

Whose blind spot? Naipaul or Gurtej Singh?

Alibis & blame-shifting

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The Sikh Review flatters me by describing me as a Canadian Sikh scholar". Gurtej Singh, on the other hand, runs me down as evident in his subtly nuanced remark: "hallmark of the scholars of his type" (Sir VS Naipaul's Blind Spot? *The Sikh Review*, November 2002). He castigates anyone who dares find fault in his thinking or writings.

Frankly, I have never claimed nor deserved scholarship of any kind. I am a mere socio-political observer, a journeyman columnist, nothing more.

However, what is painfully obvious from Gurtej Singh's rejoinder is his penchant for running down those who take issue with his exposition of some aspects of Sikhism to Naipaul. He needs reminding that it was his words as reported by Naipaul that were scrutinized and so construed. He should have known that as Naipaul had been apprised of the fact that he was well versed in Sikh history and religion from early childhood, his views and opinions mattered and a reason why Naipaul listened to what he had to say. Implications and inferences drawn from his myriad conversations with Naipaul is what were under the lens. He, as a person, was not the subject of any commentary. Yet he chooses to shoot the messenger and strive to place the locus of criticism away from himself. To the extent that he defends the "Who" and not "What", he is erratic.

Try as hard he does to rehabilitate himself in his rejoinder, "*Sir VS Naipaul's Blind Spot*" (November 2002, *The Sikh Review*), Gurtej Singh still fails to meet the burden of proof. Therefore, for him to dismiss the swirling outrage as "a barren controversy" is wishful thinking on his part. Now let's revisit the meaty issues that Gurtej Singh had gone great lengths to explain and has failed to make a good case.

My serialized articles in *The Sikh Review* were just under nine thousand words long, and addressed several issues. However, Gurtej Singh takes exception to just two of the issues, namely (a) the story about the sword of Ali, and (b) "holding the Guru to be a Prophet of God". These two topics take up just about twelve hundred words, a mere 13% of printed space. Yet, if we are to believe Gurtej Singh everything I wrote is sterile. I am glad that I never took his professorship's class, more so considering his tenuous tenure.

In the matter of the 'sword of Ali', let us first encapsulate the relevant encounter between Gurtej Singh and Naipaul. Gurtej Singh describes his 1974 initiation at the ceremony of *Khande-de-Pahul* to Naipaul in his own words, "The *amrit* was stirred with the sword of Ali". Naipaul wonders if it is the "Ali of the Muslim Shias, the cousin and

son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed", and Gurtej blurts out, "The Caliph". Gurtej then adds that the sword was a gift made to Guru Gobind Singh by the Mughul emperor Bahadur Shah.

In his explanation, Gurtej Singh is unequivocal about his "relying" on sardar Kapur Singh for the "veracity" of the sword, based on what Sardar Kapur Singh theorized in his article "*An Islamic Sacred Heirloom at the Kesgarh Takht*". Let us examine the relevant excerpts from Sardar Kapur Singh's essay to see what evidence he proffered, if any, to establish the origin and ownership of the sword that is in the custody of *Takht Keshgarh Sahib*. Emphasis placed in the excerpts, are entirely mine, as proof that the sword in question is not the real McCoy:

n "At the High seat of Sikh Authority, Takht Kesgarh, Anandpur Sahib, there is preserved a sword of high quality steel with gold arabesque, and Arabic lettering on it and **the keepers of the sacred heirlooms at the Takht would tell you that this sword belongs to Hadrat Ali, the grandson of Prophet Mohammed. You would be further told** that after many vicissitudes and changes of hands this holy sword came into the Imperial Mughal treasury. Bahadur Shah I made a present of it to Guru Gobind Singh who was personally present at the coronation ceremony on July 23, 1707. A.D. at Agra,....."

■ "It is for the **experts to decide about the date and style of manufacture of this weapon which so it is believed, was sent by Guru Gobind Singh** soon after the coronation of Emperor Bahadur Shah along with the messenger who brought the famous *hukamnamah* issued on Oct. 2. 1707 A.D. to the congregation of Dhaul..."

■ "This sword 'cleaver' that literally means khanda, faqar, was then inherited by Hadrat Ali after the demise of Mohammed, and **it is known that more than one copies were made of this sword** and on each were engraved words to some such effect, as a rule, "No sword can match the Cleaver and no young Knight can match Ali."

The foregoing account given by sirdar Kapur Singh is based on what he was told by the custodian of the sacred heirlooms. Realizing that the keeper of the relic was neither a curator nor a historian, is it any wonder that sardar Kapur Singh was quick to hedge his bets by inviting "experts" to ascertain its authenticity and determine if it is the original, or a copy of one, that was owned by Ali.

Because Sardar Kapur Singh had no means of testing the truth about the sword, he chooses his words carefully and with due diligence, to wit: "keepers would tell you", "so it is believed" and "it is known". No wonder, Sardar Kapur Singh stops short of giving the story personal seal of approval. He merely relates that which was told to him. To a "train(ed) magistrate", like Gurtej Singh, it must be obvious that all of these phrases add up to hearsay.

Let us see how the Islamic scholars trace the history of the Sword of Ali. At the battle of Uhud, Ali fought so hard and valiantly that his sword broke. Prophet Muhammad then handed Ali his own favourite sword, the *Dhu'l-Fakar* [lit. "the possessor of the notch"], a sword mentioned in the *Hadith. Fakar* (singular), meaning notch, refers to the sword's two pointed ends and the sword is so depicted in all Islamic iconography. The *Fakar*, according to Islamic folklore, was the result of "the blade splitting when Ali first drew the sword from the scabbard that had been nailed shut; Ali is axiomatically the best of all heroes and so could be expected to perform such a feat".

Now let us see how the words of the engraving got coined. Some claim that it was at this battlefield that the battle cry "*La Fata Illa Ali La Saif Illa Zulfiqar*" ("There is no youth but Ali and no sword but Zulfiqar") rang out. Some believe it was the words of the angel Jibraeel in praise of Ali's valour on the battle arena - "There is no warrior except Ali, there is no sword except Zulfiqar" - that reverberated around the battlefield. While some others claim that in paying a tribute to Ali's courage, a poet wrote, "There is no sword better than the sword of Ali; and there is no youngman superior to Ali".

Dhu'l-Fakar, the sword which the prophet gave to Ali at the battle of Uhud, could have had no engraving, such as claimed, for the simple reason that its owner was Prophet Muhammed. It makes no sense for Ali to have had the so-called words, referring to second person singular, engraved on his sword later on. It is likely that copies of the sword were made and the legendary words engraved to inspire in young soldiers the spirit of Ali. It follows that since the sword at *Takht Keshgarh Sahib* has the aforementioned words engraved on it, it cannot be the *Zulfiqar*, the sword that Prophet Muhammed gave to Ali. (Note: The actual sword bestowed on Ali, the fourth Caliph and the first Imam to Shias, passed into the custody of the Abbasid caliphs.)

Nowhere does Sardar Kapur Singh admit of his own accord that the sword was a gift to Guru Gobind Singh by Bahadur Shah. And we know there is no mention of a sword among the list of notable gifts presented to the Guru by Bahadur Shah on July 23, 1707. Again, no archival evidence bears witness of any sword of any kind passing hands at any subsequent meeting between the Guru and Bahadur Shah. One must, therefore, infer that the sword that the Guru sent with his *Hukumnama* to the congregation at Dhaul was a sword that he had probably owned all along. And, if it is the same sword that currently reposes among the sacred relics then very likely it is a copy of the Sword of Ali that the Guru had acquired at some earlier time.

Now let us tackle the second issue dealing with Guru Nanak. Gurtej Singh paints a picture of Guru Nanak for Naipaul (page 431), in these words: "He's not a reformer, he's not a philosopher, he's not a poet – though he expressed himself in poetry. He's a prophet of God".

Gurtej Singh wants us to believe that "it is a fundamental stance of the Sikh theology" to hold Guru Nanak as a "Prophet of God". (Note: This time round, for reasons not explained, the word Prophet is written with a capital 'P'). So, when Guru Nanak, according to Khushwant Singh, tells Mian Mitha, that "At God's gate there is no room for

a prophet, God alone dwells there", what interpretation would Gurtej Singh have us place on those words! What exactly did Gurtej Singh mean by denying Guru Nanak as philosopher or a poet *par excellence*? I need say nothing further, let the reader form his or her own opinion. To have selectively lifted a part of a sentence to make his point Gurtej Singh is less than fair.

Gurtej Singh takes Dr. Pashaura Singh to task on a number of issues, principally over his accreditation as "Professor of Sikhism". I carry no brief on behalf of Pashaura Singh, who is an accredited Professor at the University of Michigan. To me, no matter how many different ways Gurtej Singh tries to justify his professorial post, it is nothing short of trying to square a circle. According to the lexicon of the academia a professor is "a teacher of high rank in a department of a university or college".

I cannot but shake my head at what made Gurtej Singh - who is fond of cloaking himself in the mantle of humility by claiming to be "a small man" or " a random pebble" – come out hitting Dr. Pashaura Singh hard and below the belt; and, if that was not enough, pejoratively referring to him "as people of the type of (him)" and "other 'self-hating' Sikhs". On the question of humility, Gurtej Singh needs reminding the admonition of Nietzsche that "he that humbleth himself, wishes to be exalted". On the question of bad-mouthing others, Gurtej Singh should heed the words of Dominick Dunne, "I subscribe to the theory that name-callers project onto others what they most dislike in themselves".

Gurtej Singh cannot remain in a state of denial over what he said to Naipaul. Hopefully, I have cleared some of the fog that Gurtej Singh keeps blowing our way. This is my last word on the subject. If, like the 'parson' of his maxim, he persists on "argu(ing) still", so be it.

Our purpose in publishing Mr Mahal's two-part article (SR July & August, 2002) was to correct Sir V.S. Naipaul's perspective of Sikh history. We certainly did not wish to provide a ring side view of the wrangling between two eminent members of our intellectual elite whose bona fides are not in question. - Ed. SR

