

# SGPC Election: The Moral Purpose must prevail

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"Power", said Henry Adams, "is poison". Reinhold Niebuhr, the author of "*Moral Man and Immoral Society*", adds: "it is a poison which blinds the eyes of moral insight and lames the will of moral purpose". The conduct of the Akali leaders in the November 2002 election of the President of the SGPC is a sad attestation of the above quotes. The denigration of the moral prestige and historic dignity of the SGPC during this election process, by the political games of the petty-minded is an unedifying journey past both reason and lashing emotions. The drama indeed was a demeaning affair. It is not who won or who lost but how the image of the SGPC has been tarnished. The denigration of the SGPC, regrettably, did not bother the "guardians" of the Sikh 'Parliament.'

SGPC had been serving as a hand-maiden of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), the latest episode of unabashed "stabling" and captive voters strikes another nail in the coffin of autonomous and virtuous existence of the SGPC. Simultaneously, if the Congress Government employed dictatorial and blatantly coercive tactics to influence the outcome of the SGPC's Presidential election, the responsibility for it squarely rests with one faction of the SAD in the present context, as well as the SAD's intrusions in SGPC affairs when in power. The call addressed to the SGPC members for "conscience vote", in itself of dubious intent, was disdainfully unheeded. It seems that the faint and flickering conscience of the members, more amenable to influences of other kind than the sense of duty, was easily prevailed upon.

The nomination of a *Sant* by one of the factions for the post of the President of the SGPC exposes the naivete of the *Sant* (alas, he is also a member of the Dharam Parchar Committee). The *Sant*, as reported in the press, could be cajoled as a prospective candidate and having acquiesced, later blamed his acceptance on the perfidy of his sponsors. This exposes the opportunist political motivations of some of the tribe of *Sants*. Their domain and claim portend serious consequences for the Sikhs. Their political adventures and patronage divest them of the dignity of their assignation.

For the last four years there has been spiralling escalation in the campaign of hate and rage and the public match of revilement between the two main factions of the SAD. This has bordered on political neurosis resulting from frustration and fear of oblivion. In the November election the two factions, in their effort to gain upper hand stooped to seek extraneous intrusion in the SGPC affairs. One faction prostrated before the Congress Party that has been responsible for the infamous 1984 -a lethal blow to the Sikh

prestige. The other faction rode piggy-back on the BJP that is the patron of Hindutva and RSS Brigade. In this bargain the identity of Akalis in general and SGPC in particular suffered a grievous body blow.

The personality-based political fight and rivalry has caused damage to both the Akali Dal and the SGPC. These two prime Panthic entities are conjugated institutions and have symbiotic relationship though their orbits are, and must be, different. Necessarily, politics and ethics interpenetrate, but if the political exigencies of the moment organically decapitates the SGPC and imposes hegemony of the politicians, then it undermines the very rationale of the SGPC's total impulse for ethical objectives. If the members of the religious body purely serve their political masters then they are traitors as far as the loyalty to the SGPC and the cause of Sikhism are concerned.

It also needs to be analysed why there is a lack of conscientious protest from within the ranks of the Akali Dal. It is indeed baffling and, surely, points to the collective immorality and a kind of social morbidity. In a healthy organisation a withered and/or soiled leadership material gets discarded as dross. This has not happened in the SAD for a long time. There are quite a few elderly leaders in the SAD who have experienced both evil and good. Their value as advisors rather than active manipulators would be more beneficial to the Panth.

It seems the Akali factions have not learnt a lesson from their defeat in the Assembly elections. The Chandigarh Chapter of the Sikh Core Group, after the Assembly elections, had given a call to the Akali leadership to "Unite or Perish". The appeal highlighted the negative voting which brought a party like Congress into power in Punjab. It was also proposed that the Akalis should unite, not based on personal equations but on a purposeful agenda. Although it was realised that the leaders may not be readily willing to shed power through persuasion, howsoever elegantly proposed, yet the effort was made, hoping to appeal to the higher instincts for Panthic good. It seems the Akalis continue to follow the path of self-destruct.

In the current turmoil in the Akali politics, a serious allegation has been the denigration of the *maryada* of the Akal Takht Sahib. There have been claims and counterclaims regarding inferior *versus* superior adherents. The *persona* of the Jathedar is depicted as an infallible ecclesiastic authority and clerical inviolability. It seems that the protege of the disinherited faction becomes more virtuous. The distinction between individualized status and institutional sanctity is wilfully obscured. That it is perverse to equate and sacrilize the role of any Jathedar with the sanctity of the Akal Takht Sahib is not the concern of the contesting factions.

The course of the Sikh polity is still hurtling downhill without locating an angle of repose, not to mention regaining lost ground. A brief introspection of the fateful past, accruing monumental deprivations because of inadequacies of leaders' statesmanship, would be in order at this juncture. Firstly, the contribution by the Akalis during the independence struggle is a saga of unmatched sacrifices, far exceeding in proportion to their numerical strength. Yet after the Independence they alone were denied the demand for a linguistic

province. The Punjabi Suba had to be claimed after a further struggle. Grudgingly, a skeleton of a state was then carved out as Punjabi Suba — *minus* vast areas with Punjabi speaking population; *minus* the state capital; deprived of the legitimate right on their River Waters and deprived of the control of River Headworks.

Then, again, the Sikh soldiers in Indian army fought bravely in post-Partition wars in defence of the country. They were "rewarded" with a *reduction* of their representation in the defence services being brought down from approximately 30% at the time of Partition, to nearly 4% at present which is further to be scaled down to 2.5%.

Third, Punjab became the granary of India through the efforts of the courageous Sikh farmers who ushered in Green Revolution and staved off the food shortages in the rest of India by contributing upto 60% of the Central Pool of the food grains. However, in "appreciation" of this contribution the River Waters of Sutlej, Beas and Ravi, which should have been the exclusive right of Punjab, were taken over by the Centre through the Act of Reorganisation of Punjab and their waters "looted". Finally, the energy and vitality of the Sikhs draws inspiration from Guru Granth Sahib and their noble heritage. Their most sacred shrine was the target of attack in 1984, and was followed by a planned holocaust of unimaginable proportions.

The above catastrophic events depict a yawning hiatus between the inner dynamics of the Sikh communities and the incapacity of its leadership to translate these attributes into positive gains for Punjab.

Like it or not, the SGPC exists as the "Sikh Voice" irrespective of its pitiable performance or the "rejectionists" arguments to depreciate its significance. It would be relevant to add that an Akali leader devoid of religious potential is nothing less than a saboteur of the Panth. Since the ultimate performance of the SGPC is to be found in the character profile of the members, the reforms at the grassroots levels are the only viable alternative to revive the inner vitality of the SGPC and tilt the fulcrum from decadence to effulgence. A vigorous and pietistic thrust directed towards purgation of subsystems of selfish interests is called for. Only drastic and revolutionary measures would generate the resolute force necessary for asserting righteous conduct. A few suggestions made by the Core Group may be relevant to this crisis:

a) It is important, that essential screening of the candidates (for election as SGPC members) is made obligatory by representatives of Panthic bodies which do not themselves enter the electoral fray. Voters should also be educated so that they vote for only such candidates as have a total commitment to the Panth and the cause of gurdwaras, unfettered by loyalty to a political party.

b) SGPC must constitute a group of devoted Sikhs who may be deputed to filter a list of such *sewaks* who are appropriately qualified to be members of the SGPC and that political parties, according due deference to Panthic primacy, should provide cooperation in supporting such nominated candidates."

In the present international polity, religion has emerged as a significant factor influencing international relations. Sikhism, by virtue of being "a treasure of mankind" has a prominent role to play in the evolving new global social order based on politico-ethical rationale. SGPC is an institution of religious resource for Sikhism. The religious potential of Sikhism cannot be permitted to be obscured by the hubris of petty minded leaders. Groups of sentient Sikhs everywhere must add their will, in whatever manner possible, to revolt against the present Sikh institutional failures.