

Harbhajan Singh Hundal

After migration from West Punjab (Pakistan), I did my B.A. from Randhir College, Kapurthala in 1955. Soon after I got a teacher's job. Then in 1957-58, I did B.Ed. course from Ramgarhia Training College, Phagwara. In 1957-58, I also started writing poetry. During these years, I was teaching at different schools and then was assigned to a school near our village. This was Bhandal Bet Middle School about 5 miles from here where I became headmaster for six years. In 1968, I passed my M.A. and soon thereafter, I got Punjabi lecturer's post. After sometime, I was involved in teachers' union, this was called Government. Teachers Union, Punjab. Several friends of mine dragged me into this organisation arguing, you are social conscious and a writer, so why not work for the union? For the next 15-20 years, I participated in this union's activities, marches, protests and other activities.

Then I came across a literary magazine *Lakeer*, its editor was Prem Parkash who used to publish Naxalite literature. I also published a few items in it. Anyone published in this magazine was thought to be a Naxalite, but I was no supporter of Naxalites. All my friends in Jalandhar circle were communists, party members of CPI (M). Living in their company, I became a Marxist but not a Naxalite. In 1965, I published my first book. It was the time when experimental poetry was much talked about. It was called experimentalism. A question arose in my mind that such experiments are okay, but these should be from progressive angle. They should deal with public issues, problems and solutions for them. At that time Navtej Singh of *Preetlari* informed me of a new book worthy of buying and recommended me to go Mai Heeran Gate, Jalandhar to buy it. In this book, there was answer to my doubts and questions. I confirmed that experiments are welcome in literature and for a Marxists these are not barred, but not at the cost of ideology. Then the next challenge came from the Naxalite Movement. By this time I felt that a violent approach to India's problem is wrong. There is no scope for violent revolution to India. India is a multinational country, it has several cultures, a very large geography governed by a very strong state which has at its disposal, army, police and several kinds of security forces. Moreover, borrowing an external ideology to implement in India, that context was not right. At that time I wrote some poems which contradict the Naxalite approach.

Then came the emergency years, I wrote poetry during this time also, but I had to think hard because of censorship. I wrote one *gazel*. It contained some lines which were objected by the Censor Board and in September 1976, they ordered my arrest. With the emergency lifted in January 1977; I was released on 27th January. My stay in the jail meant, I wrote a full book inside, that I published with the title '*Kale Din*'. It is bit amusing now, I was jailed for one poem declared as dangerous while on release I could publish the whole book of such poetry. Then came the *Khalistani* phase in Punjab, starting from 1981 to 1993. I accept that by attacking the Harimandir Sahib, the government hurt the Sikhs' sentiments, but the way Sikhs' reaction took shape was also wrong. During this reaction, the prime minister was killed followed by Sikh massacre in Delhi where three to four thousand people were killed and Punjab entered into a long period of terrorism. The issue for me was how to present this political scenario. I wrote at first four or five poems and showed them around my circle of friends. They thought this is politically correct. During this era which lasted, some 15 years, I wrote poetry against the Khalistan movement and my angle was through an understanding of Sikh principles, saying how wrong it all is.

By now, I am author of some 20-21 poetry books. I have been writing since 1965 on a continuous basis. You know writing poem means waiting for the right mood and time. So in the rest of the time

what should a writer do. I faced this question and my friends advised to write other genre of literature during this time. When I was released from jail, the editor (Tarsem Purewal) of *Des Pardes*, a weekly newspaper in England, came to see me. He asked me write some essays on my jail experience. I told him I have not written prose yet. He said just write what your experience was, what is so difficult about it. So I wrote some 50-60 pages of this. He published these with some photos; this account was much discussed and appreciated by readers. So I felt I could try my hand at prose also.

I have been a member of CPI (M) belonging to Tarlochan Singh Rana group with whom I used to work closely. I had a lot of experience of party organisation and this stood in good stead with me. I drew on this experience for my writings as well as broadening my mind. While working for the organisations, I never accepted money for my work, I used to spend some from my own pocket. Then my friends suggested I should work for Kendri Lekhak Sabha. They suggested I should follow three things- a. Don't give up writing; B. Whatever duties are given to you, don't refuse or shirk; C. Put all efforts into the duty you are given and remain honest. So I started working for Kendri Sabha, became member of its executive committee and carried on working without having any position in the association. At that time, there used to be elections after every two years. I was usually selected for Executive Committee -its main function was to arrive at some consensus.

After all this organisational work, I started writing a lot of prose on all sort of subjects. First of all, I wrote my memoirs from Pakistan, then my experience of arrest and jail. My prose books also number nearly 20. Alongside, I also started on translation. In fact when I retired in 1992, several friends of mine suggested that we want to publish a magazine called *Chirag*, you will be its chief-editor. This was new stage in my creative life. In publishing this magazine, I did every little work from dispatching to prepare its material. I was almost alone in this venture, my friends would go to collect subscriptions or provide advice and of course, there would be vigorous debate and criticism of what was published. I have carried on this task for the last 20-22 years, by now there are 86 issues of this quarterly magazine. A distinguishing feature of this magazine from others was to publish literature from West Punjab. I tried to acquire literature from West Punjab translating it into Gurmukhi script. There was also a lingering feeling in my mind that I should visit my birth place at some stage in West Punjab -which was now part of Pakistan. I did go to Pakistan after four or five trips there. I managed to visit my birth place and the village we left behind in 1947 just once. All together I made six trips to Pakistan and wrote a travel account also (*safarnama*). Our magazine *Chirag* became well-known for publishing such memories of visits to West Punjab across the Wahga border.

You know there is a well-known poet Habib Jalib. When on a visit there, I had an interview with him at Lahore. However as I came to know of him more, he soon passed away. I published one or two poems of his. As I came to know about his writings more, I wrote to his brother who lives in Karachi. I was surprised his brother sent me a full bundle of things written by Habib. I spent nearly 1800 rupees on the post of this bundle. As I opened the bundle, there was lot of material including a book by his brother, a thousand pages long which was published in Urdu in Pakistan. During these days, he wrote a book about his mother, which he also posted to me. All this material enabled me to publish Pakistani literature in our magazine bringing out 'special numbers'. I brought a special issue on Habib Jalib. Apart from this I brought to the attention of the Punjabi reader much of progressive literature around the world. This work occupied a major part of my life. I selected a number of books and a number of poets. I translated them into Punjabi and published them through my magazine or

through books. There was a time when progressive writers' association of Hindi language stopped functioning, then for time a Hindi-Urdu association came into being. I attended some of these meetings at Bhopal and Calcutta. As a result of such interaction I felt I should get some of my poems translated into English. This was the same feeling as every writer wishes his creative work to make available in other languages. I translated some of my poems and took them to Bhopal. I had 15 to 20 photostat copies with me and handed them over to gathered writers. I was surprised these photocopies helped my poems to be published in other India languages in different states of India. I was very encouraged with this and felt enormous satisfaction.

The Kendri Sabha (Punjabi Writers' Association) to begin with, was very active. Its leadership was in the hands of prominent writers. Its branches were established in many villages, towns or cities and through this way it made a major impact on cultural awareness. One impact of this was talented youth in villages was identified. Then, of course, we entered into the second stage of literary activities. This is when differences arose within the association. A lot of politics was involved in the executive committee of the association. Some new writers wanted to hold these positions and for this purpose, they would enrol members who would then vote for them. In this way, membership was recruited not on merit as in the past, but through relatives and friends. It almost reached a scandal as the membership expanded in this way. This is the kind of history of last 40-50 years and this was the environment in which association was working. As a new writer myself, I remember there was Rampuri Writers' Association in their village Rampur. They had a regulation by which you could become its postal member. I had not written any poetry then when I became this association's member. They used to have a monthly meeting, what I would do, send them a poem and they would discuss this poem and its secretary Kulwant Neelon would send me a summary of discussion related to my poem. Reading through this discussion helped me as a writer. In a way we were a generation of writers who are product of organisational efforts of such associations.

Now you know there is one more literary writers' association, this is Punjabi Academy at Ludhiana. It was more of an academic body. It did not participate in any political organisational activities, but remember in more recent years, it has seen as much troubles in its organisational structure through elections where lot of lobbying is part of the process. Writers have become more jealous, materialist, and they are after positions and power within the association. They seek prestige one way or the other. Even when we know, a position within the association does not confer any monetary benefit and writer should prefer their life experiences and not indulge in such nefarious motives. A Writer should draw on his natural talent, his own study of literature and experience from life. These three ingredients are what a writer needs, but in tune with the contemporary times, writers are also motivated by greed and money, seek fame as well as positions beyond their talents. That is one reason why writers have lost their previous reputations.

Of course, time has changed, as change is the rule of nature whether we like it or not. A writer is supposed to discover and represent such social changes in their works. A writer has to see from appearances to dig the reality behind it. A writer's biggest problem is how to see from the observed reality, forces working in its background. In contemporary life governments are abandoning their social responsibilities and handing most of such activities to private concerns. You can see consequences of such policies in Punjab. Now the situation has degenerated to such an extent that government-run schools have failed because of lack of teachers, lack of pupils. Schools have crumbling dissipated buildings. Imagine ordinary people had invested so much of their expectations

in primary and secondary education. Here government schools are wasting themselves. And in their competition we have seen expensive private schools opened everywhere. All parents now wish to send their sons and daughters to such model schools as they hanker after the English medium. In such an educational atmosphere, writers' responsibilities have increased. They need to rethink their function in society what is their duty to the society now. It has certainly become more difficult to function as a writer. He has to be aware of results of his own writings. Does it help forces of fascism; as such political forces are in ascendance in this country. The whole political system is now more corrupt and people are oppressed by it.

When we started our magazine, its framework was decided as; broadly it was to follow progressive ideology and promote secularism. On that basis we would publish various contributions. During this time, suddenly I had to accompany a Sikh *jatha* to Pakistan. I had no contact in Pakistan where I could meet some of the writers there. At Nankana Sahib, there is a Guru Nanak College. Then it was teaching classes up to 12th year. I went into the college and met some lecturers there. They told me whenever the *jatha* arrives; some writers from Lahore who are writing in Urdu, while others who write in Punjabi also arrive here. I asked them I should be delighted to meet any such writer. Luckily, I met one contact right there. He was Munir Asri -an Urdu *Gazal* writer. He was a professor there. I told him where I was staying and soon three of them came down to meet me. One of them was Raja Rasalu who was a sort of organiser of such associations. He told me as you are leaving for Lahore now, we shall certainly arrange to meet you there. And he gave me more contacts, and address of a Pakti House in Anarkali Bazar of Lahore. As we reached Lahore, I soon inquired about Pakti House where we met some of these writers. They told us they are bringing some books for us. These books were published by an association called Majlis-Shah Husain. Among the books, there was one by Nazim Husain Sayad, a poet.

Let me remind you how during my visit to Pakistan I was stopped at the border by a Punjab government CID officer. I was part of Sikh *jatha* with a valid passport and visa. But I was told by the police at the border you cannot go. I argued with them, "Look what has police to do with my valid visa and passport issued by the President of India." But they insisted on refusal and I asked them to write this up, they wrote "exit as refused as per government instructions". And I asked to put a stamp under it, date and I returned from the border. on arrival back, I gave out a press statement. After my statement an advocate contacted me saying your case is worthy of taking up. I won't charge anything, let us enter a writ at high court. I agreed with the advocate, he was Paramjit Singh, someone from Gurdaspur. He fought the case for me, which resulted in five hundred rupees fine to the police officer who had refused my visit to Pakistan. They then asked me to expunge the comments I had written there. During my second visit to Pakistan I had the fear that they will stop me again, but nobody did that. After this, I made few more trips and got material for my magazine which I published as *safarnama*-Pakistan (A travel account to Pakistan). In fact I wrote its title as *Mohabat da Safarnama* (A trip of Love). With these trips across Wahga and with my poetry, I started writing a book with a title *Wahge paar de Punjabi Kavi* (Poets across the Wahga border). In this book, I discussed some 20 poets. Reception for this book was pretty good as this subject was not written before. Then there was a book by Baba Nazmi, this was brought to my notice by Dr. Nirmal Singh of Lambra who is a social activist keen on promoting friendship between India and Pakistan. He was to honour me and I asked him, "Why did not you publish Baba Nazmi?" He replied, "Yes, we had promised that, including an offer of honour for him, unfortunately we could not publish it." He asked me translate this in Punjabi. By then I had acquired all three books on Baba Nazmi and got

them translated. These are poetry books. I selected poems from them and finished the book within one week. Similarly you know Ustad Daman, I publicised his poetry on this side of Punjab. So I have made these four or five names from across the border familiar in Punjabi on this side of our border. Then there is a major writer, Afsal Tafsil who was a close friend of Amrita Pritam. She visited Delhi also, she belonged to Hoshiarpur district before the partition of 1947, some village there. You know during the partition all her relatives, *taya chacha* (uncles) and their children were all killed through communal riots while she escaped because she had gone to her maternal village. As she visited Punjab, I promised we shall have a special issue on *Chirag* devoted to Afsal Tafsil. In this issue, we published her novel, a short novel about military rule in Pakistan when she was underground. This is nearly 80 page long novel. Then I also promised to publish her story. In this way I was committed to promote Pakistan Punjabi literature on this side of the border and this is my contribution.

As far as Pakistan's popular literature we published a special issue on Habib Jalib, it contains his biographical studies, some poems and some essays. Similarly two years back we published a special issue on 1947. Again a special issue of *Chirag*. Another special issue we published was on the centenary year of Faiz Ahmed Faiz. This is nearly 150 page special issue in which there are his memories and interview, some poems and which were translated from Urdu into Punjabi. Now see this poem by Habib Jalib where he says:

Jalib says occasionally a worthy thing or two
Sun rises every day for sure only to go down
Then without you my beloved, think of my heart's position
Tired like a passenger he sits down to take some rest
Living in Sandal Bar my beloved Heerai, may your laughter last forever
While I remember my misery, my eyes get wet

You know Habib Jalib was from Hoshiarpur, he was born here and wrote:

Oh! This land of Doaba, where the love prospered
As I remember my homeland, tears flow in my eyes
Jalib having seen the world, nothing shines as much
And that night all those miseries have to be born with a laugh instead

When I went to Lahore, I had required one of his book, its title was *Raat Kalaihini* (The Sorrowful Night). In this book there are his Punjabi poems and some of the songs he wrote for films. I got all these poems translated and gave the manuscript to Sahit Academy Ludhiana, who are about to publish it soon in the future. Then the Academy asked me, you have worked on Faiz with such labour, prepare a manuscript of about 200 pages along with a biographical sketch. As Faiz Ahmed Faiz did not write his autobiography, but he had a friend Dr. Ajob Mirza who met me in England, who wrote a book in the shape of several interviews. Every third or fourth day he would conduct an interview and write about it. That book was titled *Hamke Thehre Ajnabi* (I am a stranger). As I had read all of it, Punjabi Sahit Academy asked me to prepare a book on Faiz, so I did.

Then there is a photographer, Teena Maduti. He is from Mexico and there was a painter Deگو Rabera. They were very close together. I wrote an essay on Teena Maduti. She was very well known photographer, I acquired her photography and published something through my magazine. You see I

published a lot of foreign literature, writers and artists in my magazine *Chirag*. Never, I saw any commercial motive in my magazine. The aim of the magazine was to create a movement by publishing progressive literature and to bring world's leading writers and their writings to the attention of Punjabi readers.

On writers' associations, only those associations remain active which are lead by wise leaders who have experience of organising things. Only such leaders can avoid disputes and factions which usually arise. Our Kendri Sabha despite internal disputes, has tried to tell the government about the issue facing Punjabi Language on a continuous basis. At least the association was performing two major functions: one, discussion around ideological issues; second, publications of various authors were discussed. In fact there was third function that became an urgent issue; It was to get Punjabi language the status of official language and to emphasise that Punjabi should be compulsory language of government administration, courts and civil administration. For this purpose, from time to time our association organised protests, processions, discussions and held conventions. In those years a question also arose about the language medium for government schools. At that time the government had decided that Punjabi would not be compulsory, and of course private schools were being established all over Punjab Punjabi was neglected. The issue of Punjabi language became far more serious and writers' responsibility increased.

When I retired in March 1992, friends suggested we should publish a literary magazine. In this way *Chirag* was started. Its first issue was in August–September 1992. I was appointed its chief editor. We used to hold two three meetings every year, and people will volunteer to collect subscriptions. I had suspicion that by appointing me as editor, these friends are also putting me under the obligation to finance the magazine. This worried me. In 1993, a literary association from England invited me there. I stayed there for four months. My sponsors and others in England provided me financial help by getting several subscriptions. On return, I got that money deposited into a bank and felt confident that the magazine would be secure now. In 1998-1999 I went to America and Canada and on the way also to England. That time again I got some funds from Punjabis abroad. *Chirag* has by now published 86 issues since 1992 and it has run for 23 years. Imagine the magazine was never late even once nor it had any stoppage. And second notable thing is it has kept a minimum standard in its publications.

The progressive values which we had started as its objectives, we have maintained them. Note, we never received any government advertisement. Whatever advertisement we published were due to some friendly contacts. I have some friends abroad who have helped us and we have taken them as our advisors. They usually send us funds on various occasions. Another problem was this; we used to send 25-30 copies to Pakistan. We had collected addresses of writers who could read Gurmukhi. Our magazine cost two rupees through the post. During the last four years, government has increased postal charges, we have to spend 45 rupees on each address. Similar high charges apply for postage to other countries. Earlier it was 18 rupees per issue. You see there is SAARC body, we thought one of its benefit will be low postage across these countries. Just the opposite has happened. Postage has raised so much as to be prohibitive. Till we have tried to maintain the standard of our magazine, second we had tried to encourage new talent. In these months you may or may have not read a poet named Gurdeep Dehradoon who has published eight poetry books of *gazals*. We published a special issue on him. Then we are preparing a special issue on Afsal Tafsil. We are always trying to get

special issues on particular occasions. Let me leave you with a poem that I wrote during emergency when I was jailed in Kapurthala:

The shadow asks me what was the crime
For which we are sentenced here
The shadow asks me what was the crime
for which we are sentenced here
the walls keep flavour and try to close it
but waves of here share this with us

Next is:
Though flavour is confined behind walls
Still it flows along with the wind

The sun will shine later or earlier
Dark clouds cannot blacken its rays

If you wish to meet me, my dear
Ask those shadows in the balcony my address

At every step there is a test
At every step there are dark forces

This was the common village with pipal trees
What else has brightened this Fattu Chak village?

If Hundal were to live a peaceful life
He should stop writing seditious poems

Thank you