

## **Memories of Preet Nagar**

Preet Nagar is Punjab's first planned township. In a sense, it is the socio-cultural hub of the rural area. Preet Nagar was established at this place; it lies between Lahore and Amritsar. Lahore is near to us, it is only sixteen kilometres from here while Amritsar is thirty kilometres away. And you know Lahore, was the capital of Punjab and it is cultural centre of Punjab. The road that you came through did not exist then. In earlier time, you would have to go to Atari first to reach Preet Nagar. This land around Preet Nagar is historically important because it was only sixteen kilometres away from Lahore which was Emperor Jahangir's capital. It is on east side of Lahore from the bank of Ravi River, when King Jahangir used to go to Kashmir, this place was his first halting station.

The inspiration of establishing a new village here is a dream of my father. My father went for his education to Michigan University in America, This was the year 1919 and he graduated in engineering in 1922. He met many people at the university and his other associates. Several people inspired him; among them were John Dewey & Henry Thoreau. You know Henry Thoreau was a philosopher and a philanthropist. He was worried about the impact of rapid industrialization of America and felt it is destroying America's cultural values. So, he did an experiment in Concord at Walden Pond. He would gather people around that area and tried to understand their needs. My dad learned from his thought and inspired by that Philosophy. When he returned he did experiments with those ideas in Punjab. The credit that goes to him is that he was the first mechanized farmer of Punjab; he started farming with a tractor in 1932.

The basic idea of Preet Nagar was collective living and being self-sustained, self-maintained and self-reliant. So he planned around that. It is a planned township. So, Preet Nagar is a planned township, but the houses are made by local masons and carpenters. They are not made by someone from outside. Preet Nagar's soil was used. Preet Nagar's houses were mud houses. There are bricks on the outer side, but inside they are mud houses. Construction was done using the local mud/soil. Slowly, it developed. My dad was an engineer, and as a thinker, his ideas also kept developing. So, he used the modern technique too. He understood the needs of local people. Yes, there is foreign influence, but why not do what can be done here. You should take whatever you want to take from the world, it's a good thing. So, all our common buildings were mud houses. Agriculture was done here for people's needs. Because there was collective living, food was not cooked in houses, it was cooked at one place. So everyone was using that product. No one was allowed to keep animals because there was a collective dairy. It has recently come to India, but it was prevalent in Europe, milk was taken in a van to every house, whoever needed it. Fire was not lit, because food was not cooked at home. You used to get boiled and sugared milk at home, according to your need. First flush system was developed by my father. Even cities did not have sewerage system, at that time. And, Preet Nagar had no electricity or water. But, my father designed an ever-clean latrine, which is a very big thing about Preet Nagar. People used to take the designs from us. You must have heard about Vinoba Bhave, That Ashram's toilet's design was taken from us.

Preet Nagar had one big shop only and you could buy most things from there, it was similar to your superstore. Tailoring and shoe-making was also available in Preet Nagar. Plus, since we used to live in a village, handloom was important consideration. Cloth was made in Preet Nagar for all our needs. The basic contribution of Preet Nagar is that it showed you how to improve your living even in a village. Another contribution of Preet Nagar is in the field of education. New methods of education were adopted. Here, every child was given education according to their aptitude. Classes were not fixed on the basis of age, that if you are of a certain age, you should be in a certain class. Plus, no alphabet was taught. Activity school was meant to teach you to develop whatever aptitude you had. So, carpentry, masonry, gardening, painting, etc., was a part of our curriculum. So, we produced, because of this, many persons who are respected in the field of culture, literature and all that. So, this is the contribution of Preet Nagar.

The major contribution of Preet Nagar was that it started the first Punjabi magazine, 'Preet Lari', which is older than me. I am eighty, and that magazine has crossed eighty years. It gave projects and ideas. Interested people slowly used those ideas and used this as a platform to publish in 'Preet Lari.'

Preet Nagar is birth place of Punjabi theatre. Not birth place of Punjabi theatre, but the birthplace of Children's Punjabi theatre. Preet Nagar gave a magazine for children. Preet Nagar gave, to writers, a platform by publishing their books. So, it is that contribution. Then, coming to theatre, Preet Nagar produced many theatre personalities. Preet Nagar has produced many literary persons. And, above all, giving inspiration to live better, giving inspiration to think better, giving inspiration to express yourself better. When you combine these three means, literature is produced, theatre is produced. So, this is it.

Plus, what I told you, all the masonry is local. One thing that we are proud of is that the house where you are sitting, has no brick in it. It is a prefabricated house. In America, you do it now. The machine for making all the material was designed by my father here, and all the material was produced by the workers living around here. So, this is a contribution of Preet Nagar. To give what you have, and take from others what they can give you. With this, not only ours, but the taste of nearby villagers changed too. They learnt a lot of new things. Their culture was dominated by religious beliefs.

Preet Nagar is a secular city. Now, it's not. Preet Nagar had no Gurudwara, no Mandir, no Masjid. But, all the festivals were celebrated at one common place. Festival of every religion was festival of every resident of the village. There was no disparity in them. Feeling that you can have your ideas, you can express your ideas, and people should understand what you want to say, and gracefully accept what can be accepted. So, this is it.

Preet Nagar was at peak during the partition of 1947. But like I told you, this was Jahangir's resting place. Lahore is nearer to us. This total belt is Muslim. Even today, the name of all the villages are – Chak Malkhan, Chak MisriKhan, Chak Pindi Sayeda. Syed is Muslim caste. This is the belt. The first demarcation of limitation on August 15 was on the basis of population. The population around here was predominantly Muslim. Then on August

15, Preet Nagar, on papers, was in Pakistan. Later on, they decided to make a natural border, Ravi. On August 15, we came back to India. Predominant population could do nothing because of the feud stage. Minority started ruling on the predominant population. Then, a massacre occurred. Nothing happened in Preet Nagar. Muslims took refuge in our houses. We took care of children and families for 1.5-2 months. Unfortunately, in this situation, we were persona-non-grata because the thing that we were taking care of, was not liked by people. Unfortunately, the situation was such that we also had to leave Preet Nagar. They used to come to kill my father at that time because he didn't let them kill Muslims. So, we had to leave Preet Nagar for three years. After that when the situation is in feud state, you have bad relations with Pakistan, and hooligans are ruling...Whenever there was something happening in Hyderabad or China, army used to come here, and things would become messy. So, we had to go for three years. When we came back, it was almost in ruins. So, all the material of all the big buildings of Preet Nagar was produced here, and was useful to them. So, they destroyed all our big buildings, such as school, kitchen, clubs, etc. Our library, which had ten thousand books at that time, was burnt. And, they probably made food from that.

This was from 1947-1950. It was the peak period when you are neither recognized as Indian, nor as anything else. Everything is in feudal stage. Even a small happening would cause firing here. So, no smart person was ready to stay here. Everyone from Preet Nagar had moved and settled elsewhere. We left for three years and settled in Mehrauli, Delhi. So, when you don't see any impetus to come back...When you come back and see that your house and everything else is in pieces, you go back sad. Whenever something would happen at the border, firing would start here. We would know of something like that before rest of India. So, the development stopped because of that.

When the situation got better, Preet Nagar started to survive, and activates began. Then, in the war of 1961-65, Preet Nagar became brigade headquarter. The firing that was done on Lahore used to happen near our house. The cannons had a range of 21 kilometres. They were huge balls of fire. So, in those situations you want to survive, but you don't want to, or can't do anything that would maintain its glory. After 1965's war, the war of 1971 happened. After that, the situation got a little better. Then, Preet Nagar was affected by militancy. This whole belt was a big militancy belt. We too got affected. Two members of our family were killed. One of my nephews got killed. They also attempted to kill me because we couldn't agree to what they were saying, plus we were soft targets because...You are intellectual, but the rest of the India isn't. So it was a long struggle for us.

The biggest tragedy of this belt is that smuggling is very easy. Earlier, only small things like spices were smuggled, but now it's mostly smack. AK47 goes from this route. Then heroine came, and all that. When people who take opium lose all their money, they start stealing. They would take someone's motor, etc. And this thing about Preet Nagar that houses are well made and people have left... And, those who can't stay our selling. Houses were bought at throw-away prices. And, the people who bought at throw-away prices were farmers. And, you know farmers didn't have money at that time. But, imagine people who have some other business, and they buy a house near the border...One tragedy of Preet Nagar is that many unwanted people have come. Unwanted for us. They have bought houses here. You can't

disclose them. Bholu, who has been arrested in a drug case, one of his partners' lives in Preet Nagar. When we came to Preet Nagar in 1950s, one person had claimed the whole land of Preet Nagar. Slowly, efforts are being done. Preet Nagar is trying to bring back its glory. Now, odds are not as against us as they were. Because when you have an existence and you go on surviving after all that, you get recognized. So, Preet Nagar is coming back. And, we do hope, like it's said, 'Phoenix rises from its ashes'. So it is that.

Basically, the contribution of Preet Nagar is that it has made you think. When you start thinking, you also start differentiating between good and bad. Preet Nagar gave you that idea that if you think, reason is there. Once reason is there, you will also find your personality, you own values. You may be influenced by so much. My father's philosophy was that 'I am not me only. There are many people around me who have influenced me. On my front, on my side and even on my back.' So, if you have that, that can only be if you are susceptible to ideas. And, if you are susceptible to ideas, basic need is to understand. And, once it is understood, the feeling of oneness comes. And, feeling of oneness is personified by love. Love is in many forms, but love, he says, is not a possession. Love is to understand. So, the names of Preet Nagar and the magazine are based on that. Love is essential part. So this is what Preet Nagar is going to be.

by Varan Mann