

Sikhism's Global Outreach: The Role of SGPC

THE LAST FIVE YEARS HAVE witnessed a ferment in the Sikh faith across continents. Its prime motive force has been a series of celebrations - from the Amrit initiation of the Khalsa Panth by Guru Gobind Singhji (1699 to 1999) to the fourth centennial of Pehla Prakash of Adi Granth Sahib in 2004. While the pieties and festivities are welcome reminders, a deeper introspection is no less important, considering that the people of the world are closer than at any time in history. The glorious Guru Nanak thoughtfully and vigorously proclaimed the divine message far beyond the Indian subcontinent. He travelled to some of the toughest destinations: Tibet, deep in Northern Himalayas, Chittagaon in the East, Rameswaram and Sri Lanka in the South and - incredibly but significantly - by sea and land to Mecca and Baghdad - the heartland of Islam.

Religion for Mankind: The Sikhs as an outgoing people have benefitted tremendously from Guru Nanak's teachings and travels. Migrants have nurtured the faith for a century and more in far off countries, from Kenya to Canada to California. Sikhism has been adopted by Americans and a small but significant minority of Europeans. In tracts of India, the Sikh communities flourish in several states well beyond the confines of (a much vivisected) Punjab - land of Five Rivers. The community flourishes in Australia and New Zealand, even as our brethren in Malaysia and Singapore boast of continuity of generations despite many socio-cultural pressures.

Domain of Inspiration: Sikhs, irrespective of nationality and ethnicity, look up to Amritsar as the God-ordained capital city, notwithstanding its labyrinthine lanes, open drains and chaotic traffic. An indifferent state government and incompetent municipality have never bothered to develop amenities aimed at tourists and pilgrims. SGPC - the statutory organisation for holy Sikh shrines in Northern India has therefore to act beyond the call of duty, and assume a comprehensive responsibility as the premier rallying point for global Sikhism. In this context the specific reforms in SGPC adumbrated by Gurdip Singh Grewal [SR March 2005] are relevant. The premier body needs to be rid of divisive politics, and strengthened in its global outreach through advisory boards and similar regional bodies. Initiatives on the lines of Vishwa Sikh Sammelan (1995) are overdue. The moral authority vested in the Akal Takht should be used sparingly, that too must be tempered with toleration and compassion.

Dynamics: The 21st century has doubtless thrown up many challenges. Sikhs as a dynamic community have the capacity as well as ingenuity to turn these challenges into opportunities, as amply illustrated by the aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001 and the outrageous killing of Balbir Singh Sodhi in Phoenix, Arizona. In the worldly setting the Sikh *swaroop* is the best assertion of our sovereign faith. Guru Nanak's gentle persuasion that human body is at once an opportunity and a challenge to discovery of one's true self, finds an echo in the creative art of Michelangelo (1475-1564) - the Italian philosopher-sculptor, and his depiction of human body as a "classical ideal". In a manner of speaking, Sikhism signifies much more than conventional religion, it is a way of life, singularly exuberant and free from the baggage of rigid ritual or idol worship. There is, arguably, a danger implicit in the

burgeoning ceremonialism connected with Guru Granth Sahib, as the granthis (priests) assertively discourage common folk from reading the holy text. Coordination between SGPC's Dharam Prachar Committee as a semi-formal structure and the Chandigarh-based Confederation can pay good dividends. Gurmat colleges should be revitalized and multiplied.

Universal Inputs: While professional granthis need to follow an enlightened methodology to disseminate *Guruvani*, another area of scholarship also calls for urgent attention. This is the university "chairs" of Sikh studies in India and abroad - which enter the esoteric domain of defining and delimiting Sikhism. Time and again, these studies focus on the culture and history, arguing that Sikhism is somehow rooted in Punjab, that its constituents are historically specific. Such a confining definition is itself a product of historical processes that trace roots and seek geneologies, bypassing the human spirit and universality of moral values. The Akal Takht as an institution can regulate religious discourse and practice - modifying the latter, while asserting their eternal validity and transcendental values. The spirit of martyrdom is one example of this commonality. Guru Arjun's martyrdom and Guru Tegh Bahadur's *Shahidi* in Delhi's Chandni Chowk have a universal relevance and purpose - upholding freedom of human spirit. Banda Bahadur and thousands of martyrs of the 18th Century could belong to the whole human race. These sacrifices could have been for emancipation of slaves in North America, or ending the repression of "Indians" of Mexican Chiapas. What can be more relevant to the present age than Guru Nanak's protest against corruption among hegemonic rulers and the unspeakable excesses of the priestly class against "untouchables"?

Academia as Powerhouse: It is heartening to watch the centres of comparative Sikh studies, from Madurai to Santa Barbara and back to New York's Hofstra University. Institutions of higher learning need to deliberate upon their style of functioning as well as their programs. Do these programs enhance and promote the Sikh perspectives, or remain mired in needless controversy? Personalized theorization (e.g. Oberoi, Pashuara Singh, McLeod, et al) is best avoided. Youth - the future generation - and a new terminology rooted in Scripture should become the focus of Sikh studies. Two good examples are reflected in W. Owen Cole's report (SR March 2005) and the I.J. Singh's "The power of Heritage" (SR Oct. 04) as also the Bindra Chair Symposium (2004) at Hofstra University, New York, not to speak of the GNDU symposium on SGGS late last year, and the proactive Guru Nanak Chair at Madurai Kamaraj University. Let the Sikh studies be disenthralled from pettyfoggery and brought into the sunshine of *Gurmat's* pragmatism, in robust optimistic terms. So when we speak of the manifest Reality let us repose faith in the symbology that derives from the Divine power: the *Amrit vela*, Five *Gunas*, Five *Tatwas*, Five *Baanis*, Five K's in keeping with the Five *Khands* enumerated in Japuji, and promoting the principle of *seva* - humanitarian welfare - as exemplified by Bhai Kanhaiya, Bhagat Puran Singh and, in present times, by Bhagwant Singh Dalawari of Tapovan.

Let the *Shabda* of SGGS be proclaimed for the people of the world - not confined to Gurdwaras or kept in multiple wraps. Let the society **benefit** from its message: to subordinate ego, to spread sweetness and light, to banish bigotry, to rise above materialist existence, to befriend the poor. It would be a pity if the SGPC or the Akal Takht were to pass edicts to curb translations of *Gurbani* - as recently reported. At

best, let the august religious institution sponsor, or authorize, translations, not only in Indian languages but in Spanish, Chinese and other world languages. The *Akhand Path*, as a ritual, must be redefined and its spirituality re-asserted. Kirtan sessions at the Harmandir Sahib must reflect the classical realms of music set by the holy Gurus, so as to awaken the inner consciousness - free from drift and mundane repetition.

Discourse & Practice: Sikhism is clearly the faith of the future. Its true character must be encouraged to blossom. One recent instance of its demonstration was witnessed at Barcelona, Spain, during July 2004 at the Parliament of World's Religions. Sikhs from UK won the people's heart by their beautiful and imaginative display of *Seva* and *Simran* - at daily *langar* and spell-binding kirtan sessions - a gift of Birmingham's **Nishkam Sewak Jatha**. The group made one proud in authentic resplendent Sikh *swaroop*. The youth - like Rabbi Singh Shergill - shone in their turbans and beards, *chunnis* and *dupattas*. It was truly, an act of faith. The cause for concern is the way we treat so-called deviants, (*patit*) and place them **outside** the pale of Sikhism - thereby triggering a negative growth of religion in terms of demography. No wonder Punjab shows a decline in the Sikh population. Every *patit* is potentially reclaimable; God sustains even the ungrateful. SGPC would do well to promote *inclusive* Sikhism - not *exclusive* eliteism. There is no place for excommunication in God's realm.

