

How much of Sikhism do we Understand?

*JOGISHWAR SINGH**

** A Swiss citizen, his earlier Travelogue appeared (serialised) in SR: Aug. Sept. & Oct. 2009. Email: jogishwarsingh@gmail.com*

AS A SIKH PERMANENTLY settled in Switzerland, observing events affecting Sikhs in India and elsewhere, I wonder more and more whether the Sikhs of today are really fit for Sikhism. I get the feeling that the message of the Sikh Gurus is so oriented to liberation from all kinds of superstitions, rituals, baser instincts and basic follies that Sikhs are just not intellectually up to a level where they can understand its full import. The message embodied in Sikhism is so universal, humanistic and elevating that it can only be imbibed and practiced by very strong individuals, capable of rising above basic human instincts like prejudice, envy, racism and ignorance.

Ahead of Times:

I feel that the Gurus were way ahead of their times - with their universal and egalitarian message which had to be understood by the masses which ostensibly converted to their teachings. Different social groups became Sikhs for different reasons but, leaving aside a tiny committed kernel, most of them seem to have converted to Sikhism for reasons other than a full grasp of the philosophical message being preached by the Sikh Gurus. The Jats seem to have become Sikhs in large numbers during the 17th and 18th centuries, but appear to have done so more to establish a privileged status as land holding gentry than out of loyalty to the principles inherent in the Gurus' teachings. In the Hindu caste system, Jats would have remained classified as Shudras, notwithstanding their desperate efforts in manufacturing vaunted genealogical trees for themselves, showing them as descendants of Luv and Kush of Ramayana fame. Even a so called former Sikh High Priest has propounded this thesis in recent times. One only needs to see young Jats, mostly without turbans, sporting beards seemingly mown with lawn mowers, wearing designer brand clothes, mouthing a very approximate English syntax, preening around in most Punjab towns to realize that they are materially well situated but are miles away from any basic understanding of the message of the Gurus. Pride, vanity, absence of intellectual curiosity and aggressive posturing seem to be the main characteristics of Jat Sikh society not only in Punjab but also in foreign lands today. This is not to suggest that non Jat Sikhs are any better. However, we shall come to that later. Jat Sikhs constitute the major group in Sikhism, therefore, they are being considered before the others.

Pioneering Reform:

Banda Singh Bahadur shattered traditional land holding patterns in Punjab by taking land away from established non-Sikh landholders and redistributing it to smaller peasant proprietors, mostly Jat Sikhs, or those who subsequently became Sikhs because of this fact. Banda's role as India's pioneering land reformer needs more ample consideration on its own. I get the subjective feeling that a large number of Jats became Sikhs in this period not because of any understanding of the essentials of Sikh philosophy handed down by our Gurus but for sheer economic gain. They had a good chance of earning title to land by becoming followers of Banda Singh. Their physical attributes made them good fighters. Their experience of tilling the land made them good farmers. They provided the emerging Sikh society with the means to fight oppression from ruling cliques and feed itself by

producing staple diet items in Punjab. They deserve the encomiums showered on them in later times. But did they grasp the Gurus' spiritual message? I honestly do not know. Was attachment to the Gurus' message the principal factor in their becoming Sikhs in such large numbers? In my opinion, the jury is still out on this.

Sikhism's Backbone:

The advantages to Jats in becoming Sikhs are obvious. From a low social status in Hinduism, they acquired a privileged social status in Sikhism, reaching a climax in the empire constituted by Maharaja Ranjit Singh. By becoming Sikhs, they acquired titles to their land holdings under Banda Singh Bahadur. They were able to mask their traditional penchant for robbery, plunder and aggressive posturing in the garb of a liberation struggle being carried on by Sikhs against genocidal political authorities. The consolidation of their social and political status continued even after the swift collapse of the Sikh Empire in 1849.

The British conducted a scientific policy of "divide et impera" (divide and rule). In this context, they selected the Jat Sikhs as one of their favoured "martial races", recruiting them in the British Indian Army in numbers absurdly out of proportion to their numbers in the total population. They cleverly used their patronage by conferring titles of Sardar Bahadur, Sir etc on rich collaborators who were more loyal to the British Crown than to their fellow Indians. French collaborators who collaborated with the Nazis during 1940-45 were either shot or ridiculed after the Germans were expelled from France. Jat Sikh collaborators who aided the colonial power against their own people were honoured with titles, land grants and other privileges like an elite education in chosen schools like the Aitchison College in Lahore. Collaboration with foreign invaders was a badge of honour in India rather than an eternal stigma as it should have been, especially in Sikh society based on values taught by the Sikh Gurus. This should in no way take any merit away from the thousands of Jat Sikh participants in the freedom struggle but hardly any of them are part of the ruling political and social Jat Sikh elite dominating Punjab politics and society even today. A lot of the so called Sikh elite of today are direct descendents of collaborators, toadies of the British. No amount of chest thumping posturing and splurging of wealth should be allowed to mask this basic historical fact.

As for non Jat Sikhs, it seems to me that the Khatri originally became Sikhs also because it gave them an even more privileged status than they had in Hindu society since they could claim kin with the Sikh Gurus, all from Khatri families. It is ridiculous to classify Sikh Gurus as Khatri since they had risen so far above such petty classifications. It is equally ridiculous to consider bhagats like Sant Kabir ji, Bhagat Ravi Das ji or Nam Dev ji as belonging to lower castes. Any person considering such elevated souls as belonging to such or such caste, high or low, reveals his or her own stupidity rather than a proper grasp of the message being conveyed by them. Those who grasp the message of the Sikh Gurus and Bhagats find it impossible to understand how Sikhs can continue to be mired in the shackles of casteism, totally antithetical to Sikh philosophy.

In this context, Khatri Sikhs considered themselves as the apex of Sikh society. They vaunted the fact of their being of kin to the Sikh Gurus. Hindu society had placed them below the Brahmins. They sought the spot of the top dog in Sikh society. Even a few of the off-spring of the Sikh Gurus were not immune to jostling for the top spot. The first, second, third, fourth, sixth and seventh Sikh Gurus set aside their children or their eldest son in favour of outsiders to the family or younger sons as their successors. The influence of Khatri Sikhs diminished with the large scale entry of Jats into the Sikh fold in the 18th

century but till then they pretty much ruled the roost in Sikh society. Even today, it is not rare to see them preferring their own caste kin as marriage partners for their children. Some of the Sodhis, for example, go about preening themselves as direct descendants of the Sikh Gurus, totally forgetting the message of equality preached by their own ancestors.

The social Prestige:

It appears to me that even the non Khatri non Jat Sikhs were attracted to Sikhism more by the temptation of improving their social lot compared to what they were getting in Hindu society than by genuine understanding of and attachment to the Gurus' message of sublime equality. Even they did not get rid of their caste attachments when it came to marriage. This group of Sikhs is as mired in ritualism as the other Sikh social groups. They have acquired a reputation as sharp businessmen, cutting corners for profit. There is the stereotype of such Sikhs going to the Gurdwara early in the morning to rub their noses at the doorstep before going over to their shops to fleece their customers with all sorts of unsavoury practices. How can we reconcile their practices with the story of Guru Nanak Sahib getting fixed on "Tera, tera, tera" while doling out foodgrain rations to customers while working at the shop in Sultanpur Lodhi? The Gurus' message of unflinching adherence to ethics and morality in every aspect of the life of a Sikh does not find true reflection in the business practices of this category of Sikhs. Posturing seems to have gained the upper hand over substance.

Raw Deal to Guru-ke-bété:

The Mazhabi Sikhs have got the rawest deal of all with the evolution of Sikh society after the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The tenth Guru said "Rangreterey Guru key betey" (The Rangretas are the sons of the Guru). We have the sad spectacle of Mazhabi Sikhs being obliged to have their separate Gurdwaras because they are not allowed to participate as equals at the Gurdwaras controlled by other castes. This paradox should make any true Sikh revolt with passion. It does not seem to be even creating a ripple. Even in places like the UK, separate Gurdwaras seem to have been set up for Mazhabi Sikhs. This total negation of the Gurus' teachings is a direct reflection of the theme being developed in this article that most Sikhs today do not even have any proper understanding of their own Gurus' teachings. If they did, there would have been a massive social upsurge against the treatment reserved for Mazhabi Sikhs.

A Sikh fully conscious of and living his/her Gurus' teachings simply could not tolerate such social injustice. A true Sikh should see Waheguru Almighty's image in each and every being, let alone in every Sikh. In such an awareness scenario, an affront to a Mazhabi Sikh should be considered as an affront to Waheguru Himself since every being is in His image. If this sounds far fetched and theoretical, this just goes to prove that the message of our Gurus is far ahead of us in time. Will we ever get to the stage where we shall start to actually implement the Gurus' message in our everyday lives is an open question. Dr B.R. Ambedkar was keenly interested in Sikhism as an alternative to Hinduism for his dalit followers. A minute examination of Sikh social reality showed him that it did not conform to the Gurus' message. How many people in the present day Sikh leadership are actually trying to redress these social injustices, leaving aside political hypocrisy being spewed about by all political parties to garner Sikh votes?

Talking of Jat Sikhs, Khatri Sikhs, Arora Sikhs, Mazhabi Sikhs is an oxymoron for any Sikh imbued with the true essence of our Gurus' message. We can only talk of the Gurus' Sikhs, nothing else. However, even a casual look around Sikh society today in India and overseas establishes that it is anything but this. The fact that a large majority of Sikhs

continue to revel in their caste tags shows that they have the outward form of Sikhism without understanding an iota of what its basic message is. Even the outward form is now difficult to distinguish since large numbers do not even keep unshorn hair or tie a turban, both absolute necessities demanded by the tenth Guru. Many Sikh women keep the karva chauth fast. Aartis are done on a regular basis. Dowry is widely prevalent, as is female infanticide, an absolute shame. A low profile lifestyle, full of gratitude to Waheguru Almighty at all times, has been shunned in favour of a high profile materialistic lifestyle, flaunting wealth. Historical gurdwaras are being destroyed by Kar Sewa Babas with impunity, wiping out centuries of architectural heritage in favour of marble spattered mausoleum like structures. This is supposed to be sewa.

A British historian, Lord Acton, wrote in 1891, "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely". With reference to contemporary Sikh society, ignorance is bliss and absolute ignorance is total bliss! This is what I feel when I see modern day Sikh marriage ceremonies, bhog ceremonies or other manifestations of Sikh social behaviour. People with long flowing beards behave no better than clean shaven "Sikhs" flaunting thick iron "kadas", Khanda symbols on their T shirts and Khalistani slogans on their cars. They do not have the gumption of obeying their tenth Guru's injunction to keep the five symbols of the Khalsa but go around posturing as the crusading knights of Sikhism. Dante Alighieri wrote the "Divine Comedy". Were he today to write about Sikh society, he might give his writing the title "Hilarious Comedy".

Identity is not for Barter!

A major damage being caused by present day Sikhs in contact with non Sikh societies is the distortions of Sikh religious requirements that they communicate to others. I have never understood why people who abandon the basic tenets of the Gurus' teachings feel this desperate need to flaunt themselves as good Sikhs. It is almost as if they feel that Sikhs alone have the patent on being good human beings, which, obviously, is nonsensical. "Maanas ki jaat sabhey ekey pahchanbo" said our Gurus, so where is the question of Sikhs being better human beings than others? Driven by this need to flaunt their Sikh identity, such people confuse the needs of their personal comforts with the requirements of Sikhism. They come up with notions like the Khalsa being created only by the tenth Guru, in complete disregard of the fact that all ten Gurus have to be considered as an integral entity, one "jot". They ask for proof of this in a laboratory. Anyone seeking experimental proofs in any religion is barking up the wrong tree. It is a matter of faith and personal enlightenment, not of laboratory experiments. As more and more Sikhs emigrate to overseas countries, more and more of them mask their personal penchant for comfort as a doctrine of their religion. This creates confusion in the minds of non Sikhs about what exactly Sikhism stands for.

I am convinced that the root cause of Sikh social morass today is the basic fact that large majorities of various social groups embraced Sikhism, not because of conviction about its message, but because of relative social advantages that they sought out of it. This was true in the time of our Gurus and this is true today. This is why most of them were not able to transmit a living heredity to succeeding generations. One of the finest compliments I ever received in my life was when a Muslim industrialist, at the head of one of the biggest industries in Pakistan, told me after a personal meeting in Lahore that I should convey his sincere regards to my parents who had managed to transmit such a strong set of values to their son who, in spite of being married to a Swiss Caucasian woman, living in Switzerland, had not abandoned his identity. More importantly, the son had not attempted to justify the

needs of his own personal comfort or ambitions by distorting the message of his religion. I conveyed this message to my mother last year just before she passed away. My interlocutor told me that he travels frequently to the Indian Punjab and nothing saddens him more than seeing swathes of Sikh youngsters belonging to families of his Sikh friends who have abandoned their identity and their mother tongue. This is the view of an educated Muslim about contemporary Sikh society.

The sublime Message is for Living:

Of course, there is a microscopic minority of Sikhs who live out the Gurus' sublime message in their daily lives. Such people do not go around broadcasting this fact from rooftops. The irony is that those who know do not speak and those who speak do not know! In the middle of swirling Sikh ignorance and cupidity, the Gurus' message remains a beacon of shining light, waiting for those who understand its import, not just for Sikh society but for the whole of humanity.

To end on an optimistic note, when Kaliyuga gives way to a better epoch, the sublime message of the Sikh Gurus in the form of their teachings might just be better understood and actually practised in their daily lives by Sikhs who would then rise above casteism, dowries, drunkenness, drugs, ritualism, corrupt ignorant leaders, heritage destroying sant babas, rampant female infanticide, braggadocio instead of intellectual ability and pride in stupid behaviour. This is not going to happen in my lifetime. I sincerely hope that it happen some day. Till then I remain convinced that the essence of the Sikh Gurus' message is so spiritually elevating that most present day Sikhs are just not capable of comprehending its liberating thrust, leave aside actually putting it into practice in their daily lives.

