

Amarjit Chandan

Today is 23rd June, 2014, and we are in London.

Anne Murphy and I, Amarjit Chandan, at my house.

I was born in Nairobi, Kenya in November, 1946. My father first went there in the year 1929, and slowly the stay of years increased. My father first went there in 1929, and he lived there till 1957. During this time he worked there and led the Punjabi community. He was a Secretary of the Singh Sabha Bazar Gurdwara, Nairobi. He used to write poems, was a poet and a communist leader, as well as a union labour leader.

Punjab which was well preserved was handed over to me, People ask me, how can I speak and write in Punjabi so well? The main reason behind it is that my mother was illiterate. Illiteracy can become a resource in some situations. My mother tongue was proper Punjabi from the Doaba region of Punjab known as 'Doabi'. My father also communicated in Punjabi, and was he was a Punjabi poet. I had to go when I was still very young, in the year 1954 I had to leave, so I went with my father. This was to arrange marriage of my sister so I accompanied my father.

Thereafter, he retired, so I stayed there. I completed my school education at Arya School, Nakodar. Nakodar is my native city, and we have our family-house there. Then, I went to Lyallpur Khalsa College, Jalandhar for higher education. Then I went to Punjab University, Chandigarh, to pursue M.A., in English. During that time, this was the year of 1967, Vietnam War was at its peak, and the whole world was up in a tense situation due to the war, there was this great hope of the revolution in the world. You probably remember the Paris of 1968. Then, I was a part of the Naxalbari movement for several years. I was in hiding for two years; -the Punjabi word is rooposh –to hide your face. But, eventually, I was caught in the office of Gursharan Singh, who was a playwright. My job, then was primarily, of writing books. Because the movement was wholly of armed struggle, everyone was for weapons, pistols and bombs. But, I never used a pistol or a bomb, instead I used my pen.

My father wrote poems. We can say he was a Darbari poet. Darbari (someone who performs on a popular public platform, usually a gurdwara or other public function) poets are those who go to Gurdwaras and political meetings, and recite patriotic or and religious poems or

recite some kind of Romantic poems too. This was main way in Punjabi was popularized in the 20th century of Punjab. . My father did not get any book printed of his poems. He used to send his poems to newspapers and magazines. I used to write poems for him, in a way I was his secretary. While doing this work for him, I started writing poems myself. My first poem was printed in the Preet Lari magazine when I was 20 years old at the time. And, this is how I became a writer.

What is the relationship between politics and literature? This topic has been discussed extensively around the world, not only in Punjabi, in English, and many other languages as well. It (such debate) is a gift of twentieth century. It is an important part of the history of Punjabi poetry and literature too. You can say, if you want to measure, time from the year 1970 to the year of Paash's death, that is till 1988, or say from 1970 to 1985. This period had great influence on Punjabi poetry and literature due to the Naxalbari movement. Not only poets, but story and drama writers were also influenced by this political movement.

So, this discussion regarding politics and literature has been going on for a very long time and it is very difficult to explain in a few minutes. The inspiration was Russian literature, we also had Chinese literature, but it did not influence us as much. All the poets and writers of my generation were influenced by Russian literature. The reason behind this was the fact that Russian literature was very cheap, and it was available in translations in Punjabi. We all have learnt from the Russian literature and did not read literature in other languages, including English as much.

So, is there any relationship between politics and literature?

Yes, there is! I believe there is a relation between the two, but we should not over-emphasize it. Literature should be considered literature and politics should be considered politics. Now, I am composing a selection of Munri Niazi's poetry He was a very good poet of Hoshiarpur, Punjab. I would not divide Punjab. You can say of Lahore of Western Punjab. He is not a political poet, not at all, but he does talk about politics with great finesse. He expresses with imagery and other poetic devices about current political situation in Pakistan. He does not do it aggressively; he does not employ that kind of rhetoric. He says he is a pure poet. This is also a debatable topic. Who is a pure poet? Without politics, one cannot be a poet. If you say you are not interested in politics, then this is also a political statement.

An interesting fact is that the most of my poems and books have been printed after 1995. Writing ideology-free poems is a present day fashion, and this is the usual custom these days, to assert poetry free from ideology. Some literary critics say this about my poetry as well. You cannot put a stamp that on my poetry; that it is ideology-free poetry or this is revolutionary. Some call me mystic poet; others a neo-mystic poet, a secular or spiritualist poet. So, I am not boasting about myself in English. No one can put a stamp on my poetry that he is a particular type of poet. If you do, then you he, he isn't so. And, if you fail to identify a type, then, what remains is a poet.

Especially, poetry is a medium to express the feelings of your soul, or heart, about comfort or pain. You cannot always shout slogans, hurra, hurra etc.,. A human being is sometimes sad, feels bad, or hurt, cries laughs, and feels quiet, sometimes. Many poets in our generation did not write how their hearts felt. They tried to hide heart's pain mind's sorrow, soul's bafflement under the pressure of outside noise. They harmed themselves by it and perhaps, literature is poor because of this seems something missing here?

Why am I not Pro-Khalistan, what are the reasons for it? I am a supporter of a united Punjab. Even though, to cross Wagah, I have to show my passport, I do not see that as a separate part of Punjab in my mind. Without Nankana Sahib there is no meaning of Punjab, no meaning of Khalistan. Tell me, Sant Singh Sekhon was one. I am now talking in a loud voice, I am getting passionate and excited because this is an emotional question. Pardon me, Sant Singh Sekhon was a Marxist throughout his life, but in the end, even he started tying a saffron turban, a yellow turban, to show his support for Khalistan. He also started talking about Khalistan, and made a map of Khalistan. Let me tell you an interesting fact; he left out Nankana Sahib from that map. However, very intriguingly, he kept Karachi in the map. These are strange matters. Why keep Karachi? To keep a port city (laughing).

By asking for Khalistan, these Khalistanis prove the argument for the formation of Pakistan right. First they should first share their views about the formation of Pakistan, was it right? Was the division of Punjab justified? I am still talking emotionally and loudly, pardon me. I ask of these supporters of Khalistan, including my two or three academic friends who are well established names, I usually ask them: tell me if you establish Khalistan, what are you going to

do there? What will be its map like? By the map I mean, what sort of economy? What would be its state structure? One of them said, first, let us establish Khalistan, then we will think about such issues afterwards. What is this; how childish is all that? This is not how an academic, well educated person talks. Speaking against Khalistan does not mean you are supporting the State. When they fought in the Second World War, against fascism, it did not mean they were supporting America or the capitalists. There is a specific arising through particular time. They got together and defeated fascism together, do you understand what I am saying? Then there was immediate danger was from the people who wanted Khalistan, and it was not from the Indian state. Indian state is there and will be there for a long time, it is not going anywhere. They had climbed on your shoulders and sitting there, they were killing communists. Paash was killed by them, and so were many others.

Secularism...being a secularist means one is not a communalist, does not follow sectarianism. The positive meaning is that one does not hate anyone or goes to war on the basis of religion, and one does not say that my religion is better, someone's religion is inferior than others. In that regards, secularism has a positive meaning. In Punjab it was Bhai Santokh Singh who translated Marx, he brought Marxism into Punjab. He was the general secretary of Gadar party. He was editor of Kirti. He was very good writer of Punjabi—a very able prose writer. Very few people know about his literary essays. I was going to compose a prose book of the twentieth century in Punjabi. It is very difficult to find good essay writers in Punjabi. I have touched a different topic. My favorite essay was the one written by him as an example of twentieth century prose. So, Bhai Santokh Singh brought in Marxism to Punjab, and other philosophy such as Nietzsche was brought in by Puran Singh. Puran Singh translated it in Punjabi. Then, Greek philosophy was translated by someone Anant Singh. He knew Greek himself. These three writers took western philosophy into Punjab.

Many Punjabis have migrated after the 1960s; several were already writing in Punjab, for instance; Ishwar Chitarkar and a few others like him. Many writers, who used to write in Punjab, migrated, settled here and continued writing poems and stories here, as well. They used the same formula. He brought in the things he learnt about the relationship between literature and politics in Punjab, and never wrote what was in his heart even after migrating.

I don't think (the environment for Punjabi) is bright over here. Why talk about someone else, I will start from my household, from the place where I am sitting now. I will say this always, I have two sons, they don't read Punjabi; I tried a lot but they did not learn Punjabi, nor speak Punjabi. I always talk to them in Punjabi, which they understand what I am saying, but they always reply in English. I cannot see any solution here, in Punjab and Delhi too, children of many writers do not read Punjabi, they perhaps speak.

I think the number of published each year in East Punjab would be around three thousands. Does that mean a bright future of literature? Not at all. Publication of books is a different matter. It is a reflection of different reality, of a life, it is different, and it is not the same. The present generation that is enrolled in schools, studying in our primary schools today, these are children of poor parents; of children of migrant labourers from the Eastern provinces; ..A couple of writers too who write poems and stories in Punjabi. I can't recall their names, they live near Mansa. I will recall in a moment, oh yes, Bhikhi; Laxmi Narayan Bhikhi and the other is his brother. Perhaps, two of them! There is another and these three are good examples. The coming generation are the children of Punjabi writers who boast about themselves, their children will write in English. The situation is similar in the Western Punjab or in Lahore. They have stopped using Urdu, just as we are dejected about Punjabi. They are not even ready to speak in Urdu, so what will you do? The struggle for Punjabi and Urdu is over the fact is the new generation is writing in English. Many writers are coming up successfully, they are publishing novels and so on. The western media is publishing them and making a hype, if 'hype' is not a bad word to use!

They say, in the past, there was this trend to speak in French was prevalent in England and Russia (among the elite). And, how they went back to their own languages has a separate history. I pray such a trend sets in Punjabi too. Another important thing is such debate or matters about languages, though emotional at the same moment, are always related to the economic structure as well. Punjabi does not earn bread. My children will ask; what would they benefit by learning Punjabi? I cannot lecture them, as our politicians do on public platforms, that look, "Punjab is a land of sufis and saints, land of Nanak, land of Waris, land of Shiv Kumar, land of such and such historical figures". They (children) ask a simple question, supposing I learn Punjabi and score A level grades, how is it going to benefit me They won't get a job. If they were to get a job, they would learn Punjabi in a night! And I vouch for this with a written

assurance. . Yes, research work should be done, a lot of research awaits to be done, and many universities need to do this work. New foundations should be established.

If I talk about the ‘Dhahan’ award, you are going to present an award of \$25,000, a huge amount. My view is that putting \$25,000 in someone’s pocket is not going to do any good to Punjabi language or Punjabi literature. Instead of this, it is much better if you were to create small research or archiving projects. There is a lot to be gathered from the old literature, books in Lahore that are uncared for; there are more than 50,000 of them rotting and decaying. In another ten years, nothing would be left of them, please save them. There are so many other tasks like these, that should be taken up. None cares about these small things. You will put the award money in someone’s pocket and click a few photographs with them, but then forget it. You have given an award in the first year, you can give one in the second year too, but who will you give it to in the third year? How many people write in Punjabi? Of the 3,000 published books how many are of a high standard? Very few of them, you can count them on your fingers. I am saying there are more beneficiaries, who want to eat the fruit, than those who provide service to Punjabi. There is this saying, “One gets the fruit of one’s labour.” In Punjabi there are too many people who want to eat the fruit, than those who want to do the labour first of cultivation. We need more volunteers, people who can serve the cause of Punjabi language.