

Maksood Sahib: Interview

I was born not far from here, some 22-23 miles away at Sheikhupura. I was born in a peasant family. It was a traditional peasant type household. I was born in 1955. Our language was Punjabi; this was spoken at home as also in the neighbourhoods, and everywhere around us. We were living ordinary lives and the language we used was Punjabi –these were Punjabi households, of Jats and our language was classical Punjabi –here was no question of its completion with another language in our area. Our household used to have all kinds of traditional qissas –Hir of Waris shah, Saif-Ul-Malik, Shah Behram, and several vars (epics) such as var of nadir Shah; Sikh var, -these we can say were part of classical literature most households used to possess. In my childhood our household had these sorts of publications. There was Jang-namas (qissas of warfare) too –one was Awam Husain's war; this was in Arabic; he was grandson of Rasool; there was this famous jangnama.

Then in daily life, the kind of language we used was almost part and parcel of classical Punjabi. This was our everyday language of conversation, There was no two ways about it or any differentiation in its use; this was one seamless language. So as we opened our eyes around the world and were growing up this was the language we grew up in. All our friends and relatives used this language –a common medium of communication. Our parents, mother and father, brothers and sisters and all relatives' kinds used the same language. We were born into Punjabi language –it as the language which we socialised in and it talked and walked with us. As we got out into neighbourhoods, the region around us everyone was doing the same –talking in Punjabi.

Well, when it comes to schooling –there was the difference. There Urdu entered. At home it was Punjabi –and that was the language in which all our disputes were settled; or advice was tendered – eventually many elders or our father himself would quote Waris for advice citing some prominent lines from his *qissa*. He would say, listen this is what Waris says; it was how our elders understood the world and instructed us to do same. They would recite some poetry –this was nothing unusual about it. From our oldest *nani* to my brothers and sister, they always knew what we were talking about. You see there was hardly any difference between literary and common Punjabi. Waris' language and other classics were part of our vocabulary.

It was eventually as we grew up and went through school, we came to know of Urdu –this was propagated as a language for civilisation. It was preached as language of the well-mannered. We were surprised to be told that Punjabi is language of Ganwars (of the fools) we could not think we were part of such uncivilised lot when speaking Punjabi. But there it was. We used to hear stories and folktales in Punjabi – my grandma (nani) used to recite old folktales which we listened attentively as part of our childhood. These would so absorb us and decide us. Then as children we used to play several kind of game; lookan miti; touch my feet; go yup the tree and so on –these were very much part of Punjabi language and phrases used. Then we had several rhymes which we remembered by heart; All this, I mean to say we grew up in a world totally absorbed in the rich heritage of Punjabi language. Our personalities were formed by this language. As we know now it is language which makes the complete man. It is language which mediates our relationship with the immediate world as well with the world at large. The personality of persons is developed by their language. This is a dialectical relationship between language and personality formation.

Then of course we have seen how the formal sector of education was established –where it was a different language than Punjabi which dominated its curriculum. As you entered school, one's own language was stopped at the gate. As the language inside was different –Another was forced upon the entering pupils there. The second language learning meant you need to forget the first language. The language which you brought from home was to be replaced by another language. This is what this school language was aimed to do –to make you forget the first language.

In establishing this second language –of course there was a long history of its lineage –how much information was collected from ground-level. They started with identifying different kinds of grass that was in Punjab villages; water-level was measured accurately; land quality was surveyed properly there did not leave anything unmeasured –all things of rural life were evaluated. Then of course same thing happened to the language. There were surveys of languages spoken, local proverbs were collected; sayings and folktales, children tales, puzzles, all kinds of folklore traditions were tabulated. What was left out was the poetic tradition of Punjab –which started from Baba Farid and had come down to the contemporary times; this was something that they did not exhibit any enthusiasm or expression. They did not emphasise enough about our long heritage and language. This poetry contained Nanak, and there were so many others. You should know that poetry does not come alone, there are all sorts of poets, different expressions of poetry and Punjabi had a long tradition of poetry in its origins. The tradition has its own diversity. All this was not mentioned by English observers –that is what they lacked in all their knowledge and data collection from Punjab –which they did during the colonial Punjab.

Now let us consider the Punjabi tradition at length. It is a language of communication alone –it has its own culture –this cultural heritage is rich in all sorts of ways. And the culture is never static it is always moving and making and breaking itself –but there is distinct form of Punjabi culture. Now the colonial administration recognised it in some ways. For Sikhs they granted its connection with Punjabi fur to historical reasons and reasons of national consciousness. Then came the category of Muslims –the bureaucracy under the colonial rule –Zaildars, Lambrdars, Suphaidposhs, and Jholi-chuks –all ranks of honours under the colonial rule –they became aligned with the English administration whose language was Urdu. They were the first to support Urdu language in Punjab and the raj. They were part of old and new aristocracy, Rais, Rai Bahadurs etc.

But Punjabi as a language survived this onslaught. This is a fact that Punjabi was never part of any Empire –never gained the status of court language. This is something we need to think seriously. Neither the Mughals nor the Hindu princes or their principalities adopted it, Neither the Pathans nor the Turks. Never had it enjoyed the royal patronage. So the question arises; under the hegemony of Persian, we have Punjabi language; Then there was Arabic –still we had common language as Punjabi; we still had Punjabi poets –even flourishing in it. Many poets made their names still. And consider this how common Punjabi peasantry lived by farming –subsistent means, grazing their buffaloes and cows around, farming small patches of land, etc., Non one demanded that 'please sir, why don't you promote our language –why not make it medium of administration and instruct –and give us jobs as clerks working bout administration work in our language?' There was no cry from the common Punjabi speaking public.

So, what was happening someone will pick up Persian or Farsi and join the ranks of clerks? Things were that not many people wanted to become clerks at that time –it was era of mass unemployment seeking jobs. Recruitment to government posts came from old ruling classes or newly urban education classes. In fact our mother tongue became a vehicle of our consciousness for revolt against the colonial administration. We came together because of common language –as it enjoined us into a Punjabi community; there was sense of solidarity and cooperation among different communities due to common language of Punjabi. You read Farid, all gurus from Guru Nanak onwards, add Madho Ram Hussain –all these poets (we have labelled some of them Sufi – rather a cheap label when we talk about them that they were only into spiritual things –far from the truth –this is not true) then you know a different reality. They all inspired the common public for revolt; the rebellion was born through Punjabi language. One can say the very essence of Sikh religion was a big rebellion due to the adoption of Punjabi language! This led to the formation of Misals, the legend of Sikh hegemony but then it was all downhill for the Sikhs as it went the wrong way. But there is no mistaking the fact that Sikh tradition was due to its language. It was a language of resentment the Sikhs adopted. Punjabi as such was of resistance –it was not a language made for submission. And if you look at Punjabi poetry –this is all in the tradition of resistance –seeking to upset the established order of things. Ours is a language which is uncomfortable for the ruling classes.

Now consider the formation of the Ghadar party. Its essence was based upon the Punjabi language – its var tradition. That var tradition used to sing praises for its resistance heroes. If you read about Sohan Singh Bhakna –whatever is published on this side of the border, I picked up, when Bhakna as a youth was misled into various vices; he met an old gentleman; who used to recite gurbani. That fellow read Farid's slok; this line had such a powerful impact upon Bhakna –that changed his life. Consider a whole revolution inspired by that Baba Farid; -it was what instigated that revolting style – as inspiration for a youth. And this led to another fresh set of revolutionary poetry from the Ghadar poets. If you think seriously, all resistance movements from Punjab were of countryside origin; this was peasantry in revolt; think of ghadar, think of kirti party. There is connection between the Punjabi language and the way these resistance movements prospered in Punjab, appealed to common Punjabis –as the language was handy vehicle against exploitation –as this language had origins as such. You don't see such resistance among clerical classes who borrowed language. And still this language survives.

In this province still some are committed to revive the language –as far as we know and this comes through the writings of Nazam Hussain. He was singular in reviving the awareness towards Punjabi language. The educated classes have parted ways of course. But Nazam Hussain showed them the way to return and many people re-joined him. Although not all have the same force as he had.

As I told you Punjabi were very much our household language –we never had the aspiration to adopt Urdu as such. If I was to work or gain into an occupation, Urdu had to come as it was the language of instruction in formal schooling; but even after studying Urdu, our households remain Punjabi speaking. I started naturally writing in Punjabi. First came some short stories. This was from neighbouring households –themes developed from around us. But we became familiar with Urdu also for young age –we started reading much of short stories, novels etc. in Urdu too. We also

started writing in Urdu too. And people started complementing on our writings in Urdu. Although compliments have come, but it is not where my heart is. Then slowly but surely this came to my belief and realisation –look language is only genuine which is spoken by common people; and a writer's job is to express in that language. And I felt; only genuine literature can be produced through mother tongue only. Otherwise we don't identify with common people –we lose part of our identity; the language one speaks from birth is the language that is capable of deep exploration in terms of depicting social relations –the subject of stories, novels and other artistic expressions. |It is through your own language you describe in more authentic ways, the environment, the trees, the birds, the nature animals, the habitats, the land and its relationship to the living people –the whole gamut of culture. Language is the world. It is our language through which we live –our existence is through the language.

Now there is interesting phenomenon of diaspora. This is important as you say and informed me. It means there is an island of communities somewhere in the middle of large communities. The new migrant community of course mixes, resist and adopts new ways in the new environment. Its members are confronted with the issue of cultural and linguistic identity. They are living in two worlds –they are related to old world through language and economic means –a pull that is at the same declining in force with time; but they are also aware of their position as a linguist minority a social and cultural minority. There are many factors then to look for –the religious tradition, culture, the language and so on which will determine how they are going to survive as a different diaspora. The issue of turban, kitrapans for example in overseas context, beards or clean shaven, for Sikhs –how to read japuji –that means some knowledge of Punjabi –there is gurdwara –the role of granthis and of course gurdwara as cultural centre, there is Sikh tradition of kirtan now how can you understand much less enjoy Kirtan if you don't know Punjabi? The issue is manifold. You see, there a dominant language say English is taught at schools and everywhere –so your employment issues are disposed of; what remains is the issue of cultural survival as a diaspora. Living abroad, conditions are not exactly those of Punjab, are they? There is host society's atmosphere, there are specific circumstances in which those people live -all those factors determine how a particular diaspora will behave and survive over the long run.

Now there is question of exchange between east and west Punjab. I am sure Punjabis on the other side also want to conduct dialogue, they want to sit with us, exchange free ideas and common issues. Bu we need to acknowledge that we are now part of two states which are big and are not prone to love each other. Even as two Punjabs wish to join together –there is attitude of the state of Pakistan and India. Indian state fears such ambitions of east Punjab while Pakistan state is aware of west Punjab's close relations in cultural terms with east Punjab and does not want that to happen. In Pakistan, Urdu has been imposed on west Punjabis, while Indian state has hijacked |Punjabi language converting into Sanskrit based Hindisation. Both states are resisting the old common classical Punjabi language and don't wish to propagate that common bond. They are both trying to mould us into selves where we would not be able to recognise our previous selves. It is part of each state's strategy to draw a line crossing our common bonds. The two states have created all sort of barriers for both Punjab –it is only the common Punjabis –the peasantry mainly ion both sides who are resisting such measures and keep to their rustic Punjabi. Otherwise n Pakistan it is Urdu domination day and night –as Punjabis say Urdu hegemony. Urdu is raining from all corners submerging Punjabi –the same process is going on in East Punjab with Hindi dominant channels, medium of communication and all other such means. So one could look back to California's Punjabi

workers sharing their language up there –they were all workers or working on farms but living much of their shared Punjabi lives.

They came down to liberate the country –they found that capitalist class is in hand and glove with the British ruling elite. They tried to see that the new country that will be different from the slave country under the British rule. With that aim they returned. Now compare with Punjabis who have left for abroad now. Will they return to their lands? Not sure if they will? What for? They were looking for a country ruled by workers and artisans –that dream is over.

We talk of diaspora –its borders now so flexible that the entire world is a small globe and all are Diasporas. Still, that is a big talk; we want to have open communication and free borders across two Punjabs, whatever relation develops between the two sides that will be better than the current antagonistic situation. We both are determined for the progressive causes for the betterment of common people. Punjabis should continue to fight against their respective states, to try to establish a regime based upon equality. That is the aim worth fighting for.