

## **Sr. Tarlok Singh, ICS (1912-2005)**

### **Architect of modern India**

***KHUSHWANT SINGH***

NO SOONER RETIRED THAN FORGOTTEN. There was a time when Tarlok Singh was regarded as the second most important Indian after Prime Minister Nehru. On our Independence, he was asked to rehabilitate Hindu and Sikh refugees fleeing Pakistan. Then he was put in charge of formulating the country's five-year plans. He started the Planning Commission from scratch and made it the third most important body in India. It was commonly said that India is governed by three sabhas: Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha and 'Tarlok Sabha' - the name people gave to the Planning Commission since Tarlok Singh was the moving spirit behind it. Nevertheless, when Tarlok died on December 10, there was not a word in the media. I read about it in the paid-for obituary columns of newspapers.

Tarlok was a year senior to me in college in England. He became my role model. He was bookish, and brighter at his studies than his counterparts. I was neither bookish nor bright at anything. He was a great favourite of Professor Harold Laski, who often lent him books. Laski could not tell one Sikh from another and at times accosted me in the corridors of London School of Economics to ask if I had finished the book he'd lent me. I was very amused as Tarlok and I were as different in appearance as Navjot Sidhu is from Daler Mehndi.

Tarlok made it to the ICS at first go - not by nomination or minority quota but on merit. I sat for it the next year and failed to qualify. I lost track of him after he joined service. Years later, we met in Paris where I'd taken up a lucrative job at Unesco. He persuaded me to return home and involve myself in development projects - the salary would be meagre but there would be more job fulfilment. I quit my Unesco job and returned to Delhi. He had me appointed editor of *Yojana*, the Planning Commission's mouthpiece. I did my best but soon discovered that no one takes government propaganda seriously. After two years, I threw up the job and took over as editor of *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. Tarlok was disappointed in me.

Thereafter, we met only a couple of times. He had retired from service and unlike most bureaucrats, did not seek other posts like ambassadorship or governorship, which he would have got for the asking. He lived in a modest apartment in Sunder Nagar in New Delhi. He shunned social life. He took to writing serious books on subjects like poverty and the need for social change. His name will go down in history as one of the builders of modern India.

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## **Remembering Giani Sant Singh Maskeen**

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IN A UNIQUE COINCIDENCE, Giani Sant Singh Maskeen wrote me a letter dated 12th Feb 2005 in his own handwriting, inviting me to attend the Annual Gurmat Samagam at Alwar on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2005. In his letter he also wrote to inform me that

due to the pre-scheduled programmes of Gurbani discourses at Amritsar he could not be present in a meeting called by me in Delhi. By the time the letter of Maskeen Ji was delivered to me he had already left for his Heavenly abode – as if he himself had fixed his date of last prayer.

At the time of partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947, Maskeen Ji, like millions of Sikhs, was uprooted from the Western Punjab, now Pakistan, and finally settled in Alwar, where he spent 57 years of his life. Every year, since last four decades, a Gurmat Samagam had been held on 1st, 2nd and 3rd March under his personal supervision. Eminent *Gurmat* scholars/preachers, Keertan Jathas and thousands of devotees come to participate in the annual gurmat samagam from various part of the country. As per the tradition of Sikhism, Guru's *Langar*, (free community kitchen), is being served uninterrupted for three days for one and all. Last year, I along with my wife Utamjit Kaur have visited Alwar, particularly to join the Gurmat Samagam, it was an exceptional experience. A moderate Sikh population is settled in the villages around Alwar city. At present two Sikhs Schools are functional and a big educational centre had already been erected under the able guidance of Maskeen Ji. Now I feel concerned about the completion of the community welfare projects. Will any reputed Panthic organization come forward to take charge of these institutions and to make the dreams of Maskeen Ji into reality?

During initial years of Gurmat Parchar he had to struggle hard to sustain with his mission because of his weak financial position, however, he was not a man to give up so easily. He used to walk miles to attend the religious congregation and to make discourses on gurmat in villages. Whatever little the sangat used to offer out of love and affection was his only source of income and he boldly faced all the challenges that came to his way and remained firm in his goal of spreading the message of holy Guru Granth Sahib for the benefits of all mankind. He always preferred to stay miles away from politics and factionalism. Wherever he went in India and abroad for Gurmat Parchar he never deterred to ask the Sikhs to adopt the proper system of management, as per the tenets of Gurmat, to maintain the gurdwaras and other panthic institutions. In our last meeting he presented me a book, which he authored on the subject of Gurdwara management. He was very much concerned about the election procedure to constitute the committees for the management of Gurdwaras, which has now become the root cause for the infighting among Sikhs all over the world.

It is beyond doubt that Giani Sant Singh Maskeen was the most venerated and best known religious scholar among the Sikhs due to the fact that he had the in-depth knowledge of Gurmat, comparative religion and the excellent art of delivery. He always fixed his annual programmes in advance and would stick to his schedules come what may. He had made a profound study of Sri Guru Granth Sahib and acquired in-depth knowledge of Vedas and Bhagat Vanis as enshrined in Sri Guru Granth Sahib from the Nirmalas Sant Balwant Singh Ji. Apart from Gurmukhi and Hindi he had a command over Farsi and often quoted Bhai Nand Lal Ji. During discourses he also used to quote from the religious texts of Hindu, Muslim and other world religions with all the useful relevant references. In his discourses Maskeenji particularly used to mention about Bhagat Vanis as enshrined in Guru Granth Sahib, which is full of reference to Rama, Krishna and other Hindu Gods and Goddesses, and often said that, to understand the message of Gurbani it is necessary to have

basic knowledge of Indian culture and traditions. Though some Sikhs scholars who failed to understand his thoughtful analytical expression labeled him as pro-brahminical. If these 'scholars' continue to spread wrong notions, they could raise questions about the authenticity of Bhagat Vani, or about references to Islam in Guru Granth Sahib. If the critics had their way, tomorrow they may raise voices to remove the name of Ram, Allah from Guru Granth Sahib. Surprisingly, how little they realise that it is due to this uniqueness of Guru Granth Sahib that it has been revered as the holy text of the mankind all across the globe.

Maskeen Ji's sudden departure a year ago stunned one and all; thousands of Sikhs from across the world came to take part in his funeral procession. On the day of his funeral, Ragis in Darbar Sahib sung Shabad Keertan on sad tunes. This shows how much love and respect the Sikhs had for Maskeenji.

A year ago the Sikh masses praised SGPC for making excellent arrangements for the last rites. Though Maskeen Ji had already been the recipient of the highest honour "*Panth Ratan*" during his lifetime, on the day of his Bhog ceremony he was honoured by SGPC with "*Gurmat Vidya Marthand*" posthumous award. Bibi Jagir Kaur, President SGPC also announced Bhai Gurdas Gold posthumous Award, worth rupees one lakh, for Maskeen Ji and also presented a cheque for rupees ten lakh to the wife of Maskeen Ji for his outstanding contribution in the cause of Sikhism and *gurmat* way of life. Now she too has cast away her mortal coil and joined the Holy spirit.

In my tribute last year, I made a proposal that a responsible premier Institution of the Panth should collect and preserve all the priceless recordings of Giani Sant Singh Maskeen Ji's discourses for the use and benefit of the future generation. Those who are interested in making thorough research study of his contribution should be allowed to copy from the original version in order to create more preachers on the line of Maskeen Ji. Only this way the message of *Gurmat* can be spread among the people of various faiths. I also stress on the need that the learning of the Vedas, Holy Koran and the Farsi Language should be made compulsory for all the preachers in order to deliver the correct interpretation of *gurbani* as Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji is replete with all such references.

I also recall Dr. Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India's tribute to Maskeen Ji in which he expressed his gratitude to Maskeen Ji's in-depth knowledge of *Gurmat* and his outstanding contribution in spreading the message of humanity through *gurbani*. I also made an appeal to the leaders of the panth that the interest of 13 million strong population of the Sikhs of Rajasthan should always be taken into account while discussing Panthic Matters because Maskeen Ji had been a great moral support for them.

With the passing away of Maskeen Ji, the Sikh Panth has lost two of its Precious Jewels in a couple of months, first it was Yogi Harbhjan Singh Ji who sowed the seeds of Sikhism in America and later the death of great preacher Giani Sant Singh Maskeen Ji. Indeed it is difficult to fill-up the void created by the death of these two great personalities of the Sikh Panth.

Without mentioning about his fearlessness this article will remain incomplete. I remember that in 1984 when the Indian Army attacked and sieged Sri Darbar Sahib and many other gurdwaras, he endured great mental agony due to this act of sacrilege. When the curfew was lifted he made an

emotional electrifying speech (on the first diwans held at Gurdwara Shahidan) to rejuvenate the mentally demoralized Sikhs due to the army attack on their holiest shrine. Professor Darshan Singh Ji, another outstanding personality of Sikh Panth, recited *Gurbani keertan* to provide the healing touch to the broken hearts of the Sikhs. It was these two personalities who helped the Sikh Panth, through the healing message of Gurbani, to successfully counter and to emerge triumphant of the most difficult period in the recent history.

The following quotation of gurbani is appropriately dedicated to a pious soul such as Giani Sant Singh Maskeen Ji:

ਹਰਿ ਕੇ ਸੇਵਕ ਜੋ ਹਰਿ ਭਾਏ ਤਿਨ੍ਹ ਕੀ ਕਥਾ ਨਿਰਾਰੀ ਰੇ ॥

ਆਵਹਿ ਨ ਜਾਹਿ ਨ ਕਬਹੂ ਮਰਤੇ ਪਾਰਬ੍ਰਹਮ ਸੰਗਾਰੀ ਰੇ ॥

