

IN THE WITCHES' CAULDRON

By Gajinder Singh

Published by Mrs. Manbir G. Singh, Mohali (2004)

Pages: 180 Price: Rs. 220/- (Paperback), Rs. 285/- (Deluxe)

A Review by Dr. H.S. Virk*

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Gajinder Singh, the author of the book under review, has entered the realm of Sikh religious writings with the publication of his book "*Lest We the Sikh Go Astray*", reviewed in Abstracts of Sikh Studies (July-September, 2004). As claimed by the author, most of the essays have been published in the journals: **The Sikh Review** and the **Abstracts of Sikh Studies**. The title of the book is picked up from the Shakespeare's celebrated play, *Macbeth*, and forms the last chapter of the book.

Browsing across various essays listed in the book, one can form an opinion about the author and his approach to Sikh religion. Gajinder Singh served as a professional in a company. He adopts a rationalist approach to explain Gurbani. He rejects superstition and criticizes ritualistic tradition, which have cropped up in Sikh religion. He quotes Gurbani *shabads* to hammer his point of view. He is also critical about the role of preachers, *sant babas* and so called managers of Sikh religion who are preaching Sikhism and Guru Nanak's revolutionary philosophy of religion in terms of outdated Brahmanical tradition which had been repudiated by Guru Nanak.

In the first essay, *Fabricating Myths*, the author states: "Sikhs have no myths as the Guru denounced the sanctity of ancient texts. But the Sikhs went on to imitate other faiths by adopting, or inventing, myths - to be at par with them! So many *sant deras* and illiterate *Babas* love to infuse their sermons with tales from *puranas* and mythology." And again in the same chapter (page 15), the author brings out Guru Nanak's mission: "Guru Nanak's struggle was not only against the fear-based Hindu rites and rituals, or against the highly formalistic creeds of Islam, Jainism, Naths and Yogis etc. It was a deeper search for truth which was beyond the limits of the established faith."

The author seems to have been impressed by Greek philosophy. His hypothesis that the concept of *panch* (elected five) is borrowed by Guru Nanak from the Greeks during his sojourn in Iraq seems to be a figment of his imagination. Concept of *pancha* is certainly of Indian origin. My forays into the history of science convinced me that Greeks believed in the four-element theory and Indians promoted the five-element theory (*panch-Tat*) of the universe.

In "*Conversing with God*", the author seems to be at his best in interpreting the message of Sikh Gurus (p. 34 and p. 39): "God is, thus, in Guru Nanak's vision not nature alone, nor the force of energy manifest in *Maya*, the universe, but a definite entity, the creator who sits, contemplates and enjoys His handiwork". "Each hymn in Guru Granth Sahib is a direct dialogue of common man with God. Sikhism does not hold a mediator as mandatory. It is straight linkage of man with God, as and when the creator bestows Grace. Then, the *Guru-sabad* transforms into a living conversation, thus resolving the divine mystery." At the end of the chapter (p.41), the

author compares the different stages in the path of liberation advocated by all major religions of the world.

Gurmat Culture is a wonderful essay, which delineates the unique features of the Sikh values system and culture, distinct from the Hindu and Muslim religions. The author stresses the uniqueness of Sikh philosophy, Sikh music, architecture, and Sikh school of painting and above all, Sikh attitude towards life. The author gives a clarion call to the Sikh society to preserve and propagate the distinct Gurmat Culture. He is rightly worried that Sikhs are not rallying to face the cultural deluge.

Most of the essays that follow illustrate the scholarship of learned author in comparative religion, psychology, philosophy and current affairs. The central theme is the message of Guru Granth (p.100): "Guru Granth Sahib consists of contemplation of God's name and contains sermons on truthful living. It is essential to form the habit of clean thinking and truthfulness as the precondition for expectation of godliness."

"*Play of Emotions*" is another evocative essay which defines *Maya* in Sikh value system as distinct from the Hindu (*Vedantic*) concept of *Maya* (p. 138): "The revolutionary solution posed by Guru Nanak is for the devotee to remain in the thick of the worldly engagements, of a happy family, peaceful neighbourhood, honest profession, compassion and enlarging the sphere of his concern, to include one and all. *Maya* is dreadful to those who lack of determination and conviction about the transitory nature of this creation of God."

"*Efficacy of Prayer*" brings out the distinction in different forms of prayer. "In Hindu system, congregational prayer does not exist. In temples, each prays for his own requirements. Hinduism in any format is individualistic in nature and its practices did not impress Guru Nanak." The Sikh prayer is congregational, seeks *sarbat da bhala* and a desire to remain in touch with the Primal Person (God). In the last essay "*In the Witches Cauldron*", the author is highly critical of the Sikhs going astray from the Gurmat Culture (p. 174): "The Sikhs are increasingly observing *sharad* - like rituals by holding *Akhand Paths* and lavish lunches, to display their level of wealth and well being. *Akhand Paths*, of the Sikhs held for whatever purpose have replaced the earlier Vedic mantras and have no value or benefit when commercially held as rituals or with specific mundane aims."

In the review process, I shall fail in my duty to evaluate the book critically, if I do not point out some glaring mistakes. On page 49, the author quotes a warning to Khalsa attributed to Guru Gobind Singh: "*Jab tak khalsa rahey nyara*", which should read as "*Jab lag Khalsa rahey nayara*." In the essay, "*Wheels Within*", the concept of *Liv* and *Dhât* is interpreted correctly in the light of *Gurbani*, quoting appropriate *sabd*s. However, the figures (page 55) given to illustrate the concepts give the wrong impression, as *liv* and *dhât* are reciprocal in nature and not in direction proportion as shown by the author.

Another minor flaw is the rendering of *Gurbani* transliteration without using intonation marks. It would have facilitated the reading of *Gurbani* text correctly had the author adopted the internationally approved style of transliteration. On the whole, the book is a useful addition to the existing Sikh literature in the scientific age with an appeal to the younger Sikh generation.

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BOOKS RECEIVED

“Sharana Vani – Gurubani”

Kuldip Singh (C-127, Guru Tegh Bahadur Nagar, Allahabad)

Publisher: Akhil Bharatha Sharana Sahitya Parishad, 1st Main, 8th Block, Jayanagar, Bangalore 560 070

Pages 48. Price 50/-

Wherever there is a Gursikh, there is the blessing of Sangat. Sr. Kuldip Singh’s strong streak of spirituality finds expression in a variety of ways: Satsang, articles and literature. No wonder he set up his own Gurmat Vichar Kendra at Allahabad, even as he roams the country to spread the soulful message of Guruvani, in English as well as chaste Hindi. This English booklet attempts to build a bridge of comparative understanding between. *Guruvani* and Kannada Spiritual literature dating back to the 12th century *Sharana* movement – akin to the Bhakti movement that spanned the Indo Gangetic plains. Esoteric themes like the nature of the divine, relationship of soul and body have been juxtaposed in transliteration. A commendable effort to link the South with North at devotional plane.

S. S.