

Panthic Unity: Let Good Sense Prevail®

PROF. JAGMOHAN SINGH*

** The writer is the General Secretary of Shiromani Akali Dal (Amritsar). 351/100, Block J, Bhai Randhir Singh Nagar, Ludhiana.141012. Punjab. Email: jagmohan@hotmail.com.*

® This article is published, in good faith, to stimulate a constructive wholesome debate on the working of Sikhs' principal institutional framework, transcending petty party politics.

I WRITE THIS WITH A VERY HEAVY heart, with pain and anguish. I write to reach out to all dedicated Panthic individuals, organizations and the people of Panjab. I am witness to tears in the eyes of bewildered men and women, while watching the horrendous scenes of the fisticuffs at Darbar Sahib on television. The agony and distress of the pious and devout cannot be expressed in words.

Darbar Sahib is not a place for protest. The Darbar Sahib, also known as the Golden Temple, is a temple of song, peace and love; it is the sovereign seat of the Almighty and it is the perch for prayer and appeal for the needy, the weak and the oppressed. It is the spiritual centre for all seekers of Truth and truthful living, irrespective of religion, region, caste, creed, colour, age or gender.

Some individuals and organisations have a penchant for taking the short cut route to use the holy premises of Darbar Sahib for achieving their avowed goals and mission. This holier-than-thou approach is unfair, sanctimonious, sacrilegious and unacceptable.

22 February 2003 will go down in Sikh history as a sad day for the Sikh nation. In the first incident of its kind, the sacred premises of Darbar Sahib became a battleground for fratricidal internecine attacks by Sikhs against Sikhs. The tribal-fight images have acutely soured the earnest and determined attempts, particularly of a cross-section of the international Sikh Diaspora, to depict the Sikhs globally in a better light. The video images broadcast across various satellite channels and photographs published in newspapers the following day made us hang our heads in shame. No cause, howsoever genuine and urgent, warranted the kind of behaviour and response of the individuals and organisations involved.

The Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, the Khalsa Panchayat and the Sikh Students Federation (Mehta-Chawla) are equally responsible for defiling the holy status of Sri Darbar Sahib by indulging in a violent brawl within the Golden Temple premises.

The Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee is directly responsible for dilly-dallying, neglect and procrastination. It has been brushing aside all contentious issues under the carpet. The SGPC leadership has been ignoring the opinion of the Sikhs in Panjab and the rightful concerns of the Sikh Diaspora. Confronted with a precarious situation, they did not show the magnanimity and wisdom to let the event pass off peacefully.

The SGPC leadership, under the control of a section of the Akali leadership has been totally disregarding the directives and edicts of Sri Akal Takht Sahib. The SGPC, with its hegemony firmly established over Sikh religious and temporal affairs has played havoc with the authority of the Takhts —the whimsical installation and removal of Jathedars of Takhts has made us a laughing stock. The modus operandi for the installation and removal of Jathedars being followed by the SGPC today is

irreligious and shameful. With no sense of history, they are making a mockery of our glorious tradition and heritage.

For those who may have forgotten, the place where the scuffle took place has been used time and again by the Indian police, para-military and army to enter Darbar Sahib. The Indian State claims that this road is a municipal corporation road and that the SGPC or the Darbar Sahib staff has no jurisdiction over it. The Khalsa Panchayat, the SGPC and the Sikh Students Federation have lent justification to the government's thinking. The SGPC, which often complains of police intervention, wanted the police to intervene!

Every Sikh takes pride in saying that the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee is the Sikh Parliament. The Akali leadership also says so but the reality is that the SGPC general house assembles only twice a year: once to elect its president and the other time to pass its annual budget. No meeting of the general house is for more than 5-6 hours and amidst chants of "Bole So Nihal, Sat Sri Akal", resolutions are passed with a semblance of carefully chosen speakers. Not a single debate! no discussions, no questions! no answers!

Every executive meeting of the SGPC sees well prepared premeditated resolutions read and passed. Every decision —big or small, social, cultural, administrative, financial, religious or political, whatever its ramifications, is made by the President and the Executive of the SGPC conforming to their political leaning. The Sikh Gurdwara Act, 1920 gives few financial powers to the President of the SGPC, but the Executive Committee passes resolutions vesting wide powers to its President. It is distressing and outrageous that this has been going on for the last 78 years and the Sikh nation has been a mute spectator to this charade year after year.

Ten years ago when I started taking meaningful interest in the affairs of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, I started with reading the provisions of the Sikh Gurdwaras Act, 1920 and five other legislations governing Gurdwaras across India. In all these years, I have found no more than five people all over the world, who are well versed with the history of the Acts, their provisions and lacunae in these legislations. There is no official translation of the Acts in the Panjabi language, either for the members or for the general public. Some honourable exceptions apart, most of the commentaries in the media on intended Amendments to the Sikh Gurdwaras Act, 1920 or the proposed All India Sikh Gurdwaras Bill have been half-baked and irresponsible. We have still to identify the roots of the malaise that affects our religious institutions. It will not be wrong to say, "We get what we deserve".

The present house of the SGPC has no mandate. It is a lame-duck house. Elections are overdue. Under one pretext or the other, the SGPC leadership, the Shiromani Akali Dal (Badal), the Congress-I government of Panjab and the right-wing Bharatiya Janta Party-led alliance government in Delhi are responsible for delaying the elections for more than two years. They do not want to upset the applecart. *Status quo ante* suits them.

The SGPC bureaucracy has learnt all the wrong lessons from the Indian bureaucracy. The behaviour of the staff at Darbar Sahib and at various other Gurdwaras and institutions is disgusting. In the 78 years of its history, the people at the helm of affairs have not made any attempts to change the bureaucracy. They

have failed to inculcate a Sikh religious ethos, good mannerisms or to adopt professional management techniques.

The Sikh Students Federation (Mehta-Chawla), whose leadership does not have a single student, is guilty of disorder, rowdy conduct and creating mayhem. They have been doing this at the behest of their political masters. For the last many years, this group of a few individuals has been instrumental in belittling Sikh tradition by virtually poking fun about Sikh sentiments.

In 1994, when attempts were being made for Panthic unity at Sri Akal Takht Sahib by the then Acting Jathedar of Sri Akal Takht Sahib, Prof. Manjit Singh, unrestrained and irreverent leaders and supporters of the Akali Dal (Badal) had even then resorted to similar acts of rowdiness. They abused the then Jathedar of Sri Akal Takht Sahib and attempted to enter his premises to overawe him.

The Khalsa Panchayat is squarely culpable of using the holy precincts of Darbar Sahib for protest purposes. The Khalsa Panchayat, which came into being just a year ago, with the ostensible purpose of creating panchayats with the Khalsa ideal all over the Panjab, has lost track of its goal within a very short time.

Now, their only one-point agenda is: "the present Jathedar of Sri Akal Takht Sahib, Giani Joginder Singh Ji must go." They have ignored the sane advice of individuals and organisations dedicated to uphold the glory of the Khalsa Panth. If they are happy that because of their "massive protest", the Jathedar of Takht Sri Keshgarh Sahib has been dismissed, without commenting on the worth of the decision, I would like to say that the Sikhs have paid a very heavy price for such a decision. Even if they "succeed" in "dislodging" the Jathedar of Sri Akal Takht Sahib, they have no comprehension of the damage that they have done.

A number of Panthic organisations had appealed to the SGPC to resolve the key pending issues without delay. The Khalsa Panchayat was especially asked to desist from agitation within the premises of Darbar Sahib. Every plea fell on deaf ears. My fears are that the Khalsa Panchayat and those supporting them in Panjab and elsewhere will not stop their hate campaign. I will not speculate on who is prompting them, but their methodology to achieve their "Panthic issues" heretofore has been obnoxious and frustrating for the Sikh masses. Mildly put, all the three bodies owe an unconditional apology to the Khalsa Panth. Even the act of forgiveness will not be enough to undo the harm done.

The impugned institutions have failed us, but on a larger canvass, we have failed ourselves. My submission before the Khalsa Panth and the people of Panjab will not be complete without a suggestion for solutions. I pray that for a change, let us be part of the solution.

Despite all its misgivings and weaknesses, the SGPC as the only organised legal body of the Sikhs needs to be strengthened. All well-meaning Sikhs need to pool their wit and wisdom to make it an effective, truly Panthic organisation and democratically replace the modern-day *Mahants* overseeing the working of this organisation.

One of the immediate tasks that need to be done is to impress upon the Sikh leaders of all hues and shades to make the SGPC an effective deliberating body. A parliament for the Sikhs should be built, with all modern facilities and equipment in Amritsar and the SGPC house should meet at least once every quarter and discuss

all issues which confront the members of the SGPC from their respective constituencies and deliberate upon other important Panthic issues.

The Sikh Diaspora should also be given an opportunity to express their views. Representatives from all over the globe can be chosen on the basis of the Sikh population in respective countries or regions. Such a parliament can be the forerunner of a modern-day Representative Assembly of the Sikh nation. I believe that this one step will help us to a large extent in restoring the honour and standing of our Takhts and their Jathedars. It will also restrain us from rushing to the Akal Takht for petty issues and concerns. Those issues, which the august SGPC house or the Representative Assembly fails to resolve, should be passed on to the Dharam Parchar Committee. Further, if necessary, to a sub-committee of experts to be especially constituted for this purpose, under the aegis of Sri Akal Takht Sahib and, finally, to the Jathedar of Sri Akal Takht Sahib and his companion Jathedars for remedy and relief.

Let us not kill the organisation. Let us strengthen it. Our forefathers have made supreme sacrifices for the formation and glory of the SGPC. Let us democratically work to bring about radical changes in its working and let us bring forward men and women of character who will stand upright and face the challenges that the polity confronts us.

Proper procedure and mechanism should be evolved for petitioning the Sri Akal Takht Sahib. The SGPC control of the authority of Sri Akal Takht Sahib and other Takhts should be debunked. Religious and political thinkers and leaders should design a system of checks and balances for the respect and sovereignty of the Jathedars and the august office they hold. The modalities for issuance of Hukamnamas should be evolved. Qualifications and disqualifications, if any, for the highest pedestal of the Sikh nation should be defined. Rules and procedures for the selection of the Jathedars and their impeachment, if necessary, should be framed. There should be no interference of the SGPC in the working of the Jathedars.

The relationship, between the Jathedars, the SGPC and the Sikh masses globally should be codified. This is not the initiation of a new administrative iron curtain between the Jathedar and the masses, nor the start of a new theocratic set-up. I am only suggesting the setting up of simple systems to streamline the functioning of our temporal authority in consonance with the requirement of our times. I would rather be an advocate of Sikh liberal theology than a theocratic diehard.

Sikh history is replete with examples that, even under very heavy odds, whenever faced with oppression, dichotomy of thought and predicament of any kind, the Sikhs assembled at Darbar Sahib. There, with fear of God and with all the humility at their command, they deliberated and settled disputes and outlined the next course of action for the beleaguered young Sikh nation.

May Waheguru shower good sense to all concerned to understand that '*milbe ki mehma baran na sako*' and '*gurmukh baitho safa bichaye*' are the only means to redress all issues concerning procedure, rules, regulations and various other activities concerning Sri Darbar Sahib, Sri Akal Takht Sahib and other Takhts.

