

Portrait of a '*Kirti Gursikh*'

A Son's Homage to a Legend

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The Sikh way of life pursues three basic tenets: 'Kirat karo; Naam Japo and Vand Chhako'. Our father, Major Balwant Singh (1911-2004) abided by these dictums in letter and spirit. All through his long life we never saw him deviate from the righteous path shown to him by his saintly father, Bhai Hira Singhji. Pitaji, as he was affectionately called by everyone who knew him, was forever willing to help those who needed support. At the end of the day we can say with complete conviction that he gave more to life, took less.

The drawing room was the least used portion of our house. Twenty four long years of service in the army had failed to convert *Pitaji* into the social milieu that is generally associated with military. All through his life, the clubs and officers' institutes remained an emphatic "no-no" for him. He did, indeed, attend regimental dinner nights. But for him they were like a parade and he would invariably rush straight to the dining room on return from the officers' mess for his *roti-dal-sabzi*. In the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun, where he worked for nearly seven years as an instructor, he spent long hours preparing his lessons and when he was not on his study table, he was either in the prayer room or in his garden. In 1951, Pitaji wrote a couple of articles on his father, Bhai Hira Singh ji for the *Khalsa Samachar* which were widely acclaimed. It is our belief that the script for Pitaji's post-retirement life was written during that year. And now, it is time for us to begin the story where it ought to logically commence; the very beginning.

Pitaji was born in Faruka, District Sargodha (now in Pakistan) on 30th Jun 1911. Even before his birth, his father, Bhai Hira Singhji (1879--1926) had acquired considerable fame as a *Ragi* and a high school had been established in that remote village, largely due to the efforts of Bhai Sahib, in the year 1908. Prem Kaur was the name of Pitaji's mother. The first fifteen years of Pitaji's life were spent mainly in Faruka. During this period, he saw little of his saintly father because of his extensive commitments with programmes all over India. About the only other place which Pitaji had seen by then was Amritsar where Bhai Sahib had built a house, close to Harmandar Sahib.

Bhai Vir Singh's Blessings: In 1926, Pitaji completed his matriculation. When the results were declared, he received instructions from his father to go to Amritsar to obtain the blessings of Bhai Vir Singh, who was an eminent poet-scholar and a towering leader of the Sikh community. Pitaji went to the Lawrence Road bungalow of that great man. Bhai Vir Singh invited Pitaji to stay with him. In the evening, when he was going to the Majitha House for a game of Badminton in his Victoria carriage, the eminent poet invited him to hop on to what must have been the equivalent of the present day Mercedes. Pitaji got into the vehicle but sat down on its floor. We are told that Bhai Vir Singh picked Pitaji up and affectionately embraced him. "Your place is here, next to me. Do you know whose son you are? Your father is a genius...a genius" Pitaji did not know the meaning of the word.

From the body language, he could make out that the reference was adulatory. The responsibility of Pitaji's admission into the college was entrusted by Bhai Vir Singh to Mr. Gopala Rao, who was then the Principal of Khalsa College. This childless Maharashtrian gentleman with Sikh leanings went two steps farther.

The very next thing that Pitaji was to learn was that his illustrious parent was suffering from a dreaded disease, cancer of the intestines. At fifteen, he did not know the exact

implications of this development, but he followed his instincts. He rushed to his father's bedside and spent the next three months doing all that was humanly possible to mitigate his suffering. The inevitable end came on 2nd September 1926 and we have several graphic accounts of how the community responded to the untimely demise of Bhai Sahib. As for Pitaji this tragedy marked the beginning of an intense struggle. There was no steady source of income and he had three younger siblings to care for. Despite heavy odds, Pitaji decided to pursue college education. He got admitted into Khalsa College, Amritsar. Mr. Gopala Rao became his father figure and kept him in his own house for the first six months, until he felt sure that the young man was strong enough to face the vagaries of hostel life. The fees and other expenses were, indeed, taken care of by the many admirers of Bhai Sahib.

Hardship: The family must have been under severe financial strain during that period, and it is not difficult to comprehend the gravity of the problem. However, it seems that our grandmother proved equal to the task and did not let up on her responsibilities. Not only did she ensure that there was no break in the education of the children, she even organized the weddings of Pitaji and his sister as per the prevailing customs and norms, in Sep 1932. Around the same time, Pitaji was selected for a prestigious BT programme in Lahore. And that paved the way for Pitaji's entry in to Khalsa High School in Peshawar, where he was destined to spend the next nine years. The school produced some brilliant students. **Mr. Saran Singh, IAS**, former Chief Secretary, Bihar, (now editor, The Sikh Review); **Mr. Himmat Singh**, ex-Member, Railway Board, and **Lt. Gen. Tripat Singh** are some of the better known names. We have it on their authority that Pitaji was a much loved school master. Mr. Saran Singh has described him as a charismatic person.

Offspring: Three sons were born to Pitaji during this period at regular intervals, and that must have been enough load for him and *Jhaji* to bear. But Pitaji was imbued with a strong set of family values. He considered it his bounden duty to ensure that his two younger brothers received their education, under his personal guidance. Consequently, he brought them over to Peshawar and took them under his own wings. This practice was destined to continue all through the rest of his life. As far as we can tell, we had one child or another from a less fortunate family staying with us all through Pitaji's life.

In 1942, fate took another turn. The Second Great war was at its peak. The Japanese had invaded the Indian sub-continent and were virtually knocking at the door of our country. The British Army was looking for persons who had fluent knowledge of three languages, Urdu, Punjabi and English so that they could censor mail and gather intelligence. Pitaji filled the bill and was at once selected for a commission. After a brief on-job training in Karachi, he was posted to what is now Bangladesh. But soon after assuming his duties, he was wounded in an accident in which he fractured his femur joint. He was evacuated to Dehradun. During war, the Forest Research Institute had been turned into a Military Hospital and Pitaji spent about four arduous months there. During this period, he underwent complex surgical treatment. But as soon as he was fit enough to travel he volunteered to go back to the field and resume his military duties on the Eastern front. He stayed back in Burma after the surrender of the Japanese as a warder in a prisoners-of-war camp. During those four years, Pitaji was able to save up enough money to buy 26 acres of irrigated land, thanks to the handsome field service concessions which the British Government paid those days. His youngest son was born during this period.

Partition, 1947: A few months before our independence and the consequent partition of the Punjab, Pitaji was posted to Jhelum and when the communal riots broke out, he was advised by his commander to proceed on leave to a *safe* place until the situation cooled down. He chose to go to Dehradun, where we all were, on that red lettered day when the

tri-colour flag was hoisted on the ramparts of the Red Fort.

The flames were still raging when Pitaji undertook a somewhat hazardous journey to Delhi to seek a fresh posting. He was assigned to a staff job in Meerut. He reported to the British Sub Area Commander who asked him if he had any immediate problem. Pitaji listed out three; his family stranded in Dehradun, the safety of his relations, including mother, in Pakistan, and immediate need of some cash. All the three requirements were readily met by that large hearted Brigadier. And soon after settling us in Meerut, Pitaji undertook another tortuous journey. This time he travelled to his erstwhile hometown in what had by then become Pakistan. He picked up as many people as he could accommodate in his vehicles and when he returned, our house was inundated with relations far and near. It was a virtual refugee camp. However, it must be said to the credit of our folks that they found place for themselves as soon as they could, and did not burden us beyond the barest minimum.

Those days, partition was the only theme of conversation. For a while, it seemed to us that we would have to listen to those tales of horror and the escapades for ever. Every one had something to say. It was a mix of fact and fiction, and those who had the gift of words could each have written his own version of, '*The Train to Pakistan*'. But then public memory is short and very soon, other events overtook us and life returned to its normal course. Meanwhile, the Indian Military Academy had resumed its post-war regular courses and they wanted to strengthen their Science team. Pitaji was chosen for the job and we soon found ourselves in the scenic precincts of the Tons River. For Pitaji, it was quite a challenge. The IMA had a distinct military culture and the air was laden with thoroughbred Sand Hurst trained *King's Commissioned Indian Officers* who had earned the Royal Covenant. For a while, Pitaji was nervous because he feared that he might not prove equal to the task assigned to him. But he decided to give it a shot and sweat it out. He did his best and, fortunately for him, that was good enough. In fact, he did so well that his tenure was extended by one year. It is said that,

the reward for a job well done is: to be asked to do it again. Pitaji was posted back to the IMA in the *same* appointment after a gap of six years in July 1959 for another three year tenure.

Laurels at IMA:

Between the two IMA tenures, Pitaji added one more feather to his turban; he was chosen to do a course at the Psychological Research Wing of the Defence Services, and after successfully completing that programme, he was posted to the Services Selection Board in Meerut in 1955. He must have done that job well, too, because he was given that assignment *twice* more; once in Allahabad during 1957-59 and then just before his retirement in Meerut in 1963-66. He continued to work as hard as ever and after he had retired, he received an extract of his superannuating confidential report, in which his boss observed, "On his last day in the office, Major Balwant Singh was working with the zeal and enthusiasm of a young officer who has just joined service"

Dedication:

Pitaji was 55 years old when he retired from the Army. All his four sons were well settled in their jobs by then. He could very well have decided to rest on his laurels and spend the rest of his days in leisure. But that would have been against his grain. He was not cut out for that kind of life. Pitaji had known what it is to be in economic penury and he derived his urge to struggle from the deprivations he had experienced during his youth. He picked up his gauntlet and joined Dagshai Public School as a Bursar. Since that did not satisfy his appetite, he decided to till the piece of land he had purchased during his war service. This was not going to be as easy as it seemed. For one thing, his farm was situated at a distance

of about 12 km from the town and two km from the village. The road to our piece of land was one long pothole and, during the rainy season the place was virtually inaccessible. Pitaji made a decision which was then criticized by many: he chose to build a house on the farm. And he started living there; in that wilderness, all alone. For company, he had a few servants and a couple of buffalos. A pie dog later joined him from nowhere!

We often spent our summer holidays with him in that little hut. It used to be so still and quiet at night that one could hear the sound of one's own breath. The nearest house was about one kilometer from our house. Electric supply was erratic and one was lucky if we had power for a few hours on *alternate* days. During one such hour of darkness, he was asked, "Pitaji, are you not afraid here?... I mean how would we deal with the situation if something were to happen to you?"

"What will happen? A heart attack? If that happens then I will die. That is all. Nothing more, nothing less!" It was as clear as a crystal that fear of death was not a part of his system. And he was forever willing to learn and experiment. At the age of sixty he learnt to ride a motor cycle and one could see him ferrying large loads along with *Jhajji* on the pillion to the farm and back.

Chronicling a Legend:

And, then, one day in the summer of 1969, Pitaji embarked upon a project which was to leave an everlasting mark on the sands of time as far as our family is concerned. He took a plunge into the history to record the biography of his illustrious father. The events which led to this commitment are narrated in the preface of the book, "**Amolak Hira**". It is now apparent that the decision to undertake this commitment was neither sudden nor unpremeditated. In fact, several attempts had been made to record the life of Bhai Hira Singh. The first initiative came from none other but Bhai Vir Singh himself. He asked Pitaji to hand over the diaries and photographs of Bhai Sahib to his brother, Dr Balbir Singh so that the great heritage could be preserved for posterity. Pitaji did what he could, but the ball was put back in his court by Dr Balbir Singh who wanted him to sift the entire material into different subjects for ease of reference. Pitaji was then too much pre-occupied with his own professional commitments. Later, in the early forties, Bhai Sudh Singh, who was an ardent devotee of Bhai Sahib, sought to be given those invaluable documents, which were duly handed over to him by our grandmother in 1944. Bhai Sudh Singh was still working on the project when the partition destroyed every bit of that treasure.

In 1951, twentyfive years after the demise of our grandfather, Bhai Vir Singh decided to dedicate an issue of the **Khalsa Samachar** to the memory of Bhai Hira Singh. The response to the call of papers was overwhelming. In fact they could not accommodate all the material received from the well wishers of that great Saint in one issue. Consequently, one more edition of **Khalsa Samachar** in Sep 1952 was published under the same title. With this background, Pitaji began working on his book in 1970. Amritsar was his first destination. He studied the material from the archives of the various publications emanating from that holy town. What he saw there moved him to tears; not once, but several times. In his own words he recalls "ਪੀਊ ਦਾਦੇ ਕਾ ਖੋਲਿ ਡਿਠਾ ਖਜਾਨਾ ॥ ਤਾ ਮੇਰੈ ਮਨ ਭਇਆ ਨਿਧਾਨਾ ॥ (I discovered the treasure left behind by my forefathers; And I was overwhelmed by what I saw.)

"The Rare Gem"

Pitaji spent the next six years of his life researching the life of his saintly father. He wrote to every one he could think of, and visited Dehradun, Patiala, Faridkot and many other places to gather material for '**Amolak Hira**'. The work took the best part of seven years. Twice, during this period he went to Sundernagar where his second son was engaged on the Sutlej Beas Link project, so that he could work in a salubrious environment. The result of his

labours was first published in 1981. True to his style, Pitaji neither sought any recognition for his labours nor fame. In fact, there was no formal ceremony to 'release' the book. He did, however send copies of his work to several libraries and educational institutions and received hundreds of letters from the surviving admirers of Bhai Sahib. There was sufficient demand to bring out a second, enlarged edition of the book in 1995.

Gerantology:

Pitaji appears to have inherited the longevity gene from his grandfather, Bapu Bhag Singhji (1843-1947). He was in full cry right up to the age of 86 when our mother fell victim to cancer and suddenly passed away on 30 April 1997. Pitaji was shocked beyond words. For some reason he had always taken *Jhajji* for granted. She was a strong stabilizing influence on him. Pitaji was short tempered and that, perhaps, is a *gross understatement*. He was also impulsive and intense. After each outburst, Pitaji used to spend several hours repenting over his indiscreet words. Jhajji used to keep him in check mollify his sense of guilt. When she was gone, he had no one to turn to.

Despite his advanced age, he got his driving license renewed in Oct 1997 and resumed his visits to the farm in the village. But he contracted Herpes in December of that year and his health took a down turn. That notwithstanding, he lived through the next seven years in his own house, on his own terms and running an independent establishment. And he continued to be of help and assistance to his friends and relatives. He also supported several educational institutions and charities. After his death condolence resolutions were adopted by three educational institutes.

Frugality:

Pitaji's personal lifestyle was simple to the extent of being stingy. He ate only that food which he could share with his servants and traveled by the lowest class in the train. His medical expenses were negligible since he accepted no surgery to be performed on him; not even cataract. He was not a financial wizard, but he had an uncanny eye for managing his money matters. It is more than a coincidence that every one of his purchase decision in real estate as well as shares proved to be propitious. In Punjabi, they call it '*barkat*'.

In the evening of his life he spent most of his time listening to devotional music and reciting prayers. During the last three years of his life our youngest brother joined him and that mitigated, to some extent, his loneliness which overtook him after the demise of our mother in 1997. He saw his friends and colleagues depart one by one. When the last of his contemporaries died in 2001, he once said, "I hope God knows that I am still here...Do you think we will have to send a formal reminder to Him?"

Old soldiers, they say, never die. They just fade away. And Pitaji's turn to pass into the shadows came on 7 May 2004. But right until the very end, there was a glow on his face. A radiance which he had earned through sheer dint of hard work and commitment to a value system which he had imbibed from his forebears.

For the sake of record, my brothers, Air Vice Marshal Manjit Singh, ER Manmohan Singh, Brig. Surinder Singh and I drew up the balance sheet of Pitaji's life. The Principal of Khalsa College, Mr. Gopala Rao gave shelter to Pitaji for a few months; Pitaji provided such sanctuary to at least a dozen young boys and girls. Khalsa College Amritsar waived Pitaji's fees; Pitaji instituted scholarships in several institutions to repay that debt many times over. Bhai Hira Singh left an illustrious legacy which opened several windows of opportunity for Pitaji. In turn, Pitaji recorded his biography to make his life and mission immortal. On a purely mundane material front, Pitaji inherited one house in Faruka; in turn he left sufficient means for his sons to build several mansions, while he spent his life in a humble dilapidated building. *The bottom line shows an impressive credit balance. And that accounts for the*

radiance on his face during the last moments of his life. Only those who give more to life than what they take from it are entitled to that kind of glow!

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