

Gursharan Singh : A Devout Punjabi

—*Bhupendra Yadav*

Punjabi has its vibrant revolutionary tradition starting with Bhagat Singh. With the death of Gursharan Singh, fondly known as Bhaaji respected brother, a link with this tradition has been broken. If the worst crisis of East Punjab since 1947 was the Khalistani mayhem, Bhaaji emerged heroically from it. Born into a devout Sikh family, he lived in his ancestral house Guru Khalsa Niwas in Amritsar, wore his turban and did not trim his beard. This made him a ‘critical insider’ for Khalistani militancy and made his opposition to it more meaningful.

Bhaaji’s opposition to Khalistan was in a league different from others. He did not issue sanitised statements from behind bullet-proof podiums or well-guarded houses. He moved fearlessly in villeges and towns of East Punjab with the determination of a soldier for democratic socialism against Sikh extremism. This experience gave him the faith to advise activists, ‘Your doubts will melt and you will find a way if you go to the people.’ On the day of his cremation, some 150 groups pledged to carry people’s work forward on Bhaaji’s inspiration.

In 2007, the Centenary year of Bhagat Singh, the whole of India caught revolutionary fever thanks to films like *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*, *Rang de Basanti* etc. It goes to the credit of Bhaaji that he celebrated the memory of Bhagat Singh in Punjab two decade before this. Around the Martyrdom Day, viz. March 23,

Bhajji would hit the streets of East Punjab with his cultural troupe since the 1980.

Bhaaji used street theatre as the medium to spread ideas for change and he dipped his ideas for change in the earthy wit of Punjab. His enduring fame was created by Bhai Manna Singh - a play that was telecast from Jalandhar station of Doordarshan for more than a year between 1985-86. Bhai Manna Singh is a character who stands for reason amidst slippery social climbers and cunning power brokers. Some thought it was a character Bhaaji represented in his daily life.

The Green Revolution produced economic development in East Punjab. But this growth came with a cultural lag. Bhaaji put this dilemma beautifully. 'Just a few feet away from Punjab's flourishing modern agricultural fields exists an impoverished culture. This culture is full of fear for the weak and packed with ethical deprivation for the strong.' The son of a famous doctor in pre-Partition Punjab, Bhaaji took a Master's degree in Chemistry. From 1961, he earned his livelihood for twenty years as a cement technologist with the Canal and Irrigation department of Punjab Government. He contributed to the research of strengthening the bunds of reservoirs like Bhakhara. His social conscience bid him to oppose the Emergency (1975-77) and he was promptly jailed for it.

A man of immense sensitivity, Bhaaji observed keenly and expressed vividly. One dark day at the height of the Khalistan movement in 1987, we sat huddled in a meeting of a one Democratic forum at a small hall in Patiala. The Khalistanis were called people without a just cause by one speaker and condemned for bloodletting without meaning by another. As the chairperson of that meeting, Bhaaji rose to speak at the end.

'I oppose Lhalistan due to two simple reasons stemming from experience. I have seen the partition of united Punjab. I was a good player of hockey in college and was habituated to good cheer.

But after seen the bloodshed and listening to all those horror stories then, I have not laughed whole-heartedly ever since 1947. Secondly, I oppose Khalistan because I have two daughters and these fellows have no program for the future. All they are doing is making vulnerable people more insecure. And they will do is ask woman to cover their head or even face, stay home and live like caged birds. I cannot approve this.'

Though all of us had spoken our minds as frankly as we could, Bhaaji had spoken from his heart truthfully. He carried the day.

My first encounter with Bhaaji was in 1985. Navsharan, the elder of his two daughters, and I were colleagues at a research institute in Chandigarh. On my request, he carried a pair of blankets for me from Amritsar to Chandigarh. He lived in Amritsar amidst his big joint family, large theatre group called Amritsar Natak Kala Kender and larger group of fans. I learnt much later that Amritsar was as much well known for Bhaaji as it was for its woollen goods and the Golden Temple. Somewhere it hurts my conscience that I saddled a man of his stature with a domestic chore like buying a pair of blankets in Amritsar, carrying them 300 kms away to Chandigarh in an ordinary bus and delivering them to a lout like me. Who said great men do not do ordinary chores ?