

Akal Takht Jathedar: A view from America

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THE QUESTION HERE - LAST summer - was what to do with the Jathedar of the Akal Takht, on a visit to the USA. Some Sikhs remembered an earlier occasion, not long ago, that when Jathedar Ajnoha visited New York a reception for him was mounted in Waldorf Astoria, arguably one of the most prestigious hotels in the Big Apple. It is a different matter that the Sikh function erupted in fisticuffs. I don't quite remember how it all concluded because I walked out. Perhaps about ten years ago, Professor Manjit Singh, who was then the 'acting' Jathedar of Akal Takht, came calling and the Sikhs of New York honoured him at a lavish spread at the Hilton.

Now the current title-holder, Jathedar Joginder Singh Vedanti, had come visiting. Sikhs were falling all over themselves honoring him – to see him and to be seen by him. But now some uncomfortable questions had also surfaced. Jathedar Vedanti seems like a nice, genial, scholarly man. Every one tells me that he is much more approachable than most of his predecessors. They also tell me that he is well intentioned and wants to do the right things, but that he is hemmed in by the political realities in Punjab. All this may very well be true; certainly I am as ignorant of Punjab politics as can be. But he seems to come with considerable unwelcome baggage.

I notice that his name (and therefore his office) has been associated with the summoning of Gurbaksh Singh Kala Afghana and peremptory banning of his books. Now book banning, like book burning, is a practice that, to my mind, is completely antithetical to Sikh philosophy. The way to deal with bad ideas is by focusing the light on better and opposing ideas on them in the free market place of ideas, not by book banning - and then punishing the messenger. Destroying the messenger makes us no better than the Mullahs of Iran and how they tried to silence Salman Rushdie. It also reminds me of the old Roman Catholic clergy and how it dealt with dissenters, since Galileo, to nearly the end of the twentieth century when it finally stopped publishing lists of books that its followers were refrained from reading. This is not the style Sikhs need to cultivate.

It is also during Jathedar Vedanti's tenure that Sikh women recently raised the flag of rebellion because they are not being permitted to serve – clean, or sing the liturgy – inside Darbar Sahib (Golden temple) that is the holiest Gurdwara of Sikhs. It is not enough to sing paeans to gender equality every morning, as we do – “*So kyon manda akhiye jit jamen rajaan.*” There is absolutely no rhyme or reason to such a discriminatory policy. But the Jathedar sits, like an ostrich with its head buried in sand, studying the issue.

Sikh women the world over are asking that our practices be re-examined. Why is it that the woman walks behind a man during the Sikh marriage ceremony? Why is it that the bride's father ceremoniously hands her over to the groom? In the ritual of the Sikh wedding ceremony (*anand kara*) did we merely adapt the nuptials from the Hinduism? These are issues that will not go away.

Gurdwaras all over the world, including our historical gurdwaras in India, are built so as to be inaccessible to the handicapped. Admittedly many were built decades -

even centuries - ago. But the world has moved since. Now laws demand that public buildings be within reach of the handicapped. I am reminded of the fact that Professor Darshan Singh, himself a renowned *ragee* and a former Jathedar of the Akal Takht, was recently refused permission to perform by a Canadian gurdwara because he could no longer sit cross legged – he had both knees surgically replaced. We need to modify our gurdwara facility to accommodate people who cannot sit on the floor, cannot walk in unassisted, need a wheelchair and a ramp. Yet, the Akal Takht issues no directives and makes no effort to initiate and impel changes.

The question of the authenticity of major portions of the writings of Guru Gobind Singh Ji continues to divide the Sikhs worldwide; the Akal Takht refuses to act decisively, or even to direct an investigative, scholarly process to deal with the matter.

I notice that some Sikhs in India are classified as scheduled castes. Such labelling would be absolutely contrary to the Sikh precept. What does the Akal Takht have to say about it?

Then there are the events of 1984. How many Sikhs were killed in those dark years? How many were jailed for years without trials? There are no numbers and ,even now, 19 years later, there are no efforts at seeking justice.

The holocaust in Europe occurred in the 1940's. Sixty years later the fate of the Jewish victims is still being investigated. Guilty Nazis are still being identified. Oral history projects across the world are documenting who did what to whom, so that the world would never forget. The evidence of atrocities against the Sikhs in 1984 is still available, but is becoming rapidly tainted and degraded every day. (Do not forget that countless Sikhs died in 1984 at the Akal Takht and in the Harmandir.) If the Akal Takht will not take the lead in preserving our collective history, who will?

Our history also lies in the rare and handwritten documents, many of which were destroyed in 1984. Other documents and artifacts, over time, have become the property of a few families, but they really belong to the nation. How to preserve them and yet make them available to people worldwide and to scholars is a question that we ignore only at our peril. Who better to lead us in this in the name of all Sikhs than the Jathedar of the Akal Takht?

While major issues facing Sikhs remain unresolved, the office of the Akal Takht has been embroiled in local disputes, or the matter of legitimacy of *langar* when served on chairs and tables, rather than on the floor, and that too in gurdwaras overseas, local conditions of which the Takht remains entirely uninformed.

It is as if to question the Jathedar would be disrespect to the office! I suggest that this attitude emerges from our Indian cultural heritage, where people in authority – parents, teachers, religious icons, even politicians and statesmen must never be questioned! A knee jerk response of respect and affirmation is the only way. I add that this could also stem from our colonial legacy when we had masters, but I suspect that the feudal Indian society, with its caste system, had perhaps already broken the spirit. The spirit of free inquiry and the emphasis on accountability are inseparable and essential, but they do not seem to be in the Indian cultural ethos.

Let's look at the President of the United States. I am aware that the office deserves respect, even if, at times, the office-holder does not. The classic examples are Presidents Lyndon Johnson during the Vietnam years, Richard Nixon during Watergate era, Bill Clinton during the Lewinsky scandal, and currently George W. Bush, through much of his tenure so far.

Americans have enormous respect for the Presidential *office*, but this does not automatically translate into similar reverence for every *person* who happens to sit in that chair. His legitimate orders are obeyed, but analysis and criticism of the man can and does occur; in fact it never ceases. That is how it should be.

Similarly, when Aroor Singh bestowed a *siropao* on Michael O'Dwyer the "butcher" of Jallianwala Bagh in 1919, it was the man that was lessened, not the office of Akal Takht. Sometimes the office makes the man, other times the man shapes the office.

It is a lesson that we Sikhs and their Jathedar need to learn. We need to keep in mind that it is in discussion and debate that we sharpen our focus, define our goals and hone our skills.

Global Sikhism would expect the Jathedar to strive for convergence and unity, to disseminate the *gurmat* ideal in a pluralist milieu, and to combine practical wisdom with a futurist vision - whereby the Sikhs retain a place of honor in the comity of world religions.

