

Winners of first annual Dhahan Prize for Punjabi Literature announced

\$25,000 CDN First Prize celebrates the rich culture and transnational heritage of Punjabi literature

Vancouver, BC (September 22, 2014) – After receiving over 70 eligible entries from 5 countries around the world, the winner of the \$25,000 CDN Dhahan Prize for Punjabi Literature is Avtar Singh Billing's novel, *Khali Khoohaan di Katha* (The Story of Empty Wells).

Based in Vancouver, Canada, The Dhahan Prize for Punjabi Literature aims to inspire the creation of Punjabi literature across borders, bridging Punjabi communities around the world, and promoting Punjabi literature on a global scale.

The Dhahan Prize awards \$25,000 CDN annually to one “best book in fiction” published in either of the two Punjabi scripts, Gurmukhi or Shahmukhi. Two runner-up prizes of \$5,000 CDN are also awarded, with the provision that both scripts are represented among the three winners. The Dhahan Prize is awarded by Canada India Education Society (CIES) in partnership with the Department of Asian Studies in the Faculty of Arts at University of British Columbia (UBC). The prize is funded by an endowment from Barj and Rita Dhahan, and family and friends.

The winners of the inaugural Dhahan Prize in Punjabi Literature are:

First Prize of \$25,000: *Khali Khoohaan di Katha* (Novel) by Avtar Singh Billing (Gurmukhi script) – India/USA

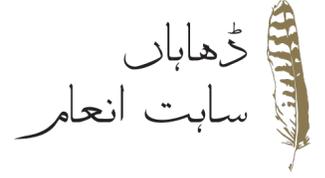
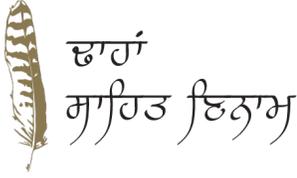
Runner Up Prize of \$5,000: *Ik Raat da Samunder* (Short stories) by Jasbir Bhullar (Gurmukhi script) – India

Runner Up Prize of \$5,000: *Kbooter, Bnairy te Galian* (Short stories) by Zubair Ahmed (Shahmukhi script) – Pakistan

“I feel happy and lucky to be the first author to win the prestigious, inaugural Dhahan Prize in Punjabi Literature,” said Avtar Singh Billing, author of *Khali Khoohaan di Katha*. “[Canada India Education Society] and the University of British Columbia have really created history by establishing such a unique, international award for Punjabi fiction. I feel proud that the Punjabi literary world found my sixth novel worthy of this honour.”

Punjabi literature has a long and rich literary heritage and is produced around the world. Barj S. Dhahan, co-founder of CIES states, “Punjabi has been a Canadian language for 115 years and it is exciting that this prize is uniquely a Canadian undertaking.”

The Prize Advisory Committee has been central to developing an independent and impartial jury of senior writers and scholars to adjudicate the prize. Professor Anne Murphy, chair of the prize advisory committee explains, “We have three juries: one to choose Shahmukhi books, one for Gurmukhi books, and one Central Jury that determines the winner. There is no overlap among the juries and the names of members are not disclosed until after adjudication is complete. It is crucial that we always maintain a strong and fair process.”



On Friday, October 24, the Dhahan Prize will host a public reading at SFU Surrey from 6:30 – 8:00 p.m., followed by a reception. Prize winners will read from their winning books in Punjabi, with translation to English. The evening is co-presented with SFU World Literature Program, and will include a question and answer portion, as well as a reception to mingle with our honoured guests. The next day, on Saturday, October 25, the winners of the Dhahan Prize in Punjabi Literature will be honoured at a gala reception at the Museum of Anthropology at University of British Columbia. Please RSVP to contact@dhahanprize.com. More information can be found at www.dhahanprize.com.

About the Dhahan Prize for Punjabi Literature:

The Dhahan Prize celebrates the rich culture and transnational heritage of Punjabi language and literature by awarding a yearly prize for excellence in Punjabi fiction. The Prize mission is to inspire the creation of Punjabi literature across borders, bridging Punjabi communities around the world and promoting Punjabi literature on a global scale. The Dhahan Prize is awarded by Canada India Education Society (CIES) in partnership with the Department of Asian Studies in the Faculty of Arts at University of British Columbia (UBC). **Learn more at www.dhahanprize.com and join us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).**

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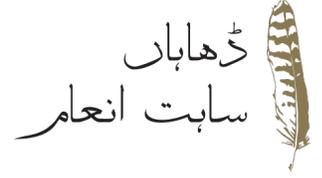
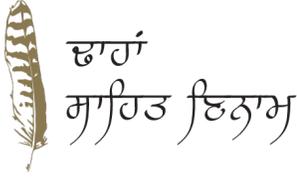
Interviews:

First prize winner Avtar Singh Billing is available for Punjabi-language interviews by phone. Please contact Manjot Bains at 604-729-5106 or media@dhahanprize.com to arrange an interview.

Prize winners will be available for in-person interviews in Vancouver from October 23 – 26, 2014. More information and schedules will be shared closer to the date.

Interviews are also available with the following members of the prize committee in Vancouver:

Barj S. Dhahan, co-founder Canada India Education Society (CIES)
Professor Anne Murphy, chair of the Dhahan Prize Advisory Committee
Ajmer Rode, member of the Dhahan Prize Advisory Committee
Professor Raghbir Singh, chair of the Central Jury and member of the Dhahan Prize Advisory Committee



Dhahan Prize Backgrounder

The Dhahan Prize celebrates the rich culture and transnational heritage of Punjabi language and literature by awarding a yearly prize for excellence in Punjabi fiction. The Prize mission is to inspire the creation of Punjabi literature across borders, bridging Punjabi communities around the world and promoting Punjabi literature on a global scale. The Dhahan Prize awards \$25,000 CDN annually to one “best book” published in either of the two Punjabi scripts, Gurmukhi or Shahmukhi. Two runner-up prizes of \$5,000 CDN are also awarded, with the provision that both scripts are represented among the three winners. The Dhahan Prize is awarded by Canada India Education Society (CIES) in partnership with the Department of Asian Studies in the Faculty of Arts at University of British Columbia (UBC). Learn more at www.dhahanprize.com.

The Prize Process

UBC's Professor Anne Murphy, with advice and guidance from the Prize Advisory Committee, designed the process, adjudication and administration of the Prize in its initial form. Professor Murphy's scholarly experience with Punjabi culture and literature, and with the adjudication and management of literary and book prizes (both in English and Punjabi), coupled with 10 years of experience working with museums and other non-profit organizations on related projects, helped devise a process that would foster engaged and ethical adjudication.

There are three juries for the prize adjudication process: one to choose Shahmukhi books, one for Gurmukhi books, and one Central Jury that determines the winner. There is no overlap among the juries and the names of members are not disclosed until after adjudication is complete.

2014 Jury Members

Central Jury

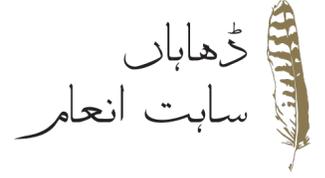
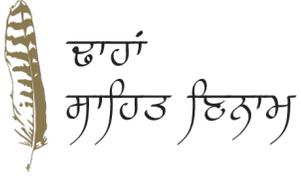
Professor Raghbir Singh Sirajana, Central Jury Chair and Professor at Panjab University, Chandigarh
Professor Niranjana Tasneem, Author and Professor Emeritus GHG Khalsa College, Saddhar
Mushtaq Soofi, Poet, Scholar and Chairman of the Pakistan Punjabi Adabi Board

Shahmukhi Jury

Dr. Furrugh Khan, Shahmukhi Chair and Associate Professor, Lahore Institute for Management Sciences
Professor Ali Qasmi, Historian and Scholar
Iqbal Qaiser, Historian, Poet and Author

Gurmukhi Jury

Professor Rana Nayar, Gurmukhi Jury Chair and Professor at Department of English & Cultural Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh
Professor Tejwant Gill, Retired Professor of English, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar (India)
Professor Dalip Kaur Tiwana, Author and Retired Professor of Punjabi at Punjabi University Patiala

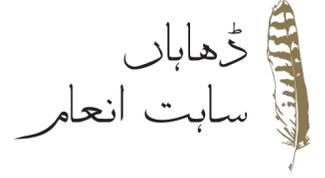
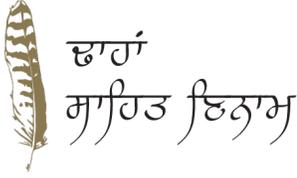


Canada India Education Society

Canada India Education Society (CIES) has been involved in numerous international and national projects designed to deepen the engagement between Canada and India, and to promote development in India. For 20 years, CIES has been active in promoting quality education, excellent health care, community development, and employment generation in the Punjab region of India. CIES also supports the Guru Nanak Mission Medical and Educational Trust located in the village of Dhahan-Kaleran, Punjab since 1991. CIES currently facilitates an exciting nursing partnership between Baba Farid University of Health Sciences and the School of Nursing at the University of British Columbia. More recently, it has initiated village infrastructure projects in partnership with Babbar Karam Singh Memorial Trust in Daulatpur and Dhahan villages in Punjab.

The Department of Asian Studies, University of British Columbia

The Department of Asian Studies at the University of British Columbia is one of the premier institutes for the study of Asian societies, religions, languages and cultures in North America with a special emphasis on Sikh Studies and Punjabi language. It hosts the most extensive Punjabi-language program in North America, where Punjabi has been taught at an advanced level for more than two decades. The Department has awarded a yearly prize for Punjabi literature in BC since 2009 as a part of its annual Harjit Kaur Sidhu Memorial Program, supported by the Sidhu family.



Winner Profiles

1. First Prize: *Khali Khoohan Di Katha (Novel)* by Avtar Singh Billing

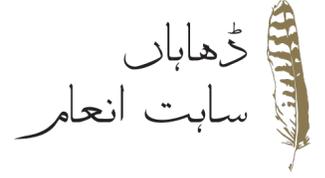
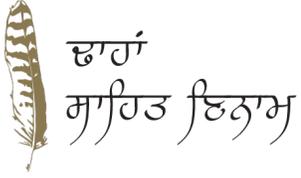
Avtar Singh Billing is one of the leading fiction writers of the present generation. *Khali Khoohaan di Katha* (The Story of Empty Wells) is his sixth novel. In this work, Billing takes the reader into his confidence and unravels the skein of his tale effortlessly. The drama unfolds in a rural setting, within the ongoing familial interaction of two brothers married to two sisters. Pashi, the grandson of the elder brother Charan Singh, spends his summer vacation happily in the remote village of his maternal grandparents. He is a keen observer of the way of life, and dispassionately narrates the ups and downs of four generations in the extended families of Charan Singh and Bishan Singh. He never forgets the dictum of his maternal grandfather, that the wells of money are emptied if there is no steady flow of income in the family. It is no surprise, then, that he finds, towards the end of the novel, that 'Happiness is an occasional episode in the general drama of pain.'

Through its powerful narrative and careful description, this novel brings into focus the social, economic and cultural changes witnessed in rural Punjab during the last eight decades. The story of four generations woven into the novel is unique in its fictional presentation, and yet remains true to the lived experience of a joint peasant family. The novel is simply superb in its realistic development of characters and artistic use of language. The local regional culture of the Dhaha area in Punjab comes alive in all its manifestations.

Avtar Singh Billing was born in 1952 in village Seh, near Khanna in Distt. Ludhiana, Punjab, India. He holds an MA English and B.Ed, and is a retired English lecturer. He has published four short story collections, three books for children, and six novels, including the winning book of the inaugural Dhahan Prize in Punjabi Literature in 2014. Billing has received several awards for his writing, including the Punjab Government Language Department's Nanak Singh Award 2003 for best novel of the year for *Khere Sukh Vihre Sukh*. He received the same award in 2008 for his novel *Ihna Rahan Utte*. His novel *Pat Kumla Gaye* was awarded the Best Book of the Year 2010 award by Nawan Zamana Jalandhar. In 2014 he was honoured with the Charan Das Award for Total Contribution in Literature from the Punjabi Sahit Academy Ludhiana.

2. Runner up: *Ek Raat Da Samunder (short stories collection)* by Jasbir Bhullar

Jasbir Bhullar is a well-known storyteller. He arouses the reader's curiosity with just the opening sentence of his short story. He proceeds then in a casual manner as if he is in search of a theme. Groping in the dark for a while, he happens to see light at the end of the tunnel. Henceforth he shows the reader what is taking place in the story, instead of taking recourse to narrative mode. This process of telling and showing makes such an impact on the mind of the reader that he finds himself drawn imperceptibly into a magical world. At the end of the narrative, both the writer and the reader find themselves in a kind of wonderland.



Ek Raat Da Samunder, the short story collection, presents various aspects of human life in a fascinating manner. In the first short story, the sea assumes at one night the proportions of the Flood of Noah by inundating the islands of Andaman and Nicobar. The loss of his family was unbearable for Major Kulbir, shortly after his posting at such an unpredictable place. But one fine morning he becomes aware of the fact that an ending can, in the long run, bring about a new beginning. Similarly, in the story, “Jadon Kujh Nahin Hunda,” he highlights the point that true living can be experienced only when one is exposed to imminent danger. In some of his short stories, he delineates the joys and sorrows of children who are eager to find their dreams translated into reality. Overall, it is an important and enjoyable contribution to modern Punjabi literature.

Colonel Jasbir Bhullar was born in 1941. His family hails from Bhullar Chilla, Amritsar, and his father was a land record keeper for the area. As a young man, Bhullar joined the Indian Army, where he retired as a Colonel. An accomplished writer, Bhullar is a Shiromani Bal Sahit Lekhak of Punjab, and has authored over 40 books of fiction, including children’s literature. He holds an MA in Punjabi Literature from Punjab University.

3. Runner Up: *Kabutar, Banaire te Galian* (short stories collection) by Zubair Ahmed

Zubair Ahmad’s short stories in his book *Kabutar, Banaire Te Galian* are inspired by both the usual and unusual, by what actually happens and what may happen. Such happenings, tangible and intangible, provide the material that can become stuff of artistic narrative. Even non-happenings like dreams are, for him, nothing less than fragments of untold and untellable stories in need of narration and description. An important theme of Zubair’s stories is time; how it changes or transforms things, making the alive dead and the dead alive. But being a fiction writer, he does not conceive of time in abstraction. Rather we see time in terms of its effects, the pervasive marks it leaves on all aspects of life, both individual and collective. In his stories the forgotten past appears as a known and familiar territory, and the unforgettable present becomes a path leading to a deviously uncertain and uncertainly devious nowhere. It is there that his characters dwell. Nostalgia evokes dreams and dreams beget nostalgia. Sensitively constructed stories with artistic care reveal what we live with at both a conscious and sub-conscious level, connected to a past we think we have lost, and disconnected from a future we have yet to understand.

Zubair Ahmad, born as Mohammad Zubair, was born in 1958 in Lahore, Pakistan. His ancestral home was in Batala, Distt. Gurdaspur, now in Punjab, India. He has an MA in English from the University of Punjab, Lahore, and a Post-graduate Diploma in ELT from the same university. Ahmad currently works as an Assistant Professor of English in Old Islamia College, Lahore. He previously worked as a sub-editor in the first Punjabi Pakistani daily newspaper, Sajjan, from 1988 to 1990s. He also ran a Punjabi bookshop and publishing house for twelve years, and has played an active role in promoting Punjabi language and literature in Pakistan since 1975. He has published many works in both Shahmukhi and Gurmukhi, and his articles in English have been widely published in literary and scholarly journals as well as anthologies in Pakistan and around the world.