

The Mystique of Mother Tongue & Predicament of Punjabi

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CALL PUNJABI A TWICE ACCURSED language! Before partition of the country in 1947 the Muslim majority in undivided Punjab gave no quarter to it. **They swore by Urdu. They had been told that Urdu - not Punjabi - was their language.** Accordingly it was Urdu that was adopted as State language and served as medium of instruction in educational institutions throughout the Province. Lahore, its capital was the hub of Urdu press, with a number of leading dailies and literary journals in Urdu. No wonder that Punjab created Urdu poets of the stature of Iqbal and Faiz, fiction writers of the eminence of Krishan Chander, Saadat Hasan Manto and Rajinder Singh Bedi, and journalists of the repute of Maulana Abdul Majid Salik and Salahuddin Ahmed.

Sense of Alienation:

In independent India it was hoped that Punjabi would have its due, the Muslim majority of the undivided Punjab having been left behind. But once again disappointment was in store for us. **This time the Hindus, in what was East Punjab suddenly discovered that Hindi - not Punjabi was their mother tongue.** They were in no small numbers, being 48 percent of the total population of the State, and in substantial majority in the urban segment.

The Sikhs (who had majority in a Tehsil) alone were left to advocate Punjabi as their mother tongue. **Doubtless the Hindus spoke Punjabi at home and in the market place, made love in Punjabi, abused in Punjabi, but when it came to 'declaring their mother tongue', they declared it was Hindi, their anxiety being to align themselves with the vast Hindi belt of northern India.**

No wonder a Punjabi poet, Babu Feroz Din Sharaf wrote:

*Sharaf puchhi na jinhanu ne vaat meri
Ve main boli han unhan Punjabian di.*

[Says Sharaf, those who never took care of me,
I am language of the people of Punjab.]

A major factor which drove the Muslims - and then Hindus - away from Punjabi was the Gurmukhi script to which the Sikhs cherished. While Gurmukhi is the most appropriate script for the Punjabi language, more suitable than Persian and Devnagri scripts, it has, unfortunately come to be identified with the Sikhs. While there is no doubt that the Ten Gurus adopted, modified and popularised Gurmukhi script (which gave it its name) the fact is that it was in vogue long before the advent of Sikhism. The fact that a poet of Guru Nanak's eminence composed an acrostic in Punjabi proves, if a proof is needed, that Gurmukhi script was in popular use before his time.

Thus, first in case of Muslims in the undivided Punjab, and later of the Hindus after Partition, it was essentially a communal bias, as much ill-advised as that of

Sikhs insisting on Gurmukhi under the impression that it was devised and introduced by Guru Angad Dev, the second Guru. Both the factions were obviously misguided, even as the worst sufferer was - and is - the Punjabi language.

A Gratuitous Conflict:

The fact that the Punjabi Hindus in independent India refused to accept Punjabi as their mother tongue palpably embittered relations between the two communities – Hindus and Sikhs, to the extent that the Sikhs started feeling themselves unsafe in the Hindu majority India. They started agitating for a homeland: Punjabi Suba.

As this demand gained momentum, the Centre merrily sliced away Himachal Pradesh from the Punjab on the pretext of reconstituting the state on linguistic basis. Thus Kangra, Kullu and even Shimla, which was the summer capital of Punjab for ages, were no more part of the Punjabi speaking Punjab. They opted for Hindi as their official language and medium of instruction. Thus Punjab, which was divided in 1947, was divided again losing some of its vital limbs.

The agony was not yet over. Not long thereafter, Haryana started clamouring for a separate state. A committee with Hridaynath Kunzru, K.M. Panickar and a retired judge was asked to look into the demand. The Committee unanimously advised that Punjab being a border state needs to be strengthened and not weakened by clipping away Haryana; on the other hand, PEPSU should be merged into it with a view to strengthening it. As a result, the Centre merged PEPSU into Punjab, but separated Haryana and created a new state. It was another mortal blow to Punjabi language, Haryana claiming Hindi as its official language and the rest. **The Punjab was divided once again. With West Punjab already ceded to Pakistan, northern belt to Himachal Pradesh and eastern wing to Haryana, Punjab was left a cripple, with its language spoken and fostered by fewer and fewer people.**

Intellectual Hypocrisy:

The position obtaining today is: while West Punjab, a part of Pakistan continues to be officially wedded to Urdu (while its people at large have awakened to the sanctity of the mother tongue, Punjabi), Himachal Pradesh and Haryana are Hindi states, with little to do with Punjabi, they, in fact, try to steer as clear away from Punjabi as they can, lest Punjab should lay claim over any part of their territory. They have no satisfactory arrangements for Punjabi teaching, their libraries in schools and colleges have no provision for purchasing Punjabi books.

Yet the Punjabi spirit is undaunted, the way the Lilliputian Punjab has brought in the Green Revolution and can claim to be the granary of the nation. Punjabi writing is behind no other regional language in the excellence of its literary output.

Be that as it may, because of limited readership, a number of outstanding Punjabi creative writers are writing in languages other than Punjabi – Khushwant Singh and Patwant Singh in English, Krishna Sobti and Krishan Baldev Vaid in Hindi, Gopi Chand Narang and Ratan Singh in Urdu, are some more important names. To be truthful, some of my own writings are published in translation first in English or Hindi, and later in the original Punjabi. **Ironically, one of my novels which had a print run of 1100 copies in Punjabi was translated and published in Malayalam with 10,000 copies as its first print-run. Another book of mine is running with its 19th reprint in English.**

Evidently, one solution of this state of affairs is translation and circulation of regional language writings into other Indian languages. It would provide regional writers better readership and foster national cohesion, primary need of a sub-continent like India with varied interests.

As it is, in the North we heard about K.V. Puttappa, the eminent Kannada poet *only* when he was endowed with the prestigious Jnanpith Award. We came to know about Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, the noted Malayalam fiction-writer when his novel was commissioned by UNESCO for translation into English (by Dr. Narayana Menon) published under the title Chemeen in the U.K., and then hit stands in our towns. The same is true of Sumitranandan Pant and S.H. Vatsayana insofar as the readers in the South are concerned. They are scarcely acquainted with their eminence as litterateurs.

During my tenure in the National Book Trust (NBT), I realized the need for such rendering, and brought it to the notice of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in one of our meetings. Appreciating my anxiety, she took no time in sanctioning a grant of rupees ten millions to the Trust advising that ten outstanding books in every Indian language in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution should be translated and published in all the Indian languages of the country. This gave birth to the NBT's popular series 'Aadan Pradan.'

Not long after launching the series, I realized that almost every Indian language had ten or more classics which must be provided, while the outstanding later writings of the Moderns and contemporary writers were left out. A pre-requisite of the project as conceived was that every outstanding writing in any Indian language should be available in all the Indian languages. **Not only this, my dream was that any outstanding piece of poetry, short story or play published in any Indian language should be available in translation in all the Indian languages within three months, at the most.**

This could be brought about by the Sahitya Akademi or National Book Trust, by setting up a high-powered outfit with a network of regional languages editors / translators who should constantly feed the central unit entrusted with co-ordination and distribution as expeditiously as possible. It is not asking for the Moon! The erstwhile Soviet Union did it splendidly not long ago.

It should also help ameliorate the present plight of the Indian writing, like that of Punjabi, languishing in the cobwebs of regional languages with their scanty readership and scarce appreciation.

I remember in the good old days in the undivided Punjab, we had one of our writers who was a big name as an author in English, translated and published in Punjabi. It didn't earn him appreciation and enthusiasm that his works in English enjoyed and he continued to write in English and died as eminent Indian writer in English.

My conviction is that one way to promote creative writing in the regional languages like my mother tongue Punjabi is to provide their protagonists with larger readership in the mother tongue and simultaneous translation in other languages. Had this been obtaining S.H. Vatsayana would have written in Punjabi and died a greater poet, Mohan Rakesh would have written in his mother-tongue Punjabi and done still better as a playwright, Rajinder Singh

Bedi would not have had to struggle with the Urdu idiom as he confessed he did. Across the border, Faiz would not have written in Urdu. Iqbal would not have drifted from Urdu to Persian.

The part played by mother tongue in the process of creativity of a writer cannot be denied. Two instances from the annals of Punjabi writing:

Maulana Abdul Majid Salik, the renowned Urdu journalist had declared once that he could not imagine anyone writing in Punjabi as any reference to the language brought to mind only the romance of Heer and Ranjha and no one could ever improve upon the excellence of Waris Shah. This was sometime in 1942 in Lahore.

I listened to Maulana Salik but did not venture to dissuade him as the Maulana was much too senior a scholar to enter into an argument with. It was about a decade later, Pakistan had come about, much water had flown under the bridge, that the Maulana visited Delhi in connection with the Delhi Cloth Mill Mushaira. **Entering my office, the Maulana declared in a loud voice that he had begun writing in Punjabi. This was indeed astounding news as Maulana Salik was, perhaps, the best known Urdu litterateur in Pakistan at that time.** On being asked how this change came about, the Maulana related the story of his transformation, which was, in itself an eye-opener. Maulana was traveling in a bus in Lahore. It so happened that the conductor of the bus missed issuing him a ticket. *“Bhaiya, tum mujhe ticket deni bhool gaye”*, the Maulana reminded the conductor. The conductor who was a refugee from India gave him a contemptuous look and said, “Maulana, ticket deni nahin hoti, ticket dena hota hai”. Maulana heard this and was stunned. Here was a semi-illiterate conductor who had found fault with his language because Urdu was his mother tongue and not of Maulana Abdul Majid Salik, the renowned Urdu poet and scholar. **Said Maulana: “That very moment, I decided that I shall in future write in Punjabi and not in Urdu”.**

Something like this happened with Faiz Ahmed “Faiz”, the renowned Urdu poet. In a Mushaira (poetical symposium) “Hamdam”, the Punjabi poet recited one of his poems and captivated the enormous audience. **He was followed by “Faiz” and, to his dismay, the crowd would not listen to him. They asked for “Hamdam” again and again, with the result that the function had to be called off. It was being held in Murree, a hill resort of Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan.**

The course of Punjabi publishing as such is as chequered as that of Punjabi language itself.

In the undivided Punjab, with the Muslim majority professing Urdu as their mother tongue, the Hindus under the influence of Arya Samaj were, rightly or wrongly, led to Hindi. This left the Sikhs in microscopic minority to cherish Punjabi in Gurmukhi script. Swayed by the Singh Sabha Movement in the early Twentieth Century, Punjabi publishing in Gurmukhi script comprised primarily of writings related to the Sikh faith. Wazir-i-Hind press at Amritsar, under the guidance of Bhai Vir Singh’s family, apart from bringing out a weekly called *Khalsa Samachar*, published a series of tracts, which Bhai Vir Singh wrote. This infuses an awakening in the world of Punjabi letters. These tracts relating to Sikh religion, Sikh tradition and Sikh way of life, helped in creating readership in Punjabi in Gurmukhi script, and also showed the way to secular elements take to Punjabi publishing in the form of journals. Accordingly one, Labh Singh Narang brought out a monthly magazine called the

Pritam, followed by a weekly known as the *Fateh*. Charan Singh “Shaheed” a popular writer had another weekly paper called the *Mauji*. Then, there were political newspapers like the *Akali Patrika*, *Sheri-i-Punjab* and others. These stray attempts at Punjabi publishing created not only the readership, they encouraged writing in Punjabi by the creative talent. The houses bringing out journals occasionally published books of their contributing authors.

In the meanwhile, inspired by the Singh Sabha Movement, Chief Khalsa Diwan set up a chain of schools and colleges throughout the Punjab which encouraged reading and writing in Punjabi. The Punjabi University started Punjabi courses at various levels – Budhimani, Vidwani and Giani. Their courses of study promoted publishing to a considerable extent in the form of text books which in due course became a sort of industry with eminent publishers, like M. Gulab Singh & Sons, Uttar Chand Kapoor and others jumping into it.

With the freedom struggle gaining momentum after the World War II, literary activity in the form of *belles lettres* received great fillip with the Progressive Writers Movement in mid Thirties. Thus the Punjab put out a crop of writers: Faiz Ahmed “Faiz”, Kishan Chander, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Saadat Hasan Manto in Urdu, Upendra Nath Ashk, Hari Krishna Premi, Chander Gupta Vidyalankar, Uday Shankar Bhatt in Hindi and Sant Singh Sekhon, Mohan Singh and Gurbachan Singh “Talib” in Punjabi. All of them needed publishers; where they were not available the writers published their works on their own. They included Bhai Vir Singh, Gurbaksh Singh of *Preet Lari*, Nanak Singh Novelist, Mohan Singh and Amrita Pritam.

I published my first collection of short stories entitled *Swer Sar* late in 1940. It was financed by one of my admirers. Printed under my personal supervision, its production was hailed as a landmark in Punjabi publishing. To my delight, the first edition of the title was sold out in less than a year. I took the money earned to my admirer who had made the investment. He would have none of it. It was decided that I published my collection of poetry with the amount. By that time I became a celebrity and publishers in Lahore and Amritsar were only too happy to publish me. Not only this, I would be offered the royalty in advance. A number of my books were prescribed as textbooks by the university. **The Punjabi publishing had come into its own. At its peak, it published books as many as in four figures in a year.**

Then came the Partition, followed by divisions of the state one after the other. The present Punjab having lost its limbs one after the other, virtually a pygmy state, produces Punjabi books hardly in three figures today. The worst is that Punjabi N.R.I’s, who have dollars and pounds in plenty, have started the practice of financing other publications.

I was shocked the other day when after the death of Bhaba Pritam Singh of *Navyug* who had published almost all my works, his daughter succeeding him, asked me to financially support publication of my new collection of poetry. **Punjabi publishing is indeed in a bad way today owing to politics of the region.**

Be that as it may, the mother tongue has its own charm. Punjabi publishing has a glorious future. The people of Punjab whether in Pakistan or in India who are misled today, must return to Punjabi, their mother tongue. The mystique of mother tongue must play its part.

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