

Ratan Singh Bhangu's Prachin Panth Prakash

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Professor Gurtej Singh, formerly of the I.A.S., has undertaken the task of translating Prachin Panth Prakash of Ratan Singh Bhangu (d. 1846) - a descendant of Mahtab Singh (who had, along with young Sukha Singh, assassinated Massa Ranghar, the tyrannical Zakariya Khan's deputy, in 1740, as punishment for desecrating the precincts of Harimandir Sahib). We publish here the Introduction, in the hope that the book can be serialized ahead of its publication.

- Ed. S.R.

The Significance of Bhangu

An introduction to Bhangu's Sri GurPanth Prakash

*The book was born out of the desire of the 19th Century British colonisers to examine whether the Sikh political power in Punjab was legitimate. It was not an academic question for them. The use of the then popular theory of sovereignty as an aid to expansion of the British East India Company controlled territory, was the obvious motive. Sensing that danger, **Rattan Singh took upon himself the task of proving that the Sikh political power was perfectly legitimate.** He begins by reiterating the basic Sikh theory of polity. It must be considered authentic because it is in accord with the religious text and coming from Bhangu, who himself belonged to the ruling aristocracy, it perhaps also represents its thought on the subject.*

Ratan Singh Bhangu's explanation is that all power belongs to God who is the True Sovereign. God entrusted it to Guru Nanak. In certain historical circumstances, Guru Nanak entrusted it to the Mughal Babar. The pact with him was that he would rule justly. Certain markers for ruling justly were settled. The pact included terms that when the rulers took to oppression, the power to rule would be withdrawn from them. Markers for oppression were again fixed. It included the martyrdom of the Gurus and their followers. This is precisely the theory which has been expressed by another powerful myth of Sikh history about the grant of seven handfuls of cannabis leaves to Babar, signifying rule for seven generations. Bereft of the myths spun by the early Sikh historians, the basic theory presented by Bhangu is that oppression, particularly when it crosses all limits, takes away the justification to rule completely. This accords the same importance to the concept of human rights, the right of unhindered self development and freedom of faith as the modern day concept of legitimacy does.

In relating the story of Guru Nanak, Bhangu seeks to establish that the Guru was indeed a special representative of God. He thinks that he was the essence of all incarnations and had an edge over them all. This theory is in accord with the one propounded in the compositions of bards which forms an epilogue to the Guru Granth. His interpretation of the mission of Nanak, which he propounds in the context of Guru's travels, is nearest to the original and depicts Sikhi as the faith of a modern person. The basic concern of Nanak, according to him was, to seek adherents to Truth and God alone and to eliminate the worship of 'pretender gods' and abjuring belief in false faiths. The universal concerns of Nanak are emphasised by him. In comparison, he consciously rejects the Hindu faith, though he continues to use the term Hindu for the Sikhs.

His interpretation of the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur is equally significant. He is clear that the martyrdom was for the freedom to practise religion. The first reaction of the Hindu priests was to execute the prescribed rituals and get their numerous gods and goddesses to intervene. They were not successful. He indicates that there was a pact with the

representatives of Hinduism that after the Guru had made the supreme sacrifice entire Hindu India would join the Sikhs in overthrowing the Mughal rule. That was in nature of a solemn undertaking by the Hindus. In the subsequent pages, throughout his work, he makes it a point to bring out that instead the Hindus joined the Mughals in eliminating the Sikhs root and branch. In the story of Banda Bahadur, he lets it be known that they were absolutely hand in glove with the Mughals. This observation is confirmed on reading the contemporary historical record. Any Hindu who possessed any political weight in Mughal India was present with the Mughal army seeking to exterminate Banda.

Particularly in the section dealing with the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur, he propounds the Sikh theory of martyrdom, According to it, martyrdom must be for a general cause, it must be voluntary and its aim should be to bring about a far reaching political change. A martyr should be of exceptionally high moral character. After being martyred, he goes to the True Court and appeals to God to withdraw the sanction to rule to the oppressive group. The mode of affecting change is the religious preceptors of the ruling oppressive people on earth are dismissed from the True Court and are relegated to some obscure corner at the back of the Court. It is thereafter the duty of the God-oriented followers of the martyr to strive in every way to overthrow the regime which has lost the mandate to govern. It is required to act God in mundane affairs and to responsibly implement His decree for change. In this context he declares the Order of the Khalsa to be God itself. He will complete his theory of martyrdom, with reference to more martyrs including the two younger sons of Guru Gobind Singh and others later in the book.

His description of the creation of the Khalsa has several significant features. Whatever the Guru has to say to the disciples, is said openly in a loud voice and in the presence of a huge congregation. There are no secret magical words or formulae of esoteric significance that are imparted on the occasion, as was the practise of several religious orders in India. The Khalsa is ever to strive for political freedom and as an assertion of that resolve it must assert the right to use weapons. This is symbolised by the injunction not to part with the kirpan. Strict code of conduct is prescribed so that the use of force is minutely governed, controlled and directed towards higher spiritual aims of humankind. These are the first lessons in open diplomacy imparted by the Guru to the Khalsa.

Bhangu understands the Order of the Khalsa as successor to the Guru, also therefore divine in nature and hence politically sovereign. Those who join the voluntary Khalsa force renounce all notions of caste, give up previous faith, abandon all superstition, ritualism and cant, undertake to live for general welfare of creation and intensely pursue moral values perceived as attributes of God. He believes that the Tenth Guru accepted Order of the Khalsa to be his Guru on the same analogy as Nanak accepting Guru Angad as Guru.

Rattan Singh's history of the rise and spread of the Khalsa Panth, is a unique description and compares with nothing else in Sikh historical writings. On this supposedly 'darkest period of Sikh history' Bhangu throws a flood of light. It is a pity that his information has not been fully used. According to him the Sikh society was consciously divided into three sections. One part was to consist of the normal householders whose only duty was to provide food and clothing to the political elements. They were expected to strictly live by the sweat of their brow and to share the surpluses with the militant Sikhs. The second part consisted of the Sikhs in services. They were to maintain faith intact and to remain neutral in political affairs. They were to be regarded as full-fledged members of the panth, except that they were to be subjected to token punishment (tankhah) and had to wait outside the panthic gathering before being asked to participate as equals of all others and fully entitled to give opinion on the common welfare of the entire panth. The third part consisted of the

fighting Sikhs always on the move. They were entitled to extract articles of bare subsistence from the householder Sikhs according to their capacity. For the purchase of other essential commodities (presumably military hardware) they were entitled to exclusive use of gurdwara funds. For this purpose there was a section of them, consisting perhaps of the elderly, which was to act as caretakers of the gurdwaras. In addition the militant Sikhs were allowed to loot and plunder the state treasuries, to levy taxes and to extract tributes from those known to be enemies of the Sikhs. The fighting section apparently had at least two brigades of efficient striking force. One, most admired brigade consisted of the supple and powerful young knights of exceptional courage and well trained in guerrilla warfare. They were to be efficient and deadly and to always remain ready to deliver the death dealing sting. In dare-devilry they were to be equal to the deadliest anywhere. These were perhaps known as the Bhujangi Dal. Bhujang of course, is a 'deadly cobra in a striking posture.' The remaining warriors went under the collective name of Nihangs or the Alligator Brigade, clad in blue. They were presumably little elderly soldiers less mobile but equally courageous and core of the main Khalsa voluntary army. This arrangement appears to have persisted until the Sikhs organised themselves into the Taruna and Buddha Dals and eventually into misls.

The rest (in first section) is descriptive with a greater part going to describe the battles of the Tenth Guru. Except where he depends upon Sukha Singh's Gurbilas, his depiction of Sikh history appears to have a distinct ring of authenticity.

[To be continued]

