

BEING AND BECOMING A SIKH

By Dr. I. J. Singh

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A review by Gurmukh Singh*

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“The journey of Sikhism is itself the destination.” writes Dr I J Singh, as he invites us to accompany him on yet another adventure in the world of Sikhism. This simple statement also sums up the underlying theme of his three collections of essays published to date: *Sikhs and Sikhism – A View with a Bias*; *The Sikh Way – A Pilgrim’s Progress*; and now the third, *Being and Becoming a Sikh*.

Dr I J Singh, Professor of Anatomy at New York University, explores everyday topics in the searchlight of Sikh teachings. Essays on diverse topics look at today’s world from the Sikh perspective. The reader accompanies the author in the uncharted territory of 21st Century topics looking for the path shown by the Guru’s *Gurbani* formulae relevant to all times and places.

The essays do not teach. They show the student of Sikhism how to learn. They are enabling DIY (do-it-yourself) notes for the serious student of Sikhism to explore further and reach own conclusions, in the company of other seekers in *sangat* (the holy congregation in the presence of the Guru), or through own research and analysis. Indeed, each essay is an exciting game of “spot the Guru’s signposting” in this area.

Being and Becoming a Sikh, released recently, continues with the same theme, but with a noticeable difference: the author has come down more firmly than is his usual style on certain issues, e.g. distinct Sikh identity and human rights. As the author says in the preface, “.happy should be the author who has one good idea in his life time to explore and develop.” *Being and Becoming a Sikh* is Dr Singh’s one good idea, which he continues to explore and develop in novel and exciting ways. To be born a Sikh is achieved immediately on arrival in this world; but to become one “remains a work in progress” till the end of this life’s journey.

From his own background, it is clear that Dr Singh discovered Sikhism after his arrival in New York in 1960. His own isolation in a non-Sikh milieu put him on the road to self-discovery. In fact he wonders what sort of a Sikh he would have been in a predominantly Sikh environment – a pointer here to the frequently heard observation that *Sikhi* has migrated to places outside Panjab. Those born in Sikh families in Panjab often do not bother to research and discover *Sikhi* for themselves. Mostly they go through the life-long *ritual* of being Sikhs.

I empathise with the author, having landed at Tilbury (London) from a ship in the same year (1960) in the middle of a similar non-Sikh society in which we were treated as “aliens”. The more we were treated as such, the greater our resolve to take up the challenge: to know more about Sikh religion and tradition and to keep our Sikh identity intact.

This third collection of essays carries a brilliant introduction by Satwinder Singh Gossal of Ontario. It summarises the diverse topics covered in a way I have not seen done for a long time. The first chapter on “Becoming a Sikh – A work in progress” is Dr Singh’s own introduction to the diverse aspects of modern life looked at from the Sikh perspective. It is his invitation to the reader to join him on this exciting journey of self-discovery of what it means to be a Sikh. The experience of becoming a Sikh is collective, in congregation, as well as within the self. He restates the *ghaal* and *nadar* concepts of Sikhism whereby ‘honest self-effort’ is in one’s own hands but “the results are like ‘pure grace’, like manna from heaven.” The message of Sikhism is timeless (true for all times and places) and “that becomes our way to escape the cruel dimension of time and its limitation.” In the words of Satwinder Singh Gossal, a “zen-like sensation” is experienced on reading such profound truths about the liberating spirit of *Sikhi*. We realise how we have incrementally given up our Guru-given freedom, to become slaves of ritualism, fashion and fads. We have allowed ourselves to become entrapped by the cruel dimension of time and its limitations.

There is a progressive change in the life of a serious student of *Sikhi* **from being a Sikh to becoming one**, but not quite. For that reason “A Sikh remains a work in progress”.

The distinct Sikh appearance is willed to the Sikhs by the Guru. It makes the Sikhs different. The question is how to model our lives so that our difference makes a statement (to ourselves and to the world). Sikh appearance is not slave to current trends and fads but it makes a statement to the world of a “rich powerful and eloquent tradition”. To have the courage to stand out is to live freely; and to live freely is to be modern.

Fundamentalism and fanaticism is a current global theme to which Dr Singh has devoted a chapter. (The topic has also been further discussed in a slightly different context by him and Amarपाल Singh Khanna, in an article in *The Sikh Review* - April 2003). Fundamentalism continually seeks guidance from basic principles of one’s faith, and, contrary to popular belief, it cannot be inherently evil. Fanatics have own agenda of intolerance and persecution. Rejection of religion, or a secular state does not necessarily promote tolerance. Secularism itself can become fanatical and aggressive. Dr Singh’s pointer to recent goings on in secular India and the appearance of “talibanized Sikhs”, illustrate that fanaticism can feed on any system by taking it to the extreme to serve own ends. Reference to fundamentals of one’s belief adds, and intolerance and fanaticism detract, from the true spirit of religion. This is also one of the main teachings of Guru Nanak, which respected the ritual-free fundamentals of all religions and opposed - with own life if necessary - any form of religious bigotry.

In the chapter, “On Pigeonholing Sikhs”, the author appears to have re-opened the question of classifying Sikhs, which, apparently, had been settled in the preceding essay on “The art of nation building.” The view expressed is that “The people that constitute a nation are bound together less by geography and arbitrary lines drawn in the sand than by a shared history and heritage.” And later, “It is interesting to look back in history and visualize how the Gurus fulfilled their mandate of developing the nation of Sikhism, the infrastructure and the land of Punjab.” And concluding, **“I believe the Gurus gave us a model for nation building and set us**

on a path for doing so by their very deliberate efforts, spanning generations, to build new cities, townships and spiritual communities across Panjab.”

Thus, no doubt is left that Sikhism is a religion and the Sikhs were systematically nurtured by the Gurus as a nation. The Sikhs are a theo-political nation. That is their classification or “Pigeonhole”! However, in the next article, “On Pigeonholing Sikhs”, the author seems to retract some of the earlier historical evidence when discussing vague expressions like *Qaum* and ethnicity for which there are no precise definitions. There is some futile discussion looking for the relevance of these labels in case of the Sikhs – a reflection of the debate going on about classifying British Sikhs under the race relations legislation.

Almost reluctantly, the author seems to accept that, like the Jews, “Sikhs, too, seem to have prevailed and the British will soon recognize them as an ethnic minority. Here, too, the worldwide distribution of Sikhs defies any narrow definitions of race, nation or ethnicity.” Perhaps the author would have come to a firm and unambiguous conclusion if the most relevant question had been asked at the outset: “Do the Sikhs deserve to be classified as a distinct community in the countries they live in?”

The distinct Sikh identity is discussed from a number of aspects. Essays on “The power of a uniform”, and “Patkas and hats with turbans as a rite of passage” seem to start low key, but conclude with a powerful and inspiring message. There is a need to heed the lessons “etched on the Sikh psyche and consciousness” three centuries ago. Guru Gobind Singh may not appear these days before his Sikhs flashing a naked sword and demanding a head; but your head is still on the line! “The Guru still challenges you to live fully and fearlessly.... Events post 9/11 have once again driven these issues home to us.” Articles of faith provide a constant in the formula of truthful and fearless Sikh living. **“The teachings are not just for the time when they were first enunciated, but for all time, and they are most powerfully expressed through the five articles of faith.”**

The underlying theme of the essays on “The magic and mystery of music” and “Singing and dancing through life” questions the puritan - and sometimes partisan - stance of “the guardians of our tradition” in recent years. While the traditional *ragis*, many hardly conversant with prescribed Gurbani *ragas*, get away with popular folk tunes and catchy rhythms, others like Dya Singh of Australia, who are taking the universal message of Gurbani to world audiences are questioned. Through fusion of Indian and western musical traditions, Dya Singh, trained in *ragas*, has brought “the music of our Gurus and their teachings to those who will never hear them otherwise.” Dr Singh’s main criterion for Gurbani *sangeet* is that the ultimate “goal of *keertan* is to train the inner ear – the heart and soul – that responds and vibrates to the celestial music within music that springs without chords being struck...” The test for acceptable Gurbani *keertan* would appear to be subjective, according to the music ear of the listener.

Music, singing and dancing are part of participative family living to which Sikhism subscribes. Concludes Dr Singh, “If the heart and the soul can sing and dance with joy, why can’t the feet? The puritan response would be that this could be a slippery slope to less spiritual and more physical forms of enjoyment. However, we need to

keep in mind Guru Nanak's art of living: being in the water but keeping the wings dry like a *murgabi* (sea gull).

And so Dr I J Singh continues with his interpretation of the Sikh ideals. Amongst the wide range of topics are: religious tolerance; human rights; management of Gurdwaras; central Sikh organisations and decision-making processes; neglect of recent Sikh history by Sikh chairs at western universities; and bridging the generation gap.

We are "a people of the Book, of ideas, of *ragas* and rhythm." Dr Singh concludes with a *chardhi kala* positive challenge, "The void between what we preach and how we live should give us some small pause for reflection, If our existence appears to hang in the balance today, look at it as an opportunity. "*Carpe diem* – seize the day – as some would say."

Sikhism is unique; it is challenging; it is exciting; and it is a process of continual and continuous self-discovery in the light of the Guru's timeless and universal teachings. Excellent reading, especially for the young and the busy professionals.



EXPLORING SIKH SPIRITUALITY
Amid the Paradox of Stereotyping in American Setting
By Nirmal Singh
Published by Sanbun Publishers, New Delhi (2003)
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A review by Noel Q King*

The writer is one of those jewels in the diadem of the Gurus. He has faithfully kept up his prayers and studies throughout a long life as a soldier and a representative of his nation abroad. Now he continues his *sewa* to the entire universe by giving us a very clear statement about what Sikh spirituality and faith can mean in relation to spiritual, ethical and social issues confronting us.

In eleven chapters he tells us of the beginnings and the diaspora of the Sikhs; their teachings and precepts on life, death, purpose and emancipation from the round of incarnation. He illuminates their experience of suffering and human travail and their ministry to all human beings and Nature; going on from the meaning of the holy books and music, to American ways of spirituality, he tells us various ways the Sikhs have come to face the stereotyping and victimization that has so grossly and unfairly been brought to bear upon them in these last two years.

I am particularly impressed by his use of local history, contemporary happening and Sikh memories of the past and the brilliance of the practical measures he proposes. The book has a preface, glossary and an index. Sardar Nirmal Singh's analysis is rooted in scripture and cites *Gurbani* extensively. It is also sensitive to the questions vexing the minds of the Sikh youth in the overseas setting.