

# Reforms — SGPC

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IT IS OVER TWENTY YEARS SINCE the holocaust of 1984 and we seem to be forgetting the ignominy of it. The two major pillars of Sikh institutional support, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbhandak Committee (SGPC) and Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) have failed to sincerely address the *panthic* issues. On the contrary, their lackadaisical attitudes has been injurious to the Sikh cause.

To my mind there is nothing more urgent today for the *Panth* than radical reforms in the SGPC. I say this for two reasons: SGPC is the most important organ of the *Panth* that exists for propagation of Sikhism, projection of the Sikh image and ascendancy of Sikhism. Secondly, for the past some years, particularly during the last twenty years, it is also the SGPC that stands out for the monumental damage done to the Sikh cause and denigrating the Sikh image, because, as an entity, it is irreplaceable — notwithstanding its current misdirection and entropy. In order to reverse the functional declinism, major changes in the structure of the SGPC must be incorporated.

## **Upholding the Glory:**

I would like to share some thoughts about the prevailing state of affairs and ground realities related to the SGPC. I feel this perspective is essential to evolve any meaningful suggestions for possible corrective steps. It is also necessary to be brutally frank. The functional deficiencies of the SGPC to uphold the Sikh image or the upkeep of the piety and exalted status of gurdwaras or support the propagation of Sikhism are too glaring and obvious failures and need no elucidation for the sentient Sikhs. A paradigm shift is required to overhaul the functioning of the SGPC. This demands focus on the structural deformities that are eroding the very purpose of the SGPC.

## **Human Resource:**

Foremost among these, relate to the elections of the SGPC Members. The SGPC elections in practice are political elections by another name. They are, infact, worse. Because it is generally the rejects from the primary political electoral field that are accommodated for the SGPC nominations. The expectations form such second grade politicians who are discards from the main arena of power, and all that goes with it, are not difficult to imagine. The election campaigns of candidates is also no different from the political campaigns with all its defilements. The rhetoric of false promises, the unrestrained use of money and liquor incentives and occasional arm twisting bargains are not uncommon practices. It is not surprising, therefore, that the elected body as a whole is servile to the political masters. As far as the President of the SGPC is concerned there have been occasions when for his election the name is presented to the assembled members in a sealed envelope. All that the members are required to do on opening of the envelope and announcement of the name is, *Bole So Nihal, Sat Sri Akal!* If there is any hinderance in assembling the members they can be herded in a secure place with all the creature comforts and transported to the selected venue.

The adherence to Sikh *maryada* by the elected members is generally perfunctory and given the existing election process, it cannot be otherwise. Rare voices of conscience are ignored or suppressed.

Contextual to the SGPC, the appointment and the role of Jathedar Akal Takht is also crucial. The Jathedar Akal Takht should be a refined acme product of the SGPC procedures, in the personification of a *numero uno gursikh*. In practice, in the recent past, the process has yielded the dross of political manipulations. As a return favour, the political masters gain freedom to violate the religious ethics. The Jathedar is readily obliging to validate such indulgences of politicians and when necessary he accords formal "indulgence dispensations". The prestige and dignity of the Jathedar Takhts has been severely decimated. Besides, serious deficiencies towards their obligations and onerous responsibilities the Jathedars have interfered in the sanctified *panthic* traditions. Some have collected allegations of moral turpitude. The end result is, while earlier on, the excommunication from Akal Takht Sahib carried immense psychological impact and a potent social stigma, now, prominent Sikhs not only refuse to appear at the Akal Takht Sahib but also challenge the right of Jathedar Akal Takht to summon them for anti *panthic* activities. Not only the institutional moral authority is questioned, but a threat of invoking legal proceedings is voiced.

#### **Distressing Politics:**

The sorry state of affairs of the SGPC vis-a-vis politicians is specially distressing because ideally it is the SGPC which should be transmitting sublime influences on to the politicians. The dismal shortcomings of the SGPC have been highlighted to stress the magnitude of the effort required to arrest the decay that is the bane of the so-called "Parliament of the Sikhs". It is not surprising that some prominent persons have opined that the SGPC is redundant. However, they have failed to offer any alternative to the SGPC. Notwithstanding the dissipated state of the SGPC, I firmly believe that the SGPC is irreplaceable. Of course, a reformed SGPC in a benific form. And irreplaceable except by the All India Gurdwara Act for which unfortunately the Will of the powers that be has been lacking. There are reasons why the existence of the SGPC is considered irreplaceable :

- (i) it is the SGPC that provides central pool of resources of infrastructure, finance and potential of human resource for the core values of Sikhism.
- (ii) it is the SGPC that is operating from the base of Sikhism and can exercise authority for harmonizing religious solidarity.
- (iii) it is also the SGPC that protects major gurdwaras from legal entanglements at lower level courts.

It becomes evident that two main areas of the SGPC which demand urgent attention are: quality of representatives and the election process. Keeping in view the immediate concern of forthcoming SGPC elections, it is suggested that the reforms, that can be implemented, should evolve in two stages : Firstly, reforms that can be implemented before the forthcoming SGPC elections. Secondly, reforms that can be carried through after the present election schedule.

It is considered advisable here to recall an earlier effort of intended reform. The concern for reform in the SGPC had motivated major *panthic* organisations to come

together for an initiative, prior to September, 2001 when the elections were due as per scheduled. A meeting was held at Chandigarh under the aegis of Sikh Core Group on June 14, 2001. The meeting was presided by Justice (Retd) R.S. Narula and attended by Baba Sarbjot Singh Bedi, President Gurmat Sidhant Parcharak Sant Samaj; Sardar Kirpal Singh, President Chief Khalsa Diwan, Dr Kirpal Singh, Editor Abstracts of Sikh Studies, Dr Kharak Singh, Member Dharam Parchar Committee of the SGPC; Principal Ram Singh, President Guru Gobind Singh Study Circle and myself as Member of the Sikh Core Group. The resolutions incorporated cogent recommendations. I quote some relevant extracts:

- (i) "It is important that essential screening of the candidates for the SGPC is made obligatory by the representatives of *panthic* bodies which do not themselves enter the electoral fray".
- (ii) "There was complete unanimity among representatives of these leading *panthic* bodies (attending the meeting) that it should be acceptable to the SGPC to constitute a group of devoted Sikhs who may be deputed to filter a list of such sewaks who are appropriately qualified to be members of the SGPC and that political parties, according due deference to *panthic* primacy, should provide cooperation in supporting such nominated candidates."

#### **Advisory Board: A step in the Right Direction:**

Fortunately, now a self corrective mechanism has been created recently by the SGPC itself by constituting a Religious Advisory Board comprising some prominent Sikhs. The Board is to advise on religious matters. One of the tasks undertaken by it is to formulate guidelines regarding the appointment and functioning of the Jathedar Takhts. This Board with suitable alternation could also be entrusted the task of screening potential SGPC candidates. However, the members of this Board will have to become more proactive. They remained reticent when *siropas* from Akal Takht were presented to Akali leaders who were released after being jailed by the court in cases pertaining to disproportionate assets.

Another Resolution of the June 2001 meeting demanded elections on schedule. I quote: "The SGPC elections must be held on schedule and should not be delayed on petty political considerations or bureaucratic procrastinations. Any disruption in the statutory schedule of the SGPC elections when Shrimoni Akali Dal led government is in power, will set an extremely damaging precedence."

Two members of the Sikh Core Group had met the Gurdwara Election Commissioner before this June meeting. It transpired that unlike the Chief Election Commissioner, he has no authority to determine the date for holding of the SGPC election. The authority for which rests with the Ministry of Home Affairs. Furthermore, the Ministry of Home Affairs was not issuing the schedule for elections because the recommendations sent by the SGPC regarding the change in voting age and *sehajdhari* voters was pending finalisation. These issues could not be finalised because the Akali government had called for giving comments on these issues. Now, this was intentional underhand imposition for delaying the SGPC elections. The Punjab government is not in the chain of processing recommendations sent by the SGPC which must be binding on the Central government based on the Master Tara Singh-Nehru pact. Therefore, not the Central government but the Akalis manipulated the delay. As such it may help in future if the

Gurdwara Election Commissioner is given the sole authority to fix schedule of SGPC elections AND holding of elections after every five years is made mandatory. This could be one item of the reforms.

For the second stage and without prejudice to enactment of the All India Gurdwara Act, it should be possible to incorporate significant amendments to the existing structure of the SGPC. Earlier important modifications have been made through notifications by the Ministry of Home Affairs like reservation of twenty five seats for women just before the last SGPC elections and now debarring *sehajdhari* voters. Therefore, the Ministry of Home Affairs, on the recommendations of the SGPC has (i) altered the number of representative and (ii) reclassified the category of voters. I suggest, the following significant amendments be taken up for incorporation which would conform to the type of amendments already carried out :

- (i) The total membership be reduced to fifty one members.
- (ii) Electoral Colleges be categorised for electing their representatives, e.g., theologians, historians, teachers, members of legal profession, defence services, bureaucracy, and so on.
- (iii) Heads of major Sikh institutions like DSGMC, Chief Khalsa Diwan, Kendriya Singh Sabha and so on be nominated as ex-officio Members.
- (iv) Representatives from foreign countries be nominated as Members.
- (v) Lastly, the associated members be taken from the Sikh Chairs established at various Universities in India and Abroad.

In the end I would like to stress that the reforms in the SGPC can only come through a concerted effort of scholars, intellectuals and Sikh luminaries because in the present environment it is unthinkable that the politicians — first grade or second grade — would be concerned for the reforms in the SGPC.

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## **Cultural Identity and Globalisation**

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CULTURE AND IDENTITY ARE ALWAYS very important issues for a community. They become more important when their uniqueness faces an abrupt threat by any establishment. Under the era of globalisation, the whole world is becoming a global-cultural village. Values, ethics, music, dress, beliefs and art of one land are coming closer to the other one. There is a great impingement of technology on traditional culture. Mass media, as a whole, has played a great role to flash light on the yet unknown tribal lives. Gone are the days of cultural shock in this world.

In this state of affairs, of cultural globalisation, if we take the example of dress, particularly of the headgear, we find different type of caps, turbans, burqas, chunnies and dupattas, etc. Arabs wear particular headgear, a cloth, covering their shoulders tied with a rope on the top of their heads. Even diplomats, prime ministers and presidents when visiting abroad wear such a dress.

There is no doubt that a dress has its own geographical, social and religious roots in its society. A community adopting a particular dress has its own emotional feelings about it. This feeling plays a great role, when it has its religious values. Turban, for example, inheres a value of pride, dignity and honour in the minds of Sikh community. So, under the era of globalisation when there are tremendous opportunities for the human mobility all over the world, a greater understanding of dress codes is needed for the smooth functioning of the countries. A slight social disturbance can be a big issue for another social group or community. For example, in France, there are 5000 Sikhs and one can easily estimate the number of school going students in the country, for whom the govt. of France is going to ban the wearing of turban.

But in Indian schools, the situation is different. In the hot months when there are inadequate electric power supply, aggravated by unpredictable power cuts, our students have to wear neck-ties and socks with boots. What is the purpose of this formal dress? Is this sort of dress suitable for Indian climate? And there is another question. When they (students) learn/recite 'Rain Rain Go Away, Come Again Another Day' while the whole of India actually needs rain for the overall development of the country. Sometimes the fate of the Indian economy depends on this unpredictable rains called monsoon.

It is a crucial question for Sikhs to keep one's cultural identity while living in a foreign country. One needs the minimum cultural environment congenial to make its manifestation not only the form of freedom of wearing one's own cultural dress, but celebrating one's own festivals and remembering one's religious/national heroes. At least one should have a cultural space to share his special day with his colleague at work place or in the neighbourhood, while you are lighting the candles at night on Diwali. (if you happen to be free on that night!).

It is a great paradox that when a man lives in another country, his love, pride and attachment for his language and culture becomes more alive. Atleast he wants to keep alive his cultural roots in him. Sense of belongingness, identity crisis and cultural communication and nationality questions are the big issues to be sorted out globally if we want the real and pro-people emergence of globalisation.

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## **How American Sikhs contribute to Homeland Security**

**LESLIE WAYNE**

Espanola, New Mexico: At the end of a dusty road, behind a barbed-wire fence, is the Sikh Dharma of New Mexico, a religious compound with a Golden Temple of worship, a collection of trailer used for business and a quiet group of people wandering the grounds wearing flowing white robes and turbans.

In the New Age culture here, the Sikh Dharma community, founded in the early 1970's, provides a place where admirers of late Yogi Bhajan, a Sikh spiritual leader and yoga master, can live *in harmony* and follow their beliefs in vegetarianism, meditation and community service. Except for Yogi Bhajan, who was born in India

and came to the United States in 1969, most members of the Sikh Dharma are American-born converts who moved here to pursue their way of life.

The compound is also home to Akal Security, wholly owned by the Sikh Dharma and one of the nation's fastest-growing security companies, benefiting from a surge in post-9/11 business. With 12,000 employees and over \$1 billion in federal contracts, Akal specializes in protecting vital and sensitive government sites, from military installations to federal courts to airports and water supply systems.

Despite Akal's unusual lineage, Sikh Dharma members say they are following an ancient Sikh tradition of the warrior-saint – as well as showing deftness at the more modern skill of landing federal contracts.

“Our customers look at who we are and filter it all out,” Daya Singh Khalsa, Akal's co-founder and senior vice president, said in an interview in his office here. “They couldn't be less interested in our religion and what we look like.” Among Sikhs “there is no stigma in being financially successful,” Mr. Khalsa added. *“Prosperity does not take away from spiritual net worth. You can have both.”*

Akal certainly bears that out. It is the nation's largest provider of security officers for federal courthouses, with contracts for 400 buildings in 44 states, including the federal court-house in Manhattan. **The company just won a major contract to guard Army bases and munitions dumps in eight states, and also provides guards for the Ronald Reagan Building in Washington, blocks from the White House. It handles security at the Baltimore-Washington International Airport, as well as at four new detention centers run by the Homeland Security Department where foreigners await deportation.**

In the straight-laced world of the security business, where most people have a police or military background, Akal stands out. It is the only security company that anyone in the business, including Akal's own executives, can think of that is owned by a nonprofit religious organization.

**“If we are in a room with 50 other contractors, you won't remember the other guy, but you will remember us,” said Mr. Khalsa, who wears a white turban, has a long beard and refrains from cutting his hair.**

It has also not hurt that Akal has been a generous campaign contributor to both Democratic and Republican candidates at the federal level, and that Mr. Khalsa has met with President Bush both in the White House and in New Mexico. Local New Mexico politicians have also benefited from this largess – and responded with friendship and support.

Four former New Mexico governors stopped by Yogi Bhanjan's recent 75<sup>th</sup> birthday party; Gov. Bill Richardson was last year's keynote speaker at the group's International Peace Prayer Day.

“WE play in the political arena like everyone else,” Mr. Khalsa said. He and his wife, Sat Nirmal Kaur Khalsa, who is Akal's chief executive, have given more than \$30,000 to both Democratic and Republican federal candidates since 2000.

Mr. Khalsa, who was once known as Daniel Cohn, was given his name by Yogi Bhanjan after he moved here in 1971, soon after graduating from Amherst College. Like other members of the 300-family Sikh Dharma community, he has adopted the

name Khalsa, which refers to a group of orthodox Sikhs. The Sikh Dharma community here blends New Age values and orthodox Sikhism, a monotheistic religion that originated in the Punjab region of the Indian subcontinent in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. “We are not used to non-Punjabis joining our religion; it is a curious development,” said Gurinder Singh Mann, professor of Sikh studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who explained that many of these new converts are more devout than those born into the religion.

Unlike their counterparts in India, women in Sikh Dharma wear turbans, as do some of the children. Most members of the Sikh Dharma live in modest houses near the compound and Yogi Bhajan’s ranch in Espanola, the Hacienda De Guru Ram Das Gurdwara. Yogi Bhajan has arranged many marriages within the community.

Under Akal’s biggest security contract, worth \$854 million, it provides protection for federal courthouses and judges. While federal courthouse guards wear United States marshals’ uniforms in nine districts, their employer is Akal, which hires mainly former police and military officers, almost none of them Sikhs. Akal’s contract with the guards prohibits them from wearing turbans or having facial hair, unlike the company’s Sikh officials, who are required to do so by their religion.

For all the group’s unusual ways, government officials have few complaints about Akal. “Our people have done checks on them years ago and we have no issues with them,” said John Kraus, a contracting officer for the Department of Justice. “Last I’ve checked, we’ve had freedom of religion.”

One high-profile contract Akal recently garnered, beating 20 other companies, was for \$250 million to provide security guards at five Army bases and three weapons depots. The Army has turned to the private sector to replace soldiers sent to Iraq. Competition was based on ability, past performance and price, according to an Army official, who added that Akal’s religious ties were not a factor, nor did Akal benefit as a religious group.

“We do not discriminate based on race, creed, religion or national origin,” the official said. “It was never really a factor.” Because of that open approach, Akal has almost exclusively gone after government contracts.

“The federal government has created the fairest acquisition system in the world,” Mr. Khalsa said. He added that with the company’s low overhead – Mr. Khalsa, its top executive, earns a modest \$90,000 – Akal is “very price-competitive” in the eyes of government agencies on tight budgets.

Akal is just one of several for profit and nonprofit entities that are part of a larger Sikh Dharma financial empire. These include Golden Temple, a natural foods company that makes Yogi herbal teas, Soothing Touch health and beauty products, Peace natural cereals, dietary supplements and private-label products for Trader Joe’s, the specialty food chain. Its annual revenues exceed \$60 million. Akal and Golden Temple both operate under the loose umbrella of the Khalsa International Industry and Trading Company, which also includes Sun & Son, a computer software company. The sole shareholder of all these companies is the Sikh Dharma church.

Equally important are a number of nonprofit ventures also owned by Sikh Dharma. The biggest of these is the 3HO Foundation, with the name standing for

healthy, Happy and Holy Organization. That group is dedicated to the spread of Kundalini yoga, which is focused on releasing inner energy, and of Yogi Bhanjan's teachings. Other nonprofit organizations have been set up to preserve Yogi Bhanjan's archives as well as to support a Sikh Dharma school in India, where many of the group's children are sent.

**“The whole point of all these ventures is not for an individual to get rich, but to perpetuate the mission of the community,” said Avtar Hari Singh Khalsa, who, as Arthur S. Warshaw, was once president of Time Life Television in Hollywood. Today he is chief executive of the 3HO Foundation and other nonprofits.**

No money from Akal, Golden Temple or the other profit-making ventures goes to the “church”, which is supported by donations, officials say. Sending money to the “church” is barred by Akal's bankers and could also jeopardize the tax-exempt status of the church. Akal pays no dividends and plows all cash generated back into the business to support its expansion, Daya Khalsa said.

Officials here say that no individual member of the Sikh Dharma community, including Akal executives and Yogi Bhanjan, has any equity in either Akal, Golden Temple or any other profit-making businesses. Yogi Bhanjan has served as an unpaid Akal adviser and has been hired, occasionally as a paid consultant on Akal management issues.

Yogi Bhanjan's guidance led to the founding of Akal. In 1980, Akal's other co-founder, Gurutej Khalsa, found that although he had graduated from several law enforcement schools, his beard and turban prevented him from getting a job. He turned to Yogi Bhanjan for advice and was told that if he started his own company, the police would begin to work for him.

The Amar Infinity Foundation, based in Phoenix, is also tied in financially. It has \$100 million in assets, gained mainly through individual donations and through such fundraising events as the annual Yogiji Golf Classic in Phoenix. Amar Infinity was set up to support the 3HO Foundation, the Sikh Dharma and a long list of other nonprofit groups.

A final piece of the Sikh Dharma financial mosaic is the Siri Singh Sahib, a nonprofit organization set up, according to its state incorporation papers, to “administer and manage affairs of Sikh religion.” Yogi Bhanjan was the sole officer and director until his death in 2004.

Akal has developed a comfortable relationship with leaders of both major political parties. In Daya Khalsa's office are numerous “grip and grin” photos of him with various politicians, including President Bush, former President Bill Clinton and former vice president Al Gore. Akal donates at the state level, too, giving \$10,539 to Governor Richardson's 2002 election campaign and thousands more to the New Mexico Democratic and Republican parties.

Federal election records also show numerous political contributions to both parties from various Khalsas of Espanola, in amounts ranging from several hundred to several thousand dollars, including \$14,000 from Yogi Bhanjan.

The group has built up trust at the federal level over a long period. When questions were raised after Akal landed its first big contract in 1986 to protect the

White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico, Senator Jeff Bingaman, a Democrat from New Mexico, rose to Akal's defense: "People were saying, 'How could you let these foreign whomevers take over a critical weapons testing site,' Daya Khalsa recalled. "And he said that we were friends and that we're good Americans doing a good job."

