

Sowing Seeds of Sikhism in the West

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I would like to share this recent personal story with your esteemed readers. By God's grace, I was born and raised in a Gursikh family of Patiala; my esteemed father S.Hari Singh was a colleague and friend of Sikh personalities like Principal Jodh Singh, Dr. Sahib Singh, and Dr. Bh. Vir Singh Ji. He was the lone member in Maharaja Patiala's Darbar, who would go there with flowing beard. So it was natural for me to acquire some of his Sikh practices, culture and beliefs.

After completing my engineering degree, I worked for some years as S.D. O Irrigation, Punjab, but soon migrated to USA, for the sake of better economic conditions, and to avoid participating in Indian corruption. I was happily living in USA, when the events of 1984 happened, which completely shook me emotionally along with so many other Sikhs, converted me into a staunch Amrit dhari Sikh.

But after a few years, I got a great shock, when following the examples of other Sikh youth, first my older son cut his hair, and then, after a few years, the younger one also did the same thing. There was nothing, much I could do, except almost coming to non-speaking terms with them. However, the things changed dramatically, when in 1997, while my wife had gone to India, to see her mother, the older son was working in Paris France, the younger one was in Washington D.C, and I was alone in Topeka, KS, that I had a heart attack. Before going into surgery, I informed my brother in-law in Kansas City about my heart attack, and left instructions with the nurse, that unless it increased my risk of fatal infection by 100 %, no part of my body should be shaved, and if my sons come to see me, tell them, that I would not want to see them without turbans.

Family Loyalty:

When I came out of the surgery, upon seeing all my family members eagerly awaiting me, my sons adorning turbans on their heads, and listening to their stories, how without waiting even for a second, and without bothering, whether they had any money in their accounts to pay for the air tickets, they had flown over the continents to see me, my love for them was re-kindled, and there and then I decided, that even if they don't become Kesha dhari Sikhs again, I would work hard and keep praying before the Guru, to at least marry them in Sikh families, so that at least there is some chance of my grand children remaining Sikhs.

Towards that end, I kept making all sorts of efforts, such as giving matrimonial ads in Sikhnet sites, news papers, contacting friends and relatives, and almost daily praying to the Guru, and asking for his guidance. But every time, the Guru seemed to be telling me that I didn't need to do any thing, he has his own plans, which would be revealed to me in due time.

Journey of Faith:

That time came last year, when in July, my wife and I went to visit our elder son in Paris, who on his way to South of France to show us some beautiful sites there, stopped at the Paris Airport, and deputed me at the arrival gate to pick a girl friend of his. I was very pleasantly surprised, when after a wait of more than one hour, this tall slim girl, wearing a black suit appeared at the gate, pointed towards me (to other

persons, who were also waiting for their passengers), and immediately started talking to me, as if she already knew me for a long time. In the mean time, my son and wife also came back, after taking care of some other business, and all four of us proceeded in the small but roomy fox wagon towards our trip to the South of France.

We kept sight-seeing for about four days. The more I talked and interacted with this young lady, the better I knew about her background, that even though living in Colombia, working as an air hostess, she has basically the same family values, faith in God, and a charitable heart for the poor and the needy, and except bearing the label of Catholic faith, has all the Sikh values, which are so dear to me. In fact I was so impressed by her endearing habits, that instead of my son approaching me for permission to marry her, I myself went to him, to suggest to him to delay no more, and go ahead and marry her. So next month, he went to Colombia, and gave her the ring. Now came the question of marriage, where to marry, and according to what rites, and how to make all the arrangements. Right at the outset, I told my son, that I didn't believe in having two marriages, one Catholic, and one Sikh, as I have seen in most interfaith marriages. I wanted only an authentic Sikh marriage, in which there shouldn't be any use of alcohol, on any occasion or ceremony connected with this event. My son tried to argue with me, to be accommodating, let there be both kinds of ceremonies, and some use of alcohol, if it was a part of their culture. But I told him, that in that case, I wouldn't be attending any of these ceremonies and functions.

Certified Wedding?

To my great surprise, after a few days, my son called and told me that he talked about these things with his fiancé, and she has conveyed that she would herself prefer a Sikh marriage, and neither she, nor her parents ever use or keep alcohol in their homes. So what more could I ask or wish for. But, now the problems, we still had to face were that in Colombia, the only marriage ceremony recognized there was a Catholic marriage. For Civil marriage, my son was required to furnish an "apostilled" (or authenticated) birth certificate, bearing his own, and father's Name, issued by the municipal committee, where he was born, verified by the Deputy Commissioner, stamped by Regional authentication office of the state, and further verified and authenticated by the Ministry of External Affairs India. They were told this thing, when less than one month was left for their marriage fixed for Dec. 28.

Any one can imagine, what kind of a nightmare this could be for persons like us, who had left India thirty years ago, had basically no friends or relatives, and in those days in 1967, when my son was born, only thing called a birth certificate was a copy of the form, showing the birth of a son, or daughter, and the child's father's name. Another big hurdle was that, perhaps Colombia being perceived as a drug exporting country, and American phobia since 9/11/2001, the girl's parents were refused visas to enter USA, even for the sake of the marriage of their daughter.

Anand Karaj in S. America:

So the only option left for us was to make all the arrangements for a Sikh marriage, including importing Indian groceries, cooking food ourselves, and finding Ragis who knew not only Punjabi, but also English, and Spanish, because all my son's friends were coming from Europe, and all the girl's friends and relatives could understand only Spanish. In our search, we came across one such person, who knew both English, and Spanish, but he demanded a round trip for his family, a seven days stay in a resort

town, plus \$ 2500, (approx. a total of \$ 7000), which we couldn't afford. Ultimately one of our own young men, who had left his Engineering job to dedicate himself to the service of the Panth, offered to go, along with his wife and seven months old son to accompany us, and do the ceremony. **In addition, a friend (of our son) and his wife, living in Miami, Florida, took upon the responsibility of transporting all the necessary groceries, utensils, for cooking Indian meals, and the necessary Rumalas, Chandoa, etc. and setting up the appropriate Palki, and stage for Shri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, and the Ragis.**

Upon reaching Cartagena on 26th evening, the resort town on a beach, and built in a classical style of a city within a fort, we found that Colombian regard for the sense of time and way of doing things, was worse than India. Even till one day before the marriage, no body knew, where the groceries, sent two weeks earlier were, where were the utensils, and no arrangements for the stage for setting up Guru Granth Sahib were yet made, except the plan to set up this stage by covering a Jacuzzi, and building of temporary stairs to climb the platform to the Jacuzzi, below which was a small decorative water pool. Luckily, a local Indian hotel owner, let us use his kitchen, where the ladies cooked some food for the next day. But as for the decoration of the courtyard, where the marriage ceremony was to be performed, it was late in the evening that some carpets were laid out, and a carpenter arrived to cover the Jacuzzi with wooden planks, but without even a saw. So my younger son had to run around in a strange country, whose language he hardly knew, looking for a shop, where he could buy the necessary carpentry tools.

However, in the mean time, at the other place, where most of the guests were staying, my brother was busy outfitting the guests, including the relatives from both sides with Indian Kurta Pajamas, and Maharaja Patiala style turbans, complete with decorative ribbons, and plumes. Seeing these gentlemen turn into sort of Maharajas, and kings, many other guests at the hotel, including teen age boys, became keen to have these turbans themselves, and many of them took the courage to come and make special requests for the turbans, to which we readily acceded. On the ladies side, my wife, and another lady remained busy all day distributing and tying multicoloured Saris.

Any how, instead of 4.00 P.M, when the marriage ceremony was to start, it was around 7.30 P.M that we received the message that the marriage hall was ready, so my son decorated with his Sehra and a ceremonial sword climbed a horse buggy and with great fanfare, we marched towards the marriage place. It was around 7.45 P. M that the ceremony started, with singing of two beautiful Shabads, by our young friend and his wife.

Looking back, it appears that this almost 4 hours delay turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Because instead of the guests sitting through the 1½ hour ceremony on a brick floor, in 80 degree temperature (being a resort town in South America), they were enjoying a cool evening breeze, while palm trees, grown inside that court yard, were softly rustling and adding their own beautiful sound to the heavenly Shabads being melodiously sung by the young priest and his wife, while I was sitting behind Guru Granth Sahib, and later read the

Lavan.

At the end of the marriage, all guests personally congratulated the couple, and the parents, and unequivocally remarked, that they had never experienced such a divine feeling, while attending any marriage, whether Sikh or non Sikh.

After the marriage ceremony, all lined up on the floor, where they were served with Langar, and the remaining food was distributed among the neighbours and poor people. This was followed by a buggy ride through the town; with great cheering done by the crowds sitting in the city squares and getting happily amazed seeing so many

people wearing turbans and Saris. Next day, we had a Colombian reception on a ship, followed by a boat trip to a place called "Magic Island", and finally New Year celebrations on the night of Dec. 31. But at no occasion, any alcohol was served, even though some young people protested against such restrictions.

More Pleasant Surprises:

On Jan 1, 2008, my wife, son and I happily returned to Miami to spend a couple of days with his friend and parents. But it appears that Waheguru had still some more happiness planned for me. On the morning of Jan 2, our host received a word from the local Gurdwara, that they urgently needed someone, who could conduct a marriage ceremony, because their own Granthi was not feeling well, and also the couple had expressed the desire, that somebody should be able **to explain the ceremony and the meaning of Lavan** in English. So our host proposed my name for this purpose. **After the conclusion of the ceremony, I approached the newly wed bride to know more about her. She explained that she was from a Sindhi back ground, raised in Surinam, a small country on the North of south American continent and she had pledged to her dying grand mother, that whenever she would marry, she would do it as per the Sikh rites, around Guru Granth Sahib.** But she never knew how she was going to fulfill her pledge. When she found her match, who was from S. Africa, she didn't know, how she could keep her promise to her dying grandmother. But, it appears that God had His own plans to honour me by not only letting me preside over the marriage of my own son, who was born in Asia, raised in North America, working in Europe, to be married to a girl from the continent of S. America, but also to preside over the marriage of this young girl from S. America - to a boy from S. Africa!

God's Mysterious Ways:

This entire event gives me the feeling that even though Waheguru didn't fulfill my wishes for my son to be married to a girl from a Sikh family, yet through me, has sown the seeds of Sikhism in this strange land, and strange country, with an impressive display of Sikh turbans, dresses, and exposure to the divine music from Gurbani, even as many people asking for a copy of Guru Granth Sahib in English and Spanish.

