

SIKHISM AND SAMKHYA PHILOSOPHY

By Dr Debabrata Das

Published by Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar

38, Bidhan Sarani, Kolkata 700 026

Pages xi+84 Price Rs. 100.

*A review by Dr Visvanath Chatterjee**

* Associate Editor, *Bulletin* of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture; formerly professor and Head of the Department of English, Jadavpur University. Address: 95, Block B, Lake Town, Kolkata. 700 089.

Samkhya is one of the six main systems of Indian philosophy, and Sikhism, founded by the noble and illumined prophet Guru Nanak Dev, is the youngest of the principal religions of our country. There are a number of similarities (as well as dissimilarities) between the two, and these have been carefully brought out and analysed in an interesting and useful study of Dr Debabrata Das, a former senior fellow of the Department of Indological Research, Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture. The book contains a valuable foreward by Sr. Prabhjot Singh.

We live in troubled times. Religion and philosophy can teach us how to live better life with beauty and serenity. But, unfortunately and ironically, as Jonathan Swift points out, 'We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another.'

It is in this context that Das's book assumes special significance. It is an important contribution to cultural studies and clearly reveals the fundamental unity underlying the different religions and philosophies of India. In his introduction Das quotes liberally from Swami Vivekananda and explains the essence of Samkhya: 'The philosophy of Samkhya believes in the *reality* of the worldly life and lays emphasis on the *dignity* of man and also on the significance and *value* of social life. This philosophical system is interested in the worldly life and also in the social relations of human beings.' Some of these points are also accepted by Sikhism; but Sikhism is basically God-oriented while Samkhya may be described as neither theistic nor atheistic. This is how Das elucidates the position of Guru Nanak: 'Spiritual union with One God is emphasised by Guru Nanak, which is possible after attaining emotional absorption into God. Burning the love of one's self, surrendering the ego and contemplation on the Name are regarded as the means to such a union.'

Das's discussion is presented in eight well-planned and well-written chapters. The first chapter is concerned with *Purakha* or *Purusha*. According to Guru Nanak, God, synonymous with *Ik-Omkara*, is the sole Cause of the universe. The main Sikh creed has been explained thus: 'There is one Absolute Being with true identity, who is Creator Being, without fear, without hostility, Eternal Being, free from the limitation of human birth, self-born and is known by the favour of

Guru.’ The term *Akal Purakh* stands for the Divine Being. Das rightly points out that in Samkhya, *Purusha*, as one of the two cardinal metaphysical principles, stands for spirituality or simply consciousness, which exerts influence on *Prakriti* or Nature, that is physical in its make-up. Das further points out that the basic difference in the thought of Guru Nanak and Samkhya lies in their metaphysics.

The second chapter is entitled ‘*Maya* or *Prakriti*’. For Guru Nanak the term *maya* denotes illusion and consists of the three *gunas* of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. Chapter 3 is concerned with *ahamkara* or the ego, the last of the five deadly vices. Chapter 4 is ‘Mind’ (Guru Nanak’s *mana* or *antara*). Chapter 5 is ‘Knowledge’. The term *giani* used in *Guru Nanak Vani* stands for divine knowledge. Chapter 6 is ‘*Sabada*’. To Guru Nanak it means the word through which God is revealed. In the ancient Indian tradition the *shabda* (word) was synonymous with Brahma. One is reminded here of the well-known first words of the Gospel according to St. John: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’ Chapter 7 is ‘Time and Akal’. *Akal*, in the sense of the Timeless and the Immortal, is central to the Sikh religious tradition. The final chapter is ‘*Jivan-Mukti*.’ In *Guru Nanak Vani*, the term *liberation* is used to denote salvation but *Mukti* has been conceived in a different way. Freedom from desires is one of the main marks of a *Jivanmukta*. We may recall the words of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus here: ‘It is hard to fight against impulsive desire; whatever it wants it will buy at the price of the soul.’

Dr Debabrata Das is to be congratulated on his newest book, *Sikhism and Samkhya Philosophy*, written with lucidity and ease, and remarkable for its comparative religious and philosophical study.



GARLAND AROUND MY NECK

THE STORY OF PURAN SINGH OF PINGALWARA

By Patwant Singh and Harinder Kaur

Published by UBS Publishers, New Delhi

Reviewed by Jagpal Singh Tiwana (USA)

Patwant Singh is a well-established author who has written on variety of subjects including Sikh history and Sikh institutions. His most famous works are "*The Golden Temple*", "*Gurdwaras in India and Around the World*," and, "*The Sikhs*". This time, he in collaboration with Harinder Kaur Sekhon, has written: *Garland Around My neck, the life and work of Bhagat Puran Singh*.

Garland Around My Neck is compelling account of the superhuman efforts of a rare humanist, Puran Singh, who, with incredible will power, wholeheartedly devoted his life to the service of the disabled, the destitute, and the diseased. It is amazing to read that this man had no time for marriage or merriment, and accumulated no personal property. All his time was spent in the care

of his wards. If there was a free moment, it was spent in reading great minds, like Ruskin, Emerson, Tyson, Thoreau and Gandhi from the nearby library. However, he got his initial inspiration for social service from his mother. Later, his faith in Darbar Sahib, Amritsar, was a tremendous source of strength to him.

Puran Singh's father was a Hindu and his mother a Sikh, but he embraced Sikhism due to an early soul-touching experience. One day on a journey by foot to his village, he had to spend a night at a Hindu temple, where he swept, cleaned and washed, (the usual voluntary work in a religious place. When supper time came, the priests enjoyed their meals right in front of him without offering him a morsel although they knew he was hungry. After some time, a similar situation occurred, and he spent a night at a Gurdwara. There, not only a sumptuous meal was served to him, but he was given a glass of hot milk, a typical gesture of hospitality of rural Punjab. This incident, in his words, "planted in my young mind the seeds of the Sikh faith from which I learned the lessons of social service, self-sacrifice and the dignity of human labor."

While a student at the Khalsa High School in Lahore, he would spend his spare time at Gurdwara Dera Sahib where, aside from cleaning, cooking and serving the *langar*, Puran Singh also tended the aged, the infirm, and the sick devotees. Here, he had a unique experience, which proved a turning point in his life. One day in 1934, he found an abandoned child near the Gurdwara. The four-year-old boy was deaf, mentally impaired, physically deformed and was suffering from acute dysentery with flies swarming all around him. Puran Singh washed, changed and fed him, and gave him the name, Piara. For the next fourteen years, Puran Singh and Piara Singh remained inseparable. During that time, it was quite a common sight in the streets of Lahore, and later in Amritsar, to see Puran Singh making appeals for money for the unfortunate people in his care - with a collection box, bell in hand, and Piara Singh on his back. This was in his words, "A Garland Around My Neck." By carrying Piara Singh, he felt as if he were carrying the aged, the infirm, the disabled and the crippled of the world, on his shoulders.

Another incident shows how sensitive Puran Singh's mind was for human pain. Asha Rani, a patient suffering from acute tuberculosis, was too weak to take care of herself and her four-year-old son, Jeeta. Puran Singh took charge of her and looked after her until her death. After she was gone, Jeeta, severely infected by the disease he had contacted from his mother, would cry and not sleep alone. Puran Singh carried the boy in his arms and slept with him until Jeeta's death. This shows how willing he was to risk his own life in order to provide comfort to the afflicted. What could be more self-sacrificing than such an action as this?

We are often told, "God helps those who help themselves," but Puran Singh helped those who could not help themselves. Overcoming impossible odds, he built *Pingalwara* in Amritsar, a home for those who would have been left to die by the roadside, uncared for and un-mourned. It is a monument to his selfless service to the poorest of the poor. In this regard, his work and achievements can be compared with those of Mother Teresa.

It is unfortunate that Bhagat Puran Singh did not get full public recognition and honour for the humanitarian mission to which he devoted his entire life. Whereas he deserved a Nobel prize, he was only given a Padma Shri, the lowest category of civil awards, by the Indian government in

1979, which he very conscientiously returned in 1984 when the Golden Temple, the source of his spiritual power, was attacked by India's army.

Authors Patwant Singh and Harinder Kaur Sekhon deserve our gratitude for giving us in "*Garland Around My Neck*", an inspiring story of Puran Singh's life full of compassion and care for ailing humanity. The book is well researched. The authors met and interviewed a cross section of people who had either benefited from his soothing hand, or had worked with him to provide comfort to the helpless. The book is illustrated with appropriate pictures from various stages of Puran Singh's life and work. There are pictures of his village, its people, *Pingalwara* and its inmates. One picture, however, that is notably missing, is that of his mother, Mehtab Kaur whose dreams he fulfilled.

The book is extremely well written. The amazing story of this extraordinary man, told with anecdotal detail, makes very interesting reading, and easily hold the reader's attention throughout.

Available for \$31 from South Asia Books (sabooks@southasiabooks.com), the book is disappearing from the shelves of the vendors. It would have been appreciated if part of the sales of the book had been donated to the Pingalwara of Bhagat Puran Singh, since people are buying the book as a token of respect to the selfless social worker.



PUNJAB HERITAGE SERIES:

The Golden Temple

Anandpur

Maharaja Ranjit Singh

By Dr Mohinder Singh

Pilgrimage to Hemkunt

By Prof. Jaswant Singh Neki

Reviewed by Dr W.Owen Cole (University of Sussex, England)

* Dr. W. Owen Cole, University College, Chichester, Vice President of WCF.

Each book has ninety-six pages, published in 2002 by UBS Publishers' Distributors Ltd., in association with the National Institute of Punjab Studies, New Delhi.

The accuracy of the narration is beyond question and they will make enjoyable reading. What is even more outstanding is their presentation. They are lavishly illustrated with excellent colour photographs taken by Sondeep Shankar. This is good reading and education made enjoyable.

Hemkunt Sahib is associated with Guru Gobind Singh. It lies in the Himalayas some 15,000 feet above sea level. The snow bound route is only open from July to September during which many Sikhs visit the highest gurdwara in the world - and certainly one of the most inaccessible" shrine associated with any religion. The mountain views are as breathtaking, as the altitude and are amazingly captured in Professor Neki's book. There are Sikhs who have immersed themselves in the ice-cold lake while reciting the entire Japji, but some take only the quickest dip!The Golden Temple includes a photograph of the British Queen's visit; I trust she has been sent a copy!

History and contemporary relevance are excellently combined.

The three books which describe important Sikh sites are of special importance in studies leading to an understanding of inter-faith pilgrimage, the one Maharaja Ranjit Singh presents an empire which was above sectarianism. All the faiths of his empire were valued for what they could offer to the community in which they flourished. That is an important lesson for us to learn today.

The series would make an excellent present to anyone interested in the Sikh religion, whatever their faith. Sometimes Sikh children in the Diaspora are far from eager to visit the cradle of their faith. These books should whet their appetites! No one reading the books mentioned above could fail to be impressed by richness and humanity of the Sikh tradition. I look forward eagerly to the appearance of the rest of the series.

