

A Question of Identity

GURMUKH SINGH*

* Secretary, British Sikh Consultative Forum, 298 Norwood Road, Norwood Green, Southall, Middlesex, UB2 4JH (UK). Email: sewauk2004@hotmail.com

“A living spirit possesses the whole Sikh people, and the impress of Gobind has not only elevated and altered the constitution of their minds, but has operated materially and given amplitude to their physical frames.” “.....in religious faith and worldly aspirations, they are wholly different from other Indians, and they are bound together by a community of inward sentiment and outward object unknown elsewhere.” (History of the Sikhs by J D Cunningham pp.75-76.)

The ultimate test of a civilised society according to the Sikh doctrine of *Anekta meh ekta* (Unity in variety) is its capacity for diversity. It is to accept the richness of God's creation in all its variety. This was the concept which evolved the final and distinct form of the *Khalsa Panth* of Guru Nanak/Gobind tradition. Through its own unique identity, the *Khalsa Panth*, the Order of the Sikhs of the Guru (correct translation discussed below), has continued to assert the rights of individuals, communities and cultures to be different by free choice without transgressing the rights of others. Nay, Guru Tegh Bahadur, the Ninth Master, went so far as to give his own life for others, the Hindus of India in that case, so that their religious and cultural identity could be preserved. This was a unique sacrifice by the head of one religion to protect another's way of life.

The importance of “assertive” identification, with a set of values and principles, was evolved by Guru Nanak and is a natural derivation from the Guru's twin track theo-political life philosophy. As the Tenth Guru Nanak i.e. Guru Gobind Singh, He confirmed the physical form in the following words:

“Tusaan khande da Amrit Panjan ton laina, kesh rakhne, eh Asadi mohar hai”

You are to take Amrit of the double edged sword from Five, keep unshorn hair as my seal (of identification).”

[*Hukamnamas* (Orders) of Guru Gobind Singh sent to Sikh Sangats (Holy Congregations) in June 1699. One such *Hukamnama* to the Sangat of Kabul is reproduced at page 189 of Giani Kartar Singh Sarhadi's *Kes Philosophy* in Punjabi.)

Invidious: Clever and divisive arguments separating “Guru Gobind Singh's *Khalsa*” from other Sikhs are not only historically incorrect but also lead down a slippery slope to community segmentation and spiritual, social and political impotence. The social and political significance of a common identity for the Sikhs was foreseen by Guru Gobind Singh during a critical and decisive period in Indian history. Thus he ordained that “They should have one form of initiation.....their locks should remain unshorn.....they should all name themselves Singhs...” (*History of the Sikhs* by J D Cunningham page 66)

‘*Sabat surat dastar sira*’ (unshorn hair and with a turban on his head) is how a Sikh is recognised in the world. That is how he is spotted in a crowd and is therefore unable to hide, deny his Guru's teachings or shirk his responsibility. It is in that form that he is elevated and that is how the constitution of his mind is altered. That is the distinctive appearance which “...has operated materially and given amplitude to their

physical frames.” (Cunningham). That is the assertive identity which changed the course of Indian history and offered hope to the down trodden, divided and caste ridden society of India. That is the identity which is feared by the corrupt and divisive socio-political system in India today.

Quintessential Unity: The Sikhs have been given only one identity by the Guru. There is no exception to this underlying truth. We are not concerned here with those who are aspiring to become Sikhs and are on different rungs of the ladder leading to that ultimate goal. We are more concerned with the ridiculous position that a Christian is a Christian, a Jew a Jew, a Muslim a Muslim etc. but a Sikh is a *Sahijdhari* Sikh, a *Kesadhari* Sikh, an *Amritdhari* Sikh, a *Mona* Sikh, a Sikh but not a *Khalsa* and so on ! It is a well established Sikh doctrine that the Guru of the Sikhs is One i.e. the Light of Guru Nanak showing the way through Ten earthly Forms. Guru Nanak's Sikhs are not divisible either. Thus, as Cunningham observed, the Sikhs collectively are “.....bound together by a community of inward sentiment and outward object unknown elsewhere.” Let those who continue to divide the Sikhs by copying the Brahmanical caste system, rituals and different forms of appearance be aware.

Even the description of *Khalsa* has been used to divide the Sikhs. The word *Khalsa*, means the Guru's Own Sikh. It is a proprietary term and was used by Mughals for land which belonged directly to the Emperor.

“*Woh zameen baadshahi jo kisi ki jagir naho*” (*Logaat`e Kishorie* quoted by Prof.Satbir Singh in his book *Sao Sawal* (Hundred questions)

The word still refers to Government land in India. It is in this context that the Guru first used this word for His Sikhs. Indeed, the word *Khalsa* was used by the Sixth and the Ninth Masters in their *Hukamnamas* (Guru's Orders). Thus: *Purab ki Sangat Guru ka Khalsa Hoi* i.e. The Sangat of the East is Guru's *Khalsa* (*Hukamnama* Guru Hargovind); *Patan di Sangat Sri Guru Ji da Khalsa Hai* i.e. the Sangat of Patan is the *Khalsa* of the Guru (Guru Tegh Bahadur); *Gur Sangat keeni Khalsa* (Bhai Gurdaas II) i.e. the Guru ordained that the Sangat was His *Khalsa*; and, *Sangat Mera Khalsa hai* (The Sangat is my *Khalsa*) was a standard expression used in the *Hukamnamas* (Orders) of Guru Gobind Singh.

Some argue that *Khalsa* means *the pure*. Others, unhappy with the literal translation of the Guru's prediction that *Raj Karega Khalsa* (The *Khalsa* shall rule), prefer the translation: that in an ideal society, the good and saintly will rule.

Kaho Kabir jan bhai khalsay, prem bhagat jeh jani (Bani Kabir, SGGs, Raag Sorath)

Says Kabir, he who (truly) understands loving devotion (to the Lord) becomes (the Lord's) *khalsa*.

Kingdom of God: All these interpretations of the word *Khalsa* are valid but the underlying divisive concept vis a vis the Sikhs of the Guru is false and unacceptable. *Raj Karega Khalsa* unequivocally means that those who follow the teachings of the Guru and are directly linked to the Guru will prevail. Theirs will be the kingdom to come. This is a spiritual as well as a socio-political concept. Those who deny this translation belong to the same divisive category which is happier with divisions of the Guru, convenient translations of Gurbani and the Sikh ideology, and which divides Sikhs into many classes. All Sikhs of the Guru are *Khalsa*. Only then would the

wording in the personal Hukamnamas of the Guru from Sixth Guru Nanak (i.e. Guru Hargovind) onwards make sense. Thus: *Purab ki Sangat Guru ka Khalsa hoi*, i.e. The Sangat of the East is Guru's Khalsa (*Hukamnama* Guru Hargovind). The Sikh doctrine of *unity in diversity* can be used to reconcile the Guru's prophesy of "*Raj Karega Khalsa*" with an ultimate multicultural society based on Sikh ideals. It is an approach which keeps Sikh unity, identity and political aspirations intact.

The Sikhs have one identity and one theo-political system for leading a complete and fully participative family life. Unshorn hair and a Sikh turban (*dastar*) are the minimum requirements for stepping on to the first rung of the ladder to the Sikh ideal of Puran Gursikh who keeps the full spiritual and physical *rehat*. As the history of the Sikhs has shown, it takes a great deal of courage and conviction to be recognised as a Sikh. In turn, Sikhs are readily identified with those values and human rights, which are now increasingly and universally accepted as the values of any civilised multicultural society.



References

1. For further reading see Piara Singh Padam's **Rahitnamey** (in Punjabi)