

Manmohan Bawa – translation

Our village was about three miles from Goindwal, named Behrowal, which is older than Goindwal. I was born there, we lived there and then, at age of three or four, I stayed for one year at Beas. This was my maternal village of our grandparents. After that I came to Dhoori. Then as fate will decide, our elder brother, we are 5 brothers, after finishing his matriculation, started working in Delhi. In 1942 he called us to Delhi, this way the family came to settle in Delhi. In those days, all outsiders reaching Delhi would settle in Karol Bagh. It was newly populated area built by the English for new settlers. Here we lived where I studied in fifth grade at M.B. School. In sixth or seventh grade, a Khalsa School was established in Karol Bagh, - the first such school in Karol Bagh. I was among the first seven students of this school. Our family was quite large, five brothers and three sisters. Because of this large family, I started finding a job as early as possible. I did not want to work as yet but was forced to find employment. Moreover, I did not want a clerical job as I was interested in arts from my school days. I wanted to become an artist. I went to Bombay where for a year or more learned art. But I came back to Delhi and could not complete five years of the course. Then whichever artist I happened to meet in Delhi, I started learning from them by going to their homes as a *Gurushishya* kind of way. This was about my art education so now we come to my interest in Punjabi literature. This was quite accidental. About my interest in Punjabi literature, when I was in eighth grade at Khalsa School, at that time we were taught in Urdu as it was the medium of education. In those days Punjabi was not taught in schools. In eighth grade, a teacher was appointed who started teaching optional Punjabi; his name was Hari Pattan Singh. Whenever I went to the library, he would give me beautiful books and say, “son, read this”; I remember he gave me “Sundari” to read once. He also gave me

"Vijay Singh" on another occasion. Both were historical novels and this was my first interaction with literature through books. I thought that since I wanted work as an artist, I should be also being literate. If a man is illiterate, it does not look good; I should at least do a B.A (Bachelor of Arts). In those days, to get a B.A, you had to do Gyani as a private candidate then you could proceed to sit for B.A as a private candidate. As I mentioned, I could not enroll in college as I was working. So I started reading for Gyani. I was lucky to get in touch with some good writers. First, there was Dr. Harcharan Singh, a playwright who was running this institute; and along with him were literary persons and writers like Sujjan Singh, Sant Singh Sekhon. In this way I got interested in literature, and then listening to such writers As we passed Gyani, several students who were interested in literature decided to have our own literary society which we named as Naveen Punjabi Sahit Sabha because there was another such society called Panjabi Sahit Sabha, the latter invited prominent writers but we felt shy about going and reading our creative works there. We made rules of Naveen Sahit Sabha exactly the same as of Sahit Sabha. We had meeting every Tuesday while the other society met on Sundays. Five or six years later when we gained enough confidence that we could also participate there, we bound up our society and enrolled as members of Punjabi Sahit Sabha. All of us I used to write, some would write poems, others stories, one or two wrote articles and almost everyone became a member of that society. Then as usually happens, we scattered, some were transferred here and there. For a long time I stayed with the Society.

All our meetings were held at the home of Gyani Hari Singh which continued for almost twenty or thirty years until he lived there. In those days, bicycles were main transport and on Sunday evening there used be a cluch of bicycles in front of his house. He welcomes us all with

affection love; we used to sit in a carpeted room, all of us sitting on the floor with our backs against the wall. One by one, we would read stories or poems. Everyone would get chance to read his work... If there were ten people, all of them will get a turn, no matter if 20 all will have their time and there would be constructive criticism of each. Among those people, some were very able and talented like Gyani Hari Singh.

The people, apart from them, there was Kirpal Singh Azad, Surjeet Singh, many more, Pyara Singh Paer was there who later came to Ludhiana and changed his name to Paramjeet Singh, I believe. There was Parminder Singh whom everyone praised; based on whose name, one of my books "Ek Raat" was published. As first stories of all writers are based on their own lives, some life incident, all these stories in my book were based on my life experiences that I changed a little here and there. So, from 1947 to 1984, how many years passed; just 35 to 40 years. The meetings continued in Gyani Hari Singh's quarter. Then in 1984 there were riots and some of our members were killed, Gyani Kuldeep Singh was murdered. Hari Singh by that time was very old man, retired and his quarter was also taken back and a *kothi* had been built. But Gyani Kuldeep Singh, before passing away used his contacts and got some land allotted for the Punjabi Sahit Sabha. Maybe you know, there is an 'institutional area' where there is a Hindi Bhavan, Urdu Bhavan, and this Punjabi Bhavan and there are three or four more *bhavans* and because the land for Punjabi Bhavan was taken first so the Punjabi Sahit Sabha has more land than the others. For many years after the allotment of land, nothing happened because money was needed to build, but where was the money to come from?

Then we built a boundary, and a small room with a tin roof and started our meetings there. Then Bhaba Pritam Singh came in the picture. He was already in the picture though, as he had formed

a trust and started collecting money from here and there and started on building where the meetings of Punjabi Sahit Sabha were held once a month. Earlier these were held weekly, now they were held once a month. They are still held. One thing I would like to add that we, the writers of Delhi used to be there for these meetings. Apart from that, any other prominent writer passing through Delhi was also occasionally invited. Among the invited were

Bhisham Sahni, Viraj Sahni, Satinder Sathiarthi would often come. Amrita Pritam came and many others and we gained so much from them. About the rest of what you just asked, it is quite simple whatever you are interested in and if you have like-minded people around you, sitting with them, you will enjoy discussing with them, you will be inspired to do something more, to write. The fact is that when a person starts writing, he has only read stories and he takes guidance from those stories but this guidance is not complete, he just gets an idea. True guidance is when you write a story and you feel that you have written a perfect story, you think "I will read it and everyone will praise it and clap but later when it is criticized, everyone has own views then you know what the shortcomings were and what the good points were, and according to this, when you rewrite it, correct it, disapprove it or write other stories. In that way we move forward but sometimes they can bind you down and become your limitation. But in the beginning a strict discipline is needed, be it art, dance, music or storytelling. With this kind of discipline, slowly you get hold of it and broaden your imagination in a liberal way and in this way, I benefitted a lot from the Sahit Sabha. Slowly though *punjabiyat* (or Punjabi culture) began fading or disappearing in Delhi, it is disappearing now and has almost gone. Along with Punjabi, I will talk more about Punjabi literature, there was the first generation, who came from Pakistan many from Lahore. Remember Lahore was

the cultural center, when

they arrived in Delhi they made Delhi the cultural center of Punjabi. Then over the next 25 years the first generation were old, they started passing away. The first generation spoke Punjabi; they were proud of their Punjabi. The second generation appeared, they were learning in Hindi, while a few were studying in Punjabi schools. As the main language was Hindi there was more stress on Hindi. In some homes Punjabi was spoken but in others Punjabi was left behind and they started speaking Hindi. Now it is the third generation there, though their parents, mother and father might speak Punjabi with each other but the children invariably speak Hindi. So this means that the generation of Punjabi speaking is completely absent all gone. . As a matter of fact, the generation of Punjabi writers is also gone. That means in the last 30 years, post 1984 era, not even one Punjabi literary person was born in Delhi. If you hear some names, they are from Punjab who have settled in Delhi becoming professors or lecturers. Note none among them is a creative writer, they are all lecturers, give lectures, criticize, attend meetings but none can write. So, in those terms, I, with subdued pride can say that I am the only one still left who write, write creatively of all the members of the Punjabi Sahit Sabha.

There is one named Kirpal Singh Azad –a committed communist minded, who offers good criticism, -he is a friend, about 5-6 years older than me. Now he has written a longish novel of nearly 800 pages –this offers a history of the communist movement –a good story it is

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As far as publishing of my stories is concerned, I was quite shy, I did not have faith, was afraid whether a reputed magazine would publish my story. So I never sent any story to Punjab. Some editors of magazines would come to the literary meeting and I would give my stories to them. I

didn't even send to Arsee, Arsee was a prestigious magazine in my estimate. Still, my stories appeared in, Amrita Pritam's *Nagmani*. The reason was that Imroj, before he was involved with Amrita, was among our group of friends, artists. I knew him and fortunately his house was near ours at Hauz Khas where I used to live. On morning walks, I would go and say I came to see Imroj. Amrita was usually there and she would say "Manmohan, how are you, send us a story" and I would send it to her, just like that.

And after that I don't know whether you want to record it or not, two of my books were published; "Ek Raat" in 1962 and twenty years later in 1983 "Chitte Ghore dw Sawar." Then there was further gap of 20 years. I had thought earlier as also then, what is writing, one can write at 40 or 50 but it will not be possible to travel after certain age, so until my feet are good, one should travel, get the experience of life. So in those 20 years I did not get out any book. Nonetheless I did write sometimes and after that, my third book "Azaad Sundari" –was published in 1990 and became quite well-known.

In 1984, a new turn of events arrived. It appeared as a rift between Sikhs and Hindus. I thought, I could not do anything politically but as a writer, as a thinker, could I do something...? I felt that the Muslims as a community understand their history and think it started with Mahmood Ghajni or Muhammad Ghorī. The Sikhs are even behind that, they say their history started with Guru Nanak. But the history of Punjabis in Punjab, is among the oldest in Hindustan. Our history started with Mohenjodaro, Harrappa, it started with the Vedic age. Why don't we reflect about it? I thought that I should write stories that start with the Vedic age and continue into the modern times. I created a guide map in my mind. However, if I was to write in straight forward essays, no readers will find it interesting. They can understand better through stories.. So I started writing such stories, with the concept - what did you say? – The secular. Of the secular

concept I used was like this: of different castes, of different classes who were in the background, who were landlords, who were exploited and so on. There were Aryan castes, aboriginals and slaves, I gave them more importance. So I wrote such stories, like the first story I wrote about Eklavya, I took his character and wrote more stories. From these, from history and mythology, I drew my characters put them in stories for my readers and I was pleased as Punjabi readers appreciated these stories.

Yes, there were many collections like "Azaad Sundari," then there was 'Narbali,' these two were drawn from history and mythology, After that a publication came out drawing upon mountains, aboriginals and what was the title of that? It was "Kaala Kabooter" and then there was another story, four more stories were published. Novels too that were all dependent on history and mythology.

At that time, Muhammad Ghazni came and there was this myth that he lived for 600 or, 700 years, whether he lived that long or not, we don't know. It is said he met Guru Gobind Singh Ji, they also say that, so I made him a character; that Ghazni, was a "Haji Ratan", which means that he was both Muslim and Hindu. I made him a character who lived in Ghazni as also in India. I made him a spy of the Hindu Rajas of that time, Jaipal and Anandpal. That he worked as a spy sending information back

The first story of Azad Sundari, which I write, on history and mythology, its outline is this. At the time Sangol was being dug up, you've seen Sangol right? I visited there was influenced to write a story on it. Then, when I started thinking about characters, its location and characters. I made all the writers of Delhi as my characters, even though it was of 7th and 8th century. I named a character Adamgupt, and that is Adamjeet, a playwright, there is a character called

Harivardhan, that is Gyani Dr. Harbhajan Singh and there is Satinder Singh Noor as Satindergupt.

I will now talk about “Kala Kabootar” its background was like this: I went to the plains of Terai region which are adjacent to Nepal. There I saw a tribe called Tharoo, its story is that as Rajputs used to fight with Mughal emperors. As fighting continued, the Rajput kings though to send their families away. So before going to war, before an important battle, they sent their women to the jungles of Terai region along with their many servants. As they fought the war, almost all died fighting. Now their queens and princesses stayed there as some of those girls grew up, they had to marry with their servants’ children. This tribe has a customary hierarchy where women are head of the family, and the men are looked down upon. I wrote a story about them, and made a symbol ‘Kala Kabootar’ as a black pigeon is rarely found. There was a couple of pigeons before, now only one remains and now he is searching for his partner, the female pigeon, nevertheless this is the background. I narrate how t the queen of the village has a husband and her husband, who is a very jolly man, plays the flute, he does not give a damn about what needs to be done, that’s all left up to the queen. This character is based on my guru’s life who was a painter. Painting who was not bothered about others just occupied with his painting. Instead of painter, my character played the flute, did not go home for couple of days. So this is how taking characters from life and weaving stories, drawing upon history or mythology are combined into my writings.