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I went to Moscow in 1977. Before that, I used to read Punjabi literature, but it was not like I used to go to literary meetings as an activist. When we reached Moscow, there were some students from Indian Punjab and some from Pakistani Punjab. (MISSING 1:10 – 1: 59)

I created an organization. We decided to name it 'Punjabi Sahitya Sabha' like many others in Punjab. But both the words 'literature' and 'association/meeting' are syncretized words for Pakistani Punjabis. That is why they used words like 'adab' for literature and 'sangar' for meeting. So, we blended both and made an organization by the name of 'Punjabi Sahitya Sangar'. In our sittings, we used to talk about the literature that was written in the past in both the Punjab's, and the literature that was being written at that time. We also used to talk about anything written by anybody from the organization. And, we used to invite and have meetings with any writers that came from Punjab or resided in Moscow. We ran this organization for the 9 years that I was there. We cannot say that the experiment inspired us for any literary creation. Nobody created anything like that there. But, yes, we made an attempt to understand literature through this organization.

In our times, there were two Punjabi translators working in Moscow, Pritam Singh Manchanda and Dr. Karanjeet Singh. Pritam Singh Manchanda did a lot of translation work that is still available with us. Other than doing translation work, Dr. Karanjeet Singh, was a poet and a critic himself. That is why the organization had a better connection with Dr. Karanjeet Singh. We used to invite any literary writers who visited Dr. Karanjeet Singh.

The most memorable part for me and the organization was that whenever Faiz Ahmed Faiz used to visit Moscow, we always invited him. He visited every year. Initially, we only invited him to our Punjabi sangar. Then we thought that the organization was very small where only 15-20 people could come. After that, whenever Faiz was available to meet face-

to-face, we used to invite all the Pakistanis and Hindustanis. That association was huge and had 300-400 members. Then, the association was no longer limited to Punjabi. He used to write more in Urdu, so we used to talk more about Urdu poetry. But, many people have reminded me how, in the end, I used to get up and request him to recite something in Punjabi. Then he used to recite 2-3 poems in Punjabi, as well. This was big. There were others who used to come. We also invited comrade Jagjeet Singh Anand. This was a matter of pride for us where we were working and enjoying, at the same time. And, the people we used to invite, used to show up and we liked that.

We started this system. We used to live in a hostel and we used to decide in advance where the next meeting would be. It was the duty of the person who lived in the room to get a cake and prepare tea. Other than that, we had no expenses. We used to live in hostels. We used to come ourselves. If we used to invite someone from inside Moscow, it was not a huge deal. Their expenses were limited to 10-15 kopeks for their bus or metro commute. So, all that was required was cake and tea, and we used to organize the meeting in the same room. Since everyone got their turn after a year, there was no financial burden.

The new generation of Punjab, I belonged to the new generation too, do not have the Farsi vocabulary. We used to use Sanskrit as a root to derive a new word. But those people were taking their words from Persian roots. Despite this, whenever we heard their Punjabi, we thought it was more pure. That seemed to be more pure because that was spoken by our parents and ancestors. That is why the Punjabi I write now...last year one of the books was discussed here and some people said that your Punjabi is closer to that one. But, I think it is not about this Punjab or that Punjab, but about the united Punjab, where Sanskrit and Hindi had not had their influence. I still have that treasure of words that I got from my mother or father or ancestors. I want to use it, and I do use it. That is why people say my Punjabi is closer to that Punjab. But, I think my Punjabi is pure. That is why, when we used to listen to

their Punjabi, we used to really like it. We should have preserved that Punjabi. Our Punjabi used to sound different to them because Sanskrit and Hindi words were a new thing for them. For us, the Punjabi they spoke was something we had left, and we were a little nostalgic about it. So, we used to like listening to their Punjabi. Even their new writers had an influence of Persian. It was never like we had difficulty understanding something. Even if we did encounter any difficulty, we used to ask each other. There is no question of Muslims or Hindus, they are Punjabis and so are we. Sikhs are also Punjabi, so are Hindus, and so are Muslims. You are right, after the partition of Punjab, many political parties tried to promote Urdu there. The influence is that of Persian and the political agenda in our Punjab was more towards promoting Hindi and Sanskrit. But, if we talk about Punjab before partition, many Punjabis used to write Punjabi in the Urdu script. We accepted the Gurmukhi script and one reason for accepting is that Sikhs feel that Gurmukhi is their own. And, Muslims were made to believe that Urdu is theirs, even if there is nothing like that. In reality, we want to write and read Punjabi. If they have two scripts available, they write in Shahmukhi. We write in Gurmukhi, there is no problem. The only thing is that, like bawaji said, it takes an hour to learn Gurmukhi or any other script. We know Punjabi, and to learn Shahmukhi script, it would take a day or three or a week. That is why, for now, at least the people with progressive thinking must help promote each other's literature. We should learn, or at least try to learn Shahmukhi, and they should try to learn Gurmukhi, or there should be a bigger promotion of books and magazines among both the scripts. There have been some efforts in Punjab, some rules and dictionaries in Shahmukhi and Gurmukhi script have been made. Some are of the opinion that both should be dropped, and Roman script should be adopted. But, I think the successful experiences that we have, are that we can write and pronounce Punjabi correctly in both Gurmukhi and Shahmukhi. I think politics should be dropped, and

the literary writers and activists should encourage the give and take of our literature. The educated people, who want to learn, should learn both the scripts.

Actually, the problem that I have encountered with Punjabi writers, or those who write, is the lack of hard work. Our media has started a trend that one can use a word from any language, be it English, Hindi, Punjabi or Urdu, as long as you are expressing yourself. And, our literary writers have adopted this same trend very casually in their writing, they do not work hard. I have seen many big critics, when it comes to words like 'rhetoric'...which has no meaning in Punjabi...a Punjabi cannot understand its meaning. So, whenever English or Hindi word crosses our mind, we, at least Sukeerat and I, work hard, ask each other or look into a dictionary to see how the word is used in Punjabi or how the villagers would use it. Then, we try to bring that word into our literature, to keep it alive. But, not everyone does that. It is important. One exception, of course, could be science or computer terminology that is emerging recently, and we do not have a good word for it. But, for the words that have an equivalent in Punjabi, I think, we should work hard to incorporate them in our writing, so that when writers write them, they leave behind an abundance of vocabulary for the coming generation. I was talking to somebody yesterday, that we make a 'paarcha' to get the stuff downstairs. And, he asked the meaning of 'paarcha'. 'khooh' died, and with that 'paarcha' died. True that we cannot keep the words alive by force, but at least when we are writing on some topic and the word is available in Punjabi, we must use it. We must use the pure word so that it is, at least, available for the coming generations. If we don't use the word, our kids would not know it, and they would not use it. Eventually, the word would die. So, this work requires some effort and it depends on the individual writers to pay attention to this.

I came back to Punjab in the year 2000. Before that, I was in Moscow, then I went to Delhi, after Delhi, I lived in America. After America, when I came back and started living in Jalandhar or Punjab, we thought we should contribute to Punjabi a little bit. The first effort

that we started in 2000 was that the '*Aitvarta*' of 'Nawa Zamana'...Balbir Parvana used to do a survey about the last year's best story or book. The surveys were done and results used to come out, but that was the end of it. We thought we should take it a step forward. We thought we would give an award to the best book and in order to give out that award, we would plan a function, an event. So, we made a trust, 'Bibi Swaran Kaur', in the name of my mother, and started organizing these award functions almost every March. We continued for ten years. We used to invite all the big writers. Approximately 125-150 writers and readers used to gather in the event. After 10 years, we started facing a problem in the origin. People started misusing the survey by asking to include their names and stories. After 10 years, Balbir Parvana and the committee we had created came to a decision to stop doing any more of those surveys. Since we used to distribute awards on the basis of the surveys, we stopped giving out awards. Now, we are thinking that the tradition, that we started to remember Bibi Swaran Kaur every year, should be given a new face by organizing seminars or something like that. But, there has been a gap of 2-3 years.

The other function that we organize is in Dalhousie. Story Symposium it was called. But, now it is called Literary Symposium, because it is not limited to stories anymore. The reason was that when I started living in Punjab, people used to call us to symposiums too. The system of the traditional symposiums in Punjab was to have a symposium on a book or a writer. The writer used to get a paper from some critic. The critic used to come and read the paper, and the audience used to listen, and only understand parts of it. Audience used to go home after, and the writers used to stay back to attend the evening party. I have seen this happening in Symposiums of Punjab. I thought they spend so much money and effort on the Symposium, and do not really work hard. Then, I thought we should start something different, and stop giving open invitations. We thought if we call between 15 to 20 participants, and ask them to read the composition beforehand, and also have a paper ready. And, we should have

a two hour session on the same composition. Everybody would get time to speak on the topic and share their opinion about it.

The thing about funding is very interesting. I had never thought about it in much depth. There used to be two-three types of expenses in our 'Bibi Swaran Kaur' award function. One was the rent of the place where we held our functions, the other one was sending out invitations, arranging for a mic and a spokesperson, and the meals. Then, we used to publish 1-1.5 pages in 'Aitvarta' of 'Nava Zamaana' about the function, and the writers. These were all the expenses. Call it luck or say that we tried that we never paid for the hall that we booked, we always got it for free, and, with that, furniture, speaker, mic, etc. Whether it was the 'Desh Bhagat Yaadgaar' Hall or 'Nava Zamana,' where we did our first few functions, or where we had our subsequent functions in Jalandhar's party office, we never had to pay for the rent. We also never had to pay for publishing in 'Nava Zamana'. For any meal expenses and the expenses resulting from sending out invitations were paid through 'Bibi Swaran Kaur' trust. So, basically, it was from my pocket. Whatever the amount was, we never kept a track of it. You can call it self-funding. Here, at the Dalhousie Symposium, also there are 3-4 types of expenses. The first one is the preparation, sending out emails and photocopying, which is paid by the one who is getting the job done. If Rajneesh Bahadur is doing it, he would pay for it, if I am doing it, I would pay. We have never kept an account amongst ourselves for those expenses. The second expense is the transportation from Jalandhar to Dalhousie. That too is paid by the one who arranges for the vehicle. If the vehicles are not enough then some people take the bus and pay for the expense. And, we never kept an account for that too. The third expense is the cost of the Meher hotel owned by Manmohan Bawaji. But, Bawaji never charged us. We organize our function in Meher Hotel's studio downstairs. So, there is no cost for that too. The funding for meals comes through the Bibi Swaran Kaur Trust, which you can say, comes from my pocket. So, there are these types of expenses. Other than that, we never

paid anyone for coming, or reading out the paper, and we never made alcohol available. If somebody wants to eat or drink, they pay it from their own pocket. You can call it self-funding, but it's not only me who contributed. Everybody who is involved has contributed very sincerely. And, whoever has participated in this symposium...I mean, participating in eight hour long sessions every day, is a big thing.