

Renuka Singh

My name is Renuka Singh. I was born in Delhi. Though my parents had migrated to Delhi after the partition. I did my schooling and higher studies in Delhi with a doctorate from Jawaharlal University, where I am currently teaching Sociology.

My father was one of the most influential and capable publishers of Punjabi of his time. It was he, who established the Punjabi culture in the city of Delhi. All eminent writers of Punjabi, whom you meet nowadays, are his contribution to the language. He was, I presume, a father figure to the major Punjabi writers of his time. Because of this, I grew up in an environment that was replenished with writers, artists and politicians. Thus, I believe literature runs in my blood.

My father namely Bhaba Pritam Singh, was the chairman of the Punjabi Sabha in Delhi. He was totally committed and devoted to the building of the Punjabi cultural scene. He even built a building where all the Punjabi writers could sit, talk and discuss among themselves. These very people were desirous of inducting me also into the committee which had been formed to cultivate the Punjabi culture. In due course, I became the chairperson of the Punjabi Sabha, i.e., in the year 2005. Though the Punjabi Sabha was started by my papa ji, after we joined, we cultivated and expanded the activities associated with it. For instance, we started running libraries in the villages of Punjab so that good literature could reach the residents of the state. We now are running more than 200 libraries where Punjabi readership is being inculcated and expanded. The Sabha confers fellowships on the promising Punjabi writers. Presently about ten such fellowships are being given. A very senior writer is given a special fellowship. The Sabha publishes a quarterly literary magazine namely, *Samkali Sahit* (Contemporary Literature). Besides all this, scholarships are given to needy children who study Punjabi in colleges. This is also accompanied by regular literary discussions every month where writers are invited to read their works. A memorial lecture is held in the memory of Papa ji every year on his anniversary. In addition, the Sabha plays a big social role by organising an annual sunshine festival where between 150 to 200 writers gather to speak. Of these two or three writers are honoured annually. In this they are given some money and mementos. To top it all, we have established a library where people with interest in Punjabi come and borrow books. At similar outlets we sell books on Punjabi at 50% of their price so that books at affordable prices are available to adults and children alike, in an effort to sensitize them.

I have also done some research on issues relating to women and have written many books on this subject. On the way, I developed interest in Buddhism also and in the company of the Dalai Lama, I wrote a lot of books which are published in the USA and Canada. These books have been translated into many foreign languages like Spanish, French and Italian. Nowadays, from a sociological point of view, I am working on a book titled International Marriage (Cross Cultural Marriage), where I am exploring the challenges faced by women who are married to Indian born foreigners.

As a supplement to all this, I am the director of a meditation centre in Delhi, the main guru of which is the Dalai Lama. I feel it is a very practical endeavour because it brings healing to the crazy minds of the modern generations who have to face current stresses and tensions.

Nowadays, the readership of the Punjabi language is suffering a crisis on several fronts. The first, people are just not interested in reading Punjabi literature. They feel spending money on books written in Punjabi is a waste of money. They would rather buy books written by English authors. This is in contrast to writers of other regional languages where readership is very popular. The second problem is that even those books which are written in Punjabi are not deep enough to invoke the

interest of Punjabi readers. Because of a lack of interest in works written in Punjabi, the publishing of such books is not very lucrative. Further, denting the development of this language, the fourth and the last crisis is that even those writers who can write good Punjabi, for some unknown reasons, feel guilty in expressing their thoughts in this language.

Our institution is trying its best to create interest in the reading and writing of Punjabi and we are making a start with children. That is why we are sending a lot of children's books in Punjabi to different libraries. This gesture has been well received and we hope and pray the readership of Punjabi becomes a sustainable habit with the children, not only now but also when they grow up.

The biggest tragedy befalling the Punjabi language is that parents of Punjabi children feel a sense of shame in having their children learn and speak the Punjabi language. Their preference is towards the speaking and writing of Hindi and English. This is in contrast to other Indian states where natives feel proud in learning and speaking their mother tongue. This preference for English is discernible all over Punjab. English and English medium schools are given a prime place in the lives of Punjabi children.

In the 60s and 70s, as also in the 80s Punjabi had a place of pride in the lives of the people of the Punjab state. Many eminent writers emerged in this congenial environment. But I don't know why this is not happening now. What are the conditions that don't contribute to the emergence of good Punjabi literary works in the modern times? This harsh environment is a big set back to the establishment and growth of the Punjabi language which is very unfortunate.

While people in Punjab are showing a tremendous preference for the westerns' way of life and particularly for the English language, in contrast, the Punjabi who are migrated to Western countries are more particular in retaining the ethnic identity just like other nationalities like the Spanish, the Italians and the French. This trend is limited not only to the written and spoken language but also to a basic Sikh religion. This, however, has led to intra-generational conflict between Punjabi origin parents and their foreign-born Indian children, particularly when it comes to social issues like eating preferences and choosing marriage partners. In summary, the older generation is more keen to retain its original roots in comparison to their foreign born children.

Stepping aside slightly from the main issue, I would like to emphasise that the religious element has become very customary and mechanical in our lives. We read and recite the scripture but we don't make any effort to understand the essential meaning that they convey. This has left us bereft of our basic beliefs in contrast to those Punjabis who are settled in Europe and the Americas who live their lives with nostalgia and preferences for their original ways of life and thinking.

In addition to providing good literature to the children and adults of Punjab, it is essential that we also furnish people settled abroad with good works in their original language so that the sense of loneliness and separation that they feel is to a large extent dissipated. They have a deep hunger for their mother tongue and it would be a blessing to satisfy their craving. It is not a coincidence that the most popular Bollywood Hindi songs have a line or two in Punjabi.

In Pakistani Punjab, the language that is spoken is identical to the one which is spoken in East Punjab and if there were more literary interactions between the two, it would benefit a great deal to the development and spread of this language. After all boundaries are merely man made.

Thank you!