

Surjit Sajjan

I was born in a village called Patar Kalan, quite a famous village. One of its prominent personalities is Didar Singh Pardesi, a well-known singer who sang that popular song *Raat chanani main turan mere naal ture parchawan ni jinde meriaye* (I walk under the moonlight, so does my shadow, oh! what a wonderful life). Our village is also made famous by Surjit Patar who in fact is related to Didar Singh Pardesi. Surjit Patar has shifted his residence to Ludhiana of course for many years. In any case, there is always talk of Surjit Patar's success in the village and I was inspired like other pupils by his legacy. Why could not I write? I asked myself often inspired by them. Then I did start writing and I was accepted by some newspapers, so I was encouraged. After a while I got a job when I was employed in Kapurthala.

I think there are family legacies or call them genes. So I should talk about my father now. He was not educated, not literate but he learned a bit of writing on the soil. Thus gaining basic literacy, he started reading *Qissas*. He was working on some canals. A particular plot was allotted to him and other workers to clear the earth. Then in the evening these workers would gather but had no entertainment. So they would recite and hear these *Qissas*. You know at that time there was no electricity, it was either candles or lanterns. My father used to tell me how they would recite such *Qissas* almost every night. Among the titles were '*Jaani chor* or there was a king called *Nar sultan* and he would tell a folk tale like that. This folk tale would a series of long story lasting sometime for one full month. At night this was also our routine at home to listen to our father telling such folk tales before we retired to bed and sleep. Then the next night story would start from where it was stopped. This must have affected my writing potential. I was in 7th or 8th class when I started writing poems and short stories. I came to know some newspapers or a magazine to which I would regularly send them.

Then I, sort of, learned about literary associations (*Lekhak Sabhas*). So, one should go to these *Sabhas* to get one's writings checked. Because, it was usual practice there to discuss the weaknesses and so on. In this way I started going to sometimes Jalandhar or Ludhiana, even Hoshiarpur to attend one of these writers' association. I got further input for my writings which started appearing in some newspapers. Seeing them I was more encouraged. In 1978 one of my stories was published in the Language Department magazine, it was awarded the first prize. So, from then onwards, I was really established as a writer although award was then only two or three hundred rupees then. But it seemed so much worthwhile and I felt I was doing something for the society also.

In Kapurthala I was fully committed to a literary association known as Sirjana Kender (Creative Centre). This was formally affiliated to Kendri Punjabi Lekhak Sabha -an elected body of Punjabi writers. Thus, I became its member, in fact a life-member and participated in many of its activities. There was of course other meetings arranged by other local associations, for example at Sultanpur, Kalan Sangha village or at Jalandhar. Our own centre used to arrange a monthly meeting. At these meetings everyone would begin by reciting his poem, members present would comment about it saying what is good about or where it lacks something. They would offer suggestions for improvement and there was vigorous discussion in this manner. In this way writings were improved. In 1983, there was one association at Sidhwan Dona which was established by Kanwar Imtiaz. This was called Sirjana Kender, Sidhwan Dona. Then, he felt village is not the right setting for it, so he shifted it to Kapurthala city. The first election for this association took place in 1984. All names of our

executive committee are on that board you see here. At that time our President was Karnail Singh Nijjar and Kanwar Imtiaz was General Secretary. Earlier on there were only a handful members. After a few meetings were publicised I became its member and there is now an office for Sirjana Kender. This is in Kapurthala Virsa Vihar. Earlier on we used to hold meetings at a school. And after some time they would put barriers saying you need permissions etc. For a time we held meetings at a mosque also. Our general secretary Kanwar Imtiaz was a Muslim who did not migrate to Pakistan in 1947. He is excellent painter, writer and a columnist. So he took permission to hold meeting at the mosque. And we would bring our lunch from home and so on or prepare lunch for visiting writers. Kanwar Imtiaz would volunteer in this respect. He was a very good host. For a while this continued.

Then we were offered a college room by Professor Aujla who used to teach us. So at that time we had no permanent office, it was then when Virsa Vihar was constructed. We wrote an application to the district administration to allot a room for us where we could hold literary meetings. At that time Rakesh Verma was Deputy Commissioner of this district who allotted this room to us. In this way, this has become our permanent place for meetings. Sirjana Kender became pretty well-known not only around this district but throughout Punjab. Although in Kapurthala district here are two or three other associations; there is one at Sultanpur, another at Nadala, and Kala Sangia and in Kapurthala city itself. A literary forum in this city is called Kapurthala Adab Society and there is Adbi Shaam Kapurthala, but these all share the same members from our centre of these associations, ours remains the most prominent.

It was Kanwar Imtiaz who was the real founder of Sirjana Kender. When he was General Secretary, I worked with him as Assistant Secretary for a number of years. I used to write annual reports and so on. As a well-known painter Kanwar Imtiaz had a very good relationship with Amrita Pritam. He would go to Delhi on 26th January and 15th August and impress the audience through his recitations. He used to lecture in a very effective manner. There was a distinct style to his presentation. After his death, a book was published with the title '*Bol Mirzaya Bol.*' You can see here a couplet from the booklet appended here, it says:

I am Mirza's turban, now thrown under the feet
I am widow's son or fire at a funeral place (*siva*)
I am red, a burning eye of the tiger
I am rose separate from its branch
I am a sorrowful flickering eye
I am a rejected prayer from my hand
I am throttled rose among the plants
I am not gold sparrow, but crying Punjab

This was a poem about the 'Punjab problem.' Terrorists had killed several people in his village. Among them was Taya Shankar- an old man who used to sell berries. Kanwar Imtiaz wrote a poem in his memory also. I can't recall it but I remember a line as, 'Taya Shankar no longer comes with his sweet berries'.

I have published three books, the first of them was on the 'Punjab problem,' this was called *Tirhkya hoye Akas* (The Fractured Image). You see people were killed after ordering them to down from buses. This book was a poetry book. Then I published an anthology of song- titled *Ful Sandhoori*,

Mehak Kusaili. I had intended to publish its next edition but was delayed because of death of my publisher's relative who was in America. So, there is delay, this will be the third edition. Then I published book of 'gazals' with the title '*Mere gulabi rang de supne*' in 2009.

In our meetings, we used to invite authors to contribute five poems each. At the next meeting, we would get these together. At a subsequent meeting we would appoint an editorial board to judge them for their quality. So, in this way we published several books. First of which was '*Sirjana da Safar*' and its title was prepared by Kanwar Imtiaj. This was followed by books such as '*Sirjana de nakas*'; '*Sirjana de ru-b-ru*'; '*Sirjana de Pandh*'; '*Sirjana de ang sang*' and so on. And there are eight or ten books in this series. Among other books which we published is '*Alam Pairha*', this is reminiscences of our members. There was another title Gurmukh Fatehpuri '*lang gaye darya*'. So in this way we published these books on behalf of our association.

This is the latest publication, *Sirjana di lo* (he shows this title) consisting of *gazals*. Let me recite one *gazel* of mine here:

The pretence of loyalty will be put to test at last
The dramas they enact will be out at last
There is no end to proofs of their good intentions
Such and other kinds of tricks will be known at last
The camouflage they wore for so long
Issues they deviously preached would be revealed at last
How megalomaniac proclaimed their autonomy
And their slogans will be bare for all its worth
How clowns pretend to be gentlemen in various ways
Honest traders will be recognised at last
In this city of stones none recognises
Among the gathering of familiar none is a friendly face
There is little of purity or nutrition in things they sell
Who enjoys life beyond the age of 60
Even tress suffer from storms, torrents and sun
None cares to offer any cover for those
God ha endowed tongues to stones in this way
None can match their dark pronouncements

In the association meeting all sort of opinions are expressed by writers present there. Someone would make a joke about a poem, another would laugh, someone would offer a serious comment and so on. Writers usually have a sensitive skin. In any case the whole business of the reading and discussions a particular poem, short story, even a drama or a novel , our aim is to tell the author how this creative work can be improved. This is main function of a literary association. From our Sirjana Kender, writers would visit schools to inspire young pupils as literature is part of school curriculum -in the form of travel accounts, poetry or other genre. These are capable of bringing changes in society and thus affect politics also. Pupils get to know what is good and bad in society. Literature tells them how to distinguish the right from the wrong and how we should live in our society. So in this way literature and society are connected. The difference between ordinary people and writers is; writers are capable of reflecting on life through their writings while workers after day

long duties come in the evening want rest or sleep. Writers struggle through the night with creative work as they feel it is important to convey particular messages.

Thanks