



Giani Gurmukh Singh Musafir



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Giani Gurmukh Singh Musafir was a great patriot, a front-rank freedom fighter and a veteran Parliamentarian. He was actively involved in building Punjab as a model of growth, particularly in the post independence era. An enduring symbol of creative energy, he has an abiding place in the history of Punjabi letters. He marshalled his poetic gifts to the cause of the awakening of the people to a new awareness of their political destiny and arousal of social consciousness amongst them.

Gurmukh Singh was born on 15 January 1899 at village Adhwal in District Campbellpur* in a rural farming household. After receiving his early education in village district board school, he received training as junior vernacular teacher and was employed at the age of 19. With a view to improve his educational qualifications, Gurmukh Singh passed the *Giani* (Hons. in Punjabi) examination alongside teaching and came to be known as 'Giani'. A poet and a writer by heart, later when he started writing verse more seriously, Giani Gurmukh Singh took the *nom de plume* of 'Musafir'.

The Jallianwala Bagh tragedy of 1919 stirred his soul and left a deep scar on the mind of young Gurmukh Singh. After a couple of years, when a similar tragedy was repeated at *Nankana Sahib**, the holy birth place of Guru Nanak, where over 200 Sikhs were massacred with the connivance of the British Government, Gianiji gave up his profession and joined the Akali Movement of the 1920s aimed at reforming the Gurudwara administration. The Akali Movement in the Punjab was the source of political awakening in the area and its course ran parallel to that of the national struggle for independence. Many of the prominent political leaders in the Punjab were drawn through this Movement. Soon 'Musafir' was arrested and thus began a long drawn series of his

*Now in Pakistan.

'*Jail Yatras*' bringing untold hardships to him and his family. He was imprisoned in almost all the nationalist struggles till the country attained Independence in 1947.

His steadfast faith, spirit of dedication and sincerity of purpose brought him to the forefront of the Akali Movement and he was appointed to the highest religious office of Sikhism, *i.e.*, the *Jathedar* of the *Akal Takht*. He is remembered as a visionary high priest who took certain historic decisions and handled ticklish issues pertaining to Sikhism in that phase. A member of the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee for nearly 20 years, later, he became its Secretary-General during 1936-1937.

Starting his career as a journalist and a poet of great talent and charm, Musafirji, joined the Indian National Congress in 1922. He took a leading part in the freedom movement and courted arrest a number of times during the Civil Disobedience, the *Satyagraha* and the Quit India movements. A man of determination with supreme sense of sacrifice, Giani Gurmukh Singh refused to be released on parole even when one of his five-year old son, his young daughter and his father passed away when he was in jail in 1942. A member of the All India Congress Committee from 1930 onwards, he was a member of the Congress Working Committee and of the Executive Committee of the Congress Party in Parliament from 1952 to 1966. He was the President of the Punjab Pradesh Congress Committee for many years. A confidant of Mahatma Gandhi, he was often invited by the Father of the Nation for consultations, particularly on issues relating to Punjab. He also came into contact with Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, and their mutual affection and admiration grew over the years into a strong friendship.

When India became independent in 1947, Gianiji was invited to serve as a member of the Constituent Assembly. He was also a member of its Steering Committee. He was a Member of the Provisional Parliament from 1950 to 1952; the First three Lok Sabhas from 1952 to 1966; the Punjab Legislative Council from 1966 to 1968; and the Rajya Sabha from 1968 till his death in 1976. He was also the Chief Minister of Punjab from 1966 to 1967. A soft spoken and amiable person, he carried the audience with him with his endearing

warmth and great sense of humour. He took an active part in the proceedings of the House. His speeches, most of the time interspersed with the recitation of appropriate *Urdu* and *Punjabi* verse, were full of zeal and dedication to the ideals cherished by him.

A member on many boards, trusts, Committees, etc. at the Centre, Gurmukh Singh was also the President and Chairman of many leading societies and institutions in the Punjab State. Musafirji also represented India at several international Writers' and Peace Conferences, viz., the World Writers' Conference held in Stockholm in 1954; and in Tokyo in 1961. He also represented India at the World Peace Conferences held at Helsinki in 1965 and at Berlin in 1969; and led a three-member delegation of Indian Writers to the Afro-Asian Conference on Vietnam and Peace at Baku in the then USSR in 1965. In a political symposium held on the occasion, Giani Gurmukh Singh Musafir read a poem, a bold denunciation of neo-colonialism, which won him universal applause.

A genial, humble and utterly guileless person, Gianiji never hankered after power and considered political recognition to be of little use in his life. Reluctant to accept the offer of the Chief Minister of Punjab initially, Musafirji opted for it when it appeared to him to be more urgent and required his primary attention. His upright handsome bearing and sense of dignity and poise marked him out as a natural leader. On assumption of the Chief Ministership of the Punjab State, Giani Gurmukh Singh brought to his office the lustre of an unblemished record of public life. Elected unopposed as the President of the Punjab Pradesh Congress Party for several years, 'Musafir' loomed large on the political horizon of the Punjab State and provided sound leadership and stable governments in the State.

Giani Gurmukh Singh Musafir distinguished himself as a very respectable public figure. At the same time, the presence in him of the poet and the writer remained pre dominant throughout his life. Actively participating in the literary and cultural renaissance in the Punjab State, he contributed immensely to the revival of Punjabi poetry bringing it closer to realism and exhorted people to take action. Later, however a stage came

when he enjoyed writing short stories more. Rather he found the fulfilment of his poetic instinct in the short stories, which are as subtle, as tightly constructed, and as lyrical, as poetry.

Giani Gurmukh Singh initially wrote poems in praise of the Sikh Gurus for recitation in Gurudwaras on the occasion of anniversaries and festivals. Essentially secular in outlook, he had faith in oneness of God, however plunging into the freedom struggle soon, he started writing poetry dripping with patriotic fervour. Later on, his poetic anthologies also dealt with metaphysical experience. On the other hand, keeping pace with the time, he wrote poetry on some of the most modern themes as well.

Gurmukh Singh Musafir has written more than 20 books of poetry, short stories and on general themes as also an autobiography. He has to his credit nine collections of poetry, viz., *Sabar de Ban*, *Prem Ban*, *Jeewan Pandh*, *Musafirian*, *Tutte Khambh*, *Kavya Sunehe*, *Sehj Seti*, *Wakhra Wakhra Katra Katra* and *Door Nede*; an equal volume of short stories, viz., *Wakhri Duniya*, *Ah!ne de Boat*, *Kandhan Bol Paiyan*, *Sattai January*, *Allah Wale*, *Gutar*, *Sab Achha*, *Sasta Tamasha* and *Urvar Par*; and four biographical works, which besides his reminiscences of his association with Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru in two separate volumes, viz., *Vekhya Sunya Gandhi (Gandhi as I Knew Him)* and *Vekhya Sunya Nehru (Nehru as I Knew Him)* also include *Baghi Jarnail*—the History of Azad Hind Army and *Vihin Sadi de Shahid*—a monumental work on *Martyrs of the 20th Century* in the cause of India's struggle for freedom. During his imprisonments by the British Government, he also took time to translate into Punjabi important works like *Gandhi Geeta* and *Anand Marg*. A widely travelled person, his impressions on visit to various places forms a formidable portion of his autobiography.

Giani Gurmukh Singh Musafir was a man of the masses. He had sympathy with the havenots and the underprivileged and believed that the real malady of his countrymen was the unequal distribution of resources. He condemned exploitation of the poor by the rich. A dedicated social worker, Giani Gurmukh Singh

Musafir played a memorable role in re-settlement of displaced persons from the then West Punjab and Sind; and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP)[#] after partition.

A multi-faceted personality, besides being a poet and a short story writer, Giani Gurmukh Singh Musafir was also chief editor of the 'Akali Patrika' for several years. He was a member on the Court of the University of Delhi. He was also the President of *Kendriya Punjabi Lekhak Sabha*. He was awarded with Padma Vibhushan, the second highest national award of India in 1976 and the Sahitya Akademi Award for his collection of short stories *Urvar Par* in 1978, both posthumously. Besides, he was also honoured with the 'Punjabi Poet of the Year' award by the then Patiala and East Punjab States Union (PEPSU) Government in 1955.

Giani Gurmukh Singh Musafir died on 18 January 1976 after a heart attack. Offering her tributes to 'Musafir' on the day, Smt. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India said:

" A man of ideals, steadfastness and simplicity,he served Punjab and the country with devotion....."

Speaking at the Congress Centenary Session in Mumbai in 1985 and referring to 'Musafir', Shri Rajiv Gandhi, the then Congress President remarked:

" Seldom has the world seen a nobler galaxy of patriots like Giani Gurmukh Singh Musafir, so selfless in their devotion to the cause of freedom, so exalted in thought, so brave in action, so pure in spirit....."

[The Portrait of Giani Gurmukh Singh Musafir, painted by Shri R. M. Singh, will be unveiled in the Central Hall of Parliament on 22 December 2008 by Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh. The Portrait has been donated by the Giani Gurmukh Singh Musafir Trust.]

[#]All now in Pakistan.