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Old Challenges, New Opportunities

CYNICS WHO SO OFTEN DESPAIR of Sikhism's survival as a vigorous world religion need only to visit Harmandir Sahib, if not physically, then at least visually, via the live *kirtan* sessions over television, to feel the power and vitality of the Sikh faith.

At the other extreme are our sundry detractors, including the official agencies, who are allergic to a turbaned Sikh and occasionally indulge in sordid games of either spinning sick jokes or conjure up the ghost of Khalistan. The scare caused by the recent arrest of alleged members of Babar Khalsa is an example. Those apprehended as suspects will, we hope, receive fair justice under the law.

Our critics need to be reminded that the concept of sovereignty in Guru Granth Sahib visualizes *Sarbatt ka bhalla*, peace and welfare for all, in the realm of God where no one is oppressed on grounds of creed, caste or colour. A close study of the *Guruvani* ('ਬੇਗਮ ਪੁਰਾ ਸਗਰ ਕੋ ਨਾਉ') makes the concept clearer. There is no territorial ambition, nor the craving for an empire. Recall the March 9, 1783 conquest of Delhi by the Sikh Confederacy, under Sardar Baghel Singh and Baba Jassa Singh Ahluwalia. Within weeks the victors withdrew their troops, but not before they had demarcated the historical holy sites of Majnu-ka Tilla, Sisganj, Rakabganj, Bangla Sahib, and the Motibagh Gurdwara where Guru Gobind Singh ji had camped briefly en route to the Deccan.

In philosophic terms, the concept of sovereignty in Sikhism harks back to the ancient ideal enunciated by the Athenian philosopher Plato (d. 347 BC) in his celebrated work the *Republic*, coupled with his enunciation of the proposition that while it is the mind which gave matter its form, mind is not *outside* matter. A just and equitable regime is the key to happiness on earth. A Sikh is born to promote human welfare wherever destiny takes him. Yet certain rulers and dynasts have tyrannized the emerging community in the past, mistaking our aspirations as a threat to their ambitions.

Is there a pattern in historical events? If so what is the driving force behind these events, e.g. The *Ghalugharas* – holocausts – in the history of the Sikhs? Only philosophers or historians can explore these questions, but anyone with a modicum of intelligence will concede that struggle for survival has been Sikhism's defining characteristic ever since the advent of Guru Nanak in 1469. This explanation of historical causation is not only discernible but compelling, because the spirit of Sikh religion is rooted in freedom of the spirit. It is associated with the idea of pain and danger as well as with the instinct of withstanding any physical challenge – including, especially, martyrdom.

Guru Nanak's message arose out of the imperative need for God's truth to prevail. In all of their ten incarnations the Gurus made the **fusion** of the spirit of faith with the spirit of freedom as the bedrock of the Sikh belief system. This has ushered in freedom and economic prosperity despite territorial vivisection at the time partition of the subcontinent in 1947.

In recent times we have been privileged to air similar viewpoints in the writings of several eminent scholars, notably Dr. Kuldip Singh (SR July 2005) Brig. Gurdip Singh Grewal (SR March 2005) and the inimitable Dr. I. J. Singh.

The last time an effort was made to hammer out a comprehensive consensus among the community at Amritsar was in September, 1995, at the World Sikh Conference. Unfortunately, friends as well as foes combined to torpedo the formation of a global representative body: the World Sikh Council - one by default and the other by sabotage. Indeed, the veteran Marxist leader, Harkishan Singh Surjeet described the initiative as a 'boost to extremism' (*Indian Express*: Oct 9, 1995) raising the bogey of 'Khalistan'. The reference to 'Sikh economy' in the resolution was dismissed as 'incomprehensible'. Despite election of (the retired judge of the Supreme Court) Justice Kuldip Singh as Head of the Council, the detractors derailed the process of Sikh unity.

Today, a decade later, Punjab has a relative peace without happiness, an administration without integrity, Industry and agriculture without vigour, stability without strength and economic success without public morality. The state figures nowhere in the list of India's best twenty colleges - of Science, Arts, Technology, Commerce and Business. Mediocrity and stagnation seem to have become the state's hallmark. No wonder there is a flight of the young blood. Often desperate youth have been forced into bizarre methods to emigrate. Scores of them are caught and detained in strange countries, bereft of identity as well as dignity, with Indian embassies unable - or unwilling - to intervene.

Meanwhile, the new generation of Sikhs abroad are marching ahead with confidence and a degree of pride in their identity. Their success in diverse fields has been highlighted in this Journal over every passing year. Jassi as IIGS youth leader in Los Angeles, Gurinder Kaur Chadha as a film director from London, Charanjit Singh Kathuria and Nanak Singh Kohli as the American millionaires, the distinguished Standard Chartered Bank, Chief Executive Bindra and India's pharmaceutical giant Ranbaxy's third generation directors, are a few of the success stories that come to mind.

Then we have the musical innovator and inspired singer Dya Singh of Australia who circumnavigates the globe about once every year. The spell-binding Rabbi Singh Shergill hops from metro to metro to enthrall and mystify youthful crowds, even as London's Jaggi D a.k.a. Joginder Singh Dhaliwal's Bhangra album remains a hot favourite even after crossing 25000 discs. Let us forgive him if he flaunts his close cropped torso. Maybe he is embarrassed deep down!

In Sydney, Australia, however the boisterous youth is less pious: their Vaisakhi celebration marked more with beer guzzling than with moral and spiritual reflection. Dya Singh wistfully observes: "But, Oh, how much more valuable these get togethers could be if only Sikhism (could be) the main theme, not in a religious sense, but from a spiritual upliftment point-of-view, while fostering the holistic way of life....". We could not agree more.

So, ten years after the 1995 conference in Amritsar, we commend to the SGPC in particular, and the Sikh leadership in general to cast off their torpor, forget petty internal bickering, and convene a World Sikh Youth Conference before the close of

2005. The agenda is selfevident: learning lessons from the past and to fashion a bright future for the 21st century global Sikhism.

Let such a conference guide the teenagers of today to imbibe the glorious message of Gurubani, and apply it to our lifestyle, in sociology, economics, science and technology, so as to benefit all humanity. Let the youth recognize that the wholeness of the distinctive Sikh identity has a basic purpose, and that the cost of unimpeded cultural diffusion could be the impairment of Sikhism's unique destiny.

