

REFLECTIONS ON GURU GOBIND SINGH'S VISION

Where We Stand After 350 Years and Future Challenges

ARTICLE

Dr Sarjeet Singh Sidhu

The Racing Circle, No. 5, Jalan Impiana 1,
Taman Bandaraya Impiana, 30250 Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia
Email: sarjeetsidhu@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The ideal source to turn to when trying to define what Guru Gobind Singh's vision was, would likely have been his bani (scriptural writings), any other historical document penned by him and by his contemporaries. Since there is so much controversy regarding the authorship of the *Dasam Granth* (DG) it will not be used as a source material for this paper. In any case, I am not one who believes that the DG, or at least large chunks of it, is the Guru's work.

That will leave me with very little to work with, other than to rely on the stories and writings of others; again sources whose veracity will be hard to establish. This paper will therefore use some of the commonly used words and phrases employed by Sikhs to describe the basic principles of their faith, and assume them to be true.

It has to be declared from the start that every attempt at ascertaining the origins of these phrases, i.e. as to which person they may be ascribed, yielded no real or conclusive results. No scholar seems to know the exact origins. In most cases, it can be said with certainty that these phrases were not uttered by any of the Gurus. Therefore, they must have been put together by others and derived from the verses in the *Aad Guru Granth Sahib* (AGGS) or words attributed to the Gurus, or more likely put together by looking at the institutions, such as 'Langar', set up by the Gurus.

Lest there be any confusion let it be stated that the word 'vision' will refer to the desired end-result or objective; the word 'mission' will be used to mean the approach utilised to reach that objective. All too often, the words will be used interchangeably; in any case, such action will make little difference to the thrust of this paper.

ABSTRACT

Given the paucity of written material directly attributable to Guru Gobind Singh this paper attempts to discern the vision of the Guru from his actions and from Sikh traditions associated with him. It starts with the Vision and Mission of Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith, as evinced by the institutions started by him and through concepts such as Ek Jyot (One Light). The paper follows through with the deeds of Guru Gobind Singh, his achievements, and what his vision for the future might have been. The vision is finally linked to the concept of sant-sipahi (saint-soldier) and concludes that this vision has only been partly fulfilled.

The terminology used herein assumes that the reader is familiar with common Sikh terms and no real attempt has been made to expand upon the terms, and to the disadvantage of the uninitiated.

DISCUSSION

Concept of "Ek Jyot"

Sikhs, from childhood, are taught that the Sikh Gurus, from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh, are one "Jyot" (*Ek Jyot* – One Light). Now that *Jyot* is embodied in the AGGS for all the time.

My quick random questioning of Sikh friends and relatives regarding the "Jyot" concept produced some amazing results. Some had never heard of it; others had heard it mentioned and just accepted it without applying their minds to it. The latter group, when pressed for an opinion, as to what it means, either simply said, "His light was passed to the next Guru" or admitted that they did not quite understand it. They were then asked, "When you heard of this how did the preacher explain it?" The reply was "No explanation was given". Amazingly, it did not occur to anyone to ask.

Whilst this writer has not found any overt reference to the passing of the *Jyot* or Light from Guru Nanak down to the AGGS

as some kind of physical / sudden passing on of the Light, the tenor of many believers appears to suggest some such magical moment. It would appear that this concept, if truly held, is untenable. It is not denied that many eminent scholars have spoken about it and others written about this 'Ek Jyot' being passed from Guru to Guru. In such cases, it would have been good if the writers had spelled that out unambiguously rather than couch it in language that may well give the erroneous impression of "magic". The passing of the Jyot from one Guru to the other can only mean the conferment of the Guru-ship to someone who had a belief in, and expressed, the same spiritual ideology as his predecessor; that spiritual ideology is the sabd (Word) as incorporated in the AGGS; hence the reference in the phrase *Dasan Patshahian di Jyot Sri Guru Granth Sahib* used in *Ardas* (prayer). *Ek Jyot* ultimately refers to the Unity of Thought.

The Vision

Guru Gobind Singh was the last human Guru. Sikh tradition avers that he compiled the final version of the *Aad Granth*, and vested it with the Guru-ship: hence the references to the *Aad Guru Granth Sahib* (AGGS), also called *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* (SGGS). Sikh tradition is unequivocal that all the Gurus who succeeded Guru Nanak understood his vision and simply completed the mission of the founder. Thus, Guru Gobind Singh's actions would be meant to complete the vision of Guru Nanak; that would be his mission.

In order to discuss "*Where We Stand after 350 Years and Future Challenges*" we really need to know what Guru Nanak's vision and mission was. During Guru Nanak's time, Indian society was riddled with the social problems associated with caste, gender-bias, and religious bigotry. Guru Nanak stood up and taught against all these.

Besides advocating a casteless and egalitarian society, he also emphasised the need for honest labour, sharing one's good fortune with the less fortunate and

maintaining a spiritual demeanour by contemplating on the Divine. These virtues are identified by Sikhs in the aphorism "*Kirt karo, Vand shako, Naam japo*" (Simply put: Honest Labour, Share with the needy, Remember God). These will not be discussed here.

As the community of Sikhs founded by Guru Nanak expanded under the succeeding Gurus, so did it evolve in keeping with the commands of the succeeding Gurus who, presumably, were merely completing the mission of Guru Nanak whilst keeping his vision in mind.

Since this paper is about Guru Gobind Singh's vision no attempt will be made to take an in-depth look at the contributions of his predecessors: it is presumed that Guru Gobind Singh continued to follow the traditions of his predecessors. To try and figure out what Guru Gobind Singh's vision of the future of the Sikh Community was, it will be necessary to look at the Guru's actions since there is no document spelling out his commands or hopes.

Guru Gobind Singh's Contribution

Attempts at getting to the source of phrases like "*Sant-Sipahi*" (Saint-soldier) and "*Kirt Karo. Naam Japo, Vand Shako*" from various sources, including the Yahoo Group Gurmat Learning Zone (GLZ), came to nought. Having failed to get an answer from 'Google' the next step taken by this writer was to simply ask lay-Sikhs, such as family and friends, questions such as:

- What do they remember about Guru Gobind Singh?
- What was his contribution to or impact upon Sikhism?

Depending on the level of education and understanding of Sikh traditions and teachings, the common answers inevitably revolved around the following words/phrases:

- Formation of the Khalsa at the Vaisakhi of 1699

- Sant sipahi* (Discussed below)
- Sarbans dani* (Explained below)
- Sava Lakh Se Ek Laraun* (Explained below)

This is not to say that other Sikh principles/institutions were forgotten; it is just that these are the key things, which come to the Sikh mind when he thinks of Guru Gobind Singh.

The formation of the Khalsa in 1699 is not doubted by anyone. The debate on this issue always revolves around, and inevitably turns to, the question: Who is a Sikh? Then comes: How do you define god? Does god exist? Most questions are interrelated and the issues have been debated at length on Sikh forums such as the GLZ. The only conclusion that can be drawn with certainty is that there is no one answer acceptable to all Sikhs and most experts are in disagreement.

Sarbans Dani

Let us first take the appellation "*Sarbans Dani*". It means someone who has sacrificed his all for a just cause; Guru Gobind Singh sacrificed his entire family and his own person in the fight for justice. This is not something that is disputed and so referring to him as '*Sarbans Dani*' is justified. But this sacrifice does not, should not, stop at just a recognition of Guru Gobind Singh's greatness; it remains an example to all humanity and certainly to Sikhs, that one should not be afraid to sacrifice his all for a just cause. Whether anyone will be capable of such a sacrifice is another issue.

The Khalsa and Sava Lakh Se Ek Laraun

When specifically asked about the formation of the Khalsa and the saying '*Sava Lakh Se Ek Laraun*' these are quickly conflated. However, the two, though related, have separate connotations. '*Sava Lakh Se Ek Laraun*' (meaning that a single Sikh will valiantly face 125,000 in battle) alludes to the courage of his Sikhs (Khalsa). The effect of this has been amply demonstrated by the lion-hearted deeds of Sikhs in battles and wars in the years

and centuries after the events of 1699, including many Sikhs who in today's conservatives' view do not qualify to be called Khalsa. That the Khalsa will be unflinching in battle is not doubted by anyone, certainly not the Sikhs themselves. The debate actually involves the question: who qualifies to be called a Khalsa? This controversy too has been dealt with many times and there is no agreement between the warring groups. To rehash the various arguments in favour of any one group will serve no purpose and so must be dispensed with. However, it will remiss to completely ignore the two versions altogether.

The 'orthodox' (the word is used with caution and limitations) will insist that to be a Khalsa one has to be an Amritdhari; that is one has to undergo the initiation ceremony by undergoing the 'Amrit' ceremony, whereupon one is given the 'Gurmantra', and then follow the Rehat Maryada and maintain the 5-Ks, which will include being *Keshdhari* (one who keeps the body hair intact). This group easily accept a *Keshdhari* who has not undergone the 'Amrit' ceremony as a Khalsa. In other words, the external manifestations are all that the 'orthodox' really focus upon. They often rely on the verse "*Rehat pyari mujko Sikh pyara nahi*" (Literally: I love the Code, not the Sikh) as proof of the importance of the external appearance. This verse is attributed by many to Guru Gobind Singh. The Editorial of *The Sikh Review* of Feb 2006, rightly or wrongly ascribes this line to Bhai Nandlal's Rehatnama. The word '*rehat*' is most frequently said to mean the Sikh Rehat Maryada (SRM), translated as 'The Sikh Code of Conduct'. If *rehat* refers to the external appearance, it seems unlikely that Guru Gobind Singh penned these lines, for such would portray the Guru as callous, one who prefers form over substance.

The fact that the word '*rehat*' preceded Guru Gobind Singh is not lost on those who will point out to ਸਚੁ ਕਰਣੀ ਸਚੁ ਤਾ ਕੀ ਰਹਤ (*Rehat*) translated as "True are his actions; true are his ways".

That becoming a Khalsa also requires an intense internal change is acknowledged by all but, unsurprisingly, not quite insisted upon. The other group ('Non-orthodox') insists that the internal changes are more important.

Discussions on Sikh forums bear out this assertion wherein it has been argued that "*Rehat--means code of conduct / (more) inner cleansing than outer appearance*" and "*Khalsa was created by Guru Gobind Singh.....to be disciplined to follow certain duties & maintain code of conduct which will lead to be khalas/ pure by inner cleaning... Inner cleansing is tough so most people give solace to their mind that at least looking like one is enough*" [<http://gurmatbibek.com/forum/read.php?3,33603>]

Without going into the origins of this verse and the interpretations it is worth bearing in mind that even here there is disagreement.

Sant Sipahi

One last term that needs discussing is '*Sant Sipahi*'. Again I must confess that my attempts at getting to the root of this term failed. No one knows. My lay-Sikh survey revealed that most thought Guru Gobind Singh used this term, though there were two who attributed it to Guru Hargobind, the Sixth Guru. The latter suggestion is not unreasonable given that he introduced the "*Miri-Piri*" concept and is hence referred to as "*Miri Piri da Malik*" or "master of worldly matters as well as their spiritual matters".

'*Sant*' is often translated to 'Saint' but this is misleading. A *sant* would be someone who would be spiritually 'immersed in god' (I use the term for want of a more convenient and pithy explanation), and he would be clean in thought, word and deed. He would be free of the five vices (*Kaam, krodh, lobh, moh, ahankar*) (Literally: lust, rage, greed, attachment, conceit), someone to whom one could turn to in when in need of spiritual solace and comfort. This is a tall order; I dare say impossible to fulfil.

'*Sipahi*' literally means soldier. Here it is meant to be understood that a Sikh would have to be a soldier in the fight for truth and justice, and not just a soldier on the battlefield.

Thus *sant-sipahi* could for convenience be translated as '*saint-soldier*'. So what exactly does this concept of *Sant-Sipahi* entail? It was intended to create a creed of persons who would be *sant*-like (saintly) in demeanour and actions, whilst at the same time be a soldier who would be prepared to lay down his life in the battle against injustice. This, for all intents and purposes, was the Vision of Guru Nanak and thus of Guru Gobind Singh.

With this rather short discussion of the various terms/concepts I can now turn my attention to the key questions raised by the theme of this seminar:

Guru Gobind Singh Ji's Vision: Where do We Stand After almost 350 Years?

Taking the two limbs of the term '*sant sipahi*' separately I would say that on the *sipahi* component Sikhs have done admirably. As far as the courage component is concerned, we have proven ourselves repeatedly in the wars and on the battlefield. Indeed this knowledge that Sikhs, including the many who are 'technically' not considered Khalsa, show no fear in battle has helped me personally in some measure. I am a doctor by training, and thus cut out to heal and not kill. During my Military Service in the Malaysian Armed Forces I was twice handed an M-16 and asked to man a cordon with orders to kill on sight. I quickly learnt and now know what a 'chill down the spine' means (it is more like pain in the spine), and what it means to go weak in the knees. What kept me going and caused me to show no fear was the repeated thought in my head: "You are a Sikh and Sikhs have no fear of battle or death". That was enough to keep me calm and collected. It would seem that the *sipahi* component has been a considerable success.

As far as being a '*sant*' is concerned, I think we have largely failed. If we accept that the characteristics of a *sant*, as

described above, are what is meant by being a *sant* (and I would like to know why anyone would disagree), then I must say that at my most generous there must be less than 1% who would meet the standard. In fact, I personally have not met anyone who could fit the bill.

Thus, the vision of creating *sant-sipahis* is largely unmet and so after almost 350 years the mission of fulfilling that vision remains.

Guru Gobind Singh's Vision: Future Challenges

The challenges, however phrased, must be geared towards the creation of a (Sikh) nation of *sant-sipahis*. Will we make much headway here? I think not. If we assume that our history as handed down to us is true, then it would seem that we have actually regressed as far as the '*sant*' component is concerned. If what we now witness is indicative of what is to come then the outlook is not quite, what one wishes for?

Does this mean I am a pessimist? No, it does not; I am simply being a realist. Whilst the Gurus may have held high hopes for us it cannot be denied that, we are simply human and possess all the fallibilities expected of such primates. All we can do is to try to keep in check these failings and focus on the inner being, and try to bring change. It is the inside which is more important, and that is why it is more difficult to mold.

CONCLUSION

The concepts embodied in the terms used in this paper do not have a direct word-for-word connection to either the AGGS or any Guru but have likely been derived from the intent of the Gurus as can be surmised from their writings. I do not think that as a species we can ever achieve the ideal envisioned by the Gurus but we can endeavor to stay as close to it as possible.

Note:

1. *Much of what is written herein is no more than logical deduction and the author's opinion. All I can ask for is an unemotional, objective and fair hearing. Do not be too quick to reject everything out of hand. I would have liked to be at the seminar in person as this would have enabled me to answer queries immediately, having to think on my feet.*
2. *Most of the ideas and concepts discussed in this paper could each do with a full debate.*
3. *References for some of the statements made can be made available though they are unlikely to be any more reliable than my own opinions.*