

Unite or Perish! - A Call for Panthic Unity

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With a following of over 25 million, Sikhism ranks fifth among the major religions of the world on the basis of population. While the Sikhs are concentrated in the Punjab State where they constitute nearly 65% of the population, they are a significant minority in the Indian Union as a whole (2%). Internationally, Sikh diaspora is visible in all major countries of the world where they have made their presence felt due to their dynamism, hard work and adventurous spirit. This kind of distribution has its own problems as well as advantages. With their numerical dominance in Punjab, one would believe that Sikhs could lead the State and the community to progress and prosperity through their professed policies of universal love and brotherhood for *sarbat da bhala*. They could also fulfil the expectations of the Indian Sikh community outside Punjab as well as the international Sikh diaspora who look to Punjabi Sikhs for leadership and support.

Glow of Freedom: Unfortunately, this is not happening. Mounting problems, rather than achievements, dominate the present scenario. The downward slide in the fortunes of the Panth has been particularly marked after the Partition of Punjab in 1947. ‘The glow of freedom’ promised to Sikhs when they decided to cast their lot with India, never materialized. The promise was in fact dropped on the plea that ‘times have changed’.

Centralism: Before Partition, the national leaders and Congress Party were committed to a federal structure and autonomy for States in independent India. Aims and Objects Resolution moved by no less a person than Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru in the Constituent Assembly and passed by it on January 22, 1947, provided that ‘Independent, Sovereign India shall be a Union of States which shall possess and retain the status of autonomous units together with residuary powers. The model adopted, however, was anything but federal, the Centre retaining all the subjects, exclusively or concurrently with the States, and through special agencies, like the Planning Commission, Central Water and Power Commission, University Grants Commission, Finance Commission, NCERT, ICHR, etc. All India services cadres, like the IAS, IPS although assigned to the States, are completely under the control of the Central Government. As if all this was not enough, Section 356 was added to the constitution, which empowered the Union Government to dismiss any inconvenient State Government on flimsy grounds. Sikhs who had been recognised as one of the three parties for negotiating with the British for transfer of power, considered the draft to be violative of earlier assurances. Their representatives in the Constituent Assembly, therefore, refused to affix their signatures on such a Constitution. But their protest was ignored with disdain.

Another commitment of the Congress was formation of linguistic States, which was fulfilled in 1956 in case of all other languages except Punjabi. In case of Punjabi-speaking State, however, the decision was that no such State would be formed ‘whatever the merits of the case’.

Struggle: This forced the Sikhs to launch an agitation, which continued for 10 years in which over 50,000 Sikhs courted arrest. In 1966 the government reluctantly agreed and conceded a

truncated Punjabi-speaking State, transferring vast Punjabi-speaking areas to the other newly created States of Haryana and Himachal. Besides, its capital and control over river waters and power were retained by the Centre. Even the High Court was to be shared with Haryana and the Union Territory of Chandigarh. **This has reduced the Punjab State to a second class status.**

Recruitment to Central Services was, as it should be, on merit alone. This had led to a relatively higher proportion of Sikhs in the Defence Services due to their aptitude, tradition, physical fitness, martial background, etc. In order to reduce their numbers, the Central Government introduced the system of geographical representation completely ignoring merit which was earlier, and in other departments still is, the sole consideration for recruitment. Representations of the Sikhs against this discrimination have fallen on deaf ears so far.

Autonomy: Pursuing the goal of greater autonomy for the States, the Shiromani Akali Dal adopted in 1973, at Anandpur Sahib, a resolution to this effect. The document projected the concept for future Centre-State relationship. This demand had come from several other States also. However, rather than consider the merits of the contents, the government propaganda machine, time and again, through a clever subterfuge, has managed to divert attention to the concluding phrase of '*Khalsa ji ka bol bala*', which was contextually unconnected with the subject matter of autonomy, and has been a traditional Akali slogan akin to *charhdi kala* and *sarbat da bhala*. Consequently, evading the cause of greater autonomy for the States, the promoters of the demand for autonomy have been consigned to great misery as 'communal and secessionist.'

Assault: 1984 Seeing no hope of getting justice on issues of State autonomy, river waters, etc. *Dharam yudh morcha* was launched. The response of the government was the Blue Star attack in 1984 and the ruthless repression of the Sikhs, which continued during eighties as well as early nineties under NSA/TADA, etc. taking a heavy toll of Sikhs. The trauma suffered during 1984 when the sanctum sanctorum of the Sikhs, the Golden Temple Amritsar, was attacked by the army, killing thousand of innocent Sikh pilgrims including women and children, and subsequently the indiscriminate killing of Sikhs in Delhi and several other towns of India, continues to cast its painful shadow on the Sikh psyche.

The assembly elections in 1997 brought the SAD to power with a big majority. At the Centre also the Akalis became a party in the coalition government. Our leaders, however, failed to solve any of the problems facing the Sikhs community. Condition of rural Sikh masses continued to deteriorate, as is clear from hundreds of suicides committed by farmers during the last few years. The latest shock is the Supreme Court directive to the government to complete the SYL canal within a year. This is not surprising, since defence in the legal battle on river waters issue on the part of the state government has been, at best, halfhearted. While waters of the Beas, Satluj and Ravi belong exclusively to the Punjab, a large part of it continues to flow out of the State. And when the directive of the Supreme Court is implemented, the total area (about a million acres) served by the Bist Doab Canal and the Sirhind Feeder is sure to turn into desert without irrigation.

Recent Challenges: Sikhs face a multitude of problems today. Their very identity is challenged. The RSS is making all out efforts to confuse the Sikh masses on this issue. The problem of

apostasy among Sikhs, particularly the youth, has assumed alarming proportions. Sikhs outside Punjab as well as the Sikh diaspora outside India have their own problems. Besides, there are millions of tribal Sikhs, like Vanjaras, Sikligars, Lobanas, Tharus, etc, known as Nanakpanthis who are living in abject poverty and utter neglect in several States of India, notably Madhya Pradesh, UP, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, etc. They have received no attention from the Panth, and are vulnerable to influence of missionaries of other faiths. To the list of problems of Sikhs must be added the recent controversies over Dasam Granth, Nanakshahi Calendar, All India Sikh Gurdwaras Bill, the Sikh Personal Law, seating arrangement in *langar*, authority of the Akal Takht Jathedar, and mushrooming *deras*, etc. Unfortunately the list is growing, with no efforts towards solution.

Problems as a Minority: In addition to the internal problems mentioned above, Sikhs share serious problems with other minorities. Some outfits of the majority community have assumed an aggressive posture. Major communal riots occurred at Bombay, Ahmedabad, Surat, Calcutta, Kanpur, Malegaon, Bhopal, Delhi and several other places in which hundreds lost their lives. In fact, the whole decade of eighties and early nineties was a period of communal crisis. Sufferers were mostly the minorities. Enquiry commissions were also set up. However, no action on their findings followed. Examples are Srikrishna Commission report on Bombay riots, Reddy Commission report on Ahmedabad riots and Madan Commission report on Bhivandi/Jalgaon riots. The fate of enquiries into the 1984 massacre of thousand of Sikhs in Delhi and other towns is no better. Even after nearly 18 years, the victims have hardly received any relief, or any criminals punished. In fact, the latest enquiry (Nanavati Commission) is still going on and has recently been given an extension of six months.

In True Colours: The latest case of communal violence in the widespread riots is the one in Gujarat following the Godhra incident. Hundreds have lost their lives, besides property worth millions. The violence continues. The chairman of NHRC, Justice J. S. Varma, has indicted the State Government for delayed and inadequate action. The Chief Minister tried to explain it away as public anger. **What is happening to other minorities has already happened to the Sikhs in a much more virulent form in 1984 and the following decade, and might be repeated.** Bhagat Kabir warns :

"Know, all that to the neighbour has happened, to thee, too, shall happen."

There is no doubt about the communalisation of politics during the long Congress rule at the Centre and in several States. The BJP claimed that under its rule no communal riots take place. This claim has been completely exposed by the riots at Kanpur and several other places which have taken place under the BJP rule.

South used to be free from communalism. It is no longer so. Another trend that is visible since 1998 when BJP came to power in Gujarat, is the anti-Christian trend. It has already spread to UP, Maharashtra, MP, Bihar and Orissa - where Graham Stains and his children were burnt alive.

D. R. Chaudhry, reviewing Sham Chand's work *Saffron Fascism*, says: "The RSS is aimed at perpetuating the hegemony of the Brahmanical order in Indian Society. Its Hinduism and Cultural Nationalism are a smoke-screen. The RSS, the author says, has some very disturbing

similarities with Hitler's fascism. Its organized hypocrisy, institutionalized terrorism, criminalised communalism and mythologised falsehood remind one of the teachings and methods adopted by Hitler and his followers." (*Tribune*, March 24, 2002)

The Sangh Parivar no more considers it necessary to conceal their aggressive intentions. Sh. I. D. Swami, Union State Minister for Home Affairs supported the RSS chief's statement that the minorities should be on the right side of the majority to ensure their safety in the country. Sh. Swami also criticised the NHRC chairman 'for misreading the statement of the Gujarat Chief Minister, Sh. Narendra Modi with regard to tackling of the post-Godhra incidents in the State'.

The Present Scenario: The problems facing the Sikh community listed earlier, in the atmosphere charged with communalism described above, present a very disturbing scenario. The problems are indeed formidable, and there are no easy solutions. However, they are by no means insurmountable. What really worries a well-wisher of the Panth is that we are not prepared to face the problems. No meaningful steps have been taken to deal with the various issues. Sikhs are divided politically into half a dozen Shiromani Akali Dals, each claiming to be the sole representative of the Panth. Also, there are Sikhs who owe allegiance to the Congress or the Communists.

The SAD was originally created by the SGPC to look after the political interests of the Sikh community. In the initial stages it discharged its responsibilities extremely well, as is clear from its role in the liberation of gurdwaras and the struggle for India independence. The same cannot be said of the later period. While the Sikh masses continued to give them full support, and always responded to their call with heavy sacrifices, the leadership failed. Consequently, we could not achieve the desired goals, even after winning the battles.

Failure: The leaders failed in getting a rightful place for the Sikhs at the time of Partition of the subcontinent in 1947. After the Punjabi Suba marcha, they failed to watch the interests of the nascent State in the drafting of the Punjab Reorganisation Act in 1966, to that we got a truncated and powerless State. They launched a prolonged and bitter struggle against the usurpation of Punjab river waters and the construction of SYL canal, but eventually signed the Rajiv-Longowal Accord which surrendered almost everything we had been struggling for, and committed the State to completion of the SYL canal in 6 months! In 1992, the Akali leaders decided to boycott the elections, offering the State to the Congress on a platter, which brought so much suffering and misery to the Sikhs under draconian laws, like the TADA. In the 1997 elections, when they won with a big majority they entered into a needless coalition, which forced them to abandon the Panthic agenda for which the Sikhs had been struggling. The coalition government did not solve any of the problems of the Sikhs or the Punjab State. Those who opposed were expelled from the SAD, forcing formation of a parallel Akali Dal. The result is there for all to see. The SAD has been thrown out in the recent elections to the Punjab Assembly and the Congress, whom the Punjabis, particularly Sikhs, would not touch with the longest of long poles, is back in power ! The Akali leaders have only themselves to thank for this catastrophic reversal of their fortunes.

The present representation of the SAD in the Parliament is negligible, and that, too, as an appendage of the BJP. This is clear from the outrageous support the SAD MPs gave to POTA in

the Parliament on the 26th March, 2002. They could have shown some sensitivity to the unforgettable sufferings of the Sikhs under TADA.

Due to contesting of elections on party tickets, the SGPC has lost its independent character. It is completely in the hands of one individual who presides over the Akali party, and has been reduced to the level of its propaganda wing.

Call for Unity: Unity is desirable at any time. For Sikhs today it is the need of the hour. Even a cursory look at the prevailing political, social and religious scenario will show that it is so. The Panth is face to face with a number of problems which threaten its very existence. And survival is at stake. Guru Nanak says:

"Only a whole seed can sprout,
Even in the most favourable weather conditions

A split seed is reduced to *dal*,
Fit only to the swallowed."

The Guru exhorts therefore :

"Brethren, all in union meet,
And, by absorption in God, cast off duality"

Bhai Gurdas cites examples of ants, migratory Siberian Cranes and deer, who stay united behind their leader and reach their destination. Those who stray away are sure to be lost.

According to *Gurbilas Patshahi* 6, Mahadev, brother of Guru Arjun Dev, explains the disastrous consequences of disunity to his elder brother, Pirthi Chand, thus:

"Due to disunity with Prahlad,
was Harnaksh destroyed by Narhari.
Alienation of Bibhikhan led to the plunder of Lanka. Enmity of Kauravas and Pandavas brought about their doom. Alienation of Kaikayee, led to exile for Ram and Sita. Rift between Rajputs (Prithvi Raj and Jai Chand), brought extreme suffering to them. There are countless other examples in history, To show that unity leads to happiness, And disunity to extreme suffering Cooperate, therefore, with your brother and forget the past".

The list of ills that plague the State and the Panth is long. New problems keep cropping up and no attempts are made on the part of the leaders to solve them. This is a very disturbing situation. The Panth has to address the problems sooner than later. It must be remembered that a divided and disorganized Panth/leadership cannot solve any problem. Three things are necessary, viz, unity - **a central apex body of the Panth, and a clearly defined agenda, if we want to live with honour, and to make our full contribution in national and international affairs, through the message of justice and equality for all and protherhood of mankind bequeathed to us by our great Gurus.**

Unity: We have seen what disunity can do. Before the last elections, the leaders of the various Akali Dals did not heed the advice to come together at least for contesting the elections. As expected, the result was their own liquidation, besides incalculable harm to the cause of the Panth. It is essential, therefore, that all Sikh parties unite. We should issue an appeal to this effect.

Apex Body: The Panth should have a central Apex Body to make decisions to achieve the goals of Panthic *charhdi kala*, and *sarbat da bhala*. The Akalis and the SGPC should take the required initiative in this direction. Without this agency, the existing issues as well as the controversies that may arise in future will never be solved, and will continue to erode the Panth. All Sikh organisations in India and abroad should be represented on it through eminent educated Sikhs with acknowledged track record of service to the Panth. This body should command respect as Guru Panth, and function through Sri Akal Takht Sahib.

Agenda: Long term goals and short term objectives must be clearly defined. Sikh intelligentsia should actively involve themselves in discussions and decision making. The Sikh Core Group has given a lead in this direction, and its example should be followed. The goals should reflect the high ideals of universal brotherhood of mankind and global fraternity based on justice and equality and free from discrimination. The false propaganda of secessionism against Sikhs must be effectively countered. The whole of India is our homeland. Sikhs have always lived and made sacrifices for this country and cannot afford to drop out. Sikhs cannot even think of it. Moreover we want to share the message of our Gurus with the entire mankind. This will not be possible if we shut ourselves in a small area among hostile neighbors. The exact agenda should, in fact, be determined by the Apex Body proposed above. It must, however, include inter alia some outstanding issues like the following:

- Sikh identity
- State autonomy (Anandpur Sahib Resolution)
- Exclusive rights to Punjab River Waters (Riparian Principle)
- Return of Punjabi-speaking area
- Chandigarh.
- Unrestricted access to Gurdwaras in Pakistan
- Recruitment to Defence Service on merit alone
- All India Sikh Gurdwaras Act
- Sikh Personal Law
- Nanakshahi Calendar

- Supremacy of the Guru Panth – Apex Body.
- The World Sikh Council

Conclusion: The message is clear – Unite or Perish. The leaders should realize the need to unite, and rising above personal, group or party interests, should carry out the Panthic agenda. If they are serious, then as a first step in this grim situation, they could pave the way for the formation of the Apex Body proposed above, so that the affairs of the Panth can be handled intelligently and effectively with the participation of knowledgeable Sikhs who understand the national and global forces at work. In this hour of disarray a heavy responsibility devolves on all educated Sikhs and the various institutions and organizations. Everyone of them should contribute actively in thought and deed to ensure an honourable existence and a brighter future for the Panth - in the service of mankind.

