

BEING AND BECOMING A SIKH

By I.J. Singh (New York University)

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*A Review by Hakam Singh**

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According to Sikh tradition, Bhai Satta and Bhai Balwand, devotional singers in the court of Guru Arjun Dev at Amritsar, demanded, as their daily wages, one 'takka' (two paisa) "per Sikh" in congregation. They hoped that by this arrangement they would soon become rich; because they noticed that the considerable size of the Guru's devotees congregation was increasing every day. The Guru readily agreed to this demand. However, when the time of payment came he paid them only seven paisa (three and a half takkas). He explained that three takkas were: one each for Guru Angad Dev, Guru Amar Das and Guru Ram Das, who had succeeded in becoming True Sikhs, and the half takka was for himself (Guru Arjun Dev) because he was still on the way to becoming a "Sikh". Thus Guru Arjun Dev, in a hint and allegory, gave the idea of the difference between *being* and *becoming* a Sikh. He left it to dedicated souls and discerning minds to further elaborate this idea and draw the 'road map' for the guidance of common people. I.J.Singh seems to be one such dedicated Gursikh who has embarked upon accomplishing this task, with characteristic subtlety.

Although the title of I.J.Singh's third (and present) book is "*Being and Becoming a Sikh*", his earlier two books, "*Sikhs and Sikhism – a View with a Bias*", and "*The Sikh Way, a Pilgrims Progress*" also deal with the same theme. In the preface of the present book Dr. Singh says: I have to acknowledge the importance of a single idea. I would add that happy should be the author who has one good idea in his lifetime to explore and develop". It seems he has hit upon an excellent idea which he has been meticulously exploring, efficiently developing and presenting in a form that is easy to read and digest, specially by young Sikhs born and brought up in the Western countries.

Quite appropriately, in the first of the twenty three essays of the book, I.J.Singh emphasizes that it is the (Divine) grace and not mere effort that leads one to embarking on the path of becoming a Sikh. This essay, to me, is the real introduction to the book. He then proceeds on to say that even being a Sikh takes a certain amount of courage and strength of character. Here he gets into the oft-discussed and rather controversial subject of "who is a Sikh", and boldly declares that maintaining physical identity intact is a necessary prerequisite to call oneself a Sikh.

He seems to have made an effort to explain the term 'fundamentalist' on the basis of its literal meaning. Unfortunately, however, the prevailing connotation of this word is somewhat different and is difficult to change.

A novel hypothesis has been propounded in the essay: “the art of nation building” to explain the purpose of founding of towns by the Gurus. One wonders if the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh was modeled after the blue print given by the Gurus.

Emphasis is correctly laid on the importance of local Sangats and a model of Sarbat Khalsa has been proposed in order to resolve the disputes and conflicts, which our Gurdwaras are infested with, instead of taking recourse to courts of law or the Akal Takht. Also the need for a paradigm shift has been felt necessary in the appointment of Jathedar of Akal Takht (and other Takhts) such that it involves participation of Sangats throughout the world; thus making them the true representatives of the Sikh world. This is an extremely important suggestion with far reaching effects. It may save the Sikhs from ignominy of violent fights within the precincts of Gurdwaras and law suits. It is hoped that our religious (and political) leaders do some soul-searching, look at the pathetic state of our institutions and refrain from blaming each other.

In the essay, “the power of a uniform”, the difference between “being” and “becoming” a Sikh has been indicated quite explicitly. This has further been substantiated in the next essay with the profound statement: “Sikhism exhorts its followers to live their lives such that their external form and internal lives are consistent and synchronous.”

The importance of singing of *Gurbani* in the prescribed *Ragas* has been emphasized. However, contrary to what I.J.Singh states, in case of a vast majority of hymns (shabads) in Guru Granth Sahib, the beat or tempo is not prescribed. It is left to the singer to choose the beat as long as the specified Raga is adhered to.

Many *ragis*, though, sing the starting *shabad* in a classical *Raga* tune, more often than not, this Raga is not the one prescribed for this particular *shabad* in Guru Granth Sahib. Bhai Chand played only on harmonium while doing ‘*kirtan*’. If he was an exponent of *rabab* or any other string instrument, I do not know because I never saw him play one.

Guru Nanak had no intention to draw attention to the tale of ‘Tunda Asraja’ nor did any subsequent Guru do to any other tale associated with the ‘*Dhuni*’ of various *vaars*, e.g. “Lalla Behleema”, “Malik Mureed”, etc. These melodies were popular at that time and each one had a name tag that could identify the way a particular melody was supposed to be sung. Even today, for example, “*Heer*” of Waris Shah is sung in a certain style (melody) in Bhairvi Raga. One does not have to know either the story of Heer-Ranjha or the Raga Bhairvi in order to sing another composition in this melody.

Emphasis is correctly laid in developing honest and open relationship with our younger generation in order to gain their confidence and respect.

The current plight of Sikhs is due to political climate in India, including the attitude of the Government and apathy of Sikh intellectuals – specially the chair holders in Western universities.

Superfluous and honorific titles are un-necessary. They are indicative of personal ego, contrary to the Sikh teachings and lead one away from the path of becoming a Sikh.

Some other necessary ingredients for becoming a Sikh are honesty, ethics and morality not only in an individual's day-to-day dealings, but how, as community, we build our institutions.

In the final essay, "when life gives you a lemon", Dr. Singh strikes a note of optimism. However, it is contingent upon following the teachings of the Guru who showed us the way to accept the ultimate in suffering and transcend it with grace, humility and dignity. Thus living happily within the Divine Will is the true "*chahrdi kala*".

In the preface of the book I.J.Singh writes that he has "intentionally avoided leaning on too many spiritual or historical citations". Instead he seems to have given a generous sprinkling of quotations from Western writers. This no doubt has made the material more palatable to the Sikh youth in the West. However, to substantiate and idea, or an issue, on Sikhism by a quotation from a Western writer looks less convincing to me than a quote from Sikh scriptures.

Some historic facts need to be corrected:

India was never a single political unit until the English conquered all the states and made it into a single country. Even when the Mughal empire was at its zenith during the time of Aurangzeb, there were still some independent states in the Southern part and Assam. Actually, Aurangzeb spent the last part of his life in trying unsuccessfully to conquer the Southern independent states in the Deccan.

Guru Tegh Bahadur founded only Anand Pur, and not Paonta Sahib.

The book is extremely well written and contains ample food for thought for all categories of readers. It is a must for the Sikh youth in the West.

The path of becoming a Sikh, as indicated by I.J.Singh, is long and arduous, but appropriately rewarding to those who continue to follow it steadfastly. We pray and hope that Dr. Singh continues to show the challenges and rewards involved in following this path.

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