

Harbhajan Bajwa

I hail from *jaṭ* family, my parents were farmers. My becoming a photographer professional seems odd coming from such a family background. This happened due to a visit I made to Sobha Singh. I had thought I will learn painting from him. As I started learning from him, after some time, Sobha Singh said, 'look, this is expensive art, nobody is going to ask your parents to get a painting done by their lad. Why don't you switch to photography which has a bright future in the coming years?' This will satisfy both your urge for a new art and it will also give you some income to survive as a household.

The first talk I had with Sobha Singh was at Amritsar in 1962-63 when he had come to the city at Thakur Singh Art Gallery. This gallery was inaugurated by the President of India then. I met him there and requested him that I want to see Andhreta where he was living and wish to learn painting. He replied, 'look our Andhreta is like a village well (*Khooh*) -if you want to jump into it, do come. Andhreta village was in Punjab then. So, I went to meet Sobha Singh there. It was a small village -the passage was not brick-lined, it was rough, only one bus of Punjab Roadways plied there daily from Pathankot. So, I stayed with him for 2-3 days and he asked me how you feel? I replied, "it is nice living here in mountains and alongside natural scenic beauty." So, I began to learn painting there.

My photography is different from others. In my studio there is no beautiful girl's face like other photographers keep them in their front window. Mine is an artist's photography or you can call it creative photography. I have learned much from my own work and art. I was called by a TV crew someone who keeps his camera by his bed. I have photographed creative writers in the series 'A Writer's Day.' In this series of photographs, I have photographed several writers including Sujana Singh, Sant Singh Sekhon, Jaswant Singh Kanwal, Gurbax Singh Preetlari, Bappa Pritam Singh of Navyug, and others. I have offered a glimpse of their life in one day from the morning till they go to bed. This was presented as Writer's Albums. I have kept them here somewhere; I can show you one of Gurmukh Singh Musafir.

Showing that album, you see Gurmukh Singh Musafir gets up from the bed, rubbing his eyes, sipping tea, taking the bath, reading the newspaper. Then you see him through the day; working in his garden, massaging his body, walking through his mansion, getting dressed formally, tying the turban, all that having breakfast, lunch and so on. This I made as part of several writers 'one day' series.

I have also done commercial photography of weddings; have covered many political leaders' meetings and so on. I have been a member of Kendri Punjabi Lekhak Sabha for 25 years. For some years, I was executive member of it. So, I have kept a very large record of their proceedings through photographs. Some people ask me if they pay you for photographing them. No, I did not charge them. All I wanted was to preserve their faces and memories for posterity, for the future so that younger Punjabi generation will know how Shiv Kumar looked, Nanak Singh, Gurbax Singh Preetlari, Karter Singh Duggal, Sant Singh Sekhon, and so on. Now you seek photos of Bulleh Shah, Varis Shah, or Bhai Vir Singh -you don't get any. I have photographed these prominent writers to keep their memory alive.

I have met many writers both popular and highbrow. I met Shiv Kumar heard him singing, drinking and so on. I also met Jaswant Singh Rahi from Dera Baba Nanak, I met Gurbachan Singh Parwana who was a very good singer. Then, there was Medan Singh Medan, I met Teja Singh Sutantar and his brother also who was a very good artist and poet too. Among others I met Sujana Singh the short story writer. Also, Suba Singh who was press writer of Giani Zail Singh, when he was chief minister of Punjab. There were popular writers such as Kartar Singh Balagan, Hazara Singh Gurdaspuri,

Harbhajan Singh Komal of Haryana I met them. They were popular among common listeners as they used to write of common themes. Now there is Pash or Dil, they write something not intelligible to common people. Common people think they are asking them to fight or do some revolutionary struggle. Sohan Singh Misha was a good poet and was a very companionable fellow. Then there are intellectual poets like Harbhajan Singh or Amrita Pritam, I have not heard them at Kavi Darbar that much.

Now look at this photo, what you see is I have a photograph of four people here -I happened to go to meet Amrita in Delhi in 1980 or it was 1981- as we sat there, Amrita told me 'do you know Bajwa, today is marriage of Dalip Tiwana?' I said, 'oh no, I did not know that.' You see Dalip Tiwana here -I said with whom is she getting married? Amrita pointed to me, 'That young man is sitting outside.' So, we four of us got together and took tea as Imroz brought the tray. I took a photo of them together: Amrita and Imroz, Dalip and Bhupinder.

This is a rare photo with me. I have not shared with anyone. When Jaswant Deed at Doordarshan wanted to make a film about Punjabi writers, he asked for this photograph. I refused and made the excuse that I have lost it somewhere. Then as Dalip Kaur Tiwana became President of Punjabi Sahit Academy, Ludhiana she also asked me to give that photograph. Again, I made the excuse -so this a rare photography I want to keep for records.

Seeing photographs Bajwa points at one, 'well this is of Suba Singh and as I told you he was press secretary to Giani Zail Singh. Suba Singh was from Mehta. Pointing out at another photo, Bajwa says, 'this is Sohan Singh Misha -a poet working at Jalandhar Radio Station.'

He shows a series of photographs, including Shiv Kumar, Dr. Ganda Singh, Hazara Singh Gurdaspuri, the latter was a popular poet who later settled in Delhi. This is Mohan Singh, another of Sahib Singh *tika-kar* of Guru Granth Sahib, this one is Surjit Rampuri who has passed away -he was really a very nice man.

And this photograph is of Gurbax Singh Preetlari.

Question: When this photo was taken?

Bajwa: This is from 1972

Now this is Kapur Singh Ghuman of Punjab Languages Department at Patiala. This is a phot of Pash which I took at his village. Then this is photograph of Kulwant Singh Virk; this is Ajit Kaur of Delhi; this one is Amrita Pritam with Shiv Kumar in 1972 as he passed away in 1973. All writers have complicated lives -they are not what they seem from outside.

I have published four poetry books although none recognises for my poetry, they call me photographer Bajwa. Let me recite a couple of my lines:

A long poem follows

No one can break the pen of Baba Nanak

None can imitate *japuji* he wrote

Pundits and *Mullan* create doubts about God

They monopolise the truth and way to God

They charge for saying Nanak's name

Those greedy ones turn into babas and sadhus

They don't meditate upon *Japuji* or his teachings

They recite like parrots

Don't implement it in their lives
Baba Nanak says live a practical ethical life
People go to worship funeral places
Put marks on their foreheads
They all think we are true disciples of guru
If Baba Nanak were alive he would surely ask
Why you gone back from where I had brought you up
This is one world
You act as if you own dharma and you are selling it for profit
Dharam fights with other *Dharam*
You sit behind *Dharam* for selfish purposes
Every religion is in conflict with others
And grows at others' expense
Dharam has aided genocide of mankind
Dharam is one word
This word has killed millions
Dharam has now lofty buildings
Dharam is now a condemned word
And man is now ferocious animal
If religion did not exist man would be an angel
Dharam has divided the mankind
Man has become enemy of man

Another poem is as:

Take me there without covering my dead mouth
Let the world say I have cloaked my face
Let my neighbour know
Let us meet face to face
Why not let him say now
What he is going to say after my departure
Those friends who betrayed me often
I will remember them all
I am leaving them
To meet my true friend alone
I am rather ashamed

All modern writers are using uncommon words drawing upon a lot of foreign vocabulary -from Hindi, Sanskrit and so on, or even Urdu which ordinary Punjabis don't understand. Language is changing fast and common people are divorced from it. Some of our critics and writers seem to use difficult words to impress their intellect or expertise without searching for appropriate Punjabi words. They are borrowing from English -all again to impress others, not to make people understand what they're saying.

Same thing has happened with Punjabi language in West Punjab where they have borrowed words from Urdu and Persian. Thus we have no standard Punjabi left as it used to be.

We have many literary associations -they are now all craving to become its president or secretaries. and there are factions among writers. Everyone wants to be president, or seek alliance with government officers by becoming somebody of a literary association. Punjabi writers are turning out as selfish as are the common people -no ethical standards are maintained by writers. Kendri Punjabi Lekhak Sabha was divided into two major factions to communists' influence as you know. You see Bhardwaj, there is no ideal left among writers

They are now for their own ends; they have divided the Sabha for their own purposes. Writers have not performed their duties to the society -they have not taught common voters to vote carefully or suggest any social reform messages. They have not conveyed such messages through their writings.

Punjabi writers have forgotten that literature has a high purpose, they seem to have forgotten the main role of the literature.

thank you