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IN MEMORIAM



Kanwar Surjit Singh
(April 6, 1949 - December 22, 2021)

When Harwant called me to pen the obituary of Surjit for his journal *Punjab Geographer*, I felt privileged but with a sea depth feeling of sorrow and deprivation. The entire image of Surjit's persona, life flow and laudable performance spread over my mindscape. He was distinctive and made a difference anywhere. He was a vivid figure of upright personality - tall, athletic and always carrying cheerful eyes. His face was a statement of a confident individual.

Surjit contacted COVID on his return from a professional meeting at Lucknow toward the closing months of 2021. Initially, it was deemed as dengue but was eventually confirmed as COVID. He struggled for a month at the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research, Chandigarh but could not come out of its fatal grip. On his demise on the wild winter day of December 22, 2021, he was cremated at Sector 25, Chandigarh, with all COVID protocols. Ironically, only a few could have his last *darshan* (view). For the family, this was devastating and destabilizing. The professional world linked with Institute for Spatial Planning and Environment Research (ISPER), his colleagues and friends were left stunned in utmost grief. Condolence messages

converged from far and wide. Rightfully, his name is alive through the prefix to the nomenclature of ISPER (KSSISPER)- Kanwar Surjit Singh Institute for Spatial Planning and Environment Research, the institute he had founded, nurtured and nourished.

Surjit's world view and talents had multiple roots and environs. As per official records, he was born on April 6, 1949 at Khasra-Bungal, district Pathankot of Punjab. His parentage was defined by father Khushi Ram and mother Dhanni Devi. The trajectory of his education touched many locations - elementary schooling at village Jugial, close to his birth place; secondary education at Pathankot; college education at Kathua in Jammu and Kashmir; and post-graduation from Department of Geography, Panjab University, Chandigarh in 1972. Geography was his perpetual love. On completion of his post-graduation and in recognition of his outstanding caliber, he was inducted as Research Fellow in a project on Chandigarh Gazetteer, sponsored by Chandigarh Administration. This study of a completely planned city extended his interest from geography to spatial planning. He joined the Guru Ramdas School of Planning, Guru Nanak Dev

University, Amritsar, in 1974. Here his performance was again outstanding. The dissertation, he wrote on, the application of Christaller's Central Place Theory to central places in Bist Doab of Punjab, brought him laurels.

After obtaining degree in planning in 1976, it was not difficult for him to get a job in the Area Planning Office of Town and Country Planning Department, Punjab, located at Hoshiarpur. Soon after in 1976 itself, he was selected as Assistant Town Planner, this time at Hisar in Haryana. Hereafter, Haryana became his primary *Karma bhumi* (action field) till not only his superannuation in 2007, but even beyond.

In his official capacity, he moved progressively up from the designation of District Town Planner, Senior Town Planner and finally to Chief Town Planner, Haryana. Valuing his extraordinary contributions in any capacity, he was invited on deputation to look after the development plans and their implementation at the Haryana Urban Development Authority (HUDA, now HSVP or Haryana State Vikas Parishad) from 1991-97 and Haryana State Industrial Development Corporation (HSIDC) as its Chief Town Planner from 1997-2007. Most notable among his accomplishments during these years were Model Township of Manesar in Gurgaon district and Industrial Township of Bawal in Rewari district. He also designed industrial estates at Saha in Ambala district, Barwala in Panchkula district, and Jagadhri in Yamunanagar district. He was the person behind the contemplation, planning and completion of Kundli-Manesar-Palwal Expressway. Thereby, he could ensure a rapid development of Haryana, particularly in the field of industry.

Surjit sustained his dynamism even after his completion of government service. With ISPER as the base, he regularly organized national and international conferences/seminars, brought out a number of edited books, and led as many as 26 projects. Here his focus was on preparation of master plans of towns in several states such as Haryana, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Maharashtra and the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir. His interest in heritage planning covered many religious places in Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. He was invited to be on the Board of Indian Heritage Cities Network where he made rich contribution. No less was his concern for environment reflected in his projects on watershed management and impact of development on vulnerable ecology of hilly regions of Haryana, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh. He made extensive use of GIS in all undertakings. He was the President of APG from 2013-14 to 2014-15. He was also the Managing Editor of *Punjab Geographer* since its start in 2005.

Indeed the path of Surjit's professional life was paved with several distinctions. For his outstanding contributions to urban development, he was honoured thrice by Governor of Haryana on independence days (1989, 1990 and 1991). He was recipient of Life Time Achievement Award by Global Friendship Forum, Chandigarh (2012), Vastu Shillpi Award by Authors Guild of Himachal Pradesh (2013), and Award of Excellence in Town Planning by First Friday Forum, Chandigarh (2013). His contribution to Master and Zonal Plans was highly commended by National Institute of Technology, Jaipur (2019). Not to miss, he was conferred with Manas Chatterjee Award for presenting the best paper at the

annual conference of Regional Science Association of India, Kolkata (2012).

Around 2017, Surjit came into contact with Kulwant Singh, who served as Asia Regional Adviser for Asia and the Pacific subdivision of the United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-Habitat) and currently is the President of KSSISPER. This interaction proved transformative for Surjit. His perspective got deflected from rigid zonal land use planning under Master Plans to flexible mixed land use planning of towns in wider context of their surroundings. This was very much visible in his review of Amritsar Master Plan, the plea he made for a regional plan of Ladakh, and emphasis he placed on spatial planning while speaking in Malaysia and Abu Dhabi at the World Urban Forums. His ideas mapped the state-of-the-art of spatial planning.

A manifest monumental contribution of Surjit was in the form of ISPER, now KSSISPER. He raised it in Amravati Enclave on the bank of Ghaggar river in Panchkula district. Perched on a local relief, it enjoys a fascinating site in the Amravati Institutional Area. The morphology of the KSSISPER, in its form, internal layout and functionality carries the geographic ingenuity of Surjit.

In its first *avatar* (incarnation), KSSISPER came up as Centre for Urban and Rural Environment Research (CURER). On November 14, 1995 it was registered with the Registrar of Societies, Haryana. The stated objective was to deliberate on issues pertaining to settlement planning as an element of regional planning, consistent with sustainability of environment.

To carry out studies on spatial structure of settlements and associated planning issues, another body was formed under the name

Institute of Spatial Planners, India (ISPI) in 2000, with R.C. Aggarwal as President and Surjit Singh as Secretary General. It was also registered with Registrar of Societies, Haryana, on October 18, 2000. Evidently in its second *avatar*, the focus moved on to spatial planning, symbolizing a marriage between geography and planning. In 2004, it was decided to merge the two bodies into one under the name ISPER. Here was a formal confluence of spatial planning and environment in the third *avatar* of the Institute. Its registration with the Registrar of Firms and Societies, Haryana, became effective on March 12, 2014.

After the tragic demise of Surjit on December 22, 2021, the Executive Council of the ISPER resolved to prefix the name of Kanwar Surjit Singh (KSS) to the nomenclature of the Institute (ISPER). This was meant as a befitting honour to him. The amended name KSSISPER was approved by the Registrar of Firms and Societies, Haryana, on May 31, 2022. His spouse, Harjinder Kaur, was conferred the status of the Patron of the Institute in its new *avatar*.

Institute of Surjit took birth, flourished and acquired fame with consistent support of his key peers, devoted colleagues, and influential individuals. Its initial core group included Jaswant Singh, Dilbagh Singh Sihag, Kamal Kumar, M.S. Aujla and Vijay Kumar Goyal. All of them were town planners. The works related to civil engineering, building construction, and accounts management were looked after by D.N. Sharma. Manjit Singh was the guiding light in the mode of a mentor. Harwant Singh Mangat of the APG and journal *Punjab Geographer* gave publication support. Any grand structure rests on trusty pillars!

But then it was Surjit who made all this possible. His determination, team spirit and

urge to innovate served him well. The experience of having worked in diverse official capacities at different places was a veritable asset to him. He accumulated support for his cause from all possible avenues. He never allowed an opportunity to pass by. Call it a *karmic* (as divined) turn that before his untimely demise he had raised a team of successors to carry the ISPER flame ahead. Among them, Kulwant and Jaswant were in forefront to ensure sustainability to the Institute.

In Surjit's life, work and love walked in tandem with each other. His was a love marriage with the class fellow, Harjinder Kaur, on April 6, 1984, coinciding with his 25th birthday. They were product of our department, signifying my association with them as GK Sir for almost half a century. She was a double M.A. in Geography and Economics, and he in Geography and Planning. Their's was an inter-religious marriage between a Hindu Rajput boy and a Sikh Jat girl. As a mirror to their loving nature, both were avid movie-fans. They were blessed with a son, whom they named as Navdeep, a new light in the family. Today he runs his company, Maxreach at Mohali. He is married to Anoop Kaur Chauhan, who is an urban planner and works with the Department of Urban Local bodies, Punjab. They have two children, son Indradeep and daughter Mehak. Living all together, they make an ideal family in harmony.

In his professional life, Surjit integrated geography in thought with spatial planning in practice. Look at the nomenclature of his Institute, title of the conferences/seminars he organised and kind of research projects he

undertook. On any issue, his approach was - *koi baat nahi, sab thik ho jayega, kya fikar hai* (it hardly matters, everything will fall in place, why worry) exuding optimism. While in government service, he performed his duties in strict conformity with legal provisions, without fear and favour. This endeared him to both politicians and administrators alike. He could recommend a variety of development projects which saw their approval and fruition in Haryana, in particular.

Surjit was a human being par excellence. He personified goodness - generous, dependable and self-effacing. As an egalitarian he revered holy books of all religions. By nature he was most helpful and the word 'No' was missing in his vocabulary. He was always dignified and graceful in ways of life. His human touch endeared him to all. He established a permanent bonding with any one who carried a sentiment of mutuality.

Indeed Surjit's life was a saga of a successful enterprise. He was highly eulogized for his professional competence, administrative acumen and commitment to obligations. The distinctiveness of his Institute is a testimony to what he stood for and lived for. Today he is in eternal peaceful rest but not without creating a place of abiding love for him in our heart and soul. His contact number is alive in my mobile. It is difficult for me to locate another person of his kind. I remain in search of his synonym.

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