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Report

Science, Sikhism and Service: The Life and Legacy of Prof. Hardev Singh Virk (Through the Eyes of His Mentee)

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There are teachers who complete a syllabus, and there are mentors who shape a life. For me, Professor Hardev Singh Virk belongs to the second category. To describe him merely as a physicist, educationist, or Sikh scholar would be inadequate, because he embodies a rare synthesis of scientific brilliance, spiritual depth, intellectual courage, and human warmth. As his mentee, I have always seen him not only as a scholar of international standing but also as a guiding light who taught generations how science and spirituality can coexist harmoniously.

Professor Hardev Singh Virk was born in 1942 in Kamo Ke, District Gujranwala, now in Pakistan. His early life was shaped by the trauma of Partition, an event that displaced millions and deeply influenced an entire generation of Punjabis. Yet from those difficult beginnings emerged a mind that would later become one of the most respected scientific and intellectual voices in Punjab and beyond.

His academic journey itself inspires awe. He earned his Master's degree in Physics from Aligarh Muslim University in 1963 and later completed his doctorate in Nuclear Physics from Marie Curie University in 1972. For students like me, these achievements were not merely credentials; they were proof that a Punjabi scholar rooted in Sikh values could stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the global scientific community.

Over the decades, Professor Virk served at several major institutions, including Punjabi University, Guru Nanak Dev University, DAV Institute of Engg. & Technology, and Sri Guru Granth Sahib World University. Yet his influence extended far beyond classrooms and laboratories. He travelled to more than fifty countries, presented research globally, and became internationally known for his work in radiation physics, geosciences, seismology, radon studies, nanotechnology, and environmental sustainability.

His research on radon concentration, uranium contamination, and earthquake prediction in the Himalayan region significantly contributed to environmental safety and sustainable development. He was among the first scientists to raise awareness about radiation hazards and groundwater contamination in Punjab. As students, we were deeply inspired by his scientific integrity. He often reminded us that science must serve humanity and not merely academic ambition. His publication of about 500 research papers and over 4 dozen books reflected not only productivity but also a lifelong commitment to knowledge.

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As mentees, we admired not only the breadth of his scholarship but also his discipline. He often reminded students that science is not merely a profession but a moral responsibility. He taught us that a scientist must remain intellectually honest even when society becomes trapped in superstition, dogma, or political pressure. His commitment to rational inquiry was unwavering.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Professor Virk's life has been his ability to bridge science and Sikh philosophy. In an age when many assume religion and science are at odds, he consistently demonstrated that Gurbani encourages inquiry, reflection, and universal understanding. He became one of the leading figures associated with the "School of Scientific and Logical Interpretation of Gurbani." Through lectures, books, and articles, he argued that Sikh philosophy is deeply compatible with modern scientific thinking.

For students like me, this was transformative. He did not ask us to abandon faith for science or science for faith. Instead, he encouraged us to pursue both with humility. I still remember his emphasis on Guru Nanak's spirit of questioning. He would explain that true spirituality is not blind acceptance but enlightened understanding. In his presence, discussions on cosmology, quantum physics, ethics, and Gurbani flowed together naturally.

Professor Virk's literary contribution is equally extraordinary. He has authored around fifty books and hundreds of research papers and articles across science, religion, education, and Punjabi literature. His books, such as Sikh Dharam Ate Vigyan and My Journey in Science, reveal not only his intellectual depth but also his deeply reflective personality. His autobiography, in particular, allows readers to witness the struggles, triumphs, failures, and philosophical reflections of a scientist who remained deeply human despite immense accomplishments.

What made him truly special as a mentor, however, was his accessibility. Despite international recognition, awards, and academic prestige, he remained approachable to students. He listened carefully, encouraged young researchers, and never dismissed questions as foolish. Many of us entered his office carrying confusion and self-doubt, yet left feeling intellectually empowered.

He also possessed a remarkable global outlook. His travels across continents gave him a cosmopolitan perspective, but he never lost touch with Punjab's cultural roots. He wrote passionately in Punjabi and contributed significantly to Punjabi scientific literature. In doing so, he made science accessible to ordinary readers and inspired young Punjabis to pursue scientific education without abandoning their linguistic or cultural identity.

Professor Virk's contributions have been widely recognized. He received the Shiromani Award for Scientific Literature in Punjabi from the Government of Punjab and numerous honours from Sikh and scientific organizations worldwide. In 2022, he received international recognition at the Sustainability through Science and Technology Summit for his contributions to interdisciplinary scientific research. Yet he wore these honours lightly. He believed that knowledge was meaningful only when used in the service of humanity.

As his mentee, I believe his greatest legacy lies not merely in his publications or awards but in the intellectual confidence he instilled in others. He inspired students to think independently, speak courageously, and remain ethically grounded. He showed that one could be deeply scientific without becoming spiritually empty, and deeply spiritual without rejecting rationality.

In today's polarized world, Professor Hardev Singh Virk represents a rare and necessary voice. He belongs to a lineage of Sikh intellectuals who viewed knowledge as a sacred pursuit meant to uplift humanity. His life reminds us that education is not simply about acquiring information; it is about cultivating wisdom, integrity, and compassion.

Future generations may remember him as an eminent physicist, prolific author, or distinguished Sikh scholar. But those of us fortunate enough to learn from him will remember something even greater: a mentor who transformed curiosity into purpose and learning into service.

That, perhaps, is the true measure of his legacy.

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