

Ajit Cour

Firstly, I came to this world on November 16, 1934 with support of my mother. I was born in Lahore, which is now in Pakistan. My umbilical cord is buried there. So, half of my body part is still there. There used to be a road called Chamberland, which was mostly inhabited by doctors. There were doctors on both sides. My father was also a doctor. We used to live on Chamberland Road. Downstairs were clinics, and houses or flats were upstairs. There were huge mansions. I was born there. And, I grew up there for a few years. My father got me registered in a school there. It was Sacred Hearts School, a convent school. There were Irish nuns as teachers. And, that is where I started writing "C" instead of "K" in my name. The Irish nuns didn't know how to explain the difference between "C" and "K" to Punjabi kids because kids don't know how to say "C". They used to say that "C" is pronounced from the throat by filling in air, it's not the sound "k". They used to say "K" is masculine and "C" is softer, it is feminine. So I said I should remove the masculine "K" from my name. That thing stayed in my mind that "K" is masculine when I grew up a little. That's how I started using "C" instead of "K" in my name. Once, Amrita Pritam's father, Kartar Singh Hitkari, came to our house. He scolded my dad for sending me to a school where English was taught and where they didn't teach Punjabi. My maternal grandfather was a religious leader in Gujranwala. And, Kartar Singh Hitkari had also come from Gujranwala. He was a disciple of my grandfather. He said she's the granddaughter of Bapu Isher Singh, and she is not learning Punjabi. He said take her out from that school and send her to me for six months, I will teach her Punjabi. So they took me out of that school. School was a child's play at that time. Girl education didn't have much meaning at that time. Girls were sent to school just to keep them busy. If you don't like the school, you leave it. So they sent me with Kartar Singh Hitkari. I was eight when I was studying Heer-Ranjha, Sassi-Punnu, Mirza-Sahiba, Gurbani, etc. And, I was eight and a half years old when I used to cry that I didn't want to sit in the exams. He used to pick me up and take me to the exam. He used to make me sit on a chair and say that I am outside, don't worry, write your exam. So, I used to write the exam. So, I was eight and a half when I completed graduation in Punjabi. My photographs got published on front pages of many newspapers. I used to look scared in those photos. I used to wear frocks at that time. My mother said if her photos are going to get published in newspapers, she can't wear frocks. She must wear salwar-kameez. So she sewed a satin salwar and a satin kameez for me. She used whatever cloth she had at home. Now, an eight and a half year old kid wearing a satin salwar and a satin kameez with a banarsi dupatta

on the head. The dupatta kept slipping from my head. I felt like the salwar would come off, dupatta would fall. So, I kept sitting in a very uncomfortable manner. So, those photos got published in newspapers. After that there were questions in the university that how could a child aged eight and a half years sit in university exams. Then they made a law that anybody younger than fourteen years of age could not sit in university exams. So that's my record that can't be broken because they have changed the law. After that, Sacred Heart School said they won't take me back because I came after six-eight months. Hitkari ji had got a job by that time in Khalsa School. So he said get her registered in that school. So, from second class to graduation and back to eighth class. They got me registered for eighth grade.

Not even a year had passed, that Pakistan was created. Knives, fire and murders had just started in 1947 when my parents said that it was a matter of four-five days only, and it wasn't going to last forever. So they decided to go out of Lahore for a few days. My mother's sister used to live in Shimla. She said they would book a house for us there, and we should go there. So, we went to Shimla. There was no way we were going back from Shimla. Violence increased, number of murders and fires kept going up. And, then in the middle of one night we came to know that Pakistan was a reality and Lahore had gone to that side. My father was listening to radio when we had gone to sleep at night. His beard was black when we had went to sleep. And, when we woke up it was white. He got so shocked that Lahore became a part of Pakistan, and that his property and his parents (my grandparents) were there. He was thinking how he would get us back. His beard got white in shock. Slowly, we started reviving from there. Then they got me registered in pre-medical. He didn't tell I was studying in eighth. He lied that I had passed tenth, but the papers got burnt, so I could get admission in a higher grade. Only four-five months had passed since Pakistan was created that we came down to Jalandhar. He got me registered in pre-medical there. Five-six months had passed when they said it was dissection lesson, anatomy day. They had a frog, made it unconscious and put it upside down. Its white stomach was up, and it was laying on its back. Our teacher put a pin in its foot. When they pricked his foot, I fainted and fell down. I was unconscious for three months after that. I had high fever for three months. I could not take it, pricking frog' foot with a pin. Then they said I was useless, and I can't do medical. There was an English only course. Refugees could do B.A. in two parts, one English only and then two subjects. So, they got me registered in a

college that looked like a small shop in Karol Baag. He was there (pointing to the person sitting in front of her).

(No, I was not in Jalandhar). No, not Jalandhar....Karol Baag in Delhi. He was a manager there. He asked me if I knew anything about Karl Marx. I said no. I was little. I got in B.A. by jumping classes. He said he would teach me. The Communist Party was banned at that time by Sardar Patel. I don't know why it was banned. One of his relatives used to sell gutke, kade, etc. in his shop near Gurdwara. Our school was in front of Gurdwara. They used to hide Karl Marx and Ages in Gutkas. They used to get those and teach me. This is how I became a part of the Communist party movement. Then we used to sit all night to make posters. Because the party was banned, its posters could not be printed. So, kids like me used to make posters. And, we used to keep ink stands of blue, black and red ink. We used to make the symbol with red ink and write in black ink. And, boys used to paste them at night. There was a lot of passion that we were doing something good for the country by bringing in new ideas that had come from Russia, Soviet Union. And, that we were trying to bring them in practice to make people's lives better. There was a lot of enthusiasm to do that work. And, I was studying at the same time.

So, I did B.A. in English, Economics and Political Science. Then my father said there was no need to study further and I should sit at home and learn something useful like cooking, sewing, etc. I was on hunger strike when Naranjan Singh, a principal, came to our house. He was also my father's teacher at one time. He said he didn't have a place to stay. We had built a new house, but we were still living in a rented place. So my father said Naranjan Singh could take that house as he was his Guru. Naranjan Singh got very pleased. I got *lassi* for him. Then he looked at me and asked what I was doing. I said nothing. He asked me why don't I study. I said I had studied. I had finished B.A. Then he asked why didn't I do M.A. I said I didn't know and that Daar ji said I didn't need to study. Then, Naranjan Singh scolded my father that why didn't I need to. My father said where would they send me alone. He said why wouldn't I go. All girls go alone. So, he scolded my dad. So he said my father should bring me to the college, Camp college, that he was working at as a Principal. Classes were in the evenings. He said I should get registered in M.A. So my father took me to the college the next day. He asked which subject I wanted to study. I said English literature. Then he asked the manager what time the classes were. He said it was the third and the fourth period. College used to start at 5:30 in the evening. My father said how would I come alone at night. Then he said I couldn't take English literature

and asked what other subject I wanted to take. I said Political Science. Political Science classes were also late in the evening. What was left was Economics. Economics classes used to start at 5:30pm. So, he said take Economics otherwise let's go home. Economics was the only subject I hated. But, because I was getting registered in the college I thought I would at least get to come to college if I took Economics. So, I registered for M.A. Economics. I got married right after I finished M.A.

My mother used to stay unwell. She wanted me to get married while she was still alive. She didn't die until several years after. She just had to kick me out of the house. I was seventeen-eighteen when I got married. And, I was nineteen when my first daughter, Alpna, was born. And, then I just got busy taking care of the kid, the house and working. My husband told me that I had to earn my own living, he can't provide for me, and I have to earn for myself and my daughter. So, I used to wake up early to go to school, then there was my job, and then I used to come home and take care of the kid and the house. It was such a race that I felt like I would die. Death seemed better. But you have to live till you have to. So, I kept living. Then another daughter was born. Then, I lost her.

I started writing when I was studying in M.A. I think when I was studying in his college I wrote my first story. My husband warned me not to write any stories. Then, for eight years I didn't write any story. Then, I decided that the relationship couldn't last any longer. Then I got separated. I went to my parent's place. My parents used to send me to my husband's place, and my husband used to send me to my parents'. Parents told me to get to my house, that is, my husband's house. I got exhausted after facing hardship. You know how a person breaks down.

I was the first person to write about male-female relationship in Punjabi. Sex is also a part of the male-female relationship. I was the one who talked about it. After that I wrote many stories on the topic of politics, terrorism, and other subjects in the world. But, I have the stamp that I only talk about male-female relationship. But, that is not the only thing I write about, I take different subjects.

There's some poetry and some nicety in Shelly. I know my shelly is different. People who speak Punjabi would keep on speaking. But, I am a little sad about the future of Punjabi literature. When my younger daughter passed away, there was a DDA flat booked under her name by my

father. There were flats registered under both my daughters' names. She got a flat when she was in France. I said she would take ownership when she returns. Neither did she return, nor did she take ownership. The vice-chairman was my acquaintance. He came home to pay condolences. He said we should take ownership otherwise someone would sit on it and that we have paid. He said we should do something there in her memory if we don't feel like living there. So, I took ownership. There were buildings being constructed nearby, and idle little girls used to wander there and look at their little siblings. I gathered them and started teaching them. Teaching and helping them learn painting. There was a lot of exportation of clothes with designs and colors in those days. Making flower patterns with blocks and colours is called textile designing. So, we used to do that and sell them. The girls used to earn from that. This is how this N.G.O. started.

Then, Indira Gandhi gave me a very big job of preparing a directory of prominent women. So, I was doing that job. I used to get tired, and I used to say I can't do it. Then, Indira Gandhi would invite me for breakfast. One day she asked me what other things I was doing. I said other than this difficult job, I publish a magazine about economics and trade. He knows about it because I take his help. I said now I am educating slum girls, daughters of those who are. I am teaching them and helping them learn sewing. I am teaching them textile designing. She was very impressed. She asked if I teach completely uneducated kids. I said yes, completely uneducated, who have never attended school. She asked why it could not be done in Delhi, teaching poor boys and girls? In Delhi, they want those kids that have at least passed B.A. IIT of Delhi wants graduates. And a graduate who is fixing a pump, or learning plumbing or doing electrical work, how would he feel. His heart would be burning. She said you do this work and I will give you land, and you construct a building on it. I said I couldn't construct. She said their ministry would do this for you She called an officer and told him to allot 1.5 acres to me. This place was a jungle. The road from Siri Fort Road to Panjsheel was jungle. And, they have established twelve institutions in the jungle.

A patch of jungle, then institution, then jungle, then institution. He said allot one to that to me. So they allotted 1/2 acre to me. I said what would I do with this. This happened when the government changed and new leaders came. They said they would keep things as they were for now and wouldn't give possession to anyone. Only two plots were allotted, one to Hamdard and the second one to us. They asked us to stop the work right there. So, it stopped until Indira

Gandhi came to power again. Hamdard people tried hard and got around 30 acres. They established a university near Patra. I said thank God I got rid of all this venture. Who would have built the buildings?. So, I didn't pursue this for several years. A letter came after 10 years that if we did not take it, they will close the file as we are neither taking ownership nor are we pursuing it. So, then I went. I said tell me what are you giving and where. They said if you want 1.5 acre, then it is near Hamdard. I asked them if there was smaller plot than that.

Everybody was laughing because people would normally ask for more, and here I was asking for less. They said there was 1/2 acre in the Kutub institution area. I asked if there was anything lesser. They said there were 1000 yards. I said that seems right Then I sold my flat quickly to buy this area, and started constructing. It took eight years to build this because we didn't have enough funds to complete. Whenever we got money by selling we could then call builders to build further. They used to come and build some. So, it took us eight years to build this. Now, this building is ready, and we have moved the school for poor girls here. The school is downstairs. Slums are now far away. Parents are not ready to send their daughters here. They say their girls would have to travel with boys, and boys will misbehave. So we have hired our own buses. Our buses go and pick them up in the morning. The girls can't stay all day because they clean dishes in people's houses. They have to work and earn money. So, they stay half the day. The buses that go at 10am stay till 2pm. And, the buses that come at 2pm, stay till 5pm so two shifts; 10am to 2pm and 2pm to 5pm. Girls come in two batches. So, there's that school for girls where they can learn from computers to English speaking courses to knitting, stitching, tailoring, beautician courses, beauty culture, we teach everything here. A six month course here helps them get a job. There's a big difference between washing used dishes and working in a parlour. (It's a skills centre). Yes, we teach skills.