

From trauma to triumph: Resolving conflicts peacefully

THE CEREMONIAL CELEBRATION of centennials often misses the core message of the Scriptural text. Sri Guru Granth Sahib time and again demands loyalty to God's will. Individually as well as collectively human behaviour must promote active resolution of problems. A Sikh, ever being a learner, needs to focus on the fusion of mind and body. Religious experience, rooted in the power of divinity, could thus be measured in terms of outcomes that bring peace and goodwill. This calls for a broader understanding among all faiths in a heterogeneous society such as India.

One of the paradoxes of the information revolution is, how little people know about the psychology and history of the minority religions. Events of the recent decades suggest that the much-touted Indian tolerance is a myth. The stereotype Sikh depicted by Bollywood movies, of a loud mouth, brawling drunken truck driver, scarcely recognisable as a Sikh, may be a thing of the past. But the print media in a symbiotic relationship with the 'filmy' world still promotes an ill concealed bias born of ignorance, if not jealousy. Earlier, in 1980's the press skillfully cultivated the Sikh image as that of the fundamentalist, instead of the fiercely patriotic Indian he is. It studiously blacked out the historic role of the essentially non-violent Akali movement of the 1920's, which Mahatma Gandhi had characterized as the "first victory in India's freedom struggle."

A significant, if minor, example of the majoritarian mindset is the portrayal of Sardar Bhagat Singh sporting (not the turban he wore most of his youthful life, but) the bowler hat that he used only as a disguise. His portrait in the Parliament's committee rooms, or his bust in Calcutta's Shahid Park, bear mute testimony to the general insensitivity to minority susceptibilities.

Government's tourist literature does not even list the Golden Temple as a popular destination. The recent acquittal of two Sikhs by a Canadian Court in the Kanishka bombing case, has been seized upon by the press to resuscitate the image of the Sikhs as extremists. [In this context, readers may see Sardar Patwant Singh's interview elsewhere in this issue.]

Likewise, Vir Sanghavi misused the columns of the Hindustan Times to target the Sikhs little realizing that the newspaper was first established by a Sikh, Sr. Mangal Singh, over six decades ago.

To write about Punjab's deprivations is unfashionable in post-1984 India, though negative images find ready space in syndicated columns wherein certain "pretenders" claim, every now and then, that the natural beard for men was a sign of orthodoxy; jobs are denied to Sikhs, Punjab has no capital or high court exclusively its own. Non-riparian states are claiming water resources of the much divided Punjab. India's school syllabi are singularly bereft of the basic information on Sikhism or, for that matter, other religious minorities. The argument is dismissed by pointing to the India's secular character. No wonder Bodh Gaya's Buddhist shrines are managed and controlled largely by Brahmin priests.

One can speculate, in retrospect, that had the principal advisers of the late prime minister Indira Gandhi known a little more of the history and mystique of the Sri

Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) the tragedy of the army assault, and the trauma of the Indira Gandhi assassination, in 1984, might have been averted.

There is no denying the fact that all the civil and military leaders of the time had been caught up in a process beyond their comprehension. They had no idea of the political manipulation of the Sikh affairs that had preceded the brutal suppression in Punjab, much less of the Sikh moral value system.

But when we pause and ponder, we find that events such as Operation Bluestar have receded into the far pavilions of history, a dark spec in history's horizon. While 1984 is burnished into the psyche of the older generation, the Sikh youth in their 20's have neither any recollection nor emotion. The same applies to the 1947 partition of India which is remembered only in books and films.

India now has a Sikh prime minister, even an army chief of staff they can identify with, though this happened after an incredible fifty seven years. With all these bonus points, one can forget history only at one's own peril, for history has a bizarre way of repeating itself!

Problems, however, continue to fester. To illustrate: Article 15-A of the Constitution speaks of Fundamental *duties* of Citizens - a belated but essential counterpoise for Fundamental *rights*. It enjoins upon the people to "value and preserve the right heritage of our composite culture". The dictionary defines the term "composite" as "made of constituents that remain recognisable". In all conscience, the people are entitled to know about every strand of our common heritage. That should include the Muslim, Christian and Sikh cultures. But some state administrations, television and other media seem to be working overtime to project and promote only one culture - that of the majority. Tourist literature, history text-books and the media ceaselessly propagate the customs, festivals and mythologies that perpetuate the image of India as a Hindu state. Homogenisation and assimilation are the subtle underlying objectives. An appreciation of India's diversity, or insistence on the distinguishing characteristics of minority cultures, beliefs and traditions is simply not acceptable. It is even frowned upon as "communal" in the pejorative sense.

The world may be shrinking into a global village, but the people's aspirations for recognition are growing apace. Religious, cultural and ethnic identities are, more than ever before, becoming the defining elements in our society. Those who set the intellectual agenda for the mass media, as well as the corps of educationists who run the system of primary and secondary education have a duty to the Constitution, and to their conscience, to hold the scales even, for promoting a better and more comprehensively understanding of the minority religions and cultures.

Now that Punjab - and most of the Sikhs - have re-emerged from the trauma and the ordeal of the forces unleashed by Operation Bluestar, the leaders of the majority community must also adopt a positive and flexible policy framework and, for a change, try to understand the minority aspirations. As for example, is there any logic in denying the Sikhs the right to campaign for greater autonomy and federalism? Or, for the right to an exclusive capital city of Chandigarh? Or to demand deletion of explanatory clause in the constitution which lumps together the Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs with Hindus for civil law and taxation procedures.

India's 22 million Sikhs wish to live in peace, with honour, committed to a strong federal India. Our commitment to the Sikh ideology and religious identity only reinforces our faith in democracy; this commitment must, therefore, be safeguarded, rather than sabotaged through misrepresentations and distortions. The correct policies and attitudes will not only validate the Indian secularism but also promote patriotism, enterprise, and optimism.

