Remembering Justice Ranjit Singh Narula

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IF EVER I WERE TO BE ASKED to make a portrait of HUMILITY, I would draw the picture of my adopted 'father', Justice Ranjit Singh Narula. I know I would still not be able to depict the nuances of the selflessness which I have witnessed for over 16 years. I had heard so much about the various aspects of his personality, and his unrelenting help and succour in terms of relief and rehabilitation of the Sikhs who fell victims of State-managed carnage in 1984, as also the guidance he gave in bringing the perpetrators to justice. The opportunity to see him first came my way when, as a companion of Baba Amte during his trips to Punjab in the worst days of terrorism, I was asked by Inder Gujral to address the Punjab Group of which Justice Narula was a Member. The benign face, the tender soft-spoken voice impressed me and I longed to get closer to him.

During my trips to Punjab with Baba Amte, I began meeting the members of the Sikh Forum, receiving the news about what Sikhs had gone through in 1984, and informing them about what we had experienced in the Punjab during our trips 1986-87. General Aurora, Wing Commander Chhatwal, Prof. Harkishan Singh kept me informed about the condition of widows and orphans. During one of the meetings with Prof. Harkishan Singh, I asked him whether he could introduce me to Justice Narula. "You have not met him?" he expressed shock, which meant that I must meet him and he took me at once to C-215, Defence Colony, after fixing an appointment. Our first meeting itself disarmed me of my inadequacy in talking to a former Chief Justice. Deeply interested in the subject that I wanted to talk to him on, he at once called his wife, Sardarni Sneh Lata by telling her that the subject was really hers! What I wanted to talk about was why in spite of our great Sikh Heritage in Gurbani and tradition as also the deeds of our Gurus and our illustrious ancestors, we were only the caricatures of the Khalsa?

Justice and Mrs. Narula's warmth and their self-denial encouraged me to open my heart. Then began our *amritvela kirtans* in their home whenever I visited Delhi. We had some meetings also at their home for discussing the subject with other like-minded people. I would plead every time that we, Sikhs, must LIVE Gurbani in our life, instead of merely talking about external image, or prestige, and that we must have our external appearance of respectable Sikhs along with our internal devotion to our Guru's Word practiced in our deeds. Justice Narula lent whole-hearted support. We had a few meetings at *amritvela* in their home and in my place of stay in Delhi, but before we ourselves became a GROUP of *satsangis*, we came across a complete, open Sikh humanity in Justice Narula.

During my visit to USA to meet my daughters, Sardarni Sneh Lata passed away and although I held Justice Narula in great esteem as my father, he continued to say to last day: "I am the junior-most *sevak* of Papaji", putting me to shame. And he did so not only in the confines of our *satsang*, but also in meeting other people. Once we went to see Mr. Vaishnav, Punjab's former Chief Secretary in Chandigarh, (now the patron of PREET LARI for which I write on Gurbani and Sikhi). Just when I introduced Justice Narula as the former Chief Justice, he humbly stressed: "*Mein tau inka Sevak houn*!"

In one of our *satsangs* in Delhi in 1997 in which a blind Tamil girl, a Punjabi Hindu girl, a pahari ex-domestic servant, a Sindhi family and others regularly take part, I had the 'temerity' to suggest to BHAPAJI – the way I addressed him, to visit Tapovan. He agreed. Since we all continued to feel our "smallness" in his august presence, I was not sure whether he would really come here. But, true to his word, humility, simplicity and commitment to *amritvela*, he first came to Tapovan in October 1997 and declared this place as a HEAVEN ON EARTH, but has visited it time and again, the last of his 8-9 visits being in 2004. I live here in voluntary poverty and the leprosy patients with whom I stay are really the poorest of the poor (ਨੀਚਾ ਅੰਦਰਿ ਨੀਚ ਜਾਤਿ). Used to 5-star living, his repeated visits to Tapovan, in themselves proclaim him to be a Saintly Sikh.

We were 10 satsangis from different backgrounds, and although all of us knew him well but we were deeply respectful. He started attending *satsangs* at *amritvela* at different places in Delhi, when I was there. And also in the evenings. We generally hold *satsangs* from 4.30 a.m. to 6 in the morning and from 6.30 p.m. to 8 in the evening. He would be driven to the place of *satsang* at 4.45 a.m. by one of our *satsangis* but in the evenings he would come in his own car. We had a certain amount of respectful fear and when, in Tapovan, I suggested whether he should like to stay in the Guest House alone, he smiled and said: "I am going to sleep here right by your side," in the adjoining bed. I cautioned our other *satsangis* not to make much noise in the morning when they got up around 3 a.m. and let Bhapaji sleep until 5. But I discovered, to my delight, that he had woken up at 2.30 a.m. and was ready before all others to join satsang at 4.30 a.m.

Till the last he was a father to us, other 'children' being Sunita and Rajlakshmi, my kirtan companions, Nimma, Ramesh, Satinder, Asha, Chander, Kamala from Delhi, and some Marathi and Sikh children from Nagpur and Amravati. I always tell his sons, daughters-in-law, daughters and sons-in-law that I am grateful to all of them for allowing me to share their 'father' as mine too.

We all *satsangis* have been together at many places, many times and have lived together for weeks together like a family and, not once, did Justice Narula give us the impression of being "superior" to any of us. On the contrary, he has embraced warmly Chander and Kamla who came to serve as domestic help in Delhi long ago and became our *amritvela* companions since 1970. He participated in satsang in their home in a servant quarter (which I call a 5-star hotel), with as much enthusiasm as in a home in Golf Links. We have been together at Dagshai, Baru Sahib, Dehra Dun, Jamshedpur, Nagpur, Mumbai, Nashik, Jalandhar, Chandigarh and perhaps many more places and he had always been a source of great inspiration.

His agility was superb. He was in full control of his faculties and his warmth never diminished. Indeed, his humility astonished me. If I had not known the command of our Gurus that a Sikh should become the dust of the feet of all, I would have wondered more. But I know that HE WANTED TO BE AN EXAMPLE OF A REAL GURSIKH so that mortals like me can learn from; Let me share two examples of his greatness as a humble man and a humble Sikh.

As an acting Governor he visited Solan when the local organisers used to provide hot water to be taken away by visitors at 3 a.m. But thoughtfully they decided not to bother Justice Narula and provide water themselves at his place of stay. However,

on reaching there they found Justice Narula had already gone to bring water and was standing in a queue with buckets in hand!

As a Senior Advocate he used to earn a lot money and I am told that he deposited Daswand everyday in a vessel reserved for it.

Let me conclude by sharing with the readers of ***The Sikh Review*** his great sense of humour. Since he really considered every advancement in life as a gift of God and not his own effort, he reacted in child-like simplicity. And he told me this anecdote himself:

'On a visit to a place for inspection of the local judiciary, he was informed late at night that he had been appointed Acting Governor of Haryana and he had to travel in the Raj Bhavan car for his return journey, while his own car would be driven by a driver and left at their residence. Says Justice Narula: "As my wife and I sat in pomp and show of the formalities attending a Governor, I told her: Darling, *ye kya tamasha hai*l!"

And the real Sikh that he was, he told me that during his time he never allowed liquor to be served in the Raj Bhavan.

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