as a particular person, wrenched from his/her universal root... By building up the selfish ego, the individual is divided from the One Reality.” (N. Singh, Sikhism p. 71) This poem is Bhai Vir Singh’s attempt to teach others about *haumai* and why we should avoid it. Right away we see that the poem is meant for the reader, as the poet uses “we” and “your;” this poem is meant to be revelatory and informative on how one should live. Physical union with the Divine is what brings us happiness, as the poet asks rhetorically “if we divide our self from the Other, how could we ever delight?” and then even explicitly commands “recognize that your joy comes from the Other.” A connection is brought between knowledge and physical contact, as
knowing and holding are placed hand in hand when dealing with the Divine. And if one is able to “know, hold, and leap high,” then one “will never splinter.” Bhai Vir Singh ends with an inspiring message that empowers the reader. If one is in tune with one’s physical sense and connects with the Divine physically, then one will know the Divine and indeed one’s own “self” will never be broken down into pieces.

One interesting phenomenon we see with the physical sense is that it shows up in many of the longer and more complex poems. In Dew Drops, we see it in two of the longer, two stanza poems, and in My Beloved it appears in 3 of the longest poems. Perhaps because the physical sense is less straightforward than the others in terms of its manifestations or its enjoyment, Bhai Vir Singh needs a more structurally complex space to talk about it. In My Beloved, this sometimes takes the form of narrative poems, which we never saw in Dew Drops, due to the length required to complete a narrative arc. These short stories are allegorical and used to teach the reader some part of the nature of the Divine.

In Lagg Gai Si Bali Umare (Struck By Desire) (N. Singh 2008, p. 57), the poet literally speaks from the perspective of a “little girl of tender age.” The beginning is filled with a few nostalgic memories from an ordinary childhood, with the girl doing activities such as “playing dress-up with my baby dolls,” and “filling platters with marbles with my friends.” In the second section of the poem, we see:

I was sound asleep locked in childhood sleep,  
Nobody was around me — no nurse, mother, father.  
The moon in the skies was sending its silvery waves  
Stars were emitting their caressing rays —  
Those soft delicious rays hit my tender face.  
You came cloaked hidden in the night of silver  
You kissed my forehead in moonlight’s dazzle,  
You slipped a ring around my little finger,  
Then you leaned over my ear and whispered something  
I was asleep, but perhaps inside I was awake  
You went away cloaked in the night of silver.

The challenge of narrative poetry is evident in the complexity even of the lines – they are now longer than other poems from My Beloved, and there are many more – 46 lines total. The poet uses this space
to bring us through the journey of this little girl, from dreaming to waking and then back to dreaming. We see here that in her dream, there was no one physically present, and specifically mentioned are those people for whom the girl would normally have strong affections – her nurse, mother and father. But she is not alone, as we see by the physical contact between her and the moon and stars. A sense of great care and luxurious comfort is given by the physical imagery – the rays of the stars are “caressing,” “soft,” and “delicious;” and they hit her “tender face.” The interaction between the natural world and this young girl is warm and loving, like a parent to his or her own child. The poet then shows us that this warmth is coming from the Divine, as It “kissed [her] forehead in the moonlight’s dazzle.” Unlike in *Dew Drops*, the physical union between the Divine and the poet is warm and comforting, not passionate and sexual. The softness of the connection shows that Bhai Vir Singh is now looking for love and support from the Divine, not just an exciting or powerful lover. Instead of a strong embrace, the Divine “slipped a ring around [the girl’s] little finger,” a much smaller form of physical contact but more constant and lasting. The Divine once again leaves at the end of the stanza, but this time It has left behind a ring for the girl.

In the third section of the poem, the girl wakes up in a confused state. But where the Divine had kissed her “forehead throbbed in joy.” The place of physical contact between the girl and the Divine is where her joy came from, literally described as “a delicious fountain burst inside.” The joy of physical union with the Divine has created such desire in her heart that the little girl’s “little finger shook shooting tremors in [her] heart.” Bhai Vir Singh remembers back to a youthful time when he felt such joy and desire to meet the Divine, but we see him describe such memories as “a naïve girl I was struck by desire.” In the final section of the poem we see the reason for the naiveté; that the Divine went off “not waiting a wink” which caused the girl’s desire to “grow even more.” Being so young and inexperienced, she did not realize the transient nature of connection with the Divine. And so she says:

“Close close, near me, here, closer to me
Come my Beloved! Yes please do come for sure!”
Kisses with your own lips see how they make it flutter
   My forehead, look at it, also look at my trembling finger —
   Yes, with the ring you slipped on, and that too trembles
It wants to touch your lotus feet
Seeking a vision of your luminous form.”

Seeking connection to the Divine, the girl desires physical closeness and kisses. Her desire is manifested physically in her “trembling finger” that “wants to touch your lotus feet.” The physical desire is also joined by the visual desire to see “a vision of your luminous form.” The poet ends the poem with this desire of the young girl unanswered – it merely goes off, leaving the reader without a conclusion. But this is the tragic element of My Beloved; the strong desire to connect with the Divine is not always fulfilled, and the poet is often left wanting more. Unlike the almost unanimously joyous or revelatory Dew Drops, there is a sadness which permeates My Beloved. Even though he is just seeking a warm and caring embrace from the Divine, his wish is not always fulfilled. It is this sadness that the poet is sharing with us.

Some of this sadness comes from the infirmity of old age. Unlike in Dew Drops, in My Beloved Bhai Vir Singh is often incapable of reaching the Divine. He describes himself as physically weak and therefore unable to cross the distance to reach the Divine, and so he must plead with the Divine to come to him. From Mil Vela Uu (Meeting Time) (N. Singh 2008, p. 63):

Calling out loud by the river,
Frantically waving my arms in the air,
Stammering, bawling, “Beloved, Beloved,”
   You carefree self you!

Swim? I can’t, my arms are too weak,
The river hisses in its tidal waves.
Walk? I can’t, there is no path,
   Lover, friend, you comforter!

My raft is too old,
Too ragged from use,
I see no oars, no ferryman,
   Going across is far too threatening.

Amidst billowing clouds and gusty winds,
Men who pilot aeroplanes,
Scream and yell in panic:
— “This is not the time to fly.”

My helplessness knows no bounds my love!
The wish to meet you has doubled itself
I am calling you in agony my Beloved
Come, you come yourself and meet with me!

The first five stanzas of the poem mirror each other in structure and content, reinforcing the message that the poet’s “helplessness knows no bounds.” The poet is in an abysmal state; he is “frantically waving” his arms, “stammering, bawling,” calling out the Divine’s name in despair. He cannot swim because his “arms are too weak,” and there is a terrifying obstacle before him: a river that “hisses in its tidal waves.” He also cannot walk to reach the Divine because “there is no path.” His “raft” which symbolizes his physical vessel is now “too old” and “too ragged from use,” and there is nothing and no one can help him across the river: “no oars, no ferryman.” Even those with the ability to fly tell the poet that “this is not the time to fly” due to the dangerous “gusty winds.” The worn state of his physical body has greatly upset Bhai Vir Singh, and his mortality has surely made him feel inept. He no longer has the strength and passion of youth to reach and embrace the Divine. The Divine has also transformed into more than just a lover, but also a “friend” and “comforter.” Being older and weaker, Bhai Vir Singh is more interested in someone who will care for him than an exciting lover. He needs a Divine who will “come [Itself] and meet with [him].” And to show the seriousness of his desire, he explicitly states that “the wish to meet you has doubled itself,” and says that he is calling the Divine “in agony.” The final stanza praises the Divine, calling It “omnipotent with all the facilities” and that It also has “compassion and empathy.” Knowing that Divine has the power to do anything, the poet pleads with the Divine to “quickly let the meeting time be” – he quickly wants his physical reunion with the Divine he loves so much.

The entirety of this poem is very reminiscent of one by Sheikh Farid in the Guru Granth. When compiling the Guru Granth, Guru Arjan included poetry that he felt encapsulated the spirit of Sikhism,
even though the authors themselves might be Muslim or Hindu, and not Sikh. This inclusivity must have had an impact on Bhai Vir Singh, as *Meeting Time* mirrors the following poem in several ways. (N. Singh 2012, p. 56)

When it was time to make a raft  
You did not make yourself one;  
Now that the waves leap high  
How difficult it is to stay afloat!

Why hold the saffron flower?  
Its color runs, my dear.

You are weak to begin with, and  
The husband’s order is strong;  
Your breast cannot flow  
With milk any more.

Says Farid, O dear friends  
When our husband calls,  
The swan of duality will fly away  
Our body will be a heap of dust.

The setting and imagery is very similar in the two poems. Sheikh Farid uses the same situation of crossing a river filled with dangerously high waves on a raft. The poem is about the infirmity of old age, and the transience of the human body. Just as Bhai Vir Singh’s arms were too weak, so too is Sheikh Farid’s addressed female protagonist. She is old enough now that her “breast cannot flow with milk any more.” Just as Bhai Vir Singh ends his poem in agony, so too does Farid end his poem on a dark note: “our body will be a heap of dust.” In old age, our bodies will fail us and become weaker, and eventually we shall become dust. Bhai Vir Singh has closely modeled his own poem about the infirmity of old age after this Muslim poet. This shows that to Vir Singh, Sikh identity is not defined as a separation from other religions, as his very own poetry is modeled after poems from another religion’s poet. But Sikhism has adopted the words of this Muslim poem, and in so doing, made them a part of the Sikh tradition to which Bhai Vir Singh wanted to return.
Even though sight and hearing seem to dominate the sensory experience in Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry, especially when they are combined with the other three senses, each sense is important in its own right. There are times when the physical sense is more important than other senses when it comes to connecting with the Divine, and this is evident in Bolan Da Nahion Tan (No Art of Language) (N. Singh 2008, p. 72):

My memory — that memory of mine,  
Erases all chasms my Beloved!  
When you come and embrace  
Take me tightly in your arms, 
My lips close, I become mute —  
How can I explain my state?  
Be silent O friend, O handsome be silent!  
Here the art of language is lost  
“Understanding” “thought” “speech”  
Here inevitably come to a halt. 
Yes, my friend!  
When you take me tightly in your arms  
I have no strength to speak, 
The art of language is lost.

Here we see that when physical union has been achieved, it dominates the poet’s experience and places him in an unexplainable state. The sense of hearing and therefore speech is lost: “my lips close, I become mute.” Indeed, even internal words formed by thought, and understanding itself “come to a halt” as “the art of language is lost.” The physical sensorial experience when the Divine “takes [the poet] tightly in [Its] arms” is so intense that all other senses and mental faculties cease — the Divine’s physical presence is simply overwhelming.

Bhai Vir Singh also talks about the joy of embracing the Divine in comparison to other senses in Sainat (Sign) (N. Singh 2008, p. 84):

About the joy of embracing our Love,  
Ask the breeze from the ocean waves:  
Caressing you over and over  
That joy of embracing you  
She can easily explain.

About the joy of embracing our Love,
Ask the fragrance:
Wrapped intimately around you
She will give us a sense
Of the joyous scent of embracing you tight.

About the joy of embracing our Love,
Ask the beautiful woman:
With her lips bursting into smile
Her eyes bouncing off light
She’ll teach us the joy of embracing.

About the joy of meeting our Love,
Ask the one who is imbued in color:
Tears fill his two eyes,
His forehead glows
With the sign that shows
This is the joy of divine union.

Embracing the Divine is a marvelous event that brings great joy to the poet. The physical sensation of “divine union” is described in terms of olfactory and visual experiences that compare with the “breeze from the ocean waves” in the first stanza. The poet tells us that we can ask four different natural phenomena, and each one will “teach the joy of embracing” in its own unique way. Bhai Vir Singh is here drawing a parallel between the senses and experiencing the Divine; physical union with the divine is analogous to visual and olfactory union with the Divine. All out sensorial experiences relate to one another and allow for Divine connection.

In contrast to *Kiven Na Fadinda* from *Dew Drops*, in *My Beloved* Bhai Vir Singh’s sexual union with the Divine has become less about passion and more about warmth and love. From *Essian Ratan (Such Nights)* (N. Singh 2008, p. 91):

Night of the full moon
Bright light flooding through
My satiny white terrace
I am lying on my bed
With my eyes closed —
We have our tender union.
My lotus-heart and you
You, you, you!
My mind free of anxiety
Rapt in holding you, you, only you!
My Beloved! My beloved!
Do give me such nights, won’t you!

The very animated and kinetic experience of *Kiven Na Fadinda* is now replaced with a beautiful and softly romantic “night of the full moon.” There is no longer unbearable “fire sensations” but a “satiny white terrace;” there are no more “tremors” and “jolts” but instead a “tender union.” The soft romanticism that permeates this poem is very calm and pacific; Bhai Vir Singh’s fiery and passionate youth has been superseded by softness and a desire for comfort and warm love. The poem is still addressed in the same way: from the poet to the Divine. But now instead of wondering why their union does not last and sharing a revelation about its transience, the older Bhai Vir Singh now merely pleads with the Divine to give him “such nights” filled with love. He knows by now the transience of physical connection to the Divine, and no longer needs to comment on it; he is solely focused on achieving that connection again.

The physical sense in Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry is manifested using Granthian imagery of physical and sexual union with the Divine. The desire to connect with the Divine is shown through the desire to physically embrace the Divine in a loving manner. In *Dew Drops*, this desire is more sexual and exciting, whereas in *My Beloved*, Bhai Vir Singh’s sexual desire has been replaced more with a need for softer comfort and care. The infirmity of old age is bothering Vir Singh in *My Beloved*, and the physical disconnect between himself and the Divine brings him great sorrow. We see Bhai Vir Singh borrow not only from the Sikh Gurus in his poetry, but also from a Muslim poet from the Guru Granth, demonstrating Bhai Vir Singh’s inclusive rather than exclusive mindset. The Sikh identity to which Bhai Vir Singh adheres stems from the Guru Granth itself, and not any contemporary notion of exclusivity.

More than any other sense, touch exhibits Bhai Vir Singh’s distinctly Sikh conception of the Divine. To be able to sexually unite with the Divine in a physical body in the human realm would be anathema in many Western theologies. The Western divine is always separate from the individual human and placed far above the world. Even if one were to hear divine words or see a covenant of the
divine such as a rainbow, the physical separation is always there – no one ever touches God. But Bhai Vir Singh’s Divine is intimately present in this world, and is able to be experienced physically. And a physical and sexual connection is not only possible; it is something good that brings great joy and wonderful feelings. The Western notion of a static, immutable One is not applicable – Bhai Vir Singh’s Divine is dynamic and engaging; It has the ability to interact with humans and enjoy them physically and sexually.
The sense of taste is an important one in the Sikh religion. Just as one can hear the revealed Word (bani) of the Divine through the auditory sense, one can taste It as well. Guru Arjan even states explicitly: “amrit bani rasna chakai – my tongue tastes the ambrosial word.” (N. Singh, Sikhism p. 75)

From the epilogue of the Guru Granth itself, we have (N. Singh 2012, p. 53):

On the platter, three things lie:

Truth, Contentment, Reflection;
They contain the ambrosial Name,
  By which we are sustained.
They who eat, they who savor,
  They are liberated.
This thing must not be abandoned,
  Ever and ever, keep it in your heart.
The dark ocean can be crossed,
  If we take hold of the Guru’s feet.
Says Nanak, all existence is the Divine’s expanse.

Bhai Vir Singh uses the image of ambrosia in his poetry as another metaphor for the Divine that would be instantly recognizable in the Sikh world. The overwhelming deliciousness of the Divine becomes his expression of joy, and so Bhai Vir Singh is able to branch out from ambrosia to talk about taste as a whole in regards to the Divine. After all, those who eat Truth, Contentment, and Contemplation from the platter mentioned by Guru Arjan are not the ones who are liberated; it is only those who “relish” these three that attain moksha. The importance of relishing empowers the sense of taste to something more than mere enjoyment, but essential for union with the Divine.

Tasting and eating are actually quite abundant in the poetry of Dew Drops, showing up in over 10 different poems. Bhai Vir Singh is very much concerned with the extremes of taste in this collection; he wants to explore the idea of savoring in its entirety in an attempt to better understand the Divine. He is still young and experiencing new things, and he has a strong desire to share the discoveries about life he is making. Sikhism is very much a religion about living and enjoying everyday life, as opposed to religions such as Christianity or Islam that mainly focus on the afterlife, or ascetics who renounce the
world. In the Guru Granth it says: “spiritual liberation is attained in the midst of laughing, playing, dressing up and eating.” (N. Singh, Sikhism p. 69) This is never more evident than in Ajjo (Today) (N. Singh 2008, p. 21):

Sip it today, sip it right now,
And keep on sipping....
From the cup of primal nectar
Don’t take your lips away.
Sip it continuously and rejoice,
Its ecstasy will not wane;
Who knows about tomorrow?
Death may reduce us to ash.

The poet here presents immediacy to us at the beginning of the poem: he wants us to sip not just “today” but “right now” and continuously without end. This is meant to draw the reader in, as we are not given the object of our sipping until the third line – the “primal nectar” mentioned by the Guru as ambrosia. The poet then reiterates the point: “don’t take your lips away” from the cup – this is a very important lesson to the poet, worth repeating over and over. We are finally given the reason for our actions – by sipping the primal nectar, we will “rejoice” and the “ecstasy” it brings us “will not wane.” The Divine is able to enter us and fill us with ecstasy through our sense of taste, and with unlimited potential as well. No matter how long we sip, there will always be more primal nectar – a testament to the infinite nature of the Divine. The poet then gives us a reason for the immediacy of our action, if endless joy were not enough – “who knows about tomorrow?” Humans are not able to predict the future, and so we can never be sure what our exact situation will be even tomorrow. Indeed, “death may reduce us to ash.”

Bhai Vir Singh is calling our attention to the current state and forcing us to look at how we are living our lives at this very moment, and reminding us about what he feels is important – we should be enjoying life with the Divine at all times; it is not something to put off until tomorrow.

Young Bhai Vir Singh talks more directly about the effects of the Divine drink in the two stanza

*Amar Rasa (Immortal Drink)* (N. Singh 2008, p. 12):

Pretty hands, carafe, and cup
Turn sadness into smiles.
Seeing the good person’s happy face,
The carafe begins to cry.
Seeing her tears, he happily says,
“I did not bring bitter wine:
Immortal wine fills this carafe,
Its drink makes the dead come to life.”

We see from the beginning that the aesthetic senses of sight and taste are bringers of happiness: the visually pleasing “pretty hands” and the vessels that symbolize good taste “carafe, and cup” have the power to “turn sadness into smiles.” And upon seeing the happiness that is brought to a “good person’s” face, the carafe has an emotional response – it “begins to cry.” In response to her tears, the good person seeks to reassure her by saying that he “did not bring bitter wine.” What he has brought is something amazing indeed: “immortal wine” that “makes the dead come to life.” This is our clue that we are now dealing with a Divine drink, as only through the Divine can one overcome the cycle of death and rebirth.

Give us a drop from this carafe —
Let thoughts drown in the sea
Lift us up to the inebriated skies
Shatter our agendas and anxieties.
Radiant nine colors we see
As our swings go round in ecstasy!
Wafts of infinite comforts come to embrace —
Never to return — such is their union.

Having set up this context in the first stanza, the poet is then able to give a personal response to the powerful Divine drink already defined. We are then brought on a majestic journey through the effects of merely one “drop” from the carafe holding the “immortal wine.” We are taken in two physical directions simultaneously: our “thoughts drown in the sea” while we are “lifted to the inebriated skies.” The poet wants to instill in the reader a sense of freedom of motion, and so asks to “shatter our agendas and anxieties” – sources of restriction and trepidation. The poet then brings in the visual dimension to heighten the splendor of the description: “radiant nine colors we see as our swings go round in ecstasy.” The inebriation gained from the drink of the Divine is a sense of joy that is so wondrous it leaves the
bounds of human experience: “wafts of infinite comforts come to embrace.” The infinite nature of the
Divine brings about uncountable comforts, but they are “never to return – such is their union.”

Bhai Vir Singh chooses to end his poem that was leading to a euphoric sensorial climax with a
theologically complex statement. This brings all our excitement to a point and refocuses it completely
into a contemplative mood. This kind of jarring experience is one way that the poet can attempt to
highlight an issue he wants a reader to consider more deeply, especially considering the end of the
poem already has special importance, being the last impression someone receives from a poem. The
nature of the Divine is complex and a human cannot hope to fully comprehend infinity as the Divine
might be able to Itself. This sometimes leaves questions for humans to consider. If Bhai Vir Singh is
intimating here that each experience of the Divine – each sip from Its immortal wine - is unique in its
wonder, then it makes sense that the “infinite comforts” felt at one point would never return again,
because there are infinitely many more comforts and delights from the Divine to be experienced. The
nature of union with the Divine would then be that each experience with the Divine is unique, and such
a thing is magnificent and infinite itself. Whatever the individual interpretation, Bhai Vir Singh’s goal to
induce the reader to thought would surely be successful, given its climactic appeal.

In order to intimate how desirous the Divine’s drink is to taste, Bhai Vir Singh adopts the
character of an addict in Almi-Sophi (Addict-Abstainer) (N. Singh 2008, p. 27):

Give us a drop from your carafe
    Just give us one, O love!
Give us its half or yet even half of half,
    O give us the tiniest of the tiny, Beloved!
Just once may we have a sip,
    So we break our Sufi abstinence!
We stand at your threshold
Give us a taste O Beloved!

Here we see the desperate nature of an addict seeking even the tiniest bit of his addiction. The poet is
frantically asking for a “drop” from the Divine’s carafe, which contains the immortal wine. So great is his
desire that he will settle for “just one,” “its half or yet even half of half,” “the tiniest of the tiny.” Bhai
Vir Singh aims to express the wondrous power that the taste of just one drop holds by showing how desperately he will try to attain it. The pleading persists throughout the whole poem, never relenting—the addicting nature of the Divine’s taste is far too strong for any to resist after having tried it. By making it irresistible, Bhai Vir Singh wants to glorify the Divine he loves so much.

Bhai Vir Singh also uses food as a metaphor to talk about another addiction—a desire for knowledge. From *Ilm, Amal (Knowledge, Addiction)* (N. Singh 2008, p. 26):

Making my head a bowl in hand
I wandered in search of knowledge,
From door to door I begged for food
Filling it to the brim.
Seeing it stuffed I swelled with pride,
— I was a learned scholar.
My feet refused to touch the ground,
I bounced pompously up in the air.

One day I took this bowl and
Placed it before a master. Saying,
“False! False!” he flipped it over,
And emptied all its contents.
He scrubbed and scrubbed and washed it clean
—Wiping off its mental stains.
See, how this bowl now shines:
Like a lotus brightly blooming.

The message that the poet brings us here is admonitory: one should be wary not to be absorbed by arrogance. Bhai Vir Singh talked also about this problem through the sense of touch in *Exulting Self.*

This notion comes directly from the Sikh ideal of removing haumai—selfish pride or arrogance. “By building up the selfish ego, the individual is divided from the One Reality.” (N. Singh, Sikhism p. 71) Since connection with the Divine is Bhai Vir Singh’s ultimate goal, and his poetry is a way for him to share his aspirations, he naturally makes proscriptions against arrogance. Here we see him deliver the message in the form of a short first-person narrative. The poet’s head turns into a bowl and he goes “door to door” begging for food, eventually “filling it to the brim.” But the poet has told us that this quest is really one for “knowledge.” Upon filling his bowl, the poet “swelled with pride” at the fact he “was a learned
scholar.” Then his arrogance becomes manifested physically in an unsightly display: the poet’s “feet refused to touch the ground” and he “bounced pompously up in the air.” When he took his bowl before a “master,” however, the master immediately “flipped it over and emptied its contents.” The master, given true knowledge due to his title, was able to immediately identify the poet’s scholarly knowledge as “false,” and worked hard to scrub the bowl clean. And once it was emptied of all its previous knowledge, it shone “like a lotus brightly blooming.” Bhai Vir Singh wants to tell us that knowledge of the Divine is not something one attains by studying or seeking scholarly facts. In fact, one can only know the Divine if one is not thinking about scholarly pursuits at all, and has not inflated his ego with the status of “learned.”

Bhai Vir Singh does not use the sense of taste just to warn against arrogance; a similar proscriptive style can be found in the poem Pasari Ki Makhir? (Alchemist or Honeybee?) (N. Singh 2008, p. 13):

A chemist plucked a rose,
    He blended it with sugar over and over;
For sweetness he tried in vain,
    But the bitterness remained.
Had he gathered a drop like the honeybee:
    Neither the rose would be lost nor its flavor;
The bond with the gardener would not be severed,
The soothing drink would be enjoyed forever.

Here we see Bhai Vir Singh’s ecological leanings – how science corrupts the purity of the natural world. The chemist in the poem “plucked a rose” and “blended it with sugar over and over,” yet he was unable to produce the results he wanted. He tried “in vain” to produce “sweetness,” but “bitterness remained.” Unlike the continual ecstasy brought by the Divine’s immortal wine, the chemist’s unnatural concoction only brings “bitterness.” Bhai Vir Singh is cautioning against destroying nature for the sake of science, or for the sake of trying to improve nature. For we see that nature produces the best results: “had he gathered a drop like the honeybee” – a natural agent – “neither the rose would be lost nor its flavor.” We see now that there is a double tragedy – not only has the chemist ruined the flavor of the rose and
produced nothing but bitterness, but he has destroyed the rose in the process. But the natural world is self-sustaining, and had the chemist acted as part of it “the bond with the gardener would not be severed” and “the soothing drink would be enjoyed forever.” We see now that the chemist is not only destroying nature but also his connection with the Divine. To Bhai Vir Singh, there is an intimate connection between the natural world and the Divine, as the Divine is everywhere, nature must be a part of It. Science not only fails to improve upon nature, it destroys it, and severs all connection with the Divine. This is quite a serious tragedy, as connection with the Divine brings a “soothing drink” that can be enjoyed for all time.

Bhai Vir Singh also uses the sense of taste and food to make a comment about Christianity. From *Magganta (Devotion)* (N. Singh 2008, p. 16):

While living in the Garden of Eden,
Adam they say had some fruit.
Poor fellow was charged a criminal, and
Expelled from the garden of paradise.
Had he pressed the fruit in a jug
And drunk its nectar,
Adam would have gone far beyond Eden:
He would have attained the immortal seat.

Here the poet talks about the Biblical story of Adam and Eve – where Adam is given a forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge by his wife Eve, tricked by a snake, and is subsequently expelled from the Garden of Eden for eating it. Bhai Vir Singh’s purpose with this poem is to question the nature of the fairness in the Christian religion. Without giving the context for the forbidden nature of the “fruit” we see Adam had, the poet simply states that the “poor fellow was charged a criminal, and expelled from the garden of paradise.” The unfairness of this situation seems unquestionable, as Adam is a sympathetic “poor fellow” who was “charged a criminal” just for eating a fruit. And his punishment was expulsion from “the garden of paradise.” Such an outcome seems totally extreme for just “some fruit.” The poet then tells us that had Adam just “pressed the fruit in a jug and drunk its nectar” – an allusion to believing in the Divine and drinking the immortal wine – “Adam would have gone far beyond Eden: he
would have attained the immortal seat.” By choosing to be a Sikh instead of a Christian, Adam could have gone “beyond” the Christian realm of paradise – which insinuates that the Divine’s “immortal seat” is superior to the Christian God’s paradise. Bhai Vir Singh wants to intimate that Sikhism holds the true knowledge of the Divine and liberation. If Adam had chosen the Sikh path, he could have attained immortality through union with the Divine, but instead he followed the Christian path and was cast out of paradise.

Unlike in Dew Drops where the sense of taste was present in abundance either directly or indirectly, there is a paucity of taste in My Beloved. We no longer see the desperation of an addict or the lessons about knowledge as food. Since inebriation is a marker of jubilation and active excitement, it stands to reason that a much older Bhai Vir Singh would simply have less interest in taste and drinking, or that it might just be less prevalent in his life. Indeed, the few times we do see the sense of taste brought up are in mention of the Guru’s ambrosia.

In Chinn (A Fleeting Instant) (N. Singh 2008, p. 81), we see the “ambrosial drop” mentioned with temporality:

O my friend! Listen to me:
Between my waking and falling asleep
Lies an incredible moment.
An “ambrosial drop” is hidden
In its interstices
Like a drop of honey
Lies in the flower.
That moment I intimately touch
As if it were the threshold of my love.
It is a moment of unconsciousness awakening
How could we catch it O sister,
And seize it for ourselves forever!

Here, the poet describes to us “an incredible moment” that mysteriously lies between “waking and falling asleep.” In this undefined moment, the “ambrosial drop” of the Divine’s knowledge “is hidden.” Bhai Vir Singh uses another nature analogy to describe the Divine’s drop, which simultaneously assures its deliciousness “like a drop of honey” and its goodness. We then see that this moment is very precious
to the poet, as he “intimately touch[es]” it, “as if it were the threshold of [his] love” – a very important and dear thing. We then see that knowledge of the Divine, and therefore connection with the Divine “is a moment of unconsciousness awakening” – something ineffable and beyond the scope of normal human understanding, but right on the edge. The poem presents us with the idea that Divine knowledge is always accessible to us, but it is usually just beyond our recognition, in a land where our consciousness does not dwell. The poet wonders “how could we catch it” and “seize it for ourselves forever.” Bhai Vir Singh is still seeking Divine union, and wishes he could find a way to make that connection that seems just beyond his normal reach last for an eternity. This is a much more patient approach than in Dew Drops, where there was an addictive quality to drinking the ambrosial Word of the Divine; now Bhai Vir Singh is considering eternity instead of just the present moment.

In the final poem of My Beloved, we see the Divine’s cup once more. From Nam Pyala (The Ambrosial Cup) (N. Singh 2008, p. 144):

The cup of the beautiful Word
Is overflowing O friends!
Who will have a sip of it?
    Keep watching, O friends.
She whose own cup
    Is brimming with desire,
She alone will receive it, but
    Hold on to this secret.

In reference to the exact language used by Guru Arjan, we see that the subject of the poem is “the cup of the beautiful Word” of the Divine. As this is the last poem in the collection, it holds special significance, being the last impression a reader will have of Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry. Knowing this, Bhai Vir Singh chose to mirror Guru Arjan’s choice of ending the epilogue of the Guru Granth with a poem about the sense of taste. In the Granth, we see that liberation only comes from savoring, and here we see the same in the form of desire. “She whose own cup is brimming with desire, she alone will receive it.” It is the one who is filled with desire for the Divine and the taste of the Divine’s “beautiful Word.” It is important to note that the Divine’s cup is “overflowing” – there is an unlimited amount to it, meaning
it will always be there for everyone who desires it to enjoy. Everyone has access to the Divine, one just has to be willing. For this reason, Bhai Vir Singh tells us to “hold on to this secret” – everyone must find the Divine on their own; no one can give another a connection to the Divine. This short, inspirational poem is a fitting end to My Beloved, as it sums up Bhai Vir Singh’s dedication to keep trying to connect to the Divine he loves so much – a Divine that is overflowing with love for anyone who seeks it out.

Through the aesthetic realm of taste, Bhai Vir Singh was not only able to present his image of a loving Divine in line with the Guru Granth; he was also able to comment specifically on Western theology and Christianity. Unlike the Christian God who cast Adam out of paradise just for “eating some fruit,” Vir Singh’s Sikh Divine extends an open invitation of liberation to everyone through the delicious ambrosial nectar. Bhai Vir Singh disagrees with the Christian notion of a God removed from this world who judges humans and metes out punishment, even banishing them from eternal paradise for seemingly trivial acts. The Divine that Vir Singh loves is One that is intimately present and experienced through the senses. It is One that only offers “the immortal seat” and Divine union and does not take it away; It is always ready and willing to love those who desire It. Bhai Vir Singh is not making value judgements against Christians, however. Vir Singh is a person who has respect for other religions, and even shows sympathy in his poem for Adam and therefore all Christians for having a God that would cast them out of paradise. He does not distinguish between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs in his poems, so having a poem about Christianity shows Vir Singh’s desire to comment upon it; perhaps this is the poet’s personal response to Western theological influence. Bhai Vir Singh is stating through his poetry that he is distinctly Sikh, and that he had not been influenced by Western theological notions, as he has pity for those who received harsh treatment from the Western God. Bhai Vir Singh’s Divine is the immanent, loving, accepting One from the Guru Granth, That stands in contrast to the Western God.
Smell – The Flower’s Fragrance

In *Dew Drops* and *My Beloved*, the sense of smell is rarely present. Indeed, even in Sikhism we do not find much of the sense of smell. In Guru Nanak’s Japu – his introduction to the Guru Granth that sets out the foundations for Sikh metaphysics - all the senses are present except smell. The sense of smell is still important, however, as it also represents a possible aesthetic experience of the Divine, and therefore a way to receive Divine knowledge: “Only the relisher of fragrance can recognize the flower.” (N. Singh, Sikhism p. 74) Knowledge of the Divine Reality is represented by recognition of the true form of a flower. The sense of smell is linked with beautiful natural fragrances, and so it becomes associated with the Divine’s wonderful natural world. The natural world, as a Divine creation, becomes a source of joy and beauty that inspires Divine reverence.

In Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry, when smell is present, it also comes in the form of fragrance - usually from a flower. Bhai Vir Singh continues the Granthian appreciation for the natural world, and its resplendent beauty. However, even in poems that speak of nature and explicitly mention flowers, other senses take precedence, and sometimes smell is not even mentioned at all. Smells seems to be the least valued of the senses to Bhai Vir Singh, possibly because it offers a less climactic or euphoric appeal; there are rarely smells that are able to overwhelm with their beauty or goodness.

In *Dew Drops*, the collection that bolsters his more joyous, energetic and jubilant poetry, we only find smell mentioned in a single poem. And the goal of this poem is not to exalt the wonders of the Divine; it is proscriptive, and meant to teach the reader a lesson about how one should interact with nature - it should be respected as a joyous creation of the Divine. From *Gulab Da Phul Torhan Wale Nun (To The One Who Plucks the Rose)* (N. Singh 2008, p. 14):

Please do not cut us off our branch, for
We’ve set up our business of fragrance;
Were millions of shoppers to come by,
    Surely not one would go empty-handed.
But if you pluck one of us
    We’ll be consigned only to you;
That too a meeting evanescent —  
Our beauty and scent will soon vanish.

The poem is written from the perspective of the flowers, which is intended to arouse sympathy in the reader for nature — for humans are much more likely to sympathize with something if they know it can feel and converse. The flowers here are also pleading “please do not cut us off our branch,” and they offer reasons why one should not do this — they have set up a “business of fragrance.” The sense of smell here is realized as a commodity — fragrance can be sold, and it is something that people would want to buy. The flowers then talk about the scale of the benefit they can bring: “were millions of shoppers to come by, surely not one would go empty-handed.” Nature exists on a grand scale, and Bhai Vir Singh here wants to intimate that it is something that everyone can enjoy; it is not limited in its size and can fulfill the desires of every person. It is a natural analogy to the Divine, being expansive beyond comprehension and immensely beautiful. And since it is so worthwhile, Bhai Vir Singh wants to protect it, and offers very logical reasoning: “if you pluck one of us we’ll be consigned only to you.” Instead of pleasing millions of people, the flower would only be able to please a single person — which sounds like the height of selfishness. And then we see that this is bad for yet another reason: “our beauty and scent will soon vanish” — by plucking flowers from their stem, one takes their beautiful fragrance for just oneself, and this beauty and scent last only a short while before the flower dies! But if one leaves the flower alone, millions can enjoy it, and the beauty and scent shall stay for a long time. Bhai Vir Singh’s ecological sensitivity is grounded in reason — nature is something that everyone can enjoy as long as individuals do not selfishly destroy it.

In My Beloved, we never once find the sense of smell as the main player in a poem; it is always with other senses and usually plays a supporting role to them. The sense of smell becomes a garnish that is used to make a certain scene more appealing, while simultaneously bringing in a stronger connection to the natural world. In Bahar (Spring) (N. Singh 2008, p. 79), we see that fragrance is used to emphasize nature, and how nature can bring connection to the Divine:
“Spring is here”
“Spring is here”
Hearing the call
Flowers arose to see
Blushing with joy.
Lifting their fragrance
Spring swung ahead,
Lifting their fragrance
Spring swung ahead
And entering our house
Says: “open your doors.”
Then in an uproar:
“There is no more winter or snow,
So open your doors.”

In this poem, Bhai Vir Singh uses much repetition to emphasize his joy over the arrival of spring. We see from the very beginning that our subject is spring, and flowers are introduced right away to create a beautiful image in our minds. However, the other senses are introduced prior to the sense of smell, even though the subject is flowers – the flowers “hear the call” of spring, they rise to “see” spring, and they “blush” with joy. Only after that do we see the sense of smell that is associated with flowers: “lifting their fragrance, spring swung ahead.” It is important to note that these two lines are repeated, so the pairing of fragrance to the flowers is more significant than the other senses. This is probably the only reason smell is mentioned – as fragrant flowers are a popular image of spring time, and would grant instant recognition. Indeed, spring does not “swing ahead” until the flowers “lift their fragrance.”

We then see the power of spring and its overwhelming effect – it simply enters our houses, and commands us to open our doors. It then makes “an uproar,” proclaiming “there is no more winter or snow, so open your doors.” Spring’s entrance is grand and impressive, warranting attention. In the second section of the poem, the wonders of spring are described through the sense of hearing – the reader is told to “listen” to many natural animal noises, such as “the buzz of the bumblebee,” “the chirping birds,” and “the nightingale’s songs.” In the final section of the poem, we see how spring heralds the arrival of the Divine:

She carried good tidings —
From the lover’s home
So hear her carefully;

She says:

The Beloved will show up
So prepare yourself beautifully.
Get ready now:
Keep your eyes focused
Keep your doors open
The Beloved will come
The Beloved will surely come.

We see that spring herself dwells with the Divine when it is not her season: “she carried good tidings – from the lover’s home.” Nature has a natural connection to the Divine, even dwelling in the same home.

This makes the poet caution us to respect her – “so hear her carefully.” The “good tidings” that spring brings is that “The Beloved will show up” now that spring has arrived. And just as the world is preparing itself by becoming beautiful with the flowers of spring, so we must “prepare [ourselves] beautifully.”

The poet warns us not to forget about spring and to accept its natural beauty fully as we must “keep [our] doors open.” For if we accept the coming of spring, “the Beloved will surely come.”

In *Sainat (Sign)* (N. Singh 2008, p. 84), smell takes a totally submissive role to touch. The poem is structured into four parallel stanzas that each talk “about the joy of embracing our Love.” Each stanza uses a different sense to talk about that joy, and in the second we see smell:

About the joy of embracing our Love,
Ask the fragrance:
Wrapped intimately around you
She will give us a sense
Of the joyous scent of embracing you tight.

We see that the sense of smell here behaves like the sense of touch – fragrance is “wrapped intimately around you.” This highlights the physical act of embracing the Divine which the poem is all about. The poet’s main point is that in order to understand Divine union, you can use different senses and perspectives. If one approaches it from an olfactory perspective, i.e. one “asks the fragrance,” then “she will give us a sense of the joyous scent of embracing [the Divine] tight” – one can appreciate the “joyous
scent” of Divine union. The Divine is everything, so there are an infinite number of ways to enjoy It.

Therefore, It can be enjoyed with every sense.

In *Sundarta Ton Sundar Vicc (From Beauty to a Beautiful One)* (N. Singh 2008, p. 135), we see the sense of smell once again juxtaposed with the sense of touch when describing the Divine:

Like the rose bush blossoms
  When it looks at you,
Rejoicing, I creep towards your door.
Intoxicated by your floating fragrance,
  I sway from side to side.
Your touch sends tremors in me
  Each fiber becomes a billowy wave
I begin to lose into my own self
  Only to find myself in another’s arms!
A mysterious touch of some handsome figure
  Keeps slipping me into its wrists.
In that flood of passionate devotion
  From far behind somebody says “I”
Now tell me, that mysterious handsome
  Could it have been my Beloved?

The poet addresses this poem to the Divine Itself, with a sort of mystery playing in it – there is “some handsome figure” who has “a mysterious touch” that excites the poet. The poem is clearly about the Divine, but adding in the questioning nature of the poem – “could it have been my Beloved?” – reinforces the mysterious nature of the Divine, and how It can never be fully comprehended. The poem wants to show, however, the excitement and wonders of the Divine and union with It. From the start, we see that the natural world responds favorably to the Divine: “the rose bush blossoms, when it looks at you.” Then, to further reinforce the connection between the Divine and nature, we see that fragrance – which is usually associated with the roses just mentioned, especially roses that have just blossomed – is now coming from the Divine, and it is wonderful indeed: “Intoxicated by your floating fragrance, I sway from side to side.” The Divine’s fragrance is so powerful that it can intoxicate just like alcohol upon smelling it. The sensorial experience is then completely overtaken by touch, as the Divine’s “touch sends tremors in” the poet, whereupon he “begins to lose into [his] own self,” as “each
fiber becomes a billowy wave.” The intoxicating fragrance smelled before is totally forgotten, and the physical contact with the Divine dominates the rest of the poem.

Although flowers and their blooming are associated with smell in Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry, there are often instances where they and other plants are mentioned where other senses are the focus of the poem, and smell is excluded entirely. From *Mashobra – Khiza Vicc (Mashobra – In Autumn)* (N. Singh 2008, p. 98):

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My brother Mashobra! Now tell me,
Aren’t you that spectacular blossom
Who was rejoicing with flowers?
Whose grass was luscious green?
Now that grass lies pale,
It looks extremely sad!
Your flowers are wilting —
Standing with their heads stooped low
How they shrivel and quickly wither!
Like a mother separated from her child,
They that bear fruit are fruitless,
Laying bare their agony of separation!
Leaves too have changed their color,
They fall off with the touch of breeze!
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The poet addresses this poem to Mashobra – a small town in Himachal Pradesh, India. In *Spring*, we saw how the blooming of flowers marked the coming of spring which heralded the arrival of the Divine. Bhai Vir Singh continues his connection between nature and the Divine in this poem about autumn – the opposite of spring. As the birth of natural life signified the arrival of the Divine, its death represents the Divine’s departure, and separation. The poet starts by reminiscing about the beauties of spring – the “spectacular blossom who was rejoicing with flowers” and the grass that was “luscious green.” The imagery here is all visual, and perhaps physical – gone is the mention of fragrance. The poet then reveals the current state of the town in autumn: “now that grass lies pale, it looks extremely sad!” The poem becomes more dramatic from there, as we see the “flowers are wilting – standing with their heads stooped low.” The poet expands the scene in our minds: “how they shrivel and quickly wither!” Having created an impressive visual image in the mind of the reader, the poet then brings in the emotional
element: “like a mother separated from her child, they that bear fruit are fruitless, laying bare their agony of separation!” The strong visual image of death and decay heightens the impact of the image of “a mother apart from her offspring.” We then see the point of the poem: the “agony of separation.”

Bhai Vir Singh has used a poem about the death of the natural world to strengthen the analogy of how a mother separated from her children is like separation from the Divine. The feeling leaves one destitute and in despair, as the whole world around one is dying: “leaves too have changed their color, they fall off with the touch of breeze!” The happiness of spring is fully gone, as the “spectacular blossom” that caused “rejoicing” is now shriveled and withered. When the connection from the Divine is severed, the world feels like a barren place, just as how Bhai Vir Singh feels empty and full of sorrow whenever he is disconnected from the Divine.

*Mashobra – In Autumn* shows us that Bhai Vir Singh does not always use the sense of smell when he could – even with flowers which he often associates with smell. This is because Bhai Vir Singh never uses the sense of smell to describe something bad – the withered and shriveled flowers do not smell rotten, they just look decrepit. Since he never uses smell for negative descriptions, he does not put smell into poems where he compares good to bad.

The sense of smell is extremely limited in Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry. It is always relegated to fragrance associated in some way with flowers, as this is the image of smell Bhai Vir Singh is borrowing from the Guru Granth. It is a supporting sense that serves to evoke sentiments of the beauty of the natural world. By showing the beauty and usefulness of nature – one of the Divine’s creations – Bhai Vir Singh is able to simultaneously praise the creativity of the Divine and raise awareness of ecological issues. The natural world is meant to be cherished, as humans are connected to it deeply - we were both created by the Divine, and both are able to unite with the Divine, and feel the pains of separation.

The elevation of the natural world further complements Bhai Vir Singh’s desire to return to an authentic Sikh identity. The beauty of flowers, trees, bushes, etc. represents the immanent nature of
the Divine; whenever the Divine is present, life blooms and there are many joys and wonders to experience. Whenever the Divine is absent, the natural world begins to decay and lose its happiness.

The Divine is not simply a Western divinity that exists outside of our world, but is essentially present and mobile. The Divine does not simply stay in one place, but can come and go. This is the primary reason Bhai Vir Singh expresses so much sadness and pain in My Beloved; he loves the splendor of union with the Divine, but this union is not always possible. Just like nature connects with and separates from the Divine, so too does Bhai Vir Singh. And so comes the elation of Divine union and the depression of disconnection that is simply not present in Western theology.
Conclusion

Bhai Vir Singh joined the Singh Sabha movement to bring about reform to the Sikh identity through a return to the fundamentals of the Sikhism. Mandair’s criticism that Western influence changed Bhai Vir Singh’s theological perspective does not hold when viewing his poetry. He wanted to promote a return to the original words of the Guru Granth and move away from the Hindu rituals that Sikhs had adopted over the course of the Sikh empire. However, in opposition to his criticism, his goal was not to create a Sikh identity defined by an exclusion from Hinduism, even though he could have used poetry from the Guru Granth as evidence for the fact that Sikhs were not Muslims, and were not Hindus. Bhai Vir Singh’s mindset was more inclusive in nature and in line with the spirit of the entire Guru Granth, which incorporated Muslim and Hindu poets in its pages.

Bhai Vir Singh drew from the Guru Granth as the greatest source of inspiration for his poetry. He followed its style that elevated aesthetic experience to the level of metaphysical necessity – only through a joyous use of all five senses is one able to attain Divine knowledge and union. In his poems, there is no hint that a Western influence has changed his conception of the Divine from the original Granthian message of a formless, infinite, ubiquitous One. Vir Singh’s main goal in his poetry is to express just how wonderful and magnificent the Divine is, which could not be more in line with the Gurus’ message. He uses Granthian imagery, themes and style to teach about Sikh ethics and metaphysics. He wants to impart the knowledge he has gained on how one should live in order to connect with the Divine, and also his knowledge into the nature of the Divine Itself. Through the five senses, Bhai Vir Singh wants to express the universal Sikh desire, and his own very personal desire, to feel the marvelous joy that comes from Divine union.

The Sikh aesthetic experience that Bhai Vir Singh embodies is one that affirms the value of the human body. Divine knowledge comes to us sensorially and actively, not deep in the recesses of the mind. The Divine can be experienced sexual and physically, and an incredible intimacy is present
between Bhai Vir Singh and the Divine in his poetry. Unlike a static deity removed from the human realm, Bhai Vir Singh’s Divine is dynamic and interactive. It allows for union with the individual in all manner of ways through every one of the senses. There is a focus on enjoyment of the current moment, which is so very different from the Western Christian traditions which are more concerned with the afterlife and the ethereal soul. There is even a strong positive feminine element present in both Vir Singh’s poems and the Guru Granth. As opposed to Original Sin from the Christian tradition, Sikhism paints females in a positive and absolutely essential role – union with the Divine is achieved sexually through the union of the wife with the Divine groom. In the Sikh tradition, to connect with the Divine is to be a female enjoying her spouse.

The differences between Dew Drops and My Beloved are almost totally concerned with poetic style and the differences in interest between a younger and older man. There are no theological differences between them – the Divine is presented in the same manner across both. It is the sentiments about connection with the Divine which differ. In Dew Drops, there is a youthful vigor to the poems – Bhai Vir Singh is young and eager to reveal the knowledge he has gained to a wider audience. There is excitement about experiencing Divine connection, manifested through strong passions and exuberance. In My Beloved, the insistency of youth has been replaced with a calmer and more contemplative patience. However, the desire to unite with the Divine has not waned, but merely changed forms. In his old age, Bhai Vir Singh no longer seeks the excitement of sexual union, but is seeking the comfort and warmth of a supporting Divine. We also see Vir Singh struggle with the infirmity of old age. Many of his older poems are markedly sadder, as Bhai Vir Singh is more worried about the sorrow he feels from his separation from the Divine, and is desperately seeking the Divine connection he so easily managed in his youth.

Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry is a beautiful foray into the very heart of Sikhism. It resonates with sensual Granthian imagery and ethics, fully displaying a Divine that is infinite, immanent, transcendent,
and open to anyone seeking it out. The stirring images of intimate love and Divine union present a superlative romanticism that could resonate in the heart of anyone. Even for non-Sikhs, Vir Singh’s poetry can offer a wealth of thought about the meaning of our lives, our deepest emotions, and our human experience. The poet is able to draw us into the sensorial world of the five senses and define an aesthetic experience of the Divine which is relatable and full of exquisite joys. Bhai Vir Singh is authentically a poet of the Sikhs, and can eschew the notions of Western theological influence placed upon him.
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