

Leadership among Sikhs: The GenNext

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NB: Emphasis - bold type - is ours.

RECENTLY, A BRIGHT YOUNG SIKH lawyer wondered aloud where the next generation of Sikh leaders will come from. That brought to mind a pithy little adage that “a people get the leaders they deserve.”

We swell with enormous pride when we think of Banda Bahadur, Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, and ‘Nawab’ Kapur Singh, Maharaja Ranjit Singh and Hari Singh Nalwa. The luster is gone, though not entirely, when we think of Master Tara Singh, Baldev Singh, Gurcharan Singh Tohra and their contemporaries. And there is barely a glimmer of light, if not pitch darkness, when we encounter the likes of Giani Zail Singh, Parkash Singh Badal and Navjot Singh Sidhu, et al. Before readers start to adding to the few listed here let me admit that the list in every category is deliberately incomplete. There are many, many more that deserve inclusion, but my purpose is not to create a comprehensive listing of all those who have led us – often wisely but sometimes not. I am sure that about in the few that I have listed, opinions will differ.

We live in a different world now. Sikhs are hardly confined to Punjab; they are found all over the globe. All those that I mentioned were or remain Punjab-based. Our realities now are different. We have been defining our Sikh presence in North America for over a century. But our umbilical cord to Punjab and Punjabi culture remains tight. The past three or four decades were occupied in building Sikh institutions – mostly gurdwaras. So, the leadership of our community – new immigrants — remained tied to the ethos, values and models of Punjab. Now we have a new generation born, or largely raised, outside Punjab and India.

It is only in the past two decades or so that we seem to be developing a sense of identity and ownership in our new homeland away from Punjab. If the previous generations created institutions to capture the sights, sounds and smells of home, the home in their heads was Punjab. To a new generation of Sikhs the home is here; the sights, sounds and smells are different.

So, how and where are our future leaders going to emerge? Seemingly, not from gurdwaras. Did you ever wonder why?

Look at the larger society and culture around us. America is largely a country of laws. So what kind of people would be drawn to the political institutions here? Largely lawyers, I would venture. In a democracy, lawyers have a better understanding of how society functions. Many of the elected representatives, therefore, come from the law. Most of them are reasonably educated; some are truly broadly trained thoughtful minds. Not that all are always wise, tolerant or well-informed. Some even cater to the lowest level of constituency they can find. But most of them can understand the ramifications of the laws they make and interpret every day.

If that is the reality of this country, it follows then that we, too, will change in how we think. Our future Sikh leaders, too, will reflect a mindset that is not tied to Punjab – the land, its culture, style or its politics. And I think we are well on our way!

Three major organizations, founded by young Sikhs, who are products not of Punjab but of the diaspora, exist at this time: SALDEF (nee SMART), **Sikh Coalition** and **United Sikhs**. They did not take origin in or emerge from our gurdwaras. Yet, they are rooted in the community, and are staffed and led by Sikh lawyers who are products of this society. Their presence speaks to our growing and changing needs in our new homeland.

Of course these organizations or their leaders cannot be divorced from their continuing need to remain connected to Sikhi and reflect Sikh values. Only then will they be able to fulfill their mandate of serving and leading the Sikh community here.

It is self-evident but it needs to be said that a vibrant people deserve and need more than excellent lawyers.

So we have spawned the Sikh Research Institute. It has taken the lead to develop tools for the larger educational needs of the community in **Sikhi – its history, culture and religion**. The Institute is focused on developing the educational process, via rigorously developed curricular programs, Web based symposia and related tools.

Through many other organizations that I leave unnamed, over the years, a host of Summer Camps have emerged to introduce both the young and old to **the basics of our faith**. More books are published in the diaspora for teaching children and adults alike than perhaps in any other country of the world, including India. Movies are being made to mine our history and to build bridges of understanding with our non-Sikh neighbors. **There now exist several Sikh film festivals across North America to highlight our activities in this most challenging and effective media.**

I was absolutely amazed to encounter organizations founded by young Sikhs in the diaspora to aid victims of natural disasters like the Tsunami in distant parts of the world, as also those who needed assistance post 9/11 or after Katrina. Websites galore exist to promote a university without walls for Sikhs worldwide. In North America, Sikhs have established some academic programs for the study of Sikhism.

Expansive definitions of our needs and our wants continue to be debated and discussed so that we can find for ourselves an equal place at the table of America and the American Way as Sikhs. That is the promise of the American mosaic that we are navigating to define our presence.

Although Sikhs have been in North America for over a century and that's almost half the historical time-span of the United States, the first step of our march towards equality was won only in 1946 when we earned the right to citizenship. Development of a sense of self and awareness of a place in society takes time and, even more importantly, a critical mass that we did not achieve until the late 1970's after some of the more onerous immigration laws and quotas were rescinded. A more useful measure of our progress then is the past 40 years or so. Our many activities that I have alluded to as well as our few, hesitant forays into the political process of this society speak well of our direction and progress. Many battles have been won; just as many remain.

Sikhs worldwide have a notable presence in the public space of many nations. In the modern global village in which we live, Sikh presence as technocrats, scientists, entrepreneurs, movers and shakers of the business world, and in academia is beyond

question. Outside India, our presence in the national political arena is much better defined in the U.K., Canada, Singapore, Malaysia and East African nations than it is in the United States. In India we appear to be ascendant at this time; in the USA we are still at the beginning of the trek.

Our primary needs are two: **First**, an equal place at the table as citizens of a multiethnic, multicultural, multireligious world, including America. **Secondly**, continuing education in Sikhi so that we remain tethered to the richness of our faith. While our myriad activities continue to define and explore these; they also serve as the training ground from which the leaders of a new tomorrow will emerge. They will carry the community forward into a new century and beyond.

It would be good to understand that the pursuit of our goals and objectives will require different strategic ends and operative tactics depending on the culture and language in which we live. I hope and pray that semi-autonomous bodies that represent Sikhs in the wider world, including India, will emerge and will learn to work with one another in collaborative and mutual tolerance. Expect not painless linear progress without snags. What is assured is the march forward. I have never been more optimistic about our place in the world.

I look to our existing institutions to bring forth the leaders to serve our needs. If our past was glorious, and our leaders heroic, those who lead us to a brighter tomorrow will be no less.

