

# HISTORY OF THE SIKH GURUS RETOLD

(Vols. I & II)

By SURJIT SINGH GANDHI

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*A Review by Dr. Gurbaksh Singh*

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*\* C/o. Dr. Kharak Singh, Editor, Abstract of Sikh Studies, Chandigarh.*

Modern technology in the last twenty five years from Boeing 747 to the world-wide web has made our globe seem much smaller place, almost a village, rendering it easier for the people to get together and interact with one another comfortably. Concomitantly, various traditions and theories have begun to be scrutinized and evaluated in global context.

In the altered perspectives, it is but natural that the Sikh religion might be subjected to fresh evaluation. It is highly gratifying that this task has been accomplished by Surjit Singh Gandhi, a renowned scholar of history, who has over two dozens of milestone dissertations to his credit. His work, **History of the Sikh Gurus Retold**, is an epitome of what edges out Sikhism when it is juxtaposed with other religious traditions at global level. The book provides a valuable insight into different faces of Sikhism, its metaphysics, social order, its infrastructure, its vision of God, its ultimate objectives and its uniqueness as compared to other religious systems. It also throws light on how Gurus reacted to different challenges that came their way. The work is delineated in two volumes, each volume divided into three sections bearing headings suggestive of certain important themes. In the first section of the first volume, the author has diligently narrated the social economic and political conditions of Punjab, the rest of India and the world outside it especially Europe and the present day Middle East which in 16th and 17th centuries were considered to be holding position of vintage with potential to shape social environments. He concludes that society had lost its elan even urge to extricate itself from the syndrome of inertia and despondency.

All the limbs of the society bore serious fractures. Its sociology, its polity, its spirituality and its economy were in jeopardy. Human spirit was in tight shackles of rituals, wrong notions, debasing spiritual artifices, esoteric practices and rote-ems, constantly smarting from oppressive policy and governance, if in some stray corner of sub-continent of India or the world outside, stirrings to move forward took place, these calmed down shortly after either under the weight of prevalent malaise or because they were snuffed out forcibly. Bhakti movement among the Hindus and Sufis among the Muslims were the two such cases. They were not allowed enough freedom to fructify fully and smoothly. Against this background Guru Nanak fashioned a response which was immaculately creative and all-inclusive, touching all aspects of society, It is in this sense that the author says that "sikhism" emerged not as a part of Bhakti movement. On the other hand it was an independent system having its own individuality, its own distinct stance. The Guru held out a unique message which was commitment to immaculate spirituality recognizing only singularity and unicity of God, His absoluteness, His all powerfulness, the only cause of the whole creation, its permeation in it as spirit,

and serial structure studiously built an principles such as social equality, love for all human beings, human dignity, freedom from fear, -non exploitation, eagerness to earn livdiRood through honest means as also share part of it with the needy . 'Sikhism' unambiguously ruled out any mediatory mechanism between God and the people. Guru Nanak pleaded forcefully and categorically that God being within man and every where can be realized any time through self-effort and following ethics rooted in Self-realization. For the consummation of his teachings he believed in raising of appropriate institutions and their functioning through creative geniuses. In delineating the life, tours of Guru Nanak and his teachings, the author has taken full-advantage of contemporary and semi-contemporary sources. He has also made judicious use of well-researched work an the subject including McLeod's biography of Guru Nanak and edited text of Sri Guru Nanak Parkash by Dr. Kirpal Singh. Besides pithily profiling Guru's concept of God. His relations with the Universe and man, the path to His Realization, the author is cogent enough in presenting concretely what model of society, the Guru envisaged. Then he compared the Guru's dispensation with other religious traditions such as Vaishnavism, Nathism, Brahmanism, Bhakti Movement, including Kabirism, and strikes a very plausible conclusion that Guru's dispensation was at variance with all other religious traditions. It was an independent system having its own individuality, distinct stance and purporting to build society on three bases viz, honest creative labour, sharing of earnings thereof with the needy and reposing full faith in the unity of God-head.

Such a vision of society was indisputably unique and marked a watershed in the history of mankind, as no other prophet or leader of any religion thought of it earlier than the Gurus. It was original having no ancestry and to recognize Sikhism as syncretism of Hinduism and Islam is a sheer case of misreading of real facts. Similarly to regard it a part of Bhakti is nothing more titan a fantasy because Bhakti in Sikh religion is not a process of uttering of God's name, but an effort to channelise seeker's devotion to serve the people and to experience bliss of their aesthetic communion with the Almighty. The author's skill in discovering new facts and uncovering the facts wrapped with mythology illusions and wrong notions is praiseworthy. He seems to have perfected the craft to separate grain from the chaff.

In the process, he has corrected the sequence of Guru Nanak's travels and have portrayed the lives of the Gurus graphically focusing on their respective roles in the development, expansion and consolidation of Sikhism. In this context, whereas he delineates different institutions such as Sangat, Guru Ke Langar, Masan system, and Gurdwara~ he also brings into focus how the Gurus sustained and promoted. Sikhism and how diligently they oriented the psyche of the followers to enable them to abide by the Guru's guidelines.

The author takes special note of the raising of Harimandir and compilation and editing of Adi Granth. He regards Harmandir not only as a fine architectural specimen or a sign of aesthetics at its acme, but also a crystallized form of Sikh religious values. The Adi Granth enshrining compositions of 36 seers (Six Gurus, eleven Bhats, fifteen Bhagats Satta BALWAND, Sundar, Mardana was a special scripture. It differed from scriptures of other "religions in as much as it was original compiled and edited by Guru Arjan himself and was recognized as the supreme authority because the Word embodied in it was considered synonymous wiith Guru/God. Moreover, it was central to Sikh worship and an unchangeable referee for the Sikhs to seek guidance. Naturally it became the focus serving as a unique adhesive and fount of inspiration for them. The emergence of Adi Granth marked the definitiveness of different aspects of Sikh religion which as a sequel stood as a an identity by itself.

The speedy consolidation and expansion of Sikh faith was looked upon with askance by the Mughal state, the orthodox Muslim elites, for in their reckoning, Sikh ideology was antithetical to their socio - political ideologies. The Hindu elites also disliked the Guru's message because they regarded it sinister enough with a potential to destabilize caste-based Hindu society. The result was a violent response which touched its apex during Aurengzeb's reign. But despite all this, the flame of Sikh religion could not be extinguished. During this phase, new vistas of the Sikh ideology become manifest. The structural bonding of spiritual and temporal concerns was institutionalized by Guru Hargobind. The author has brought to lime light the part played by orthodox Muslim reaction spearheaded by the Naqshbandis causing a lot of sufferings to the Gurus and their Sikhs.

To resort to violence to uphold the righteousness and to decimate the wrong doers even courting martyrdom in the process were considered moral imperatives and an essential part of Sikh ideology.

As a sequel as also to stand as a witness to truth or to exemplify the truth itself, Guru Arjan Dev and Guru Tegh Bahadur met their Martyrdom at the hands of the fanatical Mughal Government.

Their example was followed by their votaries without any demur. Ultimately the Sikh spirit held its own even against heavy odds and articulated the people to rise, strike and establish rule of justice. The pontification of the next three Gurus, 7th to 9th has been 'rightly characterized as period of peaceful consolidation as a strategic response to the Islamic imperialism which on its part utilized it to bring about schism among the Sikhs to manipulate Sikh organization through endeavors to control the succession of gurship.

The failure of imperial intrigues was no less responsible for the incarceration of Guru Tegh Bahadur and his eventual execution. It is heartening that the author, in the light of the new material available from Bhat Vahis, has thrown light on the arrest and execution of the Guru Tegh Bahadur. The controversies regarding the manner of succession of Guru Tegh Bahadur, the purpose of his visit to different places, his foundation of Chak Nanki, his arrests at Dhamdhan, Agra, and Malikpur, the exact period of his imprisonment, his persecution in the Kotwali of Delhi have been amply set at rest.

Prof. Gandhi has dwelt at length on the culmination of the Sikh mission as it was brought about by Guru Gobind. Singh. In this connection, he regards his founding of the Khalsa Order as his crowning achievement and a landmark in the history, for, the Khalsa was to be a fresh model of man and society irrevocably committed for furthering the cause of social transformation of the whole mankind on bases of love for each other, non-exploitation, social equality and faith in oneness of God, ever ready to combat the forces clogging the wheel of progress.

The author's discovery of the history of Sikh struggle, as perfected and operationalised by Guru Gobind Singh, is undoubtedly a unique contribution in as much as it provides insights into Sikh dynamics.

The author has done a singular service by retelling history of the Sikh Gurus which in fact was warranted by fresh discoveries of Source material, fresh understanding of challenges and responses both at individual and social levels, fresh innovations in science and sociology. Whereas the author's chapters on Sikh Polity, important Sikh Rituals, Sikh Religious Orders are quite illuminating, these also exemplify what exactly

the author's approach was while building the book. The appendices add to the value of the work and provide useful information on some aspects, which could not be discussed in detail in the main corpus of the work.

All in all, Professor Gandhi has done an excellent job. The book is perhaps the first attempt to present a comprehensive study of the history of the Sikh Gurus after the MacCauliffe's Magnum Opus 'Sikh Religion'. The book is a genre in itself at once interpretative, comprehensive, all-inclusive, expressive, framed cautiously taking into consideration all possible influences, whether they issued from the past legacy or current challenges or future expectations.

The work is research-oriented and projects focused study of Sikhism in all its aspects. □

## **'SACRED SUKHMANI'**

Translation/Commentary by Harbans Singh Doabia

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***A Review by Kamalpreet Kaur Makol\****

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That the present edition of the 'Sacred Sukhmani' is the nineteenth edition in print since the first publication in 1979, speaks volumes for the efforts of the translator, Harbans Singh Doabia who is jurist and former advocate General, Punjab. It is indeed an emphatic assertion of the fact that his comprehension, interpretation & thereafter dissemination of the import of this holy and fascinating Gurbani has been well received over the decades by the essentially bi-lingual readers.

Part I of the book deals with the simple, literal translation of the 'Sukhmani' that bears a close similitude to S. Manmohan Singh's well-known translation of 'Sri Guru Granth Sahib' (published by the SGPC in 1964), although no reference has been made in this context by the writer (hence the semblance may be considered a coincidence). In the follow-up in Part II, a concerted and subjective effort, has been made by the translator to highlight as well as expound concepts targeted to actuate the entrant to an understanding of 'Gurmat' at a popular level. This is quite readable and can be given to our children for classroom reading, though I wish that some kind of continuity could have been maintained between the twenty-five fragment.

J.M. Synge has beautifully annotated, "A translation is no translation unless it will give you the music of a poem along with the words of it." In conformity with Synge's views, S. Khushwant Singh's translation of the '*Japjee*' maintains a verse-like lyrical quality, which exemplifies high standards of transliteration. However, the loving devotion of the writer makes it a 'must buy' for all evotees who are beginners in comprehending the philosophic and spiritual intent of '*Gurbani*' due to linguistic compulsions. □