

1st part of letter written by Prof Chaman Lal, eminent Hindi scholar, to the Language Minister of Govt. of Punjab. He has published it on his blog ' LITERARY ARCHIEVES'. It is copied here with his permission.

Minister for Higher Education and Languages

Government of Punjab, Chandigarh

Regarding Advisory Board, Languages Department Punjab, Patiala.

Honorable Minister for Higher Education and Languages,

First of all, let me express my belated thanks for nominating me to the State Advisory Board of Language Department Punjab, Patiala in June 2020 for three years. I have never been thought of this honor before by any Government, despite having two national awards in literature and one of the Punjab state-Sharomani Hindi Sahitkar Award, way back in year 2003. Despite of the fact that I have served as Professor and Heads of Language departments in three Universities-Punjabi University Patiala, JNU, New Delhi and Central University of Punjab at Bathinda, apart from serving as Visiting Professor of Hindi in The University of the West Indies Trinidad and Tobago. Presently I am serving as Dean, Faculty of Languages at Panjab University Chandigarh (Till 31st January 2021), for which the Honorable minister had himself came to PU Chandigarh to vote for me. I thought because of that I was nominated to the advisory board in the category of Hindi writers. Fair enough.

And yet the same honor was turned into dishonor , when for shortlisting panel for awards of six years in the month of December 2020, I was not made a member of Screening committee, whose composition was highly arbitrary and without much merit in many cases. Like in the case of member from Hindi category, a person was made part of Screening committee, whose name is not even known among either Hindi writers or Hindi scholars and he has been much junior in terms of the academic or literary status of other two members from Hindi category. Both me and Dr. Sewa Singh have served as full Professors/Head and Dean (in my case) in national level Universities and I had three awards in literary category of Hindi to my credit, of which two national awards I had returned due to the intolerant policies of the Central Government in 2015 and 2016 along with many of those writers who also had been made members of this year's State Advisory Boards like Surjit Patar and Waryam Sandhu, which gave respectability to the body. I had informally conveyed my resentment at not being included in screening committee to your good self and I was assured that my concern of keeping merit above all of the writers will be taken care of. I thought it will be taken care during the advisory board meeting, even if in the screening committee panel, merit is ignored. But to my utter shock the way some of the members in advisory board behaved and imposed their choices on the board, it was hurtful. To be fair, Honorable minister chairing the session was not imposing his views on the board, but Language dept. Officials were not that fair. In fact, in the very beginning of the meeting I had raised the issue that rules of the department have been ignored or bypassed in case of some of the biodata of writers in choice of other than Punjabi awards-Hindi, Urdu and Sanskrit. It was blamed on Language department Director by some members of the screening committee that she has interpreted the rule wrongly, because of which

many seniors and deserving Hindi writers were not even shortlisted. The rule for these other than Punjabi categories clearly mentions that a writer born in Punjab (of post 1966, or of pre 1966/47) is eligible for award in these categories. A writer not born in Punjab, but having ten-year domicile stay in Punjab is also eligible. The rule was interpreted as writer must be staying in present Punjab.

In fact, in the meeting of state advisory board, hardly any discussion takes place on the merit of the nominees for the award. Screening committee brings three names for each category of the awards and if it is many years pending awards then three names each for each year for each category, which itself is defective procedure. Even before three names are fully read, the members start shouting on one name without any discussion and in one case of highest Punjabi Sahit Rattan award, rather than discussing patiently and coolly the merits of respective candidates and reaching a consensus, the matter without any discussion was put to vote by raising hands and a ridiculous decision was taken when one of most respected writers of Punjabi, Ajeet Cour was rejected with only four hands raised in favor of awarding her! Though agenda of the meeting is sent a week or so before the meeting, supplement agenda is sent only a day before the meeting, which include few such names, which are immediately shortlisted by the screening committee and most of them are given awards too. This lack of transparency affects the credibility of the awards itself. I have heard that novelist Gurdial Singh, on whose name a new translation prize of 21/thousand rupees has been announced without being brought to the agenda of advisory board, has once resigned from the board with such practices in the meetings of the board. The screening committee though constituted in September 2020, was conveyed to the members of advisory board only at the time of meeting for 3rd December was conveyed, that was also lack of transparency even to members of the board.

It won't be fair on my part to say that merit was totally ignored, but it can be said that in almost half of the cases, merit was ignored. I cannot speak for all the 18 categories of the awards given, but I can give opinion in at least in 12 of the categories of the awards. I am giving the certain eminent names, whose merit has been ignored in some of these categories-

1. In Punjabi Sahit Rattan-the highest award of ten lakh rupees-names of very senior and respected writers like Ratan Singh(age 93 years-born in pre partition Narowal, eminent Urdu/Punjabi writer of national repute and winner of many national awards in literature), Ajit Cour(Age 85 years, nationally acclaimed Punjabi writer, winner of many national awards), Gurdev Singh Rupana(Aged 80+ years, acclaimed Punjabi short story writer), Baldev Singh Sadaknama (eminent Punjabi novelist) and Jasbir Bhullar (Acclaimed Punjabi fiction writer) have been ignored.

2. In Sharomani Punjabi Sahitkar category names of Prem Gorkhi and Lal Singh Dasuya -both eminent writers have been ignored.

3. In Sharomani Hindi Sahitkar category, names of Satyender Taneja(aged 85 years, born in Lahore, eminent Drama critic, internationally renowned for his writings), Jaidev Taneja-Again an eminent Drama Critic, born in Okada of pre-partition Punjab), Sudha Arora(Lahore born Hindi fiction writer, nationally acclaimed with many national awards), Hardarshan Sehgal(85 years old, born in Mianwali of pre partition Punjab, nationally acclaimed fiction writer with many awards) and Manorma Diwan, (writer of

history of freedom struggle 83 years old) were ignored. Satyender Taneja and Sudha Arora were not even shortlisted. Eminent Hindi novelist Raji Seth aged 85 years was also not shortlisted, but due to my pleadings and support from Surjit Patar like writers, she could be chosen for award. I had to register my dissent in few cases as a member representing Hindi language and literature, I was not even allowed to argue on the merits of the writers. My criteria for recommending the names of writers for award was clear and objective-(a)-Literary merit first and foremost, (b)-if merit of more writers is more or less at same level, the age seniority must be given priority, as they may not live to see the next award meeting. It happened this year as well. Had the meeting of advisory board held a week or ten days earlier, S N Sewak was sure to get award in Punjabi drama category, whereas the board had to condole his death as he passed away just a week before the meeting.

4. There was just one member, who neither has any award to his credit in any category nor any status as writer or scholar, and who has been close to Deputy Chief Minister of earlier Govt., was ruling the roast with his shouting, in most of the nominees for awards in all categories. From many earlier members of the board and one who has resigned from this board as well that it has been standard practice with this particular member of the board every year and he is successful in becoming member of the board, whoseever may be leading the government.

5. In Sharomani Punjabi poet category a very senior Punjabi poet Fatehjait was ignored, who was not even shortlisted.

6. In Sharomani Gian Sahitkar award two eminent doctors writing on health issues-Dr. Shyam Sunder Dipti and Dr. Ajitpal Singh were ignored.

7. In Shromani Punjabi Sahitkar-outside Punjab category-one of most internationally renowned writer Balbir Madhopuri, whose writings have been translated in Hindi, English, Russian and who won many national awards and, on whose writings, there is research in western universities and papers are written in international journals, was ignored despite being kept in shortlisting at no. 1 for one year.

8. In some of other categories well known personalities like Rana Ranbir in theatre and film, Satinder Sartaj, Rani Balbir Kaur and Jasbir Jassi were ignored despite having international reputation in their respective fields.

In my considered view all these things happen due to the faulty structure of State Advisory Board, the formation of Screening committee for shortlisting and its procedures. I am elaborating these points further.