

CONSCIENCE OF CUSTODIANS OF SIKHI (SIKHISM)

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ABSTRACT

Guru Nanak and his nine successors preached a religion free from superstitions and rituals. However, these days the followers of Sikhism are again getting mired in superstitions and it seems that they are going backward into the well of darkness, from which the Gurus had shown a way out. How this has come about? This paper traces the events that have contributed to this situation.

INTRODUCTION

Firstly, according to some, we have made a lot of progress and we are in a good shape. This is how their argument goes. (I am describing the Ontario, Canada situation). I came to Canada in 1959; at that time there were only 4/5 Sikh families in Toronto, and no Gurdwara. At present there are over 100,000 Sikhs in Ontario and about 30 Gurdwaras. This is the way of reasoning for those, who see only the green. This is not my perception.

And this is how I see the picture:
Outside Gurdwaras, there is hardly any Sikh Organization that could be taken as functional. Over the years a number of organizations were floated. Their names were very high sounding and objectives, as declared, were noble indeed. But pretty soon they became comatose and nonfunctional. Their office bearers are fixture for life and beyond. World Sikh Organization and the Federation of Sikh Societies (Canada) are prime examples. There are others.

What is the situation in Gurdwaras?

Firstly, what a Gurdwara is supposed to be?
According to Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha a Gurdwara is:

1. A school for students.
2. Source of knowledge for the students of spirituality.
3. Hospital for the sick.
4. Fortress for the protection of women and the weak.
5. Source of food for the hungry.
6. Resting place for the wayfarer

MISMANAGEMENT IN GURDWARAS

Measured against these criteria not many Gurdwaras fill the bill. Most of the Gurdwaras are Gurdwaras in name only. On one hand these places of worship are being exploited for selfish, egotistic purposes and sometimes swindling of funds as well. Not withstanding all the proclamations to the contrary, the managements do their best that the public at large, *Sangat* (congregation), does

not participate in the decision making process of the Gurdwara. The constitutions of these bodies are generally practiced in breach. The attempt is always to show to the authorities to be, that these people represent the Sikh community.

On the religious side every possible ritual, that the Gurus condemned, is being introduced through the back door. In Hindu temples generally an Idol (of some god or goddess) is the center of adoration. We are not for behind. The only difference is that we put the Granth Sahib in place of any other idol. Our behavior is not much better; in some cases it is worse.

It is not uncommon to observe a number of *Birs* (Aad Guru Granth Sahib - AGGS) installed in the same room, and supposedly *Paath* (recitation) is going on from all those *Birs*, but nobody is listening. If this is not idol worship, what else it is? The only activity that has increased in frequency is the *Akhand Paath* (uninterrupted recitation of the AGGS). There is Akhand Paath at every possible occasion, and no body listens even. Statistically a positive relation can be shown to exist between the frequency of Akhand Paaths and the deteriorating situation of the community. If the frequency of Akhand Paaths keeps on increasing at the present rate, it can be mathematically shown that even a large number of Gurdwara buildings will not suffice to accommodate all the possible Akhand paaths. It has already shown itself in various places. In a number of Gurdwaras, there is built a small all-glass structure. This is a small cubicle, where the so-called Akhand Paath goes on, while some other activity is simultaneously carried out in the Hall

With such a background very little time and money is left, and there is no intention even to consider other issues facing the community. It will be sufficient to mention the attention (not) paid for the education. Here I mean the religious and societal education. It will be fair

to say that at the community level there is no consensus as to what to teach our younger generation and how to arrange that. In a few places halfhearted attempts are being made, but no systematic plan. In such places most of the times the children do not go beyond a, A, e (*Oora Aira Irri – ABC*).

Whereas the education of the younger generation is being ignored, the older people are not much better off. They are being fed with fairy tales and superstitions. The *Ragis* (hymn singers), preachers, *Kathakars* (explaining with stories) have done a very good job? Through their selective interpretation of Gurbani they have convinced the masses and the elite alike, the corporate life of the community does not need any attention; one need only to do Paath and every thing will be taken care of. Akhand Paaths ad-lib should indicate the state of affairs. The irony is that the managements do their best to muddle the situation and then they complain, “Our leaders are not providing any guidance.” What a hypocrisy! This is perhaps true only of the Sikh community. As individuals move up the leadership ladder, they become less and less responsible. The Gurdwara managements are not behaving responsibly. At the Apex, Takht Jathedars and political leaders are even less responsible. The story is well known. Our top leaders, religious as well political, are occupied by two types of activities:

1. How to destroy each other, and
2. How to collect maximum money, as long as they are in the saddle.

To expect any responsible lead from the present crop of top leadership amounts to deluding ourselves. This is the picture as I see it. You may differ with me, that is your prerogative.

HOW DID WE GET THERE?

Let us go back to Guru Nanak’s times. Guru Nanak was not a historian, but he has left enough indications in his hymns about the political, social and religious life of his days.

On the political side, the country was ruled by decadent Sultans and Rajas. The country was frequently subjected by outside invaders and the local rulers were unable to offer an effective resistance. Rulers, Moslems, considered non-Moslems as second-class citizens. The Muslim priests were corrupt and the justice system was in their hands. They used and misused the religious interpretations to suppress the masses and to make money. Hindu society was caste ridden and the upper classes of the Hindus aided and abetted the oppression by the rulers (Muslims). Thus the lower Hindu classes were doubly oppressed.

The public at large was ignorant and steeped in superstitions. They followed the whims and rituals advocated by the priests, Hindus and Muslims alike. In other words the blind were leading the sightless. Situation this day is not much different.

It is under these circumstances, we see the arrival of Guru Nanak. Whether he was sent by God as a special Messenger or not, that is not my subject. The only point worth considering is that here was a man; an enlightened one, who saw the situation in its fullness the ground reality and he presented his vision, plan of action.

Firstly, he exploded the myth of gods and goddesses, the divinity of the caste system and the supremacy of the Brahmin. Guru Nanak has summed up his whole philosophy in the Commencing Verse and in the first Bani called JAP on which he has built the edifice of Sikhism. Rest of the Bani is exposition and elaboration of the basic principles given in his philosophy. Other saints, like Kabir, Namdeva, etc. had also raised their voice against caste system and Brahmanism. But they did not go very far. They restricted themselves to personal piety. Guru Nanak took the next logical step.

He agrees with the Saints that this life is the opportunity to meet the Lord, but the objective is to be gained while living a full societal life and not through asceticism and running away from the society, as the *Sadhs* and *Jogis* were advocating.

Nobody can change the society over night. Guru’s greatness lies in that he set the direction. Appointment of Baba Lehna as Guru Angad was a step of great significance. This was a departure from the practice of other Saints. Those Saints practiced piety, but it was piety at a personal level, not at the societal level. Piety (good behavior) at the societal level can be through continuity and organization. This has been destroyed by the *Ragis*, *Kathakars*.

Guru Angad and the other Sikh Gurus, who succeeded to the House of Nanak, preached the gospel of Guru Nanak, educated the masses and they created and consolidated the organizational structures. Inevitably, this movement came in conflict with the powers to be, religious and political, Hindus and Muslims alike. There is lot of song and poetry about certain events. Those are side issues and accidents of history. The fundamental fact is (was) that Sikhism was in conflict with the prevailing philosophy of oppression and exclusive possession of the “Truth”.

Before proceeding further, it would be important and useful to underscore one important Truth:

Any movement can be sustained only, if it has a basic

sound theoretical (of principle) underpinning and that principle is accepted and remains in the conscience of the originators, leaders and followers of the movement. A movement can fail in spite of such an underpinning, due to overwhelming outside forces. But without such an underpinning it is bound to fail or collapse when the underpinning degenerates or is adulterated.

Second point: An historical happening, who joined the Sikhism? Mostly the so-called lower castes of the Hindu society. Here it may be mentioned that according to Brahmanism *Jats* are almost *Sudars*, if not exactly *Sudars*. Very few Brahmins joined the Sikh fraternity. At that time Brahmins were the only ones, who had the privilege of Education.

This privilege they have utilized very successfully to confuse and exploit other castes. Gurus did as much as they could, to impart education to their followers. But then the chance of history, luck, destiny, call what you may, dealt a very cruel hand to the Sikhs.

By the time of Guru Gobind Singh, the state became hostile. The struggle became so intense that the very survival of the community was at stake. Sikhs fought under the worst of circumstances, but they survived and triumphed over the Mogul empire and Afghans. But they paid a very heavy price. I do not mean the sacrifices in men and material, though that was immense. The real price was, that the education of the community came to a standstill; in fact it was totally destroyed. To realize this point, it will be sufficient to note, that when Sikhs became rulers of Punjab and the surrounding areas most of the Sikh Sirdars (Leaders and Rulers) were illiterate.

It is a conundrum, the Sikhs became rulers, but at the same time they started ignoring Sikh principles. The Brahmins entered through the back door. Within fifty years (by 1830) Sikh Sirdars, especially the Rajas and Maharajas, were more Hindus than Sikhs, in spite of their big turbans.

How and why did it happen so quickly and so easily?

We need to look into:

1. The prevailing attitudes in the Indian society.
2. The position of the priest and the prince.
3. Historical confluence.

India is a country of villages. Even today close to 80 percent of population lives in villages. In a sense the Indian village has not changed during the past say last 2000 years. A village is a small or big conglomeration of houses. There is no plan of houses. Any one can build a house, if he can afford to do so. Every one is for oneself. There is no provision and actual administration for the common functions of living in a given place. For

example, there is no provision for cleaning of streets, garbage disposal and such needs. The village did provide safety from outside robbers and thieves. The village assembly (*Panchayat*) did provide some caste interfaces. But they lacked thought of planning and their execution for common issues.

The caste system had robbed the people of the dignity of labor. Among other things it gave rise to what we generally call toadyism. Greatness was sought through sycophancy of the Powers to be. The toady of the prince in turn used his power and influence to exploit the village folks, especially the lower castes.

By and large the Indian Princes (Rulers) were not interested in the welfare of the subjects. They occupied themselves with pleasure seeking indulgences and fights with Rajas, etc. The country was divided into small fighting states and principalities.

Priests in the Indian society provided no spiritual guidance, in the real sense of the word. Only Brahmins were entitled to education. The Shudars could not even hear the Vedas. Consequently, the public at large was completely ignorant. The Brahmin essentially performed two functions. Firstly, he justified the actions good/bad of the prince. Prince was declared to be *Nehklanki*, the one whom no sin attaches. Results of such a doctrine can be well imagined. Secondly, the Brahmin fleeced the public through his stories of gods and goddesses and their, some times even immoral, predilections. This was the background of the Indian society.

Then the historical struggle fell upon the Sikhs. As long as the enemy, Moguls and Afghans, was there, Sikhs fought a valiant and glorious struggle. Once that danger was gone, they (leaders of the Sikhs) forgot their historical duty. Rather than carrying forward the Sikh principles they stopped there and reverted back to the old Indian ruler psyche. The Brahmin entered through the back door and provided the usual justification for the deeds (misdeeds) of the Rulers and for that he was handsomely paid.

In the absence of any system of education, the examples of the Sikh Sirdars had their effect on the public at large as well. Rituals and superstitions became order of the day. Sikh shrines, through twists of history, came in the hands of *Mahants*, who were more Hindus than Sikhs. Idol worship was slowly being introduced. Some of the Mahants were anything but pious. Things deteriorated to such an extent that in some historical shrines even women were not safe.

Through out all this period, when the deterioration and degradation were going on, there were individuals who

were raising their voices. But these voices did not become the voice of the masses. By the end of the 19th century there arose a number of individuals, like Bhai Dit Singh, Prof Gurmukh Singh, who saw the ground reality. These men were neither rich nor from the upper strata of the community. They gave a call to the community. Their steadfast work gave rise to what is generally called Singh Sabha Movement. Eventually under pressure from the missionaries and Arya Samajists, the community rose from its slumber. The situation in the historical shrines pitted the community against the British Government. After great sacrifices the Gurdwaras were freed from the Mahants. The Singh Sabha Movement (followed by Akali Movement) achieved two objectives:

1. SGPC (Shromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee) was established to manage the historical Gurdwaras.
2. A number of Khalsa schools and colleges, and Singh Sabha Gurdwaras were established.

Here again the history repeated itself

Firstly, it is worth mentioning, for those who suffered during the Akali Movement there was nothing to help them. After suffering torture and jail terms they went home and sank or swam according to individual means and efforts.

Secondly, after the first enthusiasm was gone, things started sliding back. The Khalsa schools and colleges were not enlightening their students about Sikhism. Their sole objective was to prepare individuals for the share in the government jobs. Majority of the Sikh Students who went to Khalsa schools did not know any more about Sikhism on completing their studies than what they had known before. Perhaps, the same could be said about the Sikh staff members. A number of them were trying to substitute communism for Sikhism.

Thirdly, The SGPC came into being after great sacrifices. Logically speaking the SGPC was (should have) these objectives:

1. Manage the shrines under its control.
2. Propagate the Sikhi (Sikhism).
3. Provide a model and leadership to other Sikh institutions, and moral guidance and support to the public at large.

The SGPC has managed the Gurdwaras, on the whole, better than the Mahants, but much can be improved. It has established a number of schools and colleges, but those are no better than other Khalsa schools and colleges. As far propagation of Sikhi is concerned there was no systematic approach. They never provided any guidance to the village Gurdwaras. As far providing the

moral guidance and leadership, less said the better.

Very soon the SGPC was seen as a mere stepping-stone for political power. The SGPC and Akal Takht have been used as political props, without any regard to fair/foul means. The usual argument is that, in Sikhism (for Sikhs) religion and politics cannot be separated, which is a very self-serving argument. Those individuals, who were successful to make SGPC as a stepping-stone for political purposes, have not behaved any better after achieving their objectives.

Lack of coordinated systematic *Dharm Parchar* on the part of the SGPC has created a vacuum. And the vacuum is being filled by *Sadhs, Ragis, Kathakars* and so on. Results are just disastrous. Let us see the role the Sadhs/Saints are playing. Sadh is a noble word as so frequently used in Gurbani. Any one who calls himself Sant or whose followers (sycophants) call him so, is taken by Sikhs as Sadh, as defined and described in Gurbani. Most of the times the reality is so different.

Historically, there have been individuals who were seekers, especially in the early part of their lives. In their own way they got some understanding of Gurbani. But they had their limitations. In this category, we can list Baba Ram Singh (*Namdhari*), Baba Dayal (*Nirankari*), Sant Attar Singh, Baba Nand Singh (Kaleran) and Bhai/Sant Randhir Singh.

Once they were accepted by the public, they did not go very far, their activities were limited to Akhand Paaths and Amrit Parchar, no systematic effort for community development or education. Baba Ram Singh (rather his followers) came in conflict with the British and he was exiled. Randhir Singh suffered jail for a long time. In fact Randhir Singh's reputation is built mostly on his endurance of harsh jail conditions. Out of jail his activities were mostly confined to Akhand Paaths. He is supposed to have introduced the concept of *Sarbloh* (use of utensils made of only iron).

In the last part of their lives, and especially after they are gone, their followers have been trying to show these individuals as superhuman with all sorts of miraculous powers. It is ironic that this is being done by the so-called educated followers of these Sants.

Then we come to the present day Sadhs. There may be some odd one among these who could be called Seekers. By and large they are charlatans and some of them are real scoundrels, but they are filling the void.

Ragis, Kathakars are doing their utmost to misguide the Public. They are telling fairy tale accounts of the Gurus and of the Gurbani. Their message is: The world is transitory, do not get involved, do Paath, Akhand Paath. That is the way for emancipation. You will never hear a

Kathakar to suggest that we should organize for the education of our children, help for the underprivileged and so on. The pity is that our religious leaders at the highest level, Jathedars and so on, are in cahoots with these wandering rogue Sants and preachers.

Wherever Sikhs meet they bemoan the present situation. They would find fault with every body, except with themselves. Then they would express pious hope, such as:

1. We need good leader, in other words a Messiah.
2. We need leaders who would sacrifice.
3. Perhaps, we need a dictator.

All this has resulted in the present situation of confusion. The preachers have convinced us that participation in community life is a no, no. Our well to do and particularly the educated classes follow it whole-heartedly. Without the participation of the educated no progress is possible. After all who is going to define and clarify the issues, in the practical sense. Quoting of Gurbani is not sufficient.

It may be mentioned here, even when the educated do participate, their participation is very limited and of

short duration. Mostly, it consists of arranging a conference/seminar, presenting a paper, but they themselves do not follow the steps that emanate logically from their own papers. The result is that these conferences/seminars remain only incidental historical events, without any enduring effect.

Final Question

(I do not know the answer)

Over the years there have been so many conferences and seminars held. It seems that the community goes deeper into superstitions with every conference. Why? It is high time that the intelligentsia looks seriously into this phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

The absence of proper education, especially at the corporate level, has contributed to the creation of the present situation. Historical events, viz., struggle with Pathans and Moguls, etc., were major factors that did not allow any systematic approach to the education of the community. Even now the community is not paying the required attention to this aspect. It is high time that the intelligentsia has a serious look and devise ways and means to rectify the situation.

SCHEDULE OF SERIES OF LECTURES AT KOLKATA

Prof Devinder Singh Chahal, PhD
Institute for Understanding Sikhism
4418 Martin-Plouffe, Laval, Quebec, Canada H7W 5L9

This series of lectures on the following topics were arranged by S Jagmohan Singh, Secretary-General, Central Gurdwara Committee, West Bengal.

Topic: Sikhism – a Scientific and Logical Religion; Meanings and Functions of Gurdwara; Sikhism as a Modern Religion having Universal Acceptability and free from Myths and Rituals.

Thursday 21st November, 2002:

7-09 PM Gurdwara Behala

Friday 22nd November, 2002:

09-11 AM at Khalsa English High School (for students and staff)

07-09 PM at Gurdwara Sant Kutia

Saturday 23rd November, 2002:

10-11 AM at Khalsa Model School, Dunlop (for students and staff)

03-05 PM at Khalsa Model School, Dunlop (for Sangat)

Sunday 24th November, 2002:

07-09 AM at Sikh Youth Hall. (For Young Sikhs)

10-11 AM at Gurdwara Howrah

03-05 PM at Sikh Youth Hall, Dover Lane (For Sikh Professionals & Intellectuals) (Lecture on Intrinsic values of Sabd and Guru in the Nanakian Philosophy)

Monday 25th November, 2002:

07-08 AM at Gurdwara Dumdum

10-11 AM at Khalsa School, Dumdum (for student and staff)

Daily report was published in the *Daily Naviparbhat*, Kolkata under various heading. For example,

imiQhns AqyPkykrmkWf C-fkygrbwkl PI sPynllsmJx dw Xqn kro- cihl

shntrl g. kmjtl p-Cml bljwll dyDrm pkrw aprwl ydl sB qrPwll SI IGw