

Dr Harbhajan Singh

Better known as a critic, Late Dr Harbhajan Singh is first poet of Punjabi who brought us the prestigious Sarsvati award for his long poem *Rukh Ate Rishi* (Tree and the Sage) spread over 99 pages.

As a critic, Dr. Singh was a strong proponent of structuralism and supported autonomy of literary works. He advocated their synchronic analysis, without reference to author's life, other texts or contemporary history. Being diametrically opposite to this, the Marxists were opposed to such theories. During seventies and eighties polarization between Marxists and Structuralists was complete. Dr. Harbhajan Singh led the second group and was instrumental in introducing his students with latest developments in literary thought.

Dr. J S Rahi, a retired Professor from Guru Nanak Dev University, was Chairman of *Bhasha* Committee that was to recommend names for *Sarsvati* award. He also represented this language in regional committee to decide *Sarswati*. But Dr. Rahi belonged to the group that had no amity with Dr Harbhajan Singh. More than his academically independent position, it was on account of some personal differences, created by the vested interest, that their relationship was not very cordial. One can understand, in this light, why Dr. Harbhajan Singh didn't even submit his book for this consideration.

On the contrary, Dr. Rahi tells, he had decided that the best representative book of our language would be forwarded. He found *Rukh Ate Rishi* to be most suited for the honour because of its subject, design and formulated writing. Dr. Rahi wrote forty pages to support the book; and got it through the regional committee and final selection. He wrote, "His poetry is textured by varied rhythms and nuances creating a kaleidoscope of reflections about worldly controversies, utilitarian drives, religious enigmas, traditional bonds and bondages, mysteries of ascetic urges, paradoxes of love and sex, tensions of the physical and spiritual and riddles of the conscious and unconscious." Later Rahi also

translated the poem in English as '*Tree and the Sage*' that was published with assistance from foundation.

The long poem, divided into cantos, is in fact a narrative in which a tree undertakes a journey and moves in search of meanings of life where he gets an advice:

You are seeking your childhood
Tomorrow or the day after
You will seek your youth
That also will not be found
You seek your river lost in canals
Tomorrow it will further split into channels and sub-channels
Swallowed by crops and harvests
Life is a journey leading away and further away
From the self.

The poem is a beautiful literary creation that raises a number of questions and also offers a few answers:

When you sprout from the soil
As grass does
I, like you, will be close to you
Some cow will swallow us
Together we will be chewed and munched
Lost in the cow's abdomen
We shall be drops of milk
White and pure.

The gifted poet got the great award but was full of tears when he met Dr. Rahi after its announcement . Sentiments of Dr. Harbhajan Singh as a poet and commitment of Dr.

Rahi as a critic are sub chapters of unwritten history of these Punjabi scholars. Let's keep such fragrance of attitudes intact, as the last stanza of book declares:

The moment of losing fragrance

Is the moment of decadence.