

MY VISION AND MY VOICE

Iftikhar Arif

‘Baid Baazi’ or the Poetry Recitals is a popular institution in South Asia. When I was growing up my teachers would make us learn verses to recite. This gave us a sense of the rhythm and cadence of poetry. Just like that we would put together a line or two of our own original poetry. It was my teacher Syed Muhammad Ahmad who first introduced me to renowned poets such as Josh, Majaz, Makhdoom, Sahir, Sardar Jaffery.

In 1965 I left Lucknow and moved to Pakistan. I went back to India for a visit. By this time I had appeared on television and was now a celebrity.

When I reached home my mother told me that Syed Muhammad Ahmad, my teacher had been to see me and had asked to be sent for when I came. I started off for his house right away. He lived in a narrow lane in Raja Bazaar, Lucknow. As I reached the door I sounded the door latch. I saw him, a white haired man. He gave me a hug and said, ‘I am proud to have had you as a student.’

He went inside and came out with a magazine in which was written , ‘Iftikhar Hussain Arif, Class 7th’.

It was a poem I had written that was published in the school magazine. “There is a story behind this that I want you to know. When the magazine was edited there were lots of stories and poems. (In Lucknow everyone is a poet_ men, women, illiterate people); when the teachers received the material, your poem was not really among the best. It was not likely to be chosen for publication, but I cast my vote in favour of your poem because this was a poem that a child had himself written.” And thus the

poem got to be printed. It was then that I had seen my name in print for the first time. Had that poem not been published I would not have been a poet today.

Some things are taken for granted today in the middle and upper classes, but in the masses they are still were they were several decades ago, when I was a child. Timely detection of weak eyes sight is one such thing. I was in class ninth then, in Government Jubilee College Lucknow. My teacher Sir Badr Uddin had written an algebra equation on the black board. He asked me a question. I stood up to answer but I couldn't see clearly what was written on the board. He was about to hit me with the rope of the *punkh*, the manually moved fan in class, but then he stopped. and took me outside. There was only one eye surgeon in Lucknow, and that is where he took me. To Dr. Kualapur. My teacher got me my first ever glasses. He even paid for them himself.

In the sub-continent, there is a strong tradition of a Master, a Wise Teacher, such as Buddha, Sheikh, Murshid or Guru. Had these figures not been there, there would be no one to guide us to God. Whatever I have learnt in life was from my teachers; how to walk alongside the river and how look at flowers, how to dress, how to speak softly, lower your gaze.

Dr Radha Kamal Mukherjee was the founder of philosophy, someone I greatly admired. My gait today is a replica of the way that great teacher used to walk.

If I look at the gifts of all these teachers, I can say that Sir Badr Uddin gave me vision, Sir Syed Mohammad Ahmed gave me recognition and a voice and Dr Radha Mukherjee gave me direction.

The author is a celebrated poet of Pakistan and the DG of the Pakistan Academy of Letters.