

# Great Leap of Faith – The Sikh Initiation Rites

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*Recently, when we were invited to address the Asiatic Society, Kolkata, on the Ethos and Heritage of Sikhism, a Bengali scholar asked a significant question, during the Q & A session, what Deeksha was given to the Sikh child. We recalled our family practice in NWFP of the Mool Mantra being spoken in the ears of the newborn infant. We commend the adoption of this practice universally. It should indeed be the precursor of the Initiation - Charni lagna - and dastar bandi ceremonies as obligatory prior to Amrit Chhakna.*  
- Ed. SR

SIKHS HAVE A STRAIGHTFORWARD but inspirational and practical initiation rite. Our problem is that we seem to be surrendering it to more flashy and socially rewarding ritualism.

To an American convert to Sikhism, Kamala Rose Kaur, it was indeed strange that she could not find a clearly defined initiation rite. She wrote this to the *Global Sikh Daily News Online*, in her essay that was published on August 21, 2001. She felt disturbed on our pushing to the backseat the age-old tradition she called the Leap of Faith. She rightfully felt that, whereas most world religions instituted one or more rites of commitment to faith for their adherents, we have forgotten that we too have one.

## **Commitment:**

All rites of commitment are there for a reason; the reason being that every adherent avails an opportunity to publicly commit oneself to her or his spiritual mentor, and set the life goals consistent with that commitment. Further, the new aspirant prepares for the day of commitment with a forward outlook and the community explicitly buys into it through investing in that preparation.

Fortunately, it has not been too long ago that we had such a Leap of Faith custom very popular and very prevalent in our community. It required that a growing child be enrolled in a local Gurdwara first to take lessons on reading the Gurmukhi script and then to become proficient in reading Gurbani. When a level of competency is reached to begin reading Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the aspirant child is permitted the initiation.

## **Ceremonial:**

When the child is considered ready to be initiated, a special event is scheduled to ceremoniously carry out the first reading of the Guru. Congregation is invited to the local Gurdwara for this occasion; the pomp and show is just as gleefully arranged as celebrating a birth ceremony or the rituals of other religions that are so well know. The Granthi Sahib introduces the aspirant Sikh (student) to the congregation following the ceremonial *kirtan* and recitation. The parents of the child and members of the congregation then join in the prayer to seek the Guru's Hand of Grace for the newly initiated Sikh, and for the Guru's light to shine on the aspirant's mind. The prayer also include a pledge from the new aspirant to diligently surrender and lay down at the feet of Guru for the rest of the life by continually reading Guru Granth on periodic basis. Then the aspirant reverently lifts the cover from the holy book and reads aloud a hymn from the Guru Granth first time in public. When he finishes, all friends and relatives congratulate the child and the parents. The congregation joins

them in the celebration, to conclude with munching together the especially prepared food for *langar* followed by distribution of sweets.

In the days of the Singh Sabha movement, this occasion was given the appropriate name of *Gurcharani Lago Diwas*, literally meaning the day when the child is committed to the Guru's feet.

### **Women to the Fore:**

Mine was celebrated when I was ten years old; others in town did so at various ages, but always when they were still teenagers. Until then, I read Gurbani only from books and *Gutakas*. Only when the Granthi Sahib was satisfied that I could read the Guru Granth, she gave permission for the Leap of Faith or *Gurcharani Lago* Ceremony.

My neighborhood Gurdwara was *Istari Sat Sang Sabha*, meaning the Sikh Women Congregation, in the town of Haripur Hazara, the only town founded by Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the honor of the Sikh general Hari Singh Nalwa. Men in the town attended the Guru Nanak Sat Sang Sabha Gurdwara but the young children went with their mothers to the separate Gurdwara for women. The other Gurdwara in town was established for both genders but most women attended the congregation designated for women.

Two women Granthis known popularly as *Bhain Narain Ji* and *Bhain Dhanwanti Ji* managed the Gurdwara for women. They actually lived in the Gurdwara and were always available to meet the community's spiritual needs. The *kirtan* performed by whole congregation was led by them and was followed by reading of the Sikh history from the writings of Bhai Vir Singh, or explanations of verses from Sri Guru Granth Sahib done by the granthis. The services were conducted daily both in the morning and in the evening just like those I observed during my visit to Swat, in Pakistan, in 2000. Total Sikh population of Swat, around forty Sehajdhari Sikh families, gets to the local Gurdwara every morning and many do so every evening also.

I was lucky to be in the care of two very kind women Granthis of the Gurdwara in Haripur; I learnt my reading skills for *Gurcharani Lago* initiation rite and all of my Sikh history from them. I remember others too taking the pledge of the Introduction to the Sri Guru Granth Sahib either from them or from the Granthi, Shaheed Bhai Tara Singh, of Guru Nanak Satsang Sabha. I am elated to report that all those who did go through *Gurcharani Lago* learning course and the initiation ceremony still continue to read Sri Guru Granth Sahib periodically. Those who could not be initiated then still have difficulty in reading the Granth.

### **Inspirational Reading:**

There are some important considerations when we begin to read Guru Granth Sahib. When I say "reading of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib" I actually mean the Guru Granth *paath*. We have a set tradition of doing *paath*. **Ours is a symbolic way but with deep meaning. It is done with both the heart and the mind or, as is said in modern science, with the left and the right brains, both our logical and intuitive sides of the brain; in reality we explicitly utilize both logical and intuitive faculties of our mind.**

First of all we seek and prepare a sacred space to do *paath*. There we read the words of a passage in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Then we learn its literal, symbolic

and metaphorical meanings; we combine this with a search into the history and culture of the time when the passage was written and to which our Guru spoke. All of this is done to give us a central idea and logical insight embodied centuries ago in the verses that we are reading today.

### **Meditation:**

Next, we stop and meditate with mindfulness of the symbols, metaphors and meanings that we read into the passage we are processing. At the same time, in our meditation, we pray from the depth of our heart for divine guidance. In prayer we create a space to open within our consciousness for the real meaning to unfold. Often it does, provided we are humble in prayer and have achieved stillness of mind.

When it does unfold, we have "*Paath Deedar*" or "*Shabad Deedar*" depth of which is based upon the level of the evolution of the reader's consciousness. Modern idiom may describe it as a metaphysical interpretation, but we feel its touch in our heart. Besides, it usually includes a practical lesson for us to use in our lives today and for the days to come.

### **Spiritual Connexion:**

As you see, the Leap of Faith initiation is not just a ritual. It teaches you to do the Gurbani *paath* which is neither a simple ritual nor a complex scholarly endeavor. The Guru Granth *paath* is a sacred rite for every Sikh, permitting a connection to the Guru for spiritual guidance. To pursue the reading process, intellectual deliberation is required to seek wisdom, while keeping faith in the process is required to receive the inner light. As a seeker we learn to place our faith and trust in the divinity of the Guru and yet continue to question one's own understanding of the Guru's teachings in order to take full benefit of the process.

*Paath* certainly is not a ritual and no one else can ever do it on your behalf.

Now that we are in the thick of programs celebrating the Decade of the Guru Granth towards the Tercentennial Celebration of the Installation of the Granth as the Eternal Guru, and Kamala Rose Kaur challenged us to the occasion, it will be appropriate to reassert the ritual of the Sikh Leap of Faith.

### **Direct Relationship:**

Let children be prepared to communicate with their Guru and rejoice this accomplishment in the ensuring environment of a public applaud. It is more important a ceremony than a birthday celebration or the celebration for the Tying of Turban. To me this is what is meant from the clause included in the Sikh Rehat Maryada defining a Sikh. It required belief in Sri Guru Granth Sahib, and the ceremony described above is a public commitment to that most important pledge of belief in Sri Guru Granth Sahib to be a Sikh.

Rose observed, "Sikhs were not required to take that many leaps of faith. Still we do have to take at least one really big LEAP! There is one incredible faithful belief that Sikhs must hold: Sikhs believe that if each and everyone of us surrenders all authority, secular and spiritual, to our Guru, the Sri Guru Granth Sahib (which happens to be holy shabad), that if we - each - go directly to the SRI GURU GRANTH SAHIB for our personal marching orders, men and women and children alike, then Sikhs everywhere will be united under One Leader and we will act in

unified Divine accord, as ONE.” How well she said it and challenged us to revive the *Gurcharani Lago Diwas* celebration! It will be really a big LEAP.

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