

The Blessed Bibi Ranbir Kaur Khalsa of California

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Fresno is primarily an agricultural community. It falls in Central Valley of California, famous for its fruits. Almonds, Grapes, Apples are the main fruits. Lately, some Pistachio has been planted. It is said that the life of pistachio tree is from eighty to ninety years. The long life of the tree is a factor in its favour. Since it has an agricultural economy naturally Sikh labour gravitated towards it, to seek work as agricultural labour and to buy land. The lure of land always attracts these hardy and adventurous people. However, the Sikh roots here are not as old as in Yuba City. Moreover, here our people did not have to marry Mexican girls to buy land. By the time our people came to Fresno, the disqualification on the Indians, barring them to own the land, was already removed. Today people like Charanjit Singh Baath are reported to own thousands of acres of land. Though, in America a thousand acres of land does not mean quite as much as in India.

For Fresno we took Greyhound Bus at Hayward, near Fremont. From Fremont *Gurdwara*, another person, one *Giani* Harnam Singh was also going to Fresno. We all got into the 3 p.m. bus. It would take four hours to reach Fresno. I had already informed Master Lachhman Singh, our host in Fresno, to have us picked up from the Bus Depot. Masterji was himself there to receive us at Fresno.

Master Lachhman Singh was around fifty-five. He was from *Nawa Shahar Doaba*. He came over and first settled in a small place near Modesto. Later, as he prospered he shifted to Fresno. On settling in Fresno he put up a liquor shop - cum - general store. He has a young unmarried son and a nephew to help him in business. Keeping in view his religious bent of mind he later on established the Pinedale *Gurdwara*, for which he had invited us to Fresno.

Masterji met us at the Bus station. He had known our co-passenger *Giani* Harnam Singh, who was an old resident of Fresno area, staying mostly at Selma, a nearby suburb. *Giani ji* used to be a *Kirtania*. He was by now too old, and retired. He had also given up *Kirtan* as well. His wife stayed with his son and son's family, while *Giani ji* had become an itinerant soul. People of most of the *Gurdwaras* knew him from the old, hence food and shelter was no problem. Some old age pension that he received paid for his transportation, and day-to-day expenses.

Giani Harnam Singh had told us that about two weeks ago he had gone from Selma to Yuba City, to attend the annual *Mela*. After the *Mela*, at Yuba City someone gave him lift till Fremont, where he participated in Guru Nanak Birthday function. Now he was going back to Selma, via Fresno. But Masterji would not let him go. He prevailed upon *Giani ji* to stay on for the function at the Pinedale *Gurdwara* on the morrow.

Masterji drove us all to the Pinedale *Gurdwara*. His wife and other women had prepared the *Langar*. After paying obeisance to Guru *Granth Sahib*, we went into a small room located behind the *Diwan* hall, which acted as the *Langar* room. On one side there were gas range and cooking platform. Other side there was a large fridge. In between there were a few mats for people to sit and eat. Obviously, the normal *Sangat* was none too large.

Pinedale *Gurdwara* has a rather smallish building. In line with some other *Gurdwara* that we had seen, this too was once a church, which had fallen in disuse. Masterji and his friends purchased it and converted it into Guru Nanak's house. From the looks it was rather a smallish set up as yet. The conversion into a *Gurdwara* had not yet made much difference. However, there appears to be a craze to register new *Gurdwaras*, especially in Fresno. At the last count at least thirty-two *Gurdwaras* were registered in Fresno area

itself. Applications are still being made. Against thirty-two sanctions, Fresno has only three *Gurdwaras*. Why should there be so much interest in getting sanction to establish more *Gurdwaras* is rather intriguing?

It was already late at night. After the *Langar* Masterji took us all to his residence for our stay. Even *Giani* Harman Singh was in the party. At night *Ashaji* and myself were put up in bedroom. *Giani ji* spent the night on the sofa in the drawing room. Masterji's family managed as best as they could, in face of so many guests. We found that in our room at night the light was poor, making it difficult to have bedside reading.

It was standard three-bedroom house, which was built only on the ground floor. However, the house stood upon a rather largish lot. The car garage had been converted into a sleeping room for the two boys, Masterji's son *Parvinder*, and his nephew who had recently come from India. The garage was also used as a dumping room for surplus household things. There was soon a marriage in the family, *Parvinder's*. All the purchases were dumped there for the time being. The marriage was slated to be in January 2001, in *Nava Shahar Doaba*. The family cars were parked outside the house.

Masterji has three daughters. The eldest one is married in Los Angeles. The second one is married to a boy in India. While she herself is in Fresno with her baby girl, her husband is still in India. She had sponsored him just after her marriage. The Immigrant's visa is still awaited. The third daughter, the youngest one in the family is studying part time and working, as well. Masterji's wife *Manjit Kaur* is mostly a housewife, looking after her large family. May be, earlier she was working, but now the household work keeps her totally occupied. At times she does help minding the shop, but rarely. However, she takes active interest in running of *Pinedale Gurdwara*, along with Masterji. On *Langar* days she is the moving spirit behind *Langar* preparation.

It was Wednesday morning that we woke up to. It was the day of the function at the *Gurdwara*. At the same time the liquor shop could not be forgotten. The shop opens at 8 A.M. and closes at 11 P.M. Some one has to be there, all the time. It has to be one of the three persons, Masterji, his son or his nephew. So, early in the morning his nephew *Joginder* went to open the shop. Masterji had so much to do in connection with the function in the *Gurdwara*.

By 2 p.m. *Ashaji* and I were in the *Gurdwara*. It was rather early. The function was to begin by 5 PM. So, we made ourselves comfortable in a small room near the main door. Later, we went out for some time, to have a look at the surrounding areas. At 5.00 P.M. we returned. I wanted to go back into the room to reclaim my bag, which contained my personal belongings but at the door I had inkling that there was some woman in the room. I requested *Ashaji* to go and fetch my bag.

Ashaji went in. Later she narrated to me that she saw a White woman getting ready in the room. She was wearing an elaborate dress, very much like the one that is worn by *Nihangs*. As *Ashaji* looked around, that woman felt disturbed in her couter. So she said in pure colloquial Punjabi dialect, "*Bibi*, you are disturbing me."

Ashaji was amazed at the flawless pronunciation and the fluency of the tongue. She beat a hasty retreat. After a few minutes that woman came out, a Gori Sikhni, not one of Yogi ji's follower, but a main stream Sikhni. What a grand sight to see! At 5'6" or so, she was a healthy woman like a well-bred Punjabi Jatni, wearing blue dress of Nihangs, a tall turban, conical with steel rings mounted, wearing glasses, a White born Sikhni, holding a long spear in one hand and a laptop in the other. Meet the one and only *Bibi Ranbir Kaur Khalsa*. Discount her Sikh-dress-up and she is a White woman. Now, close your eyes and hear her speak in colloquial Punjabi, she is a true

Punjab born Sikhni. This combination is not only rare to find, but a person like Bibi Ranbir Kaur herself is rare find. No wonder she becomes centre of attraction where ever she goes. By profession she is a Sikh missionary. She goes around, giving lectures on Sikh religion and the Sikh way of life, mainly in Punjabi language. Her head quarter is at Santa Clara, near Fremont.

The *kirtan* was going on in the *Diwan* Hall. *Bibi Ranbir Kaur* took her seat on the floor, along with other women, sitting crossed legs like Indians. She had been able to master that style of sitting which the non-Indians find it so difficult. My wife and I also sat down among the *Sangat*.

The documentary was to be shown after the *kirtan*. Before the show, as was her practice, *Ashaji* spoke a few words to introduce the subject. It was then that *Bibi Ranbir Kaur* realised that *Ashaji* was another honoured guest, invited to make the function more successful.

After the movie, *Bibi Ranbir Kaur Khalsa* called *Ashaji* out and took her to the same small room. She praised *Ashaji's* accomplishment and said in Punjabi, "First, I want to congratulate you for it. Much more, I want you to hear what I have to say about your documentary to my Teacher?"

She took out her Cell Phone and dialled her Teacher's phone number in Montreal (Canada) and conveyed to him her high praises of the documentary.

Finally, she said to *Ashaji* in tone of mock complaint, "In the documentary where you have shown the mid-night ceremonial washing of the Temple with milk and water, you mentioned in the commentary that only the *Amritdharis* can take part in that *Seva*," Then in a show of mock annoyance she added, more forcefully, "I think you should have also made it clear that you meant only *Amritdhari* men." She paused for a moment. "It used to make me so mad when I was in Amritsar. I too am an *Amritdhari*. Then why I was not allowed to take part in that *Seva*?"

"What did they say?" asked *Ashaji*.

"Their stock reply was that *Bibis* were not allowed to take part in that *Seva* even if they were also *Amritdharis*," she said, now really annoyed. Then she continued, "Even hundreds of years ago our Gurus never discriminated between sexes. So, why now?"

The Third Guru even made some of the women *Manjidars*. Imagine, 500 years ago."

"You know all the Sikh lore," said *Ashaji* admiringly.

"What do you take me for," She said indignantly. "I am a *pukki* Sikhni. I have spent so many years in Amritsar, studying Sikhism. I am *Amritdhari*. I wear a real *kirpan*." She took it up in her hand, showed it to *Ashaji* and said. "**Come, hold it. It is the type of *kirpan*, which can really be called *kirpan*. Not the toys, which our sisters mostly wear.**"

Of course, her *kirpan* weighed about a kilo. And she was proud of it. These days even Sikh men do not wear such *kirpans*, forget the Sikh women.

"In any case, I am thankful to you for showing me the ceremony of midnight washing," she said. "All this while I had only heard of it from my friends who had taken part in it, but never seen it. Now I know what it is."

Everyone is curious about an exception like *Ranbir Kaur Khalsa*. They want to know more of the background of people like her.

"Where are you from," asked *Ashaji*.

She laughed a suppressed laughter.

"Don't you know, after partaking *Amrit*, we are supposed to reply, 'My home is Anandpur *Sahib* and my father is Guru Gobind Singh.' "

"Still," *Ashaji* insisted.

“That is all. All previous memories are erased. Memories of the past associations are unnecessary baggage, useless. They slow down your progress.” she said. “Today I am Ranbir *Kaur* Khalsa, a Sikh Preacher. That is my identity. Nothing else matters any longer.” By then call came for her to speak to the *Sangat*. She took her seat on the dais. She placed her lap-top computer before her, opened it and started with a loud *Jaykara*,

“Waheguru ji ka Khalsa
Waheguru ji Ki Fateh.”

For the next thirty minutes she spoke to the *Sangat* in chaste Punjabi. It is measure of her success that she used not a single English word. She took the *Sangat* through various facets of Sikh life and Sikh teachings, from Guru Nanak to the present day life. It was a very fine performance. After she finished and when came out of the hall, I asked her how she could preach so very well.

“Thanks to my Teacher,” she said. “It is his training which enabled me to be what I am.”

“Of course, you became a Sikh,” I said. “But not every Sikh is a preacher. How did you choose this life?”

“I always wanted to speak from the dais”, she said. “Over the years I had felt that the quality of Sikh preachers left much desired. As a result the Sikh missionary work suffers. I thought I could do better, so I chose this path.”

“Who is your Teacher?” I asked.

She said, “His name is Giani Gurdev Singh. These days he is in Montreal.”

It was not easy for her to persuade him to take her as a disciple and trained her in the art of public speaking. But her persistence paid.

“You have become a good speaker,” I said.

“Not yet,” she said. “As yet I am mostly an object of curiosity. But I am sure, soon I will be better. When the curiosity value wears away, people will pay more attention to what I have to say.”

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