

FEATURE ARTICLES

AN APPRAISAL OF A PEOPLE'S CELEBRATION*

Saran Singh

Editor, The Sikh Review, Calcutta, India

ਸ਼ਗਲ ਅਨੰਦੁ ਕੀਆ ਪਰਮੇਸਰਿ ਆਪਣਾ ਬਿਰਦੁ ਸਮੁਰਿਆ ॥

AGGS, M 5, p 806

"THE DIVINE SPIRIT HAS USHERED UNIVERSAL JOY ENDORSING ITS INNATE GOODNESS."

Anandpur symbolizes the spirit of sacrifice. It is forever dedicated to the triumph of human spirit over the physical body - as witnessed on Vaisakhi day three hundred years ago. On the astral plane Anandpur is essentially a state of mind and an experiential identification with Godly attributes gifted through *Amrit*. The *discipline* that links "*Guru Sangat kini Khalsa*" of all *amritdhari Sikhs*, with our religious and cultural tradition - of One God, one humanity - effortlessly springs from the deep identity that the Ten Gurus gave us in the sense of one-ness with something enormously powerful and makes us feel at home everywhere, in harmony with everyone.

Such a sense of universalism saturated the air of Anandpur Sahib on the eve of Vaisakhi 1999 when an estimated six million devotees poured into the hallowed grounds overlooking Takht Sri Keshgarh Sahib. The flood of humanity seemed to have drowned every trace of petty forgery that ambitious politicians had stirred up in the preceding weeks and months. The people - and their collective will - prevailed, for Anandpur stands unsullied as a symbol of the Great Guru's legacy of benevolent forces

that shaped the soul of Sikhism. Keshgarh is indeed the living monument to the deathless spirit that overcomes the vicissitudes of history; it recalls a tapestry of images reaching back more than 300 years. Through these tumultuous centuries the alternating struggle against persecution, invasions and home-grown despotism gave rise to a distinctive Khalsa character and its robust optimism. Anandpur today represents a new resurgence and dynamism even as it remains profoundly linked to its glorious past.

The unprecedented concourse of humanity at Anandpur *synchronized* with the news of similar celebrations from far and near. The Delhi administration *announced*

its decision to set up a new university in honour of Guru Gobind Singh. Great Britain witnessed the formal opening of the 'Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms' exhibition at the Albert & Victoria Museum by Prince Charles. The exhibition is said to reflect the bygone splendour of the *Sarkar-e-Khalsa* set in the historical context, and displaying rare memorabilia, including Manuscripts, paintings, weaponry and jewelry that have been meticulously put together from museums and private collections in the "Sub-Continent and several European countries. A notable example is Maharaja Ranjit Singh's ruby studded golden throne crafted by Muslim goldsmiths in early 1800's. Generous donation from an eminent Sikh industrialist of USA ensures a three-month tour of the exhibit to San Francisco from the end of July 1999.

But far more significant is the extraordinary turnout of Sikhs seeking *Amrit* initiation at Anandpur this Vaisakhi. At least 125,000 people received *Amrit* during the week long celebration. According to professor Manjit Singh, Jathedar of Sri Keshgarh Sahib, the majority of the new *amritdharis* were first timers, including Sikhs and new converts from North

America and Europe.

We are equally encouraged by collective community celebrations in Washington DC, New York, L. A. and Chicago. The city - that hosted Parliament of World Religions in 1993 with an impressive Sikh presence - witnessed hundreds of Sikh families in religious fervor and cultural zeal. The State Governors of Illinois and Wisconsin as well as Mayor of Chicago issued proclamations marking it as the Day of the Khalsa. Texas, which is home to 15,000 Sikhs, proclaimed April 1999 as the month of the Khalsa, in a rousing declaration signed by Governor George W. Bush. Canadian

Anandpur today represents a new resurgence and dynamism even as it remains profoundly linked to its glorious past.

celebration coincided with the strictly-on-merit appointment of a Sikh woman, Harbans Kaur Dhillon as a Senior Judge for the Province British Columbia - which already boasts of a Sikh Attorney General, Ujjal Singh Dosanjh. The Khalsa spirit is alive and well in the Western Hemisphere. It beckons all drifters and deviants to return to the proud heritage in a willing and voluntary acceptance of Gurus' benediction of *Amrit*.

For fifty two years the Sikhs' daily prayer - *Ardas* - beseeched God for *seva-sambhal*, or upkeep in devotion, of all holy shrines left behind in Pakistan. Now it seems to be - curiously - bearing fruit. According to PTI report, last month, Islamabad has agreed to set up a Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee to manage and renovate holy historic Gurdwaras. This announcement followed an address by President of Pakistan, Janab Mohammad Rafiq Tarar before a 2000 strong Sikh *Jatha* at Gurdwara Dera Sahib, Lahore.

This foregoing scenario is intended to be more illustrative than predicative, for as we recount the positive aspects of Tercentenary celebrations, we are painfully conscious of the divisive politics of Punjab, which have invariably plagued the Shiromani Akali Dal over the past decades. The anomaly becomes more glaring whenever the premier Sikh body is voted to power in Punjab. The last time we dwelt on the sorry state of Panthic politics was in our leading article : "*Great Expectations, Little Hope*" [March 997] within weeks of Sardar Parkash Singh Badal's assumption of office as Chief Minister. So overwhelming was the popular mandate that the non-Sikh press darkly, if typically,

warned of a possible "return to militancy". In a euphoric vein we had lauded the Chief Minister as a sincere pragmatist, shaping into a statesman of rare timbre. It was our wishful way of hoping that he would act boldly and retrieve some of the lost ground - not just the state capital but - by declaring an amnesty for detainees, rehabilitating youth, providing technical education, generate employment for those who had borne the brunt of the repressive policies of previous regimes, and even to set

We are painfully conscious of the divisive politics of Punjab, which have invariably plagued the Shiromani Akali Dal over the past decades.

up a Truth & Reconciliation Commission in order that past mistakes do not recur. Our disappointment is total. Even the eight MPs elected to Lok Sabha have little to show in return for a people's faith - as we lamented in our leading article: "*What Ails our MPs?*" [April 1997]. A government that cannot infuse the discipline of *Rehit Maryada* among the Sikh members of its police force and civil services forfeits its right to rule in the name of the Panth. It is not yet too late for the government in Punjab to restore a modicum of credibility during the remaining months of this momentous Year of the Khalsa.

* *Reproduced with permission from The Sikh Review, Calcutta, 47 (May): 4-5, 1999.*

A N N O U N C E M E N T

January 2000 Issue

Will be devoted on the discussion of the
Aad Guru Granth Sahib.

Articles on different aspects of the Aad Guru Granth Sahib should reach the Editor-in-Chief by the end of October 1999.