

Narinder Singh Soch: Many-splendoured Scholar An Anniversary Tribute

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It was my privilege and honor to visit Sardar Narinder Singh Soch during his last days of life. I was passing through Amritsar on my way to Janam Asthan Sri Nanakana Sahib in the month of February 2006. Whenever I am in Amritsar I make it a point to spend some time with the Soch family in order to brush up on various projects of mutual interest. This time I went there to plan our border crossing at Wagah. Both brothers, Dr. Harbhajan Singh Soch, Former Vice Chancellor of the Guru Nanak Dev University, and famous Punjabi journalist, Sardar Parminder Singh Soch were to accompany me to Pakistan. They were to participate in the First international Conference on Guru Nanak Heritage of interfaith Harmony in Lahore and pilgrimage to our holy places in Pakistan.

Parminder told me that his father, Sardar Narinder Singh Soch was looking forward to meet me. Every time I happened to be in Amritsar, I used to take the opportunity to spend some time with him. Parminder took me to his father's room in their home on Hukam Singh Road. On hearing me come, Soch Sahib got up in his bed to greet me. I could see tears in his eyes which filled me with respect and deep emotion as often was the case when I saw him. Sardar Narinder Singh Soch was in his library, reciting hymns from Sri Guru Granth Sahib. We talked about Gurbani again. I told him the purpose of my visit to Amritsar. He thanked me from his heart that I came to see him. Also, he thanked me for my efforts to bring Sehaj-dhari Sikhs closer to the Panth. In the last few years, whenever I visited him, he urged me to try my best to promote close relationships between Sehaj-dhari Sikhs and other segments of the Panth. He knew that there were large number of Sehaj-dhari Sikhs in Pakistan and I may have a role to keep them attached to Sikhi. I assured him that I was doing my best. He was unhappy over what was going on with Sehaj-dhari Sikhs in India; they were being mishandled by Sikh politicians, with all kinds of character assassinations, to create a wedge between the two important segments of the Panth. As a result Sehaj-dhari Sikhs were being pushed into Hindu folds at every opportunity. Like many Sikh leaders of pre-partition days, Soch was very disturbed over this development.

We were sitting in his library where his bed was surrounded with books. When talking to him I was also sneaking my sights to look over his collections. Suddenly I spotted the biography of Ved Mohan Singh. I have been looking for this book for quite some time and was unable to locate a copy. I told him so. He very kindly asked me to take it as he would not have time to read it again. Not knowing that it would be our last meeting we parted with usual greeting anticipating to meet again.

Guru Nanak Quin- Centennial

I must not forget the days when Soch Sahib was one of the secretaries of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC). In the late sixties when the committee undertook to celebrate the Fifth centennial of Guru Nanak birthday, Soch Sahib was recruited to take charge of the planning and execution on behalf of the SGPC. This was a new challenge for any one person or organization as there was no precedent of any one person or any Sikh organization ever celebrating a Sikh centennial before. Only Singh Sabha is known to celebrate the Second Centennial of Vaisakhi on suggestion from McAuliffe. That too consisted of only a meeting held in Rawalpindi gurdwara to include some speeches and a special prayer.

Principal Satbir Singh had told me of crucial leg work that Soch Sahib had done that led to a

successful conclusion of the Guru Nanak Centennial celebration.

Among other things, SGPC asked Soch Sahib to commission an authentic and standardized painting of Guru Nanak towards the Centennial Celebration.

The Guru Nanak Portraiture:

Narinder Singh Soch was asked to seek suggestions from Sikh holymen and scholars on formulating a standardized image of Guru Nanak, and search for a qualified artist to paint the portrait.

SGPC was determined to adopt and release a standardized painting of Guru Nanak on his 500th birthday. They felt that since the Vatican had a standard painting of Jesus and Hindus had a standard painting of Rama and Krishna, Sikhs should not stay behind.

The Sikh leaders at that time failed to take into account that our Gurus did not permit worshipping of any human form of the gurus. They also failed to take into account the strength of Sikh beliefs that the standardized pictures of their prophet was not crucial to their survival in history. There was a precedent of the followers of Islam not permitting painting of Prophet Mohammad and that did not prevent them from becoming the world's fastest growing religion.

Narinder Singh Soch contacted Professor Sahib Singh who was not only a member of the SGPC religious advisory committee but also was the Principal of Sikh Missionary College at the time. He had published a biography of Guru Nanak based upon his extensive research on the events of Guru Nanak's life that matched or those that did not contradict the Gurmat teaching enshrined in the body of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

Professor Sahib Singh was asked to come up with suggestions on creating a painting that instantaneously elicited a response about the life of Guru Nanak by its look. Professor Sahib Singh gave his mind to Soch Sahib right away.

He laughed at Narinder Singh Soch and said, "SGPC started painting pictures with color and brush instead of projecting unity in the philosophy and doctrines based on *gurbani*." He was training teachers who oppose picture and statue worship because *gurbani* condemned those practices. However, SGPC would be handing over paintings of their own design for distribution among the newly converted Sikhs. These preachers will first hang a painting in the Gurdwara and then condemn the same as well as the picture worship. Will the Sikh nation accept this historic mistake of SGPC on the eve of the Fifth centennial celebration of Guru Nanak's coming to this earth?

The positive message that Narinder Singh did bring to SGPC was to gather all of the writings of Guru Nanak and translate them in appropriate idiom in several languages. It should also publish Sikh history written in languages suitable for different age groups. To translate Guru Nanak's hymns in many languages would be the most important contribution on this occasion, the message concluded.

Sahib Singh further said, "Let me tell you, the SGPC is not just getting one portrait painted, rather it is opening doors to numerous portraits that would follow. Please get another decision accepted that, on the top of the name of the Guru Nanak, there should be a verse written, *gur moort gur shabad hai*, meaning that Guru's teachings are Guru's best portrait".

Narinder Singh Soch was the bearer of this important and historic message from a great Sikh scholar of Sahib Singh's repute. Soch Sahib collected Guru Nanak's hymns and their translation and got them published for the occasion.

I may mention that Sardar Parkash Singh of the outlawed ALL INDIA SIKH STUDENTS FEDERATION had earlier expressed similar ideas and opposed making of any human representation of the Sikh gurus.

Punjabi Literature:

A Shiromani Sahitkar Awardee and father figure of Punjabi Sikh literature, Narinder Singh Soch breathed his last on May 16, 2006. A year short of being a centenarian, he spent most of his life writing numerous biographies of Sikh personalities and about Sikh history. Thus, his writings were a century worth of witness to Sikh history.

Soch Sahib published his first book when he was 19. After receiving his degree in Punjabi Gyani, he began his literary work immediately. He was so renowned for his knowledge of Punjabi literature that famous writers like novelist Nanak Singh accepted him as his teacher.

In as many years he published 65 or more books. The genres include poetry, novels, short stories, biographies and Sikh research monographs. The biographies he wrote included those of Baba Budha, Bhagat Puran Singh of Pinglewara, Baba Kharag Singh, and Baba Sri Chand ji Udasee.

Narinder Singh Soch pioneered and edited many Sikh journals during the days when such enterprises required unusual hard work and sacrifices. They included Daily *Varatman*, Daily *Qaumi Darad*, *Gurmat Parkash*, *Gur-sandesh*, and *Sikh Duniya*. His articles were sought after and published as series in *Sant Sipahi*, *Gurdwara Gazette*, and *Khalsa Samachar*.

End of an Era:

Narinder Singh Soch was in fact born Harnam Singh in February 1908 to an Indian nationalist leader Sardar Sobha Singh Sandhu of Amritsar District. The budding Sikh youth was given the new name, Narinder Singh, after his initiation ceremony of *khande-di-Pahul* to solemnize his life long commitment of service to Sikh Panth. He chose 'Soch' as his pen name early in his career and it later became the family name.

Soch received tutelage of Sri Guru Granth Sahib from the famous Guru Granth scholar, Sant Giani Amir Singh of Amritsar. The house of this saint was known for its scholarship in translating Sri Guru Granth Sahib according to earlier Sikh traditions. Many Sikh specialists of Guru Granth exegesis were trained here. Soch Sahib was similarly inspired to continue his love for the Guru Granth teachings his entire life.

Even his advanced age and ill health did not prevent Soch Sahib from coming to all of our recent conferences and symposia to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the first compilation of Sri Guru Granth Sahib. It was so inspiring to see him in the audience with a note book even at such a frail age. His great love and regard attracted me to always visit him in Amritsar. Our conversations always related to the teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib. With his shaking hands he would present his most recent writings at these meetings.

With his death an era has ended. He left behind two sons, Dr. Harbhajan Singh Soch, former Vice Chancellor of Guru Nanak Dev University, Parminder Singh Soch, a Sikh newspaper journalist, a daughter, Dr. Tejinder Paul Singh and fourteen grandchildren and great grandchildren.

