

Sorry State of Bangladesh Gurdwaras

A report by Prof. Harnam Singh Shan*

Prof. Harnam Singh Shan, former Chairman of Guru Nanak Chair and Head of Panjabi and Sikh Studies at Panjab University, Chandigarh, recently returned from Bangladesh after participating in the 17th Conference of the International Association of Historians of Asia, where he presented a Paper on Cultural Heritage of South Asia.

After the Conference, Prof. Shan paid obeisance at the historic Sikh shrines, and had a look at the relics associated with Guru Nanak (1504 A.D.) and Guru Tegh Bahadur (1666 A.D.). These shrines have remained neglected ever since the Partition of India in 1947, because access to these had been denied to the Sikhs during the Pakistani regime.

According to Dr. Shan's finding, the first holy shrine was at the spot where Guru Nanak had a public well dug and a *dharamshala* built. This came to be known as Rayer Bazar Gurdwara. This is indicated in Burt's and Hassan's works, but stands wholly obliterated. It was around 1960 that the East Pakistan authorities demolished the building, levelled the well (known and revered as Guru Nanak's well) and the land attached to it, carved out plots, auctioned for house building. On that site now stands modern bungalows, and the locality, called Dhan Mandi, is now the leading posh colony of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh.

On the other hand, Gurdwara Nanak Shahi, still stands at its original site, in the heart of the city adjacent to the Dhaka University. However, it has been deprived of its vast estate, mostly encroached upon by authorities. It has been renovated by means of a grant by the Indian High commission and generous donations received from Sikh devotees of Calcutta, Bangkok, Singapore & the Far East, thanks to ex-Director, I.J.O., Sr. Harbans Singh.

The second existing shrine, Gurdwara Sangat Tola, is located in the Bangla Bazar. Guru Tegh Bahadur stayed here on his way to Assam. It is in a highly dilapidated condition and requires immediate repairs and renovation. Its housing complex, worth crores of rupees, is under unauthorised occupation.

The Udasi mahants and the Sikh residents, who had been revering and managing them, had to leave East Bengal soon after the establishment of Pakistan. None except a lone brave Sikh, Bhai Swaran Singh, the last Granthi of the Nanak Shahi Gurdwara, remained there to look after them. He too, alongwith Mohd-ul-Malik Haq, his Muslim friend, was shot dead by Pakistani Razakars during the Pakistan army's crackdown in 1971. There is now not a single Sikh citizen in Bangladesh who could look after such holy and historical places and the vast property attached to them.

As regards the relics, only one out of the five old, handwritten and dated recensions of Guru Granth Sahib, noticed and described by Sardar G.B. Singh in 1945 and Captain

Bhag Singh in 1971, is now extant. That too is in a highly dilapidated condition and the page expected to bear its date is washed out.

The only other extant relic is a pair of *Kharavan* (wooden sandals) placed on a *chauki* (a low wooden stool), used by Guru Tegh Bahadur and bestowed upon Balaki Ram on the eve of his departure for Assam. The original painting of the Guru, drawn by a contemporary painter of Shaista Khan's court, is also missing and its beautiful colour copy stands exhibited alongwith the above holy items in the said Gurdwara Nanak Shahi.

The two *hukumnamas* (edicts) of Guru Gobind Singh, addressed to the Dhaka Sangat, found in Gurdwara Sangat Tola at the time of the surrender of Pakistani Army to General Jagjit Singh Arora, are no longer available there.

In order to preserve all that which is now extant, to retrieve all that which has been usurped, or is unauthorisely occupied, and to re-establish the desecrated and obliterated one, Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar should take immediate necessary steps with due permission and help of the Bangladesh Government and in collaboration with the Sikh organisations of West Bengal and the neighbouring countries (such as Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Japan) as well as of the NRIs of the UK and USA, etc. under the kind advice of the Indian High commission in Bangladesh.

At present only a non-official committee, called the Bangladesh Gurdwara Management Board, Calcutta, is engaged in make-shift arrangements for their upkeep under very peculiar circumstances. A weekly congregation is held by it in Gurdwara Nanakshahi, on every Friday, which is attended mostly by the devoted staff of the Indian High Commission, some Sikh devotees from the neighbouring lands and some devout Hindu residents of Dhaka.

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TADA against Sikhs alive & kicking?

The lawless law TADA is operational. Eleven years after he allegedly backed the demand for creation of Khalistan, in a speech at Gurdwara Bangla Sahib, a Delhi Court has slapped Tada on Lok Sabha member Simranjit Singh Mann and framed sedition charges against him for supporting the cause of militants through his address.

Holding that a *prima facie* case is made out against the accused, designated judge S.N. Dhingra charged him under Section 124(A) (Sedition) of the IPC and Section 4(2) of Tada for supporting disruptive activities. Mann, who is a Shiromani Akali Dal (Mann) MP from Sangrur, pleaded not guilty to the charges and preferred trial. The trial court had closed the case against Mann and another leader, Talib Singh, on April 8 last year saying police was not interested in making the accused available and sending them to

face trial. However, the case was reopened in September following a Supreme Court order which said the trial court had not followed proper procedure.

Framing charges against Mann, the court said: "On April 7, 1991 at Gurdwara Bangla Sahib, you delivered a speech before a large gathering and by your speech.... attempted to bring into hatred and contempt, the Government of India established by law and incited people to create a separate sovereign independent state in the name of Khalistan."

[Courtesy: *The Telegraph*]

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Sikhs in jail can wear 'Patka'

T.R. Ramchandran reports from New Delhi: Acting on a complaint from the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) that Sikhs brought to lock-ups or jails in the national capital are forced to remove their turbans, the Delhi police has decided to allow Sikh accused persons to use "patka" in lock-up.

The NCM had received general complaints from Sikh organisations that whenever Sikhs are brought to the lock-up, they are forced to remove their turbans without being provided a "patka" or a cloth to cover their heads.

"The forcible removal of turbans of Sikhs by any authority is against the Sikh tradition, "the NCM observed in a letter to the Commissioner of Police on the advice of its Vice-Chairman, Tarlochan Singh.

The Additional Commissioner of Police, General Administration, Delhi Police, Mr. Mansur Ali Sayed, replied to the NCM that the issue of forcible removal of turbans of Sikhs brought to lock-up/jails has been examined. "The final outcome of the case is that Sikh accused persons have been allowed to use "patka" in lock-up."

Mr Sayed has further informed the NCM that all concerned are being briefed on this issue by the district DCP/DAP III Bn, Crime and IGI Airport.

[Courtesy: *The Tribune*]

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Sikh History: NCERT to correct inaccuracies

According to *The Tribune* News Service, The NCERT has agreed to change objectionable portions regarding Sikhs from Class XI books.

The Chairman of the National Commission for Minorities, Mr Tarlochan Singh, reacting to a news report in *The Tribune*, had convened a meeting of senior NCERT officials last January.

The officials, led by Secretary of the NCERT, Mr Satindra Singh, assured the commission that they would "remove all objectionable portions."

Mr Tarlochan Singh said he was consulting scholars of Sikh history to study the NCERT books and point out the objectionable portions, while providing authentic details.

The Sikh Core Group member, Dr M.S. Rahi, had pointed out to several denigrating references to the Sikh Gurus and wrong interpretation of historical facts.

The NCERT officials apologised for the denigrating references, and stated that the meagre time period for the preparation of the book had resulted in the "error".

The book, for instance, stated that Guru Nanak "renounced the world, and Guru Gobind Singh was described as "a devotee of goddess Chandi" ignoring the fact that Sikhism as a faith did not accept any "avatars" as intermediaries between God and humanity.

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In the Aftermath of 1984

June 85 Air India Fl. 182 Crash recalled: Disclosure by Sikh activist

Vancouver (British Columbia): A Sikh activist was jailed for five years after becoming the first person to admit his guilt in the 1985 bombing of Air India flight 182, the world's deadliest act of aviation sabotage before September 11, 2001.

Inderjit Singh Reyat, 51, pleaded guilty to manslaughter in the 1985 Kanishka attack, admitting he had helped acquire materials used to make the bomb. But prosecutors said Reyat did not know who made the bomb and thought the equipment would be used to make bombs for use in India, and not to down a commercial airliner.

All 329 people aboard flight 182 were killed when the Boeing 747 crashed off the Atlantic coast of Ireland on June 23, 1985.

The bombing, as well as a parallel blast an hour before, that killed two workers at Tokyo's Narita Airport, were alleged to be the work of Sikh separatists seeking revenge for the Indian army's 1984 storming of the Golden Temple in Amritsar.

Police alleged that both bombs were built in British Columbia and loaded on to Canadian flights, that connected with Air India jets, by an unknown man who paid cash for the tickets but did not board the aircraft himself.

Reyat, who wore dark blue turban and tan jacket to the courtroom, has already served 10 years on a manslaughter conviction for helping to build the Tokyo airport bomb.

The other defendants, Ripudaman Singh Malik and Ajaib Singh Bagri, were not present at the hearing, which took place in a high-security courtroom specially built for the trial.

Reyat was arrested on June 6, 2001, while serving the final days of the 10-year sentence for manslaughter for building the bomb that exploded in Narita, while luggage was being transferred to an Air India Flight from Tokyo to Bangkok.

[Courtesy: *The Telegraph*, 12.2.03]

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Gurbani in Braille for the ‘visually challenged’

For over two decades, Dr Kunwar Singh Negi of Dehra Dun has served the visually handicapped people by producing literature in Braille, with special reference to *Gurbani*.

Recipient of Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan for his single minded services, 75-year-old Dr Negi is the founder-secretary of Maharaja Ranjit Singh National Braille Press Society, Ajabpur Danda, Divya Vihar, PO Nehru Gram, Dehru Dun. 248001, a registered society that produces (and distributes free of cost) braille literature.

More recently, the society brought out a notable publication in Punjabi Braille titled "Guru Bal Gatha" in Gurmukhi script, released at a ceremonial function graced by Sr. Surjit Singh Barnala, Governor of Uttaranchal (now in Andhra Pradesh).

The project has been financed and supported by Dr. Jasjit Singh Ahluwalia, MD (and his wife) of the University of Kansas School of Medicines, USA.

For the Society's computer programme donations will be gratefully accepted by Dr Negi at the abovenoted address.

[Ed. SR]