

Surinder Rampuri

Let me tell you something about myself. I was an employee in the industry department of Punjab government for forty years and I retired in 2007. I was attached to my village as well as to literature so I did not live in the city. Most of my service period was spent at Ludhiana, for a time at Hoshiarpur, Nakodar and Gobindgarh. But on most evenings I was going to home. I was so fond of the writers association established at our village, and the second reason was attachment to my mother. Two were my joint mothers. For that reason I never made a home away from my village home. Even my son says sometimes, "Papa, we should stay in the village." From 1970 to 2007, what I have written consisted of 6 books. Since retirement in 2007, in the following seven years I have another titles published. Another is due next month. So, this is due to my dedication and stay in my village. I have published five titles of short stories by now.

The history of Punjabi Likhari Sabha Rampur is quite old. This Sabha was formed on 7 August 1953 by our founder writers. I was only 4 years old then. So, much that I have heard about this is from Surjit Rampuri. He told me how before the establishment of this Sabha, there used to be a progressive writers' meeting called Anjeman Progressive Organisation where Gurcharan Rampuri, Surjit Rampuri, Santokh Singh Dhir, Jaswant Singh Kanwal and Ajaib Singh Chitarkar used to gather. Inspired by that association, Surjit Singh Rampuri felt a similar Sabha should be started at our village. The association they used to attend was mostly in Urdu language. He felt so many of us are making a regular trip to Ludhiana, why not start a similar Sabha at our village and let this be in our language, Punjabi. That is how Punjabi Likhari Sabha, Rampur was established in our village Rampur. This was established near this clock tower by the canal where you have seen a rest house.

According to Surjit Rampuri, its first meeting was held with eight writers present of which six belonged to Rampur village. On my part, I started writing stories in 1975. Near our home, lived Amrit Rampuri, he had started attending Sabha meetings earlier than me. One day, he asked me to accompany him. I joined him along with other new visitors including Gurdial Lala and then Guralp Litt also joined us. Sitting together we were, sort of, competing with each other in writing stories. At the first meeting I attended, Santokh Singh Dhir was present so was Sajjan Grewal, Ajaib Chitarkar, Hasanpuri, Surjit Rampuri, and Sukhwinder Rampuri. After my first meeting there, I almost became its devoted fan. After that, I hardly missed a meeting. Then after several years, I became its General Secretary for many years and currently I am its President. My predecessor was Harbhajan Mangat who would open Sabha's library. After his passing away, I am responsible for opening the library in the evening. For a long time Niranjana Singh Sathi was General Secretary. During that time, our Sabha implemented several new conventions. One was any writer could join our Association as a postal member. This was adopted in 1956 when by paying the normal fees for membership, any member could send his creative work. Our General Secretary would respond by sending him discussion of the meeting. You would a gist of comments on your writing. You can ask about this more from Harbhajan Hundal who had become such a member. There used to be Atam Rahi who has passed away, he used to say this; "if Rampuri Sabha did not exist, I would not have become a writer."

Another convention was we started was offering prizes for writers. Currently we offer five prizes. The first was established in the name of Labh Singh Chatrik who was another writer from our village. Sardar Albel Singh Mangat was his father who has become *sarpanch* of our village. He was *kavishar* (a popular bard); some years back we published a book by him also. We offer one prize in his name

and so on. Our Sabha organises lively discussions and arranges regular seminars. Right from the very beginning Sabha would bring books of other writers and hold talks about it. Some meetings were followed by *kavi darbar*. As a young man I can recall Gursharan Singh coming every year for staging a drama here. His well-known drama titled '*Dhamak Nagare Di* (The sound of drum) was staged in this village attracting nearly 1500 spectators. Later when Punjab was in grip of terrorism, we stopped staging dramas at night. In fact, currently all programmes are held during day time because people have become fond of watching television at night. In earlier years, there used to be big gathering for *kavi darbars* (*Poetry Recitation*). People would sing songs, and once a year, Gursharan Singh would stage his play –such had become a routine for several years. Currently, we hold discussions on various books, for instance, in recent months we had discussions around Gurlal's book '*pairhan*' (footprints). As I said before, we give five literary awards annually. We always invite old as well as new writers. If you come to one of our meeting you will witness how everyone sitting around the table is asked to give his/her comments on a book or story under discussion. Every person has to say what is good or bad about it. That is why a number of writers prefer to attend our meetings where they expect critical evaluation not just usual laudatory remarks. People provide criticism without reservations and writers are usually grateful for that kind of opinions. You know Santokh Singh Dhir who later became a prominent writer, started coming to Rampur as early as 1975-76. The same year, I started. Along with him there was Ajaib Chitarkar, Sajjan Grewal and Inderjit Hassanpuri. Hassanpuri. Chitarkar was at one time President of this Association. All of them were ordinary members who later became prominent writers. Among the new crop of our writers there are three story writers; Gurpal Lit, Gurdial Lal and Amrit Rampuri.

Among the poets, after the first generation came Sukhwinder Rampuri and Jeevan Rampuri from neighbouring villages Kulwant Neelon, Major Mangat from Kuba village, Jasbir from Buani and Sherjang from Kanech. The later was handicapped; he would come on a rickshaw for the meeting. Then there were Mohinder Singh Kaidi from Jatana. Let me tell you an episode about Kaidi Sahib. This was told by Surjit Rampuri, president of our association. In an evening function Gurbakhash Singh Preetlari was present and this was time for dinner. Mohinder Singh Kaidi was serving dinner. As the dinner was over Gurbakhash Singh asked Mohinder Singh "why are you called Kaidi?" Mohinder Singh told him you see although currently I am a prisoner of love alone, but I was actually a prisoner. As he narrated his story of arrest and jail sentence, Gurbakhash Singh wrote it up and published in his magazine, *Preetlari*. That story is pretty famous now and for some years was part of school curriculum.

Showing around, Rampuri shows an old photo of Rampuri Writers Association.

Question: Who are prominent among this photograph?

Answer: This photograph is quite old, with writers: Harbans Rampuri, Gurdial, Rama Sarvar, S. S. Dusanjh, Surjit Rampuri, Santokh Singh Dhir, Baljinder Singh Hamdard and so on. This other photo is of Mal Singh Rampuri, Sukhwinder Rampuri and so on.

Q: of what date say?

A: Quite old, it seems the 1980s. Here, in this library you can see Randhir Singh Chand, then Surjit Singh Rampuri, Kulbir Singh Kang, Prof. Pritam Singh of Patiala, Ajaib Chitarkar and so on. I remember once we had released Hasanpuri's book '*Kithe gaya oh din?*' (Where have gone those

days?). This photo is dated 13 December 1987 in which you can see. Jasdev Singh Jasowal Sahib, Khushminder Singh Brar (who was Deputy Commission of Ludhiana at that time), along with M. L. Pandit who was Director of Doordarshan then, Hassanpuri and Surjit Rampuri. This function was held at Punjabi Bhawan, Ludhiana

Surjit Rampuri was the first President of this association who passed away in 1990. Since then as President, Hassanpuri was followed by Ajaib Chitarkar who was succeeded by Sukhwinder Rampuri. And for a long time, I am the current president. There is a couplet written by Surjit Rampuri about this village that says'

*Jihra pani pinda shayar ban janda
Enhi sakhat sajavan mere pind dian*

Anyone who drinks water of this village turns a poet
Such are the hard sentences passed on in my village

It does seem our village water has some quality which makes its young men and women recite poetry. Although a lot of our villages have now moved to cities such as Mohali, Patiala and so on, but I stayed at Rampur. I used to walk with Surjit Rampuri who himself lived in Rampur permanently. I used to learn a lot from our evening walks together. Our association has about 200 members of which at least 25 are from Rampur. And they have all published one or more books. So our village is quite proud of this history. I wonder another village of Punjab and indeed in the whole of India can match that.

As is familiar in starting any new venture, there are initial problems to sort out. There are people who would be jealous of your work and so on. Gradually people who oppose you come down to cooperate with you. Our association has contributed a lot to our village. The Association has its own office and a library. Unlike other village writers' associations, something else is in its rule book: that the Association will not be associated with a political party, second rule is that whoever is village *sarpanch* (elected head of the village) no matter which political party s/he belongs to, s/he will be our pattern. This is one reason our *panchayat* (elected village members) have been cooperating with us for all those years. You see bills for our seminar room and library are still in the name of village *sarpanch*. Similarly, we subscribe to the newspaper or buy books, we face no problems. We also have organised functions at Punjabi Bhawan, Ludhiana. For example in 1998 my book '*Puniya ton pehlan*' was released at Ludhiana. Some friends there raised the query why we held that function at Ludhiana. I informed them 'you see we get free chairs there, while in the village we have to fix a tent.' And we get much cheaper lunch there. But on that day, we did decide all future functions will be held at our village. Since 1988, no function has taken place away from this village. Another fact is about raising the money from our friends and sympathisers alone. We have never asked the government to donate us anything. Until 1980 we used to lobby for money among friends, even that practice is no longer needed.

Common people do want to read literature. We know how dramas by Attarjit and Gursharan Singh used to attract a lot of people. Now you know the National Book Trust of Delhi sells a load of books. Attarjit sells books in schools. You can see at various fairs such as one at Punjabi Bhawan, Ludhiana or Desh Bhagat Yadgar Hall, Jalandhar where books are sold in large quantities. Now if you still

complain why my book is not sold, you should know people have choices. Even as you go to buy potatoes, as a customer you try to buy the best product, same goes for the books. I know people as old as 70 years still read books, novels or religious tracts and so on. Some may read Waris Shah others have different reading tastes.

You have heard of a United Nations' report generating a lot of discussion. It says Punjabi language is going to die soon in the near future. Now I say, Punjabi is not going to commit suicide, we are part of Punjabi language. Our scriptures are in Punjabi and our next generation is not so divorced from Punjabi. We should not worry about this report. And later on people came to know that no such report has given 50 years' time for Punjabi. So a lot of rumours are going by. This is the age of internet, television but the book culture is still popular. People who want to buy, they do. If only we have libraries in villages, we can create new readers. There should be children literature to begin with. You see Punjabis are deep dug into drugs. And there are lot of other problems. If our government is sincere then it should adopt policies on libraries and a firm policy on our language. Punjabi Language Act is not implemented fully nobody who violates the law is persecuted. You see any employee who does not use Punjabi in administration, is by law subject to persecution. We need a tribunal with powers to implement that rule. If we have Director of Punjabi language or District Education Officer, can s/he check for example check non-implementation by a district Deputy Commissioner? If only we have language tribunal headed by an officer with appropriate power able to implement regulations regarding Punjabi language, the outcome would be different.

Thank you