

STATE FORMATION IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY BABA ALA SINGH AND THE BIRTH PANGS OF THE PATIALA STATE

By Dr. Kirpal Singh, MA, Ph, D.
Reviewed by Prof. Chhanda Chatterjee*1

Dr Kirpal Singh's renown in the world of Punjab history is proverbial. His command of several languages like Persian, Urdu, Panjabi, (in the Gurumukhi script) and Marathi has given him access to many rare source materials which make it possible for him to string together many hitherto unknown facts which reveal the past in an altogether new light. His history of carving out of the Patiala state by Ala Jat (1694-1765 AD) of the Siddhu clan later canonized as Baba Ala Singh, adds an interesting chapter in the history of state formation on the ruins of one part of the tottering Mughal Empire which was subjected to the repeated raids of the Persian invader Nadir Shah and thereafter the Afghan invader Ahmad Shah Abdali. The study of the foundation of this state has got a special significance in view of the role of Maharaja Bhupinder Singh, Chancellor of the Chamber of Princes, in throwing the lot of the princely states with the Union of India on the departure of the British and preventing the Balkanization of India by reining in the princely states from going their own ways. Patiala later emerged as the leading state of the PEPSU (Patiala and East Punjab States Union) and played a prominent role in the subsequent Punjabi Suba movement. It is therefore extremely rewarding to go back to the early travails of its founder, be familiar with the pains taken by him to knit together his brave and diplomatic conquests which later gave rise to this impressive cis-Sutlej state. Mr Jagjit Singh Walia of the Department of Press and Publications, Guru Nanak Dev University Amritsar, has done all students of Indian history a great service by bringing out a timely and updated second edition of Dr Kirpal Singh's book 'Baba Ala Singh'.

In attempting a history of the foundation of the Patiala state by Ala Jat of the Phulkian *misl*, Dr Singh hopes to improve upon the works of predecessors- Karam Singh's 'Baba Ala Singh' Khalifa Mohammad Hussain's *Tarikh-i-Patiala* and Lepel Griffin's *Rajas of the Punjab*. Dr Singh discovered several factual errors and distortions in Khalifa Mohammad Hossain. Griffin missed some information. Karam Singh's work received Dr Singh's approbation. But access to the Marathi sources has given Dr Singh an edge on his predecessor. Ala Singh's ancestor Phul established himself in a certain village of the cis-Sutlej territory in a typical struggle of the pastoral nomad seeping a sedentary existence for the control of a well. Around this nucleus of Rampura Phul, Ala Singh gradually accumulated 726 other villages which he won through a ceaseless war against the local Bhatti Rajputs, the invading armies of Ahmad Shah Abdali and his Rohilla Afghan lieutenants, the Mughal Governor of Sirhind, intent on recovering the lost ground for the Mughals and the Maratha invaders from the south. Ala Singh's predecessor Rama had taken *pahul* or *amrit* from Guru Gobind Singh. This ensured that the Phulkian *misal* could bank upon *Dal Khalsa* help whenever the need arose. Ala Singh very cleverly invited the Marathas to attack the Afghan governor of Sirhind, Abdul Samad Khan and exhaust each other in a war of attrition. Baba Ala Singh's rise coincided with the massacre of 12,000 Sikhs near Barnala by Abdali's men in 1762 known in Sikh history as *ghallugara* or the great holocaust. Ala Singh had to pay a tribute of four lakhs to Abdali. On another occasion he had to pay Rs 1 lakh twenty five thousand as ransom for sparing his hair (Since long hair was well known as a symbol of the *Khalsa*, a common Muslim way of humiliating Sikh

adventurers and conquerors was to compel them to part with their hair). Dal Khalsa regarded it as bribing and accused him of treachery. Ala Singh scraped through this problem through the good offices of his friend- Jassa Singh Ahluwalia.

The story of Baba Ala Singh's success in laying the foundations of the Patiala state during a time of great political uncertainty when a tripartite struggle for the control of the resources of northern India was going on between the Mughals, Afghans and Marathas- makes an inspiring reading for all succeeding generations of Indians in their struggle against an uncertain political future. Baba Ala Singh was doing in the cis-Sutlej territories the same work that Ranjit Singh was to achieve in the trans-Sutlej territories half a century later. Just as Maharaja Ranjit Singh had understood that a well administered state would need the cooperation of all communities and had placed Muslims in high ranks in the administration, the same liberal spirit is noticed in Baba Ala Singh's employment of Muslims in key offices, names like Nagahia Khan, the son of Sondhe Khan, figure among his trusted lieutenants and the Muslim Lakhana Dogar was employed as the head of his army. *Deg* (service to humanity) and *teg* (wielding of power) went hand in hand during his times and his dear wife Fateh Kaur helped him in running the *Guru ka langar* in those days of scarcity of food according to the tenets of Sikhism. Dr Kirpal Singh has opened a new horizon in unearthing Marathi sources which point out that the Peshwa Baji Rao II had been corresponding with Ala Singh during his advance towards the north to hit at the tottering Mughal empire and his commander in chief Sada Siv Rao Bhau had been in close touch with Baba Ala Singh. It establishes beyond doubt that even in the early days Ala Jat had become a force to be reckoned with. Dr Kirpal Singh's painstaking research gives us a complete picture of the birth pangs of the Patiala state which later produced such impressive personalities like Maharaja Bhupinder Singh, Maharaja Yadavindra Singh and Captain Amarinder Singh, the present Chief Minister of the Punjab.

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THE RAJ, LAHORE & BHAI RAM SINGH

By Pervez Vandal and Sajida Vandal

Published by National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan (2006)

Pp. 268 Price: Rs. 1500/-

Yesteryears' Arts Wizard: Bhai Ram Singh

A Review by Dr. Amrik Singh*

To ask anyone in Punjab about Bhai Ram Singh would invite silence and blank stares. "Never heard of him"! most people would say. Even in Amritsar where there should be good reasons to remember him, the situation would be the same. He was the man who designed Khalsa College Amritsar in 1892. Even those connected with the college as I have been. (a student for four years and a teacher for six years), hardly knew anything about him. Apart from having heard the name, there was little that I could say about Bhai Ram Singh until I read this book.

After reading it, I know a good deal now and, as should become clear presently, he was one of the more outstanding Indians produced in the late 19th century. When he was alive, he was very much sought after and designed buildings in various Indian states like Jind, Nabha, Patiala, Bhawalpore, J&K, Mysore and so on. For more than two decades, he dominated the architectural scene without a rival.

In the city of Lahore, he designed the Chiefs College, the Lahore Museum, the Mayo School of Arts, the Punjab University Senate House and scores of other buildings, including the Governor's House in Shimla. At Lyallpur, he designed the College of Agriculture. To put it

no more strongly, he was the chief designer of buildings in Punjab in those years and the man who actually built them was Sir Ganga Ram. As the author of this book put it, between the two of them, they shaped pre-1947 Lahore. Apart from the walled city and some Mughal buildings which had existed earlier, the rest of the city has been built in terms of what he designed.

Some two decades ago, those concerned with city planning and architecture discovered that Sir Ganga Ram had made a memorable contribution to the city of Lahore. His name was known to people in any case. Apart from being a remarkable builder, he was also a well known philanthropist. The medical college and hospital which were founded in his name a couple of years before the partition still run under his name. A good deal has also been written about him. But it took this husband and wife team to discover Bhai Ram Singh in the true sense of the word.

Like any architect anywhere in the subcontinent, the issue before them was what would be the appropriate kind of architecture for our country. Apart from the Mughal heritage, the colonial heritage was also a factor. Since 90 percent of Lahore is colonial in heritage, the role of these two persons became central. No wonder those concerned with this issue focussed on Sir Ganga Ram and Bhai Ram Singh. This is the first book which brings out the rich and varied contribution of Bhai Ram Singh.

There are chapters dealing with the right kind of architecture for the Raj, the transformation of Lahore as a city, the growth and commingling of native architecture and the changes that were taking place. Half of this lavishly produced and illustrated book is devoted to these issues. In terms of balance, that was the right thing to do.

The next half of the book deals with the personal and professional career of Bhai Ram Singh. Some of things that emerge need to be underlined. He was born in a carpenter family in a village near Batala and had an uncanny sense of design and understanding of things mechanical. He was not even 14 years of age when he repaired the piano of the Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar. He had no training of any kind but he did the job to the full satisfaction of both the husband and wife.

When the Mayo School of Arts was established in 1875, he sought admission to it. During the next few years, he learnt English, basic drawing, mathematics, geometry, indeed everything connected with his profession. He integrated the colonial with the native tradition in furniture making, tapestry making, interior decoration and architecture.

He functioned under the overall guidance of his Principal Kipling and soon surpassed everyone around him. Within a few years, his work came to be widely noticed. The Great Exhibition of 1851 in London had generated two streams of influence. One was reform in art education and the second was trade in oriental wares. Both had their impact on India as well. The establishment of the Mayo School of Art was a case in point.

After 8 years of studentship, he became an assistant drawing master in the Mayo School. In the early 80's, Kipling (his son Rudyard Kipling went on to win the Noble Prize) took him to Calcutta in connection with an exhibition and introduced him to the Duke and Duchess of Connaught who were visiting India at that time.

They admired his work and he got invited to UK a little later. He performed so well there that his work came to the notice of Queen Victoria and she asked him to design an Indian Room in one of her palaces. Altogether he spent two years in England.

By the time he returned, he was so well known that he was offered all kinds of assignments. Step by step, he got promoted in his job and achieved immense popularity. He was honoured and decorated in a variety of ways. Though delayed by several years, he ultimately became the Principal of Mayo School of Arts. It may be reiterated here that he

had hardly any formal education. What he achieved was based on his profound knowledge of the native tradition and the quality of his work.

There is a good deal more in this book than cannot be reproduced here. Now that his talent has been re-discovered, it is time to follow up the matter. His family is still around but most of the material relating to him is to be found in Lahore. In brief, it would be difficult to go beyond what is given in this book at least for some time. Two things however may be said.

The first one is that this is a book which is very relevant for students of art and architecture in India. It is understood that the book is available from Manohar Publishers in Delhi and those interested can get in from that source. It is the second thing however which I wish to underline.

Considering the immense contribution of this self taught man, the minimum that Khalsa College, Amritsar can do is to either enter into some kind of an arrangement with the authors whereby the portion dealing with Bhai Ram Singh in the book is reproduced in India or a new book is got written. The minimum that the College can do is to display a picture of the man and some salient facts about him. Is it not odd that his portrait is displayed in one of the Queen's palaces in England but in India hardly anyone seems to know about him?

Perhaps it would be a good idea to name some institution connected with art or architecture after him. No country can progress unless it knows how to honour those who had brought lustre to the country in the first instance.

[Courtesy: *The Tribune*, Chandigarh]

DIVINE INTIMATIONS: 'NIT NEM'

Text & Translation of the

Daily Liturgical Prayers of Sikh Devotees

By Jaswant Singh Neki

Published by Hemkunt Publishers (P) Ltd.

A-78, Naraina Indl. Area (Ph.I), New Delhi 110028

Pp. 320 Price: Rs. 150/-

A Review by Saran Singh

Dr. Jaswant Singh Neki has long served as Head of the Department of Psychology, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi, and later in the World Health Organisation at Geneva. What is not so well-known is his prolific poetic writing in Punjabi. Possessed of a poignantly eloquent expression, his deep sensibilities have poured forth some of the most evocative verse. In mid 1970's his volume of poems *kruxw dl Cuh qoN mgroN* (Navyug) (Which is almost untranslatable) appeared with a Preface by Dr. Karan Singh, MP and an introduction by none other than Pyare Lal, one time secretary to Mahatma Gandhi.

More relevant to our present context is Dr. Neki's definitive volume (360Page) 'Ardws : drSn rUp AiBAws' (Singh Bros) or *Ardas: Philosophy, text and Usage*. The comprehensive insight that it provides into the evolution and importance of the Sikh Liturgical Prayer makes it a compulsory reading for every student of the Sikh Lore.

In the same genre, but using English medium, is the latest volume (Hemkunt: 2006) under review. The introduction gives a bird's eyeview of the Sikh moral tradition, dwelling briefly on the Key Banis in Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Next chapter offers intimations of the spiritual and philosophical nature of the Daily Prayer, followed by the stanza-wise rendering, into English, of the Jap-ji Sahib, Jap Sahib of Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji, that 'employs amazingly live rhythms' in praise of-and devotion - to the Transcendent Reality of God. This part demands profound knowledge of Sanskrit, Farsi and Arabic – used in felicitous rhyme – by the Tenth Master, in order that we may imbibe the Spirit of the Divine to make our sojourn on earth

more meaningful. Jaap Sahib is followed by *Sawayyas* (Quatrains) that proclaim basic attributes of God while repudiating ritualist brahminical practices. The Evening Prayer, *Rehras* is followed by *Sohila* and *Ardas* that conclude the five *Banis*. The younger generation can greatly benefit from Dr. Neki's annotated volume. □

NAAM ROOP: A TRIBUTE TO THE DIVINE

By Shailendra Gulhati with Arpana Caur

Published by Digital Publications

Pp. 83 Price: Rs. 800/-

This compilation of paintings and poems throws light on the rich diversity and fundamental oneness of religions. A jugalbandi of name and form, the book is a celebration of God's creation and a tribute to the timeless self. Succinct verses by Shailendra Gulhati, a Shaivite who lives in Jammu, are loaded with an all-embracing spirituality. Each poem – be it on the brooding yoga of Satchitananda, the simple wisdom of Kabir, the Bhagawad Gita's Soul Supreme, the joyous abandon of the Sufis, the resonant natural appeal of Goddess Kali, or on the experience philosophy of Zen- is an effort to explore the formless essence that pervades, and finds expression in, all forms. Arpana Caur's colourful contemporary art is a perfect visual complement. At a time when we are striving towards a more peaceful world, *Naam Roop*, an expression of the absolute One, comes as a compelling allusion to the unity of religious and cultures. A force that moves one to look inward, it appeals as much to the mystic eye as to the modern seeker of metaphysical truth, inspiring one and all to lead meaningful lives.

[Courtesy: *India Today*]

BOOKS RECEIVED

Loving God: Practical Teachings of Baba Virsa Singhji

Published by Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd.

Pp. 90, Price (Paper Back), Rs. 75

Covering basic devotional themes of God realization, in simple language, this handy book guides the seeker along the holy path of, Naam, meditation and *seva*, until one is ushered in God's Kingdom. Gobind Sadan has long been a haven for holy souls in search of peace of mind. As Fr. Paulos Mar Gregorios observes "We must thank God that someone like Babaji is living in our midst today."

Loving The Unknown

By Dr. Kulwant Singh Khokhar

Pub. from: 12502 Nightingale Drive, Chester. VA 23836 USA

Pages 84, Price (Donations only)

The octogenarian doctor has been a prolific writer, mainly on moral and spiritual way of life, centered on the Sikh Scripture – Guru-Bani. This booklet is a handy guide to *Nit Nem* or daily recitation of Five holy texts, at the dawn, dusk and before going to bed. The Appendix provides broad guidelines for a practising Sikh, while the Index is a meticulous scale of reference.

SafÉd Lahoo (Urdu): A Collection of Pious Verses (in Urdu)

By Nanak Singh Nishtar

Pub. Sant Bhavan, 15-3-137, Goli Gowra Chaman

Hyderabad 500 012

Pp. 104, Price (Not Stated)

Sr. Nanak Singh Nishter has long served the cause of inter-faith understanding from his native Hyderabad, that remains the multicultural hub of peninsular India. The SR Dec 06 issue indeed reviews his Telegu Book on Sri Guru Granth Sahib, which testifies to his versatile talent as well as devotion. This booklet has a hundred-odd lyrics, in chaste Urdu, on a variety of themes, that should delight all these who know Urdu and love piety.

Hindu & Sikh Wedding Ceremonies

By Ramesh Chandra & Urmila Dogra

Pub. Star Publications Pvt. Ltd., 4/5 Asaf Ali Rd., New Delhi 110 002

Pages 192., Price (Hard Cover) Rs. 350/- (Paperback) Rs. 200/-

The London (UK) based couple have, in this book, comprehensively dealt with the wedding ceremonies prevalent among both Hindus and Sikhs. The bulk (116 pages) is devoted to the elaborated Hindu rituals and their mythological significance. Chapter 9 to 13 dwell on the *Anand Karaj*, its moral and social significance, while touching on the devolution of legal responsibility. The closing chapter 14 examines the implication of INTERFAITH marriages - a social phenomenon that has overtaken the new generation. Chapter 10 & 11 are devoted to the origin, philosophy and ethics of Sikhism, as a distinct religion, that nevertheless shares numerous social and superficial customs with the Hindu (and the Indian) way of life. This is evidently a sociological and populist study rather than an in-depth philosophical dissertation, which makes it easy reading as well as a reference book.

- S.S.

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