

BACK TO THE FUTURE

As we stand on the threshold of *The Sikh Review*'s fiftieth year of publication our memory lane is crowded with recollection of the many men and women of dedication who started and sustained this Journal with their time, toil and vision, their writings and advocacy. Many of them are not around any more. So the pendulum of our thought process swings from hope to despair and back again to sober optimism, for a whole new band of younger thinkers - writers and commentators has emerged during the 1980's, and 90's both in India and abroad, thanks to the computer websites reaching out to the younger generation of curious and informed readers.

The religious debate has acquired sharp focus, even a certain piquancy and occasional belligerence. Is religion threatened by an excess of modernity, or by an overdose of fundamentalism? Despite mushrooming cults and a boom in the globetrotting godmen of various brands there has been an increase in tensions, even violence, and a steady decline in the practice of truth and morality. Peace and progress continue to elude vast sections of humanity. Civilized society lives in fear and awe of terrorism. Economies and the corporate sector are plagued with uncertainties, while the working of governments remains clogged with bureaucratic rigmarole, insensitive to people's welfare.

It is upto each and everyone one of us to determine what the society and the country we live in is going to be like. As Jean Paul Sartre wrote, it is not individual freedom that is always at stake. *The Sikh Review* set out to make a difference, to enlarge and deepen our understanding and illumine it with the wisdom of Guru Granth Sahib, to inspire courage in the light of the moral tradition set by the Gurus, a willingness to make sacrifice where - and whenever - we find injustice. The coherent and compelling message of Sikhism transcends barriers of continents, race and time. Its universal quality and its capacity to arouse the nobler instincts in the humans need to be realized and disseminated.

On the contextual plane of history the emancipatory Sikh struggle for justice and dignity continues, particularly within the Indian subcontinent. Eversince India gained its independence in 1947, the crisis of aspirational deprivation for the Sikhs has only deepened, even as we have tried to come to terms with the ways of the world.

Since its inception the dynamics of Sikh religion has been rooted in freedom, as an inalienable right and a moral imperative. Struggle for a free and just society has characterized its early history right upto the advent of 18th century Sikh confederacy and the establishment of the Sikh kingdom at Lahore by Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1799. When the British decided to transfer power to Indians, carving out a Muslim Pakistan, the Sikhs were designated as the 'third party' to negotiations, but our leaders opted for staying with India and so was the Panjab province bifurcated - for the eastern wing to serve as the Sikh homeland.

However, after India achieved independence, Sikhs have been victims of political subterfuge. The "glow of freedom" that Nehru had promised was given a short shrift. The Constitution, adopted on 26 Jan 1950, incorporated a clause that clubbed Sikhs as "Hindus" despite protest. "Reorganized" Punjab in 1966 was peremptorily deprived of Punjabi-speaking territories of Ambala, Kangra and Dalhousie, as well as its capital, Chandigarh which has since become

"union territory", partly because the Hindu Punjabi disowned his mother-tongue. The Congress regime under Indira Gandhi systematically weakened the Punjab economy and undermined the Sikhism's political wing, Shiromani Akali Dal, even after the border state had borne the brunt of Indo-Pak war of 1965.

Disaster struck the Sikhs in June 1984 when India's own army was ordered to "occupy" Punjab and launch an assault on the holy shrine at Amritsar. That invasion of Harmandir Sahib and massacre of the unwary pilgrims was "celebrated" by the extremist Hindus, even as all the religious leaders - jagatguru Shankaracharyas maintained pregnant silence over the brutal assault. Significantly, it was Pope John Paul II in the distant Vatican who publicly commiserated with the Sikhs in a speech delivered from St. Peters Square on 10 June 1984.

The sacrilegious assault inevitably had its repercussions. That year, on 31 October, in a grim retribution, Mrs G was assassinated. What followed was a gruesome re-enactment of Nazi Germany's *pogrom* against Jews. Instead of gas chambers, the fanatical Hindus (who regarded Mrs G. as Durga incarnate) used petrol to burn unwary Sikhs in Delhi and across the 'cow belt'; what followed was the most brutal massacre of innocents since Ahmed Shah Abdali. The evidence uncovered by human rights and civil liberty organisations as well as commissions of inquiry disclosed brutal premeditation, including supply of petrol cans, electoral rolls to identify Sikh family residences, the confinement of Sikh policemen to barracks even as the rest of police force stood passively as bemused spectators. Again the diehard Hindus 'celebrated' the carnage, blaming it on the two young assassins Beant Singh and Satwant Singh. The lumpen elements had four field days to kill, burn and plunder - until the arrival of foreign heads of states for Mrs G's state funeral over the weekend.

In retrospect (and in the context of the recent killing of Muslims in Gujarat), the lumpen crowds were led from the front by leaders of the party in power. The brutality against Sikhs stemmed in part from the intense jealousy against the urban Sikhs who had, after trauma of Partition, re-established themselves as leaders in commerce and industry and - regrettably - adopted a rather ostentatious lifestyle. But the more tragic aspect of the *pogrom* is that majority of victims belonged to the poorest sections of Sikhs living in Trilokpuri and other trans-Yamuna shanties.

Eighteen years later, the guilty men remain unpunished. The accusatory questions posed by no less a person than the illustrious ex-chief justice Ranjit Singh Narula [The *Ghalughara* SR, Sept. 2000] have not been answered. Sikhs on their part have learned the lesson that violence, even when justified leads to more violence, and escalation is unending.

More recently, in the aftermath of Sept.11, 2001, the Indian government has been bending over backwards to toe the George Bush line. Although Punjab had witnessed state repression and violation of human rights over a decade (see the UK Medical Foundation for Care of Victims of Torture Report, SR March and June 2001), and an unknown number of the Sikhs continue to be held under detention, peace and harmony have returned to the Punjab since mid 1990's.

Yet in a bizarre gesture of hostility to the Sikhs, the Indian home ministry this year forwarded to Pakistan a list of 20 terrorists who are supposed to have found sanctuary across the border, seeking that they be handed over to India for trial. Ten of these twenty bear Sikh names, ferreted

out from the days of militancy in Punjab during 1980s. The inclusion of these "relics" of a bygone era is not only out of context but a sinister stratagem to malign the Sikhs and pour salt on their wounds at a time when thousands of India's troops, including the brave Sikh regiments, have been guarding the Indo-Pak border. This juxtaposition with the terrorists affiliated to Al Qaeda outfits of Osama bin-Laden cannot be accidental. It is of a piece with the past record of RAW and other intelligence agencies who had penetrated the ranks of militants in Punjab to liquidate Sikhs in the name of quelling terrorism. In consequence, a whole generation of Punjabi youth has been lost - to fake encounters or illegal emigration - or to apostasy, with hundreds held captive in alien lands or drowned in the Mediterranean Sea.

Have these matters been raised by Akalis in the NDA coalition or the Indian Parliament? Does anybody - MP or Minister - care?

The Sikhs were supposed to disseminate Guru Nanak's message of love and amity and root out injustice. Instead, a whole nation is under siege - at odds not only with the powers - that - be but also within its own ranks, its leadership mired in petty-fogging power politics, its religious institutions hijacked by a clutch of semi-literate priesthood blissfully unaware of the people's aspirations and unwilling to unlock the wisdom and moral grandeur of *GurSikhi*. When will the tide turn?

