

Rasalu to be remembered for long time

By Shafqat Tanvir Mirza

Personalities



first taste of Punjabi poetry came at home where he found a box full of many Punjabi qissas, including Heer Waris Shah which attracted him the most. This treasure of Punjabi poetry was not meant for a young Sadiq, who went about his reading as discreetly as he could to avoid notice. By the time he was finally caught by his brother Muhammad Ashiq and the box was locked, Rasalu had learnt by heart many stanzas of Waris Shah to meet the challenge that was to be thrown by a senior villager some time later.



Rasalu was accompanying a wedding party to a neighbouring village where a man cynically remarked about the new generation of "literate people that could not read even a single line of Waris Shah". The boy was provoked and accepting the challenge, he started reciting from Heer:

جو کوئی تمہا میرے گاہ سبھ کوئی
گھڑا بھجھسی واہ سبھ وہن گے وے
جدوں عمر دی آن معیا دیکسی
عزرائیل ہوری آہن گے وے

This practice he continued in the bazm-i-adab sessions of the Warburton schools of Warburton and Sheikhpura. Later on his elder brother also agreed to unlock the box to give him access to the treasure-trove.

Rasalu was also active in politics as the secretary of the Muslim Students Federation, Sheikhpura. It was close to the epoch-making elections of 1945-46. At League's rallies, Rasalu would recite poetry, including dholas written by a famous local folk poet, in support of the Muslim League. All this poetry would be published in newspapers. All the three Muslim League candidates from the Sheikhpura district won against the sitting Unionists members with a thumping majority.

Rasalu came to Lahore in 1947 and joined the police department as a clerk. His father, Mian Sultan, had constructed a small house in a Mohni Road street. Now a government servant, Rasalu could not indulge in politics but he remained associated with the social welfare society of his mohalla till his last breath.

Rasalu's first extra-government service activity was when he and Akram Alimi, a journalist now working with Voice of America, brought out a monthly Urdu paper Iblees. The paper wound up quickly but not before

Rasalu had contributed articles to it under such as Ibn-i-Sultan and Sadiq Aajiz. Afterwards he continued to write for Urdu dailies on social and Punjabi literary topics under pen names. His friend Akmal Alimi started writing short stories in Punjabi and Nawaz followed. It was around that time that the country's first ever Punjabi monthly 'Punjab' was launched. Classes of Punjabi Fazil had also started. Rasalu did his Fazil in Punjabi and later cleared his F.A.

Now Punjabi had become a more serious issue while the pro-establishment Urdu writers and intellectuals were bitterly opposing the Punjabi movement declaring activists as traitors, pro-India and pro-Russia. Before the imposition of Ayub's martial law, the only active organisation was Punjabi Majlis, and Rasalu and Asaf were its active members. It was banned as a political body by the regime. Both Asaf and Rasalu brought a monthly 'Punjabi Adab' under the patronage of Sufi Tabassum and supported by Iqbal Jaffery, a senior journalist. Rauf Sheikh and some other writers also helped the Punjabi Adab. The group defeated the government candidate for the office of the secretaryship of the Punjabi Group of the Pakistan writers Guild but their winning candidate was not allowed to work even for six months. The group first time in Lahore's history observed the death anniversary of Shah Hussain as a Sufi poet and that also in the Civil Line area. All that led to closure of the group by Qudratullah Shahab, then secretary to President Ayub Khan. The banning of the Punjabi Group was widely criticised in both wings of the country. Rasalu and his friends established Majlis Shah Hussain and Punjabi Adabi Sangat which are progressively struggling for the rights of Punjabi language and literature. Contribution to the cause of Punjabi by Raja Rasalu will always be remembered with great pride.

SINCE 1947, the only parliamentarian who has taken oath in Punjabi as member of any assembly in Pakistan is Rai Mansib Ali Khan from Nankana. He is now a member of the National Assembly. Belonging to the village Ahata Khushi Ram in Warburton, he won his first election in 1962, to the West Pakistan Assembly. He took oath in Punjabi on his re-election in 1964.

Back in the 1960s, Rai Mansib used to stay in Lahore with a man from his village who was very fond of Punjabi. This gentleman was Muhammad Sadiq, popularly known in the literary circles as Raja Rasalu. It was Muhammad Sadiq who drew the attention of Rai Mansib, a budding politician and a law-graduate, to the issue of Punjabi. Credit is due to Rai Sahib, but the fact is that none of the Punjabi protagonists could bring any of the parliamentarians to follow the cause of Punjabi. No parliamentarian has ever agreed to follow in the footsteps of Rai Mansib. It can be said without fear of contradiction that it was the influence of Raja Rasalu which established a precedent in the history of our parliamentary politics that is still not surpassed.

Raja Rasalu who breathed his last in Lahore on Saturday, September 29, launched his Punjabi campaign in the 1950s along with another worker and scholar, Muhammad Asaf Khan (late). Raja Rasalu writes in his unfinished autobiography, 'La Preet Ajehi Muhammad' that he and Asaf Khan decided to approach Punjabi writers who were writing exclusively in Urdu to pay attention to their mother tongue. The two campaigners reserved Sundays for this good work. They may have been ridiculed by many as being 'backward', but they didn't fail completely. They managed to win over poets like Muneer Niazi who was also under the influence of Safdar Mir.

Raja Rasalu received his early education from his village school, passed the middle level from Warburton and did matriculation from Sheikhpura. His