

New information on the Life of Guru Gobind Singh

JAGPAL SINGH TIWANA*

* 134 Greenwich Dr., Dartmouth, NS, Canada B2V 2N5. Email: tiwana@istar.ca

I HAVE RECEIVED A COPY of Journal of Punjab Studies (Spring – Fall issue 2008) published by the Center for Sikh and Punjab Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara (USA), and ably edited by the renowned scholar, Dr. Gurinder Singh Mann. The journal has high academic standards. The current special issue is dedicated to the life and time of Guru Gobind Singh. Some of the contributors are well known scholars - J S Grewal, Christopher Shackle, John Stratton Hawley, Indu Banga, et al.

I have read the article by Dr. Gurinder Singh Mann “Sources for the Study of Guru Gobind Times” and was profoundly impressed by the scholarly approach of the author. The ground breaking piece is very well researched, and it will force many scholars to have a fresh look at many incidents and dates of Guru ji’s life.

To build the life, character and personality of Guru Gobind Singh, Dr. Mann does not want scholars to confine themselves solely to the textual sources. He refers to all aspects of Guru ji’s life and personality such as the city of Anandpur that he planned, the ring of forts he built around it, the armour he used, and the religious places he visited, etc.

“We referred to contemporary evidence of the Guru’s Court (*ucha asthan*). The texts offer descriptions of how he sat on the throne (*takhat*), accompanied by his personal attendant (*hazuri taihalia*) Waving the ceremonial flywhisk (*chaur*), and the chamberlains (*ardasias*) who announced the visitors, as well as scholars, poets, scribes, musicians (*dhadis/rababis*), drummers (*nagarchis*) and flag-bearers...Court chroniclers also kept records...Guru maintained an army and his troops marched with elephants and horses led by drums ...” Observes Dr. Mann.

His research brings to our notice new sources of information which were not found or thus interpreted before. His study suggests new dates for certain texts and historic events.

Visits to Hindu Temples:

Guru ji visited some historic Hindu temples, not as a devotee, but as a patron and religious chief (Patshah). Dr. Mann personally visited Naina Devi and Kapal Mochan to collect evidence on this issue. There he found copper plates bestowed by Guru ji and a similar one he learned was at Kurukshetra. It was a common practice in those days for the hill chiefs to bestow copper plates on local shrines as a mark of their benevolence and authority. At Naina Devi the copper plate (*tamar patra*) in the name of Guru ji was unveiled by the priest in Dr. Mann’s presence. The inscription on the plate was in Gurmukhi script (also called Anandpuri lipi).

The plate at Kapal Mochan dated 1679 (Samat 1736) is in regular Gurmukhi. Its text reads “One God with the grace of the Guru. The Khalsa belongs to the Immortal One. Guru Gobind Singh bestowed the hukamnama on Jwala Das Brahmin on Tuesday October 14, 1679. My Sikh who will follow this Hukamnama will be blessed”. According to its custodians, Guru ji made two visits to their place. He bestowed the plate in 1679 and a hukamnama in 1688. A Sikh account also confirms his visit in 1688.

According to Dr. Mann, the copper plates have served as symbols of political patronage and it was a common practice for the Punjab hill chiefs to bestow them on local shrines as a mark of their benevolence as well as authority. Sikhs saw the acceptance of plates by the influential priestly families as a token of their submission to Sikh authority.

Hukamnamas:

Dr. Mann found two new Hukamnamas of Guru Gobind Singh which have great historic value.

The first one was issued in 1698 (samat 1755). It states that the Khalsa panth constitutes the Guru's own form(rup); an audience with the Guru and taking pahul will ensure liberation. (*jo Amrit Chhakega so amar hogeva*). Sikhs were asked not to have any interaction with five groups; these were the followers of Prithi Chand, Dhirmal, Ramrai, Masands and Kurimars.

The second Hukamnama is dated 1699 (Samat 1756). It brings the Guru's blessing to the congregation, declares its members to be the Khalsa of the Guru, asks them to meditate on the Guru's name and commands them to send their contribution through Partap Singh, the bearer of the letter. The scribe's name is Sainha Singh.

These two Hukamnamas are in the private collection of a family in the USA.

The first Hukamnama suggests that pahul ceremony was in existence in 1698 or before. Dr. Mann, therefore, stresses the re-examining of the tradition which holds that Pahul ceremony was introduced on Baisakhi day of 1699 for the first time.

Besides the two, Dr. Mann has photographs of five other Hukamnamas which are not yet printed.

Rahitnamas:

According to Dr. Mann the dates of two rahitnamas, one by Nand Lal and the other by Pihilad Singh further support the above view. Both were written in 1694. Chaupa Singh's Rahitnama was written in 1700. When Chaupa Singh presented it to Guru ji, Guru ji advised him to show it, especially as it relates to the controversial issue of norms of marriage, to other Gurmukhs. Guru ji wanted it to be based on the testimony of Granth Sahib. He approved it when he was satisfied that it encompasses the teachings of Sikh Gurus as enshrined in Granth Sahib.

Prem Sumarg Granth:

According to Dr. Mann, Prem Sumarg is a comprehensive document that marked the peak among rahitnamas produced at Anandpur. "The text reflects the deep understanding of Sikh beliefs, a sense of Guru Gobind Singh's vision for the future of the Sikhs and a good understanding of the Hindu and Muslim communities. Furthermore, it shows an amazing sensitivity to gender-related issues, and considerable care is taken to include the details of rituals related to birth, marriage, and death of female members of the Sikh community, including widows" observes Dr. Mann. Since there is no name of its author on the document, it may have been a joint project of some learned men at the court.

Janam Sakhi literature:

Dr. Mann lists three works, Sarab kal ki Benanti, Sri Gur Sobha and Parichian Patishahi Dasvin ki which can be grouped under Janam Sakhis.

Sarab kal ki Benanti was completed in 1698. The narrative describes the mythical past of Sikh Gurus, the divine birth of Guru Gobind Singh and his efforts to establish a community of Vahiguru.

Dr. Mann examined four manuscripts of Sri Gur Sobha by Sainapati. Two bear 1701 as the date and one has 1741 on it; however, most of the scholars now accept 1711 as the date. He thinks Sainapati might have started it in 1701 and finished in 1711.

Parchian Patishahi Dasvin ki was completed at Nander soon after the death of Guru Gobind Singh. It has much useful information. Adi Granth is referred as 'Guru Granth' and the official seal of Guru Gobind Singh is the same which Banda Bahadur uses and also later it is on the Sikh coins. When questioned by Sikhs as to who would succeed him after his death, Guru Ji said Khalsa Panth will stay in the lap of God "*Khalsa akal purh ki god*"). This comes closer to the account in Gur Sobha.

Poets at Guru ji's court:

When Guru ji moved to Paunta, some poets from Mathura area joined Guru ji's court. They wrote about Hindu deities, produced works like Krishan Avtar (1688) which were added to Bachitar Natak Granth. But before Krishan Avtar and Ram Avtar were included they were adjusted to meet Sikh theology. Lines describing the futility of worshipping Krishan and Ram were added.

Then there were other poets who joined the court when Guru Ji moved to Anandpur. They were interested in tales about kings, warriors, uncouth men and women and the result is Charitro Pakhyan Granth (1696). Such tales were meant to entertain ordinary people.

Sarab Loh Granth:

Dr. Mann discovered two new manuscripts of Sarab Loh dated 1698 in the private collection of a family in Punjab. It sings praises of the annihilating power of Mahakal/Shiva. It has almost the same spirit which Bachitar Natak Granth has. It also contains the history of ten Gurus, the nature of the Khalsa, the importance of Granth and the Khalsa Panth., the inscription that appears on the seal of Banda Bahadur and Sikh coins.

Dasam Granth:

The original manuscript of Dasam Granth was called Anandpur Birh. It was written in both Gurmukhi and Anandpur lipi. Anandpur Birh is a beautiful inscribed text which has names of scribes in the margins.

There is quite an interesting description on how Dasam Granth got its current shape and title. To start with Bachitar Natak Granth, Charitropakhyan Granth and Sarb Loh Granth appeared independently, then they were joined together under the title 'Dasvin Patshahi ka Granth' and finally in 20th century it was called Dasam Granth. Charitropakhyan was composed by more than one poet. Its purpose was to entertain people and warn them against the wiles of women and petty thieves that might have arrived in the thriving town of Anandpur. Puranic verses were adjusted to the needs of the Sikh Court. Dr. Mann does not accept the current version of Dasam Granth as solely the composition of Guru Sahib. What actually Guru ji wrote needs facsimiles of core compositions in the earliest manuscripts of Dasam Granth.

Guru Panth, Guru Granth:

According Dr. Mann, the term Khalsa was in use in the early 17th century and early reports of the “creation of Khalsa” indicate that Guru Ji declared the entire Sikh community his Khalsa. Furthermore the declaration’s association with the Baisakhi of 1699 appears for the first time in the late 19th century sources. The belief in the dual authority of Guru Granth and Guru Panth was in use in the lifetime of Guru Ji. In commemoration of the 2008 Gurta Gaddi Divas, role of Guru Panth was not highlighted.

Guruji’s date of Birth:

Earlier writers, Chaupa Singh (1700), Kesar Singh Chhibbar (1769), Sarup Das Bhalla (1776), and Sarup Singh Kaushish (1790) mention 1661 as the year of Guru ji’s birth. The year 1666 is now currently accepted and it was recorded by Sukha Singh (1797) for the first time. Why did he do so and why did Ganda Singh and others accept it ? It needs further study and explanation.

To any one who wants to study the life of our Darvesh Guru, checking the sources in Dr. Mann’s article is very important. He has thoroughly discussed both the material and textual sources, and he has not left out anything associated with Guru Ji’s life. It is a 55 page long article with 157 references.

