

S. Tarsem

I was in third year at school and there were 20 days left for India's Republic Day. My brother used to be a literary figure and also irrespective of the political party, he used to be in-charge of many public functions in the city. He would often talk about the forthcoming function at home, so I told my brother look, if I write a poem for the Republic Day, can I recite it? He replied, "why not?" show me what you write. So I wrote a poem in 5-7 days and showed it to him. My brother approved it. This poem goes like this:

Oh Vidhan Piayre, Oh Vidhan Piayre
Tere banaun vich kite ne kihne kare
Kihdi gal te bat naal tun banya?
Kihde shone vicharan naal tun tanya
pouchan da hai aaj vichar piayre
Oh Vidhan Piayre, Oh Vidhan Piayre

And this was the question:

Rajan Babu ne mainu pyar kita
Jawahar Lal Nehru ne mainu tyar kita

(Oh dear constitution! Oh dear constitution
How you came into being?
Who has made you?
You are full of good thoughts,
That's why I ask you
Oh dear constitution, oh dear constitution!

And the last two lines were an answer to the above question:

Rajan Babu loved me
While Jawahar Lal Nehru prepared me

This was the kind of the lines I wrote and recited them on 26st January. Our Barnala district used to be part of Pepsu then and Pepsu was a separate state from Punjab. And there was Prem Singh Prem in Pepsu who was a poet himself. Gaini Gurmukh Singh Musafar was deputed to arrive on Republic Day to unfurl the national flag. Musafar was a relative of Prem Singh Prem. So I recited the poem there. I was very young lad, thin and weak looking. Musafar liked my poem and offered 5 rupees as award from his jacket. Lot of people commented how can this small lad write poetry? He can hardly clean his nose yet. So, it must be Goel Sahib who wrote this for him. You see, ours family name is Goel. Anyway a lot of talk about my poem ensued. This meant I was encouraged to write poetry. Then much later, I turned to short stories. By now I have written 44 books. Do you know my eyesight had gone at the age of 33. It was decreasing steadily every year and by the age of 33 I became totally blind. This was quite a tragedy for our family. Still, somehow my work and dedication continues. I really don't know how and why I carried on writing. It must be some gift of nature. Now you can see someone sitting here and there is a girl who makes tea here. These two people work for me and I give them some wages. Even after retirement I have never been idle. I was first employed in a

government job where someone always assisted me. Here in the college, I was a professor of Punjabi for 21 years. And someone has assisted me as a teacher, I have been a writer and a frequent speaker on Republic Day functions where I have never faced any hurdle. Difficulties do arise occasionally but there was never a feeling of hopelessness in my mind that it is useless to carry on. I have never thought like that.

Regarding literary associations, since 1956 there was a Cultural and Literary Society here and this was specifically established to celebrate martyrs of 1857. Of this literary society, my brother was President. You know he was a good poet of Urdu, Punjabi and Hindi. It is different matter that he was not as well recognised as a poet as I am. He wrote many patriotic poems which I can recite to you as I know them by heart. He also wrote on Mahabharata and I remember them as well. In our family, we used to discuss all such writings, be it a story or a poem. Sometime my brother would say, "Oh dear, write me a story" and he did not write stories. So I wrote him two stories when he was doing B.Ed. degree. This was my first story that I wrote for him then. And this was for my brother. And he was doing training at D. M. College Moga. In the year 1962-63, then I wrote a story in Hindi title 'Bansuri' (the flute).

So in a way, we two brothers were very close to each other. Even as we did not agree on everything, but there was no ideological difference. He was a very great patriot and unimpressed by leftist politics. My brother was part of RSS, other person was Om Parkash Kapil who was a bit leftist. Then there was another one Parkash Chand, an advocate who was member of Parja Socialist Party. And there were others who were not affiliated to any politics. So this was a literary association and after about 18 months, other was at Tapa Mandi. At Tapa Mandi, members were rich businessmen. As this society became quite prominent, Gian Singh Rarewala came down to preside one such meeting. Our business friends were anxious to develop relation with politicians through this society. But we never allowed this to happen. In any case after about three years this Tapa Mandi Association was bound up. In its place came Punjabi Sahit Sabha. And I became president of it.

At that time we used to have monthly meetings. We were aware of other literary associations for example Punjabi Sahit Sabha, Rampura fool and one at Moga, another at Barnala or Tapa. And at Moga it was Jarnail Singh Sekhan who used to be in-charge. Anyway at all meetings of our Sabha, usual procedure was everyone would read his/her poem or story and everyone present would offer opinion about it. And at that time *Kavi Darbars* (Poetic Recitations) were very popular in Punjab. At major *Kavi Darbar* it was not unusual to have ten or twelve thousand people. Can you imagine there was one gathering arranged by Sahit Sabha, Barnala in connection with 1857 at Tapa Mandi attended by more than 10,000. At these recitation fairs, a lot of poets would get live imputes from the audience. On that occasion it was Krishan Rishant who received the biggest applause. He was a revolutionary poet, later he became an astrologist and do you know Amrita Pritam was his big fan.

In that *Kavi Darbar*, Surjit Rampuri was also present, I cannot remember all names -there were many others. It was then the usual thing to hold such *Kavi Darbars*. We used to stage dramas especially by communist groups. Drama was a better media for communication with ordinary people. Until 1970-72, these dramas would attract so many spectators. It was through these dramas that some young people were attracted to Punjabi literature. It is sad to note that kind of activity is now almost dead.

It was not that we wanted to serve the cause of Punjabi language then. It was more than that -we wanted to change society. We wanted a society that should be patriotic, public conscious and honesty should prevail; this was our vision of a healthy society; that was what we wanted to establish. So, in that era, it was not art for art sake but art for society. We stressed to employ simple language, be it a poem or a story, to convey the message that could be understood by ordinary folk

Since 1979, I am part of this.Kendri Punjabi Lekhak Sabha. I had become quite mature by that time. Several prominent members of this Sabha used to impress us, among them Sujan Singh, Sant Singh Sekhon, Santokh Singh Dhir and so on. They used to meet and I could talk to them as an equal and they would listen to my arguments. In 1983, I think, the date was 12 July, when elections were held to this Sabha at Khalsa College, Ludhiana where Sekhon was elected as President. At that time Tera Singh Chan was elected against his rival Tejwant Singh Mann who won by 36 votes. There were five Vice-Presidents and three Secretaries to be elected. Principal Sujan Singh suggested to me, "Stand for Vice-President post." I had my doubts but he encouraged me to contest. Then I took counsel of Pritam Singh who was President, he also endorsed me. Then I was backed by Surinder Singh Narula who promised to canvass for me. Narula was well-known novelist. At that time nominations were entertained earlier and names were read and asked if anyone wants to stand. Vir Kalsi who was quite influential in the Communist Party was conducting this election. She was returning officer while Raghbir Singh was General Secretary of the Sabha. As the elections were held, I was elected by a big margin, in fact the largest, by nearly 125 votes.

After that I felt very encouraged. I worked for Sabha with my whole heart. It was in 1985 when elections were held again. At that time Jangir Singh Jagtar was not with our group, nor was Tejwant Mann with me. They all backed Tera Singh Chan to become General Secretary. Sekhon stood for President's post, Chan as General Secretary. My name came for Vice -President -as there are five of them. Chan won by just 6 votes against Tejwant Mann. Opposite to Sekhon only got 34 votes, so I won there too. In fact, from 1983 to 2004 I was elected General Secretary twice, I became Vice-President three times and finally I was elected as President from 2002-2004.

During this time, I was arrested and sent to jail twice. First time it was 1992-93, second stint was in 1997-98. First time, it was the government of Beant Singh as Chief Minister of Punjab. Then we made a protest to implement Punjabi Language Act so that all official work should be conducted in Punjabi. We started from Language Department in Patiala. We were 11 writers making this protest who were arrested, among them Professor Pritam Singh, Sant Singh Sekhon, Principal Sujan Singh, Harcharan Singh Dramatist, Santokh Singh Dhir, Tera Singh Chan, Kirpal Singh Kasel, Dr Parminder Singh, (who was General Secretary of Punjabi Sahit Academy Ludhiana). An interesting episode about our arrest should be narrated here. There was Professor Gurcharan Singh from Patiala who was a writer and a distinguished personality. He brought flowers for us, put garlands in our necks, and then handed the last one aside saying I am coming back to join you later. But he never turned up. At that time, Harcharan Singh was President while I was General Secretary. We were arrested and charged for violating 144 regulations as we took out a procession. The police took us to Patiala jail. Now Harcharan Singh became worried whether they would release us or not. The police served us *chole* (roasted grams) and then brought tea for us around 5PM. I was employed at Government College then. The jail superintendent came down and asked, "Should we release you now?" I said, "Look, you have only served us only tea yet, we would rather have dinner and then go home." He informed us, "We were under order to keep you until 5PM, now your time is up, and you can go." As

he folded his hands in saying this, I told him, look, "I am blind, go and say these words to Sekhon or Pritam Singh." The Jail Superintendent went to them who were sitting on a carpet on the ground. He told them, "Look, we have not served you very well here this time, but please you can now go." So, we were released.

I have a vivid memory of my jail experiences. In fact, there is chapter in my autobiography on our jail experience. It was not unpleasant at all. My wife then was a teacher, Ram Murti Sharma and another teacher was with us. My two sons were very young at that time. The elder son is now a doctor. My wife would bring both of them to jail for interview. The jail superintendent was from a village called Salinh near Moga where my sister was married. So, the jail superintendent became quite friendly towards me. Whenever my family arrived to visit me in jail, he would send them right inside. They would stay the whole day inside with me and we would have lunch together. I have enjoyed these events contrary to general people accounts.

For any collective cause I was always ready to join in. In 1978, there was a campaign by unemployed teachers, Then I was teaching at Tapa Mandi. A teacher met me and said, "We are going to be arrested in a batch of six, but we cannot find the sixth teacher -we are now five of us." I said, "Find someone." He said, we thought, "You could be a volunteer," I said, "well, Ok I will accompany you." They asked my Mrs who said, "yes, he is always ready for such distractions -take him." So, I joined them in Chandigarh where this campaign was to be launched. There were some Naxalites too there. We faced a *lathi-charge*. It was Giani Raghbir Singh who told me to get into the bus that was brought for arresting teachers. We were taken to 17 Sector Police Station. Many teachers expected they would be released in a day or two. But I knew we were there for a long time. In any case we enquired and were told so. I pleaded with SHO to send us to a better jail. Eventually we were sent down to Sangrur for two months. We were produced in the court every fortnight, I was the only writer among these teachers. There were some political leaders too with us among them Sat Pal Dang, Bhan Singh Bhaura and so on. There were others who would lecture us regularly and I used to lecture on literature and sometimes on politics too.

Here I was met with some people from Gurdaspur who enquired, "Why you sometimes talk of patriotism, then talk of socialism, don't you see the conflict?" I said, "Look for you, it may be so, for us, socialism and patriotism are not separate entities. In our records it is one and the same thing."

I mean writing is a matter of honesty, it is not a matter of selfishness, and it is not a profitable business either -unlike a shop. But it is also not aimed to get you rich. You will see many writers boasting "I became bankrupt by writing", I don't think that is true. A true writer is dedicated -he is not looking for monetary gain. You see my position I have written many books. These have sold well also; some are in 4th or 5th edition by now. I have always asked my publishers to inform me of the edition they are selling, even if they don't pay me. They should inform me, that is what they do. |It is true unit 1980 or mid-1980s, Punjabi literature used to sell in large numbers. Now book-selling is in decline. But my books are doing well, look at my three *Gazal* books, one is in 3rd editions, one title 'Gazal: Roop te Pingal' has sold really well.

Yes, Punjabi culture is moving now in a particular direction, if you hold an *Akhand Path*, you will see a large crowd sometimes upwards of 500 people. if you hold a literary meeting offering books, it will be surprising if fifty people could turn up. This is the way society is developing in Punjab.

Contemporary time is a listening culture rather than a reading public in Punjab. People are turning more and more selfish as if they have no regard for social values. They don't care for books too.

There are of course books like *Hir* by Waris Shah which remains popular. There is an enormous readership for it, The same goes for Baba Boharh poem of Sekhon, or some of Amrita Pritam's writings. Until 1960s or 1970s, there was no need to create curiosity among readers. New readers were springing up everywhere. At that time as books were published, these were sold quickly. Although not many writers would get a royalty then, but it certainly went into the hands of many readers. Now we face many kinds of problems –which is hurting the book culture. Now-a-day, hardly any title gets a print-run of 500 copies.

Still, this does not mean you should stop writing. There is always need for literature. I am not a pessimist, if writers are not honoured, look, how are we treating other good persons in this society? There is a new culture of gangsters in Punjab. Writers should not act like them -writers have different standards to maintain. And the role of literature is to tackle some real issues facing the society

Thanks