INTERVIEW

Threading a Way between Memoir, History and Reportage — In Conversation with Author Amandeep Sandhu

by Preeti Kathuria

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Born in Rourkela, Odisha, in 1973, Amandeep Singh Sandhu studied English literature at the University of Hyderabad. He writes fiction and nonfiction books with a seamless triangulation of memoir, history and reportage. His first two books were autobiographical fiction: *Sepia Leaves* (2008) and *Roll of Honour* (2012), and the third book *Panjab: Journeys through Fault Lines* (2019) is his first nonfiction work. Besides novels, he has been consistently writing for the media and contributing to anthologies.

While looking through press articles on the Indian agrarian situation, I came across dozens of contributions by Amandeep Sandhu. With an aim to translate, articulate and disseminate the language of the farmer protests, Sandhu participated in this mass movement of reclaiming India's sovereignty. He has penned reviews for *The Hindu*, *Asian Age*, *The Indian Express*, *Businessworld*, and political commentary and reportage on *Punjab in Tehelka*, *Caravan Magazine*, and *Scroll.in*. He very kindly spared time for these questions and shared candid voice notes while he has been busy writing his fourth book about the Sikhs who reside outside Punjab in India.

(c) Amandeep Sandhu

Preeti Kathuria: You were born in Rourkela, but have stayed in Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Andhra Pradesh and you are now based in Karnataka. Where is home for you and how does this inform your approach towards writing?

Amandeep Sandhu: I have no home … actually home is here, right here, in being able to communicate with you and you wanting to listen to me, acknowledging me. I don't belong to any one place or to any one person or a family, religion, community, society. I feel deeply distanced from everything and I don't feel at home anywhere. I read various writers, they say different things, for example, John Steinbeck says, "home is where I can write, and there are books I can read" — these are nice things to say. I don't believe in any of them. I am in permanent exile and I am quite okay with it. Sometimes I think I will go back to Punjab at the end of my life, but then I ask, why? Who is there? I cannot go back to Rourkela, the place I was born in, there's nobody there. There's nobody here either. I seek refuge. I seek sanctuary. I seek to have a little place from where I can do what I think I should be doing — which is writing. Whichever place gives me that space, that is home.

Writing for me is a way of processing the world around me. It's a space for me to think. It's only when my thoughts transpire through my fingers — become words on a page — that they make sense to me. In other words, I write to remain sane, in this vastly post-structural,

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post-modernist world where everything is swirling away from meaning-making. I write to make meaning. Home is in our stories; stories that play in our heads, in which we are our central characters, the stories in which we survive — that is home.

Preeti: English is not your first language, but it is still your medium to write for a larger audience. What is your thinking language or the language in which you talk to yourself? What is your language for refuge?

Amandeep: You are right, English is not my first language. In fact, I don't have a first language. I was born in a Punjabi family in Rourkela, Orissa, but I actually grew up at the cross-section of four languages. My mother was unwell, she was diagnosed schizophrenic and the home was dysfunctional. As a child, all I heard in Punjabi was the fights and abuses between my parents. So, my father brought in a nanny to take care of me, a tribal Oriya girl with a Sambalpuri Oriya dialect. The language in the streets, markets, playgrounds was Hindi, because this was a New India town — one of Jawahar Lal Nehru's creations. Here people from all over the country came to run the steel plant, in which my father also worked. Our neighbors were from different parts of the country. They could be Bengali, another neighbor could be a Malayali, another could be an Urdu speaking Muslim family, the backdoor neighbor could be a Tamil Christian. Therefore, the common language of communication was Hindi. In my school the language was English.

I live in Bengaluru now, and when I hear Oriya or an Oriya guy speak Hindi, I can easily tell he is Oriya and lapse into Oriya. I also have a sense of Bengali as most of the officer class at the Steel Plant was Bengali — I understand it. Similar is the case with Kannada here in Bengaluru. I speak a little smattering of functional Kannada but I can understand most of it. Then Urdu, because of Ghazals and poetry. Therefore, I have too many languages in me. I chose to write in English because I wanted to speak from a small space to a larger space — and I thought English was the language for it.

My thinking language changes. When I worked on my book *Panjab* and traveled through the state for almost three years, my language became Punjabi. In fact, writing the book was difficult for me — I was thinking in Punjabi and translating it into English. Then when we translated it for the Panjabi version, it was like coming back to the language in which I was thinking about it. I have given back my books to the Punjabi audience. I count in English; the language of my anger is Punjabi; the language of my sweet talk is Hindi; language of my refuge is actually silence or tears. I struggle to find the language to convey what I am thinking. All my writing is like that. I think through my experience and write to find the language to present that experience to the audience. Does all this make sense at all?

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Preeti: How long did it take you to write your first book *Sepia Leaves* (2008)? It being your first, does it hold a special place and, after almost twenty years of penning it, how do you reflect on it today?

Amandeep: *Sepia Leaves* definitely holds a special place because it taught me how to write. I have always loved reading but did not know how to write until I penned *Sepia Leaves.* The writing happened in strange ways. I had started writing this book when my parents told me they would like to come to Bengaluru to live with me. I wanted to know who these people are because as a child I lived mostly in hostels and boarding schools. My attempts to stay with my mother mostly didn't work out so I think when I started writing *Sepia Leaves,* I wanted to capture my childhood. I wrote endlessly, page after page, reams of paper, and finally the first draft was 600 pages. Then my parents arrived in Bengaluru and my father died. It might seem morbid to state this but on the night of his demise, when his lifeless body was still in the house waiting to be cremated the next morning, I found the structure of my book. That is the reason *Sepia Leaves* starts with the father's death and the book has a double voice — one of a child and the other of an adult. I spent another three years finding a publisher and when I found one, they took two more years to publish it. Several revisions took place, I pruned down the book and then with the editor, I pruned it further. What got served in the end was some 185 pages, which I think was enough.

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Preeti: You said that you have no liminal or tangible marker of belonging to Panjab, yet two of your books are set and contextualized in the State of Punjab, i.e. *Roll of Honor* (2012) and *Panjab: Journey Through Fault Lines* (2019). How does this work?

Amandeep: All of us inherit certain markers at our birth. For example, the markers that I have inherited are that I am male, I am Sikh — a Jatt Sikh; I belong to a certain economic class; I belong to a certain family; a certain community. These gender, caste, religion, economic markers are also through which the world looks at us. Most of us take these markers for granted. We have not contributed at all to getting these markers but we end up spending our whole lives defending them or using them as our entitlement. I don't understand that. To me, life must be examined — so what does it mean to be a male? What does it mean to be a Sikh?

The reason why my books are located in Punjab is because geographically that place has an influence on me — it is a part of my cultural make-up, a part of my ideological make-up. But

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I am trying to understand these phenomena in me. I also had other markers – I was born to a woman who was diagnosed schizophrenic, I had a very unsettled childhood. I was sent off to a hostel at the age of six then brought back at seven; then again sent off to live with relatives at the age of nine and then sent to a boarding school, at a time when Punjab was imploding with militancy. While the initially mentioned markers give one a sense of roots and belonging, these other markers are unsettling. I like to examine all of them.

This is the reason why my books are about Punjab. As a writer my job is to examine phenomena around me, examine life around me and myself. I don't find safety in these markers — whether it is location or identity or mind. I am constantly trying to know who I am and I try to know it through writing. As a Sikh boy I have seen what happened in Punjab and what the repercussions were. With my mother being unwell, I was pitied upon as a mad woman's son. Inside me, I felt these markers are not all of me. Even though they define me to a certain extent, they tend to flatten me, reduce me. I am definitely more than these definitions. My writing seeks to find humanity irrespective of and above religion, creed, caste, gender and location. I try to tell a universal story, one that is well rooted in its milieu.

Preeti: What is your position as a writer/commentator in this agrarian situation and who (all) according to you is/are at stake?

Amandeep: There are several layers in this one question. I will begin with my position, which is that I am not in that space anymore. Two to three years back, there was a certain energy, a *junoon*, and I spoke and wrote extensively about it. It was a time when I had finished working on my book *Panjab* — it got published in November 2019. Soon after, the CAA protests started, and then the pandemic hit us.

My book *Panjab* begins with me visiting a friend and then together we go into a farmer protest. Being a Sikh, born outside Punjab, coming from a farming ancestry, knowing the 1980s and 90s mayhem, I realize that the popular idea and understanding of Punjab is very fragmented. I wanted to understand this agrarian crisis and what the government can do about it. Simple answer to the question is that there is a crop and there is a field and if the crop fails, then the farmer loses, but what role does the government have in it? While studying the issues, I realized that the problem lies in the structure within which agriculture is practiced in Punjab and elsewhere. About a hundred million people are dependent on farming and agriculture in the country. The government has a lot of control and intervention especially related to the seeds, fertilizers, and water. It is also the main buyer of the two primary crops: rice and wheat, especially in Punjab and Haryana. There have been around three hundred thousand farm suicides since neo-liberalization came to India, i.e. since the end of the 90s.

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I knew the protests were happening in Punjabi and/or Hindi and I saw my role in the protests as a translator and since I had networks, magazines like *The Caravan* asked me to cover the protests, which I did. I understood the issues and the day-to-day developments, which I wanted to voice clearly amidst the unforgiving slandering of the corporate and social media. I started my daily updates, wrote for magazines, spoke at various foreign universities, and my role organically grew to articulate the protests so that they reach the farthest audiences. Another aim was to convey that these protestors were not anti-national, or separatists, rather, they were only seeking a repeal of the laws that empower the Agro-processing industry corporates and impoverish them. The Agro-industry makes huge profits but unless the farmer is enabled to pay off their loans, provide for their families, educate their children, cover calamites and illnesses, whatever the GDP figures might reflect, it is bogus or fake. If the laws had been implemented, by now, an estimated 25% of farmers would have been jobless, working as laborers in the fields they once owned.

It was also important because it was a complete violation of our right to food and everyone who eats food is a stakeholder in this. I always maintain that the protests were about India's security and sovereignty. We are aware of the US P.L.480 law and what happened when we were importing grains. These protesting farmers cannot be our enemies. Their role in our society is fundamental to the society's very existence. That is why the protests were very important for me and I participated to the best extent I could.

Preeti: It seems that there is a strong personal and at the same time political undercurrent in your writing. Would you like to elaborate upon this?

Amandeep: It is very strange. We are born in the middle of life — there is a past behind us and there is a future ahead of us. There is a concept of *Zeitgeist* in German. It refers to the spirit of the times. We all imbibe the spirit of the times. We think through it, we meditate on it. "The personal is political" was the *Zeitgeist* of my time — worldwide, not in India so much. The second wave of feminism — it was the new-found ability to tell stories and personal terms, to link the outer world with the inner world, to bring about a sense of parallelism between what is going on inside and what is going on outside. You are absolutely right: There is a strong sense of personal and at the same time political undercurrent in my writing. That is my style, that's the way I see myself in the world. I am trying to draw upon that same idea, again and again, with every book I write. It is extremely autobiographical, and the context is the larger reality we inhabit. That is why I don't write too much. The objective kind of writing — there was a man, there was a woman — doesn't seem to work for me.

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Currently I am working on my fourth book, which is about the Sikh community that lives in India but not in Punjab. I was in Delhi for a book release and a panel discussion recently and it was a fulfilling experience to interact with my readers and listeners. I was talking about this book with a very senior Professor in Delhi. He has been my mentor for decades. He asked me again: “Where are you in this book? What are you looking for?” That is the most important question, I think. I attempt to answer it by connecting the inner and the outer world. Yes, “the personal is political” is my credo as a writer.

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