

Giani Kartar Singh: Legendary Fakir of Sikh Politics

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GIANI KARTAR SINGH was one of the most articulate, sharp, and prudent leaders the Sikh community has ever produced. He was at the helm of the affairs along with Master Tara Singh and Baldev Singh during the most crucial phase of the Partition of India. It is without doubt to say that he always thought for the Sikhs, worked for the Sikhs and lived for the Sikhs.

Born in 1902 at Chak No. 40 in Lialpur district, Giani Kartar Singh after matriculation joined Khalsa College, Amritsar, in 1920 for higher education but could not complete his graduation and left his studies midway to plunge into politics. He was an eyewitness to the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy at an early age and the event made him a staunch nationalist to fight against British imperialism. At Khalsa College he came into contact with stalwarts like Bawa Harkrishan Singh, Prof. Niranjan Singh and Prof. Teja Singh. The other important personalities whom he met included scholars like Ruchi Ram Sahni and political heavyweights like Madan Mohan Malvia and human rights activists like C.F. Andrews. Such encounters made his fertile mind easily eschew and also react to how these luminaries perceived many an important event and movement. Gianiji took part in almost all morchas during the Sikh gurdwaras reforms movement, and went to jail several times. He was elected a member of the SGPC when it first came into being in 1924 and remained its member continuously.

He was elected MLA in the first ever Assembly elections in Punjab in 1937. He made his name as a potential political leader and organizer and very soon was part of the Akali Party High Command. When negotiations for the Independence of the India were initiated by the British government they treated Sikhs as the third party and in all negotiations the Akali delegations were invited in addition to those of the Congress and the Muslim League. Giani Kartar Singh, who was a leading negotiator, realised at that time that the British government had formally accepted the demand for Pakistan and in that eventually Sikhs would be the worst sufferer. To forestall the creation of Pakistan and Partition of India, the leadership came forward with a proposal for Azad Punjab. The imaginative idea of Giani Kartar Singh was accepted by all and many conferences were organised all over Punjab for its support. At that time Giani Kartar Singh convinced the Hindu leadership of Punjab to make a united front. As per the formula worked out for the Partition of India, the Muslim majority provinces were to form part of Pakistan. With these efforts the Akali leadership, of which Giani Kartar Singh was the main pivot, convinced the British authorities, that the Partition of Punjab was a necessity, Giani Kartar Singh was the president of the Shiromani Akali Dal at the time of Partition. He played a historic role in not only getting Punjab partitioned but also taking the bold and historic decision of the Sikhs going with India. He had many meetings with Muslim leaders and also with Mohd Ali Jinha. The Sikh leaders totally refused to accept any allurements by the Muslim League. It was a well known fact that the British government officers made all efforts to bring a rapprochement between the Muslim League and the Akali Party.

Giani Kartar Singh was a selfless man and was known among his admirers as a “fakir”. In 1946 when S. Baldev Singh, who was a minister the Punjab Cabinet, joined as India’s first Defence Minister in the interim government, a vacancy was to be filled by another Akali legislator. The party selected Giani Kartar Singh as the leader unanimously but he thankfully refused to become a minister and offered the post to Swaran Singh. In his whole life time Giani Kartar Singh did not make any property and had never kept any bank account. Whatever money he received as salary or allowances, or collected from his friends was spent by him on party work. It is said that in Giani Kartar Singh there was total absence of vanity. People had seen him standing and eating on the road side, and having meals at dhabas, he was known for his frank and warm-hearted personality. It is said that even as a minister, he used to go to the residences of officers as and when he was to make any recommendation. He never made any undue recommendation for any individual.

After Partition Dr. Gopi Chand Bhargwa, the first Chief Minister of Punjab, invited Gianiji to join his Cabinet. Later on, he also was a member of the team headed by Bhim Sen Sachar. It was during that time that his efforts resulted in what is called the Sachar-Akali formula in which the demarcation of Hindi and Punjabi regions of the Punjab was made. This paved the way for the demand of Punjabi Suba which was ultimately achieved by the Akalis in November, 1966. Giani Kartar Singh remained on the forefront of political life in Punjab and at times changed political parties. But it is said that he did this only to gain maximum benefits for the community.

During his illness he was admitted to Government hospital at Patiala where he died on June 10, 1974, and was cremated at Tanda which he had adopted at his Assembly constituency. Giani Zail Singh, the then Chief Minister of Punjab, named Government College, Tanda, as Giani Kartar Singh College to cherish his memory.

Unfortunately his life and works have so far remained ignored. A book on him was written by one of his close aides, Jasdev Singh Sandhu, which was released last year. Unfortunately for the Indian polity, the values he stood for now belong to the by-gone era and the politicians and public men of his stature have become a rarity. Men like him have since ceased to be role models for present-day politicians. They and their values seem to have become irrelevant today.

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A true tale of our times

JAGJIT SINGH BATRA

I LIVE AND WORK IN DELHI. I have a poor, old patient who has a chronic asthmatic problem. His name is Hardeva. He was once a trumpet-player with a marriage procession band. Now, at 58 years, he is retired and lives with his wife, Rampyari, who looks after their three-year-old grandson. Their son, Prahlad, works as a peon in an export factory in Okhla. His wife has deserted him. The entire family subsists on the Rs 3,000 that Prahlad earns. Hardeva was having a problem with his vision. So I referred him to the Chandiwala Eye Hospital, which is opposite the Kalkaji Mandir, around two km away.

Hardeva went there, as directed and showed himself to the ophthalmologist. He was told that he had a mature cataract in each eye that would need operative treatment: a three-day stay in the hospital and Rs 15,000 expenses.

Hardeva came out and was standing at the bus stop, contemplating the logistics. Where would they leave the grandson if Rampyari had to attend to him during the three days at the hospital? And, more importantly, how was he to arrange for the money?

Along came a well-dressed, decent-looking Sikh gentleman, probably in his 50s. He asked Hardeva, "Why are you looking so dejected?" Hardeva told him. The Sikh asked Hardeva to accompany him back to the ophthalmologist. He paid an advance and got an appointment for the operation, to be done three days later. He also told Hardeva not to tell his wife, Rampyari, about the operation: "Just say that you are going to meet some relatives for three-four days."

Three days later, true to his word, the Sikh met Hardeva outside the Chandiwala Hospital. He got him operated and stayed with him for the next three days while Hardeva lay bedridden with bandaged eyes. The Sikh took care of his ablutions, changed his soiled clothes, bathed him and fetched new clothes and medicine. He paid the hospital bill in full and gave Hardeva some more money for the post-operative care. He put him in an auto and then, just went away. Hardeva doesn't know who this man is or where he lives. The Sikh doesn't know where Hardeva lives.

This is charity hands-on, anonymous and abundant. Sikhism teaches *Khud jaa ke deyo* (Do service with your own hands)/*Chhupa ke deyo* (Hide it from others)/*Rajja ke deyo* (Give with all your might!) The unknown Sikh did all three.

[Courtesy: The Hindustan Times]

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Canada recognizes Five Kakars: A Landmark Development

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March 20, 2006 was a red letter day in Victoria (BC). After the unanimous decision of the Supreme Court of Canada in recognizing the wearing of Kirpan by the Sikh students in educational institutions throughout the country, British Columbia has become the second province in Canada to recognize Vaisakhi and the Five articles of Sikh Faith in a row. The Province of Manitoba was the first province in Canada to grant such recognition to the Five Kakars of the Sikhs on July 13, 1999. This motion is already underway in the province of Ontario. The motion #49 for recognition of Vaisakhi and the five Sikh Kakars was tabled by Jagrup Singh Brar NDP MLA in the Assembly of British Columbia. The purpose of this motion is to recognize and reaffirm the values of multiculturalism, human rights, equality, racial and religious tolerance in B.C especially the recognition of Vaisakhi and Articles of Sikh Faith..

Sukhdeep Singh (Dave) Hayer, a senior MLA of the BC Liberal party, supported the motion. He retold the history of the Sikhs when Khalsa was initiated by Guru Gobind Singh on the day of Vaisakhi at Sri Kesgarh Sahib in 1699 to stand for justice, dignity of meek and weak. He went on supporting the motion by saying that

that B.C. was the first province in Canada to celebrate and pass a proclamation recognizing the 400 years of Guru Granth Sahib Ji in the Golden Temple in Amritsar.

Honorable Minister Micheal De Jong and state house leader who recently came back from his short visit of Punjab, appreciated the nobility of the Sikh people and paid his tribute to the Sikh pioneers who came to Canada more than a century ago and contributed vigorously to the prosperity of British Columbia. He supported the motion of recognition of Vaisakhi and five Articles of Sikh Faith with full fervor.

Harbhajan Singh Lali, a senior MLA of NDP gave a brief account of the fabulous history of the brave Sikhs on this memorable day in the Assembly. He was enthusiastic to see this motion passed in the House.

While taking part in the debate, Mary Polak, MLA said in the Assembly, “Rare is the initiative that finds support from both sides of this chamber. **The values represented by the five Ks are universal. They are values that speak to us as individuals, regardless of our own religion or culture. Truly, the ideals advanced by Guru Gobind Singh are crying out to be embraced by a modern culture that often focuses only on commercial or material success**”.

Gordon Hogg, Government Caucus Chair, repeated the motion on behalf of the B.C. Liberal Caucus, “Be it resolved that this house recognizes the importance of the anniversary of the creation of the Khalsa, celebrated every year as the festival of Vaisakhi; and the contributions Canadian Sikhs have made to our country and our province; and that this house also recognize the importance of the Panj Kakkaar: the Kirpan—a ceremonial sword representing indomitable spirit; the Kes—unshorn hair, representing a simple life, saintliness and devotion to God; Kangha—a wooden comb worn to represent a clean mind and body; and the Kachha—short breeches, representing hygienic living”.

Other Sikh MLA’s who strongly supported the motion on recognition of the Articles of Sikh Faith were Harry Singh Bains, Raj Chouhan and their other colleagues. Many of the MLA’s mentioned unfortunate story of Komagata Maru when in 1914 its Indian passengers were not allowed to touch an inch of Canadian land and they were forced to leave the Canadian shores. They reminded the people of the message of Guru Gobind Singh regarding commitment to equality, dignity and justice, for he has chosen to respond to the irrational fears of others with great equanimity and patience.

It has been the historic occasion for the Sikhs worldwide when indeed history has been created by the Provincial Assembly of British Columbia. All the MLA’s who took part in debate started their address by saying “Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh !” The gallery was fully occupied by the Sikhs hailing from throughout Canada to say thank you to the legislators who made this happen.

Amusingly, all the Kirpan wearing visitors were allowed for the first time to enter the assembly without asking them to take the Kirpan off. All the 19 MLA’s from ruling and opposition party who took part in one hour debate supported the motion with one voice. It was the historic day when both ruling party and opposition party congratulated each other for bringing the motion on five Articles of Sikh Faith. The motion was unanimously passed by the house of 79 MLA’s. For most of the time, House proceedings were chaired by Dy Speaker Sindy Hawkins (Surinder Kaur) who was fare enough to give 3minutes to each speaker in the House.

Sikhism is a religion of Divine love. More than 500 years old, it is the youngest religion in the world, with over 25 million followers living in 157 countries of the world. The Sikh identity, especially for those who live elsewhere other than in India, is so marked by external and visible signs that sometimes people don't see them and their beliefs for what they truly are.

Sikh religion requires its practicing followers (Amritdhari-baptized Sikhs) to wear five articles of Sikh faith. These integral and indispensable articles constantly remind the commitment of the follower to universal principles of justice, peace and equality. Sikh religion teaches pacifism and encourages respect for other religions. Wearing of the Articles of Sikh faith for the devout Sikhs is held a sacred religious belief and is not capricious.

With passing of the unanimous motion in recognition of both Vaisakhi and five Sikh Kakars, a new responsibility has fallen on the shoulders of the Sikh community who have already contributed immensely in the social, economic, academic and political fields of the country. Now the Sikhs need to contribute more diligently and positively in a different way towards development of British Columbia and Canada. This will be an opportunity for them to create awareness about Sikhism and paying a great tribute to the pioneers who worked hard for future of their posterities to live in Canada with peace and dignity.

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