

## **Vision & Verities revealed by Guru Nanak: A Plea for return to Faith**

Guru Nanak lives in his inspiring writings, replete with the love of God and concern for humanity. He agonises for those who are suffering and invokes blessings upon the poor and lowly: *jithey neech samaliyan, tithey nadar teri bakhshish* - where the lowly are cared for, there dwells God's grace [SGGS: 15], for humility and moral discipline are the best guarantee for survival of a humanist society. Guru Nanak warns aggressors and tyrants: *nau jina sultan khan honde dithe khey*: i.e. those who were once proud monarchs, I have witnessed reduced to dust [SGGS: 16]. For the extravagantly rich, the great Teacher's warning is indeed grim: *Aisa jag dekhiya juari sabh sukh mangey Naam bisari* [SGGS: 222]. For the sincere scholar the Guru has a special soft corner provided he promotes and searches for truthful values: *Dhan lekharai Nanaka jini Naam likhaya sach*: Blessed is he who writes True God's Name.

Yet often it is the scholar who, in ego, misguides and misinterprets. While the world in general acknowledges Guru Nanak as the founder of the Sikh religion, some Indian scholars have failed to convey the truth about the Sikh belief system, and have not cared to comprehend the kernel of the Sikh thought as enshrined in Guru Nanak's *Bani*. One such commentator is the erudite Rukun Advani. In a syndicated column last year, he observed: "Sikhism as we know it now, came into being with the rise of a group called the Khalsa Sikhs, which gradually exercised sway in the region, and, by the end of the 19th century, was the undisputed Brahminic elite in Punjab.... But until these became authoritarian there was room for great variety. Through the 19th century Sikhs could belong more freely to sects such as Udasi, Nirmala, Nanakpanthi, Sahajdhari, Kuka Nirankari and Sarvaria. ... *Many of these had neither much time for the respect given by the Khalsa to unshorn hair nor for its zeal in maintaining the other external symbols of being sartorially Sikh.*"

In this strange exposition, Rukun Advani, evidently, relied on the thesis of another scholar, Harjit Singh Oberoi known for glib aberrations. Those who argue that the Sikh *Maryada* was "not Divinely ordained but socially invented" need to re-read the holy Scripture and ponder why *Kesh*, the natural hair has acquired sanctity. In this age of tinsel and fast fashions, dexterously aimed at the callow younger generation, trivializing the Sikh moral code has become a popular past-time. Few seem to care that *Kesh* as an article of faith is sanctified not only by the historical *persona* of Guru Nanak and his successors, but also by the Guru's unambiguous declaration: *Na sat(i) moond mudai kesi* [SGGS: 952] that the shearing of hair is not the way to truth. Indeed when scholars like Rukun Advani pontificate on Sikhism's moral and cultural underpinnings, they betray their ill-will towards the *Keshadhari* Sikhs, who are the norm - not the exception.

As a matter of fact, Advani's comment had come shortly after Sept. 11, 2001 and the hate killing of the pious Balbir Singh Sodhi in USA - clearly the outcome of ordinary American's colossal ignorance of other faiths. In all cultures - Hindu, Jew, Islam or Christian - natural hair (and turban) symbolize wisdom and command respect and reverence [Bible: Lev. 19:32 and Pro. 16:31] Rabindranath Tagore's evocative poetry celebrates the spirit of Banda Bahadur and the martyrdom of Bhai Taru Singh, who was scalped alive for refusing to part with God's gift of *Kesh*.

But, then, some scholars who love to hate Sikhs persist in all manner of sophistry, including the bracketing of Sikhs (and Buddhists and Jains) with Hindus. This self serving argument has since been brazenly built into the Constitutional framework by means of a seemingly innocuous clause that lumps distinct Indian communities with the mass of Hindus. In consequence, the income tax paying Sikhs, in many cases, must compulsorily declare themselves a "Hindu undivided family" (HUF) in annual tax returns.

Nothing can be more unjust and insulting, for Guru Nanak, the gentle prophet, campaigned for human rights and social justice, even as he established a casteless fraternity where none should go hungry and where everyone could earn an honest livelihood. He championed the *dalits*' cause and agonised for them: '*Garibi gada hamari*' - Humility is my best weapon of defence.

The transformation - social, moral and spiritual - that Guru Nanak heralded eventually led to freedom and the end of tyranny and exploitation. Indeed Guru Nanak's power rests upon a revolution in ideas under the divine ordinance. His denunciation of social evils, gender exploitation and drug addiction has a perennial relevance. He emphatically challenged the priestly class against monopolizing religion and manipulating the masses through their intricate web of ritualism. In Sikhism such ritualist routine is sinful and a barrier to the Divine light. *Guru-Shabad Vichar* is the only key to enlightenment, and the observance of the moral code the best way to achieve happiness.

In so far as the sects like Sahajdhari, Namdhari and Nirankari, share a common belief in Guru Granth Sahib's teachings, their basic dynamics and inspiration should - sooner or later - lead them to join the mainstream in the manner of harmonious tributaries. It is a challenge for the leadership to move in the direction of goodwill and unity - so dear to Guru Nanak.

