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Punjabi literature is spread over a thousand year. Its origin goes to Baba Sheikh Farid (1173-1276 CE). Punjabis are hard-working people with progressive outlook and are always ready to undertake sojourns abroad. They like to take things into their own hands to improve their conditions. This is the kind of Punjabis' nature which is also reflected in past and modern Punjabi literature. This is also integrated into Punjabi literary thinking and its concerns. The twentieth century was a new age with the colonial era. At one level it was quite good that a lot of scientific thinking came down to Punjab as part of colonial era. When Punjab became part of the colonial rule in 1848-49, a printing press soon arrived in Punjab; indeed, the Presbyterian Christian mission installed such a printing press in Ludhiana as early as in 1835. Reverend Newton had published a Punjabi grammar in 1852 and by the year 1860-65 Lahore had a printing press where the classic *Qissa* of Heer was printed. One can say that printing had brought a different kind of knowledge to Punjab. And there was one more new thing- a railway line from Calcutta came down to Punjab and went up to Peshawar. The railway line certainly affected the Punjabi people's behaviour and nature in many ways. Both railways and printing press encouraged Punjabis to undertake self-help ventures.

In the twentieth century the Punjabi literature, there was one tendency to look back to discover the past, the literary heritage. (The line difficult to translate which says) There was this feeling of being slaves but we were at some stage sovereign too. This was the first tendency. The current Punjabi literature had other aims and tendencies too. For example- twentieth century literature which we attribute for the period 1900-1930 of Bhai Vir Singh, he was more of a reactionary (*puritan panthi*), but Professor Puran who was a disciple of Bhai Vir Singh proved to be different poet. indeed, a great poet who looked at past and contemporary Punjab and was a fine expositor of Punjabi consciousness through many poems; for example, in his well-known poem; 'This youth of Punjab' where he declares Punjabis as sovereign people who would brook no slavery.

The time I am talking about, there was new knowledge arriving, new thought process and new enthusiasm for life. But we lacked something which still, that feeling also prevailed. We, the Punjabis were divided on the basis of religion and still so. Our writers whether they were Sikhs, Hindus or Muslims, were against such a division. They wished common Punjabi consciousness. Even now, we want that Punjabinat. Certainly after 1930s, this kind of consciousness towards Punjabi took strong hold. Side by side with freedom movement, there was a progressive movement in writing. There was hope that divided people as we were, all working class and we can unite together and there was even talk of revolution. Such a hope was promoted by Professor Mohan Singh, Sant Singh Sekhon, Gurbakhash Singh Preetlari and others and this was a new tendency. That life was not all woes but it should be enjoyed fully. This kind of ideology was propagated by Gurbakhash Singh Preetlari who established a monthly 'Preetlari' that soon had wide circulation affecting peoples' lifestyles.

During the Second World War, in 1939, there was much turmoil in political life. Strong debate took place whether to join the war or to support the English rulers. Alongside a major event happened in Bengal where a famine killed lakhs of people due to starvation. Influenced by Bengal famine several progressive writers started writing a new kind of literature inspiring struggle against injustice. This kind of literature especially in Urdu language, as also in Punjabi was called progressive literature. And in those days, a number of progressive writers established an association to promote such literary writings. This association was first established in Bombay.

This progressive movement came to Punjab a bit late after 1950 leading to the formation of writers' association. An association called 'Kendri Punjabi Lekhak Sahit Sabha' was established. This association started conferences at all India level every two years. Under its guidance, local associations were formed with local authors coming together. In the same year, under the guidance of Bhai Jodh Singh, another literary association was formed known as Punjabi Sahit Academy, Ludhiana. A number of writers like me or some senior to us became members of both associations. So I am a life-member of Punjabi Sahit Academy Ludhiana as well as Kendri Punjabi Lekhak Sahit Sabha. Both of these associations hold annual conferences where they implement programme of organising literary discussions. At these conferences, writers would discuss issues, pass resolutions, hear lectures and so on.

Of these literary meetings and discussions, two writers emerged as the most prominent; Sant Singh Sekhon and Professor Kishan Singh of Delhi. Both were avowed Marxists and progressive but they had strong differences among themselves. For example Kishan Singh thought of *Gurbani* and *Heer* of Waris Shah as classics of world literature and treat them both as part of revolutionary literature. But writers like Mohan Singh and of course, Sant Singh Sekhon including Gurbakhash Singh Preetlari offered stringent criticism of Kishan Singh's viewpoints. In particular, Sant Singh Sekhon who was not only a writer, but an intellectual, a literary critic would object to Kishan Singh's thinking in strong language. At these meetings often personal insults were exchanged.

Writers' Associations of course could not teach writers how to write. Any writer has to learn the art of creative writing and writer must study a lot as well as draw upon the experiences of life. Moreover, he would learn from other literary writings. A writer becomes great when he has some originality as part of his personality to which he adds what he studies, learns from experiences in life and he is keen observer of social as well as individual life as well learnings from world's literary classics. So writer has to gain a lot of knowledge as well as work through his writings to make them better. He can gain through discussions at conferences, but I will repeat again, associations can help, cannot teach you to write. Those who attend conferences regularly do not become better writers. And then there are writers who are not particularly liked by common readers, so what is the use of such writings? While writers want readers and expect whatever they had written should be discussed somewhere at some stage. That is he one reason why most writers are part of such literary associations.

But these literary associations have lost momentum. These are not as active as they used to be. One reason of it was in the case of Kendri Punjabi Lekhak Sabha, that it was inspired by communist Party and progressive literary movement. But as a CPI (Communist Party of India) was split, it became CPI® and CPI(M), still writers were not split. So in a way, this was right, but this changed as a third Communist Party came into being. That is to say as the Naxalite movement was born. A new Kendri Lekhak Sabha was established. Then writers' association became quite separated. This is how Punjabi literary associations were split that affected their activities and affected creative writing. From 1970 onwards, Punjabis started going abroad in a big way, at first to England, then to Canada and USA. Remember, in 1981 there was a World Punjabi Conference in England and following that there were other conferences like that in several other locations.

In Jalandhar when we decided to have literary association (Kendri Sabha) this was inspired by a senior writer Giani Hira Singh Dard, I was more of writer than an organiser while Giani Bhajan Singh

and Gurbakhash Singh Panuwala who was journalist, they were good organisers and Giani Bhajan Singh became well known novelist. Both of them went to jail, later as Punjabi Suba movement started, both of them took part in it and were jailed. There was lot of enthusiasm to take part in literary conferences, local literary branches used to organise such gatherings while every two years, and there was a big conference. I remember when there was Punjabi Literary Conference and Rampura village and there was a poetical symposium at night. We took part in nightly poetical symposium also along with day time conference at Rampura village. There was arrest house by the canal near his village where meeting would take place. I remember about this writers' association where two poets Gurcharan Rampuri and Surjit Rampuri used to recite. And I think reason for this Rampura Association being so active was due to these two writers and one can draw a general conclusion from this that behind any active literary association, there are always two or three good organisers. We know so many associations were formed then ceased activities due to this factor. Take for example, Barnala Literary association where I used to participate, there was a poet Pritam Singh and his brother was Joginder Nirala and there was another person who did not write anything, but was an able organiser. His name is Jagjit Singh Jagtar, still alive and very active who is a journalist. He contributed so much to literary movement in Barnala, and then let us remember Ram Sarup Anakhi who was the product of this literary association and who rejuvenated it with his active participation. There are not many associations like Barnala. There was another fellow who used to live in Delhi, Giani Kuldeep Singh if I remember him correctly with his background in military, when he was employed there; he used to edit a Punjabi paper. He was also associated with this Barnala Literary association.

How, the building should be established, I mean Punjabi Writers' building. This is rather an expensive venture and writers' have little funds. Then an offer was made by a big builder to construct it. And that is how this Punjabi Bhawan came into existence. There was a Punjabi literary association that was established by Giani Hari Singh. It continues from 1940s up to now. There used to be monthly meetings, but Kendri Lekhak Sabha is quite weak because it has no permanent building for meetings. In contrast, Punjabi Sahit Academy at Ludhiana has a building called Punjabi Bhawan and that ensures its continuity.

As far as Rampur Literary Association is concerned, it has not produced writers of the calibre, Gurcharan Rampuri and Surjit Rampuri after they left it. There is one book published, I cannot recall author's name, this is a poetry titled *Pind Bolda Hai* (The Village Speaks). This is pretty good book. There is writer Surinder Rampuri and another one is called Mal Singh Rampuria who is writing. So some villages had a good tradition of establishing writers' association which promoted or created environment for new writers, and, of course, readers for Punjabi literature.

From 1984 up to 1994, I had been a newspaper columnist. I have written for *Punjabi Tribune* and *Ajit* almost every week. Usually, through these two essays per week, I would comment on Punjab and Indian events covering political, cultural and economic issues. These columns were well read across the world. These essays were reproduced in England by *Des Pardes* weekly and in Canada by *Indo-Canadian Times* weekly. This journalism established my name all over the Punjabi world. It is true that writer of whatever stature wants to be honoured needs recognition through various ways and this is best done through literary associations. And of course, such literary associations have published books of local writers. One can count Rampura Literary Association in it as well as those from Patiala. In particular, poetry books which are not usually published by commercial publishers as

there are few readers, were promoted by literary associations. So, a particular local association takes poems from different writers and publishes it, say, as one-hundred-page book. It satisfies the writers who feel recognised. So, this is a useful function of a literary association.

Literary associations have also contributed various writers by promising to publish them. For example, Arjan Singh Gargajh who used to recite stories drawn mainly from his family life was encouraged to write them with a promise this will be published as part of your autobiography. In this way Gargajh published three anthologies through Pritam Singh of Delhi. One of the books is titled- *Do pair ghat turna* (Walk two steps less) and our literary associations helped in its distribution also. In a way, this book has become part of our literary heritage. Although, not many literary associations could afford publication projects because this is rather a commercial venture. There was another scheme to establish book clubs at Punjabi Sahit Academy, Ludhiana as also by Bhapa Pritam Singh of Navyug in Delhi. Its aim was to enrol one hundred to two hundred members who would be sent newly published books after they had deposited some money.

But the experiment of book clubs in Punjab has not succeeded. The main reason for this, of course, is Punjabis whether they live in Punjab or in western countries, they have not developed the taste of reading. They are not naturally fond of reading which should have been the case by now. In this respect, it is writers who have done more for Punjabi literature and it is writers' who have done something for society. You can say in Punjabi society facing all sort of social problems, these issues are well represented through Punjabi creative literature. In a sense, it is Punjabi community which has not valued this contribution. Remember, a novel by Nanak Singh used to be published one thousand copies at a time and it was usually sold within five years. Now, one can see Punjabi readers' numbers are in lakhs while a Punjabi title is published 500 at the maximum. So why a leading novelist's writing are not published in large numbers? This was expected but did not happen in Punjab. Punjabis never developed love for books even as Punjabis are well-off. Many have earned a lot. Thousands have gone abroad, can boast a decent accommodation, afford good clothes and what not. But a typical Punjabi house does not have a bookshelf. So, one can only complain about the lack of discerning taste among Punjabis. And I feel anyone one who is well educated, has no aptitude for literary reading, in my assessment, is not a cultured person. You can call him a literate, an educated man but not a cultured person. And without culture what is the value of human life? All over Punjabis do care for Punjab, but if they care about Punjab, they should also care about Punjabi, its writers, about our society and its creative literature. Books should be read. This is food for human soul. Books are teachers as well as friends but Punjabis lack all of this facility. On the other hand, you can see, in contemporary Punjab, there are daily newspapers that sell nearly 10 lakh copies on a daily basis. *Ajit's* circulation is nearly 4 lakh, almost same figure for *Jag Bani* so that adds upto 8 lakh. Now add other titles, we get a million copies every day. One newspaper is read at least by three people, if not five, that means a minimum of three million readers. So, one can assume there is good number of readers who could pick up a books also, but they don't buy books. One could organise a book exhibition or a book fair as often done by National Book Trust at Jalandhar and at other places, you can find readers who will buy at such fairs. Partly, publishers are at fault who have no effective means to reach the readers. That is to say, the publishing trade has not developed in Punjab. In Jalandhar, for example, there are number of booksellers who are also publishers. This market is centred at Mai Heeran Gate in Jalandhar City. You go there and see most books which are sold are text books for schools, not literary works. Most of these booksellers don't keep creative literature titles. So basic reason may be literature is not distributed properly. It simply does not reach readers.

In a small way, literary associations try to fulfil this role but have not succeeded in this direction. So, one way forward would be for the existing literary associations to organise book festivals, exhibitions etc. to take literature to common readers. This would in turn help literary associations as well Punjabi writers.

Thank you

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