

# Browsing the Racks

## from *Watano Dur* to *Ankur*

It has been a long and winding road from *Watano Dur* (far from the motherland) to *Watan* (motherland) and then to *Ankur* (a new beginning). It reflects and records the Punjabi community's journey from a small group in the sixties to a fully established part of Canadian society by the end of the eighties.

The community saw a dramatic population increase in the early years of the seventies. Racism from the host community and nostalgia for the homeland created a general feeling among us that we were not *at home*, but rather temporarily *away from home*. Home was back there, in Punjab/India, and we longed for it. These were strong feelings and needed expression. As a result, a host of new cultural and literary activities began to take place in Vancouver, still the main Canadian center for the community. The Punjabi Cultural Association was formed in 1972 and Punjabi Literary Association in 1973.

*Watano Dur* saw its first issue out in July 1973 as well. These were the first efforts that can be described as trying to address the identity issue being faced by Canada's growing Punjabi community at the time. *Watano Dur* became the main link that connected old and new writers, not only to their readers in Canada but Punjabi readers around the world, including Punjab and India. The magazine regularly published poetry, fiction, non-fiction, reports about cultural and literary activities, and a number of special issues organized around specific themes.

*Watano Dur* was renamed *Watan* in 1989. The name change corresponded with the change in the attitudes toward Canada, the adopted country. Nostalgia for the motherland was replaced with the need to define our relationship to the new land. *Watan* became selective in its content and mainly published writings that reflected the change and the process itself. This change in the magazine was greeted with enthusiasm by readers both in Canada and abroad. A number of special theme issues of *Watan*, such as the Komagata Maru issue (August, 1989) and the Canadian Punjabi Theatre issue (August, 1991) attracted wide attention from Punjabi readers and critics around the world.

While *Watan* reflected the change in attitude, something was still missing. The community had moved from being predominantly first generation Punjabis to a mixture of second generation who mainly spoke and read English. Also important was the urgent need to connect with the rest of the South Asian communities and with the larger community as well. This was not possible for *Watan*, a Punjabi language publication. The answer to this new reality was *Ankur*.

*Ankur* was initiated by the Vancouver Sath Literary and Cultural Society, which published *Watan* and had been involved in community theatre since 1983. *Ankur* immediately became a meeting place for writers and activists from the entire South Asian community. It was celebrated as the link that brought together different generations and communities. It was warmly received by the South Asian community and by the larger community as well.

All this activity was undertaken on a volunteer basis without any financial aid, except for a small grant to start *Ankur*. Those of us from the first generation were feeling the fatigue from this long journey, and the well of new volunteers was drying up. Consequently, the momentum behind these activities has suffered a setback in the last couple of years. Hopefully, movement will continue, once the dream of glamour and the 'mehfil-ization' of the community slows down, and realities bring writers and activists back to the path of true expression.

The journey has not finished yet...we will keep walking.

—Sadhu Binning



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Photo: Gurmali Rai, Ankur

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