

A Premier Sikh Cyber Forum

BHUPINDER SINGH MAHAL*

* Email: bsmahal@cogeco.ca

THE NUMBER OF SIKH SITES in cyber-space has mushroomed. As there are good edible mushrooms and deadly poisonous ones, so there are sites with high-minded objectives and *pseudo-religious* tendencies. Some sites are websites created by individual(s) and maintained at their own expense. But a good many of the discussion sites are rent-free and are mostly to be found among "Yahoo!Groups".

To own one's own site on Yahoo, all that needs to be done is to first obtain a Yahoo ID, click the button "Start a New Group", select "Religion and beliefs" from a given list of categories, indicate preference for "Sikhism", choose group name and describe it and, hey presto, a new Sikh site is born.

As of now there are 450 Sikh groups registered with Yahoo, their membership varying between 5 -1900, with most Groups having less than 20 members; all vying with one another for the attention of the internet-surfer. Each site lays a claim to represent some or all aspects of Sikh faith and ethos.

Group names on Yahoo are not shielded against misuse. Three sites that are attempting to win members from Sikhs of the diaspora have identical names: Sikh_Diaspora, DiasporaSikhs, Sikh-Diaspora.

Irrespective of the number of individuals banding together as founders to form a group, only one name is recognized as the registered owner of the Group, and that person wields absolute power over the way the site is run.

Cyber sites face their own peculiar challenges. Membership rests upon a member possessing a current e-mail address. Individuals often choose a *noms de plume* for identification purposes, making true identity anonymous. There is no way of verifying generally accepted identifiers like sex, ethnicity or religious affiliation. One must accept personal data as offered. No wonder that many sites have been invaded by **agents provocateurs intent upon advancing their own agenda.**

Increasingly Sikh cyber sites are beginning to resemble Gurdwaras. First, they are a venue seeking to promote social and religious interaction. Second, their pulpit is open 24 hours/7days a week. Third, they preach a doctrine they favour. Fourth, the management is deeply entrenched and cannot be toppled.

Dialogue takes place entirely in cyber space. No one is any one's face. Sitting behind a computer screen in one's study it is easy to ignore self-restraint, stir trouble that promotes personal abuse and character assassination. Emotions, therefore, are easily ratcheted up over fiercely polemic views. To stem the tide of such acrimonious confrontation the cyber sites impose editorial control. Messages are scrutinized before being posted to the bulletin board. This lag between receipt of message and its publication is a cause for concern and a sore point with some members who accuse their forums for stifling freedom of speech. Members are routinely kicked out of some forums over conflict with their avowed purpose.

Over the past several months I have navigated through a number of Sikh sites to assess and evaluate their worth. I am particularly impressed with a handful of Sikh forums, SikhNet and Learning-Zone in particular.

SikhNet's declared aim is "to free individuals from the clutches of ignorance by bringing information on Sikhi and by encouraging open, friendly discussion". The forum shows a considerable degree of latitude on the topic of discussion, an eclectic approach.

Learning-Zone is much more focussed on religion, language and heritage as evidenced by its two-fold mission statement: (a) to uphold the gospel of the Sikh scriptures and the teachings of the ten Gurus, and (b) to enhance Sikh image and pride world-wide and to strengthen their status in the social and cultural milieu in which they live.

Learning-Zone believes in a free flow discourse among its members that promotes "the reflection and the evolving expressions of Sikh ethos, culture and heritage". The forum is like the ancient peepal tree under whose canopy members meet in an "environment of continuous learning by facilitating sharing of knowledge".

Management of both the SikhNet and Learning-Zone exercise editorial control to ensure that members conduct their dialogue and debate with mutual respect and propriety.

SikhNet has by far the largest membership, drawing its members from every corner of the world. Learning-Zone is a runner-up with over 1,800 members, comprising scholars, academicians, students, professionals et al.

Recently, Learning-Zone embarked on an introspective look at its *raison d'être*. *It has sharpened up its mission and objectives; which, in turn, has revitalized its members. The dialogue is robust and vibrant.* Faith and heritage remain its twin pillars. *Readers of TSR are invited to join the ranks to make Learning-Zone the premier site of Sikhism.*

