

Nationality of the Sikhs Erosion and Expansion

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IN THE HISTORY OF A NATION THE time span of two decades is not a long period. However, in the case of the Sikhs, the past two decades, since the Holocaust of 1984, has been too long a period of neglect and decadence. Because it has been a period which has not only been devoid of any gainful rehabilitative effort by the community but, regrettably, for having generated internal decay.

"Operation Blue Star" in June 1984 and other misadventures, followed by a virtual genocide of the Sikhs in November 1984 and the killings in Punjab till 1992 are a tragic saga of brutalities against the elevated social stratum we strived for and deserved as a minority community. All possible official agencies were sourced for engineering a motivated propaganda and instigations for persecution and alienation of the Sikhs. Ignoring the social discontent, the bogey of (fictitious) secessionist movement was raised to cast the whole community as unpatriotic, and then as terrorists. There has been no formal expression of regret by the Central Government for the Army's assault on the Golden Temple, Amritsar, and other Gurdwaras. The judicial cases relating to genocidal decimation of the Sikhs (mainly the youth), and widows of November 1984 riots, remain unfinalised and the trial of those who were brazenly guilty of organizing the killings has been miscarried, NOT without the official connivance.

The Sikh people have lived as "A People of Substance". 1984 events were a watershed for diminution of the Sikh people as a "Non entity". First, the soul and psyche and then the pride, dignity and loyalty (to the country) of the Sikhs became the targets. Retrospectively, the analysis of 1984 events shows that previously the Central Government had interest in manipulating the virile community for their qualities of martial spirit and agricultural skills and then the interest of the wily Central Authority was better served by humiliating the haloed minority community to win favor of majority's vote bank.

As a historical parallel, the holocaust, with time zero of 1984 is - historically -quite comparable to the persecution of the Sikhs by the Mughal and Afghan forces during the early and mid-eighteenth century. The phase was the immediate post-Guru period and the doctrinally embedded super-human response to those atrocities by the invincible Sikhs, at that juncture, is what truly composed the idealization and the sanctification of the collective 'will' as the Nationality of the Sikhs. The halo of such an exalted Nationality which had been the proud heritage and legacy of the Sikhs stands eroded by the virtual absence of resilience and uncontested response to the carnage and social turbulence of the past two decades.

It needs to be highlighted that the concept of Nationality is different from the concept defining Nationalism. Nationalism is a manifestation of political principle and is conjugated with, as well parasitic on, the State. Whereas, the sense of Nationality, which define the categorical self characterization, may be refracted into two components: one, that grows from religion; tradition; and history and the other that

constitutes culture; aspirations; system of ideas; accepted signs, associations, and institutions; and ways of behaving and communicating. It is the quality and intensity of these convictions and loyalties that is the genesis of the voluntaristic solidarity of a group of people claiming their shared membership of a Nationality.

The Sikh Nationality has been bestowed by Guru Nanak when he organized the Sangat giving them an ideology for positive, optimistic, and ethical way of life and for establishing an egalitarian society thus awakening the consciousness of the divinely endowed most elevated creature of God in the Universe. Such a philosophy of life and empirical terms continued to be cultivated by the successive Gurus, and it evolved into a full rigor with the tenets of proactive social justice injunctions as an ordained mission of the Khalsa. The force of such a Nationality engenders the Nation, sustains it and is a source of pervasive strengths. The Sikh Nationality confers unique identity (distinct and noble); dignity (heritage of invincibility); universal concerns of conscious psychic space and comfort; and politically untrammelled life changes. Allegiance to this Nationality is sacrosanct and any dilution of it or any isolation from it is antithetical.

It would be quite appropriate here to evaluate a few of the classical historic achievements which have enabled the Sikhs to nurture the highest tradition of their Nationality *vis a vis* the negativity of the past two decades. Soon after Bada Ghallughara in February 1762, Ahmad Shah Abdali had desecrated the Harmandir Sahib. However, despite the tremendous loss suffered by the *Misls* in the battle, they regrouped within eight months, came to fight at Amritsar, defeated the garrison of the Afghans and then subjected the captured Afghan soldiers to undo the damage, and cleanse the holy prescients. Banda Singh Bahadur, (in 1710's) imbued with the inspiration transmitted by Guru Gobind Singh, had subdued large portions of Punjab extending from Jamuna to Ravi within a decade. After raising a fortalice of Ram Rauni, thus announcing the intent of a State in 1748, the *Misls* had forged a base in Lahore within two decades. Even in recent time, the Gurdwara Reform Movement secured their objectives within less than a decade. Contextual to such achievements, the only acts that are comparable during the last two decades are those that correspond with the elimination of Masa Ranghar from the Harmandir Sahib by Sardar Sukha Singh.

Evading to confront the challenges - including pre-1984 ferment - the Sikh leadership has regrettably failed to mobilize the collective energies for reclaiming the Panthic élan, or even the restitution of social equity. Given their demographic advantage in Punjab, the Sikhs should not have remained politically innocuous. It appears that the creation of the Punjabi Suba saved the community from political castration, but, alas, not from political impotency. The two prime Panthic entities, Shiromni Gurdwara Prabhandhak Committee and Shiromni Akali Dal, are in dire straits and have accumulated much dross so as to render themselves morally illegitimate in the consciousness of the Sikhs. The blame squarely rests on the shoulders of 'veteran Akali leaders' who are guilt-laden and withered enough, for their incapacity to re-energize purposeful responses to the extant challenges. By copiously evading to confront the challenges (including those of pre-1984 period), the Akali leaders have collusively betrayed the community. Historical record, later, may compare the treasonable role with that of Tej Singh in the Sikh Wars with the British. The Sikh masses have time and again shown their spirited fervor. The zeal

and enthusiasm for the Tercentenary Celebrations of the Birth of The Khalsa and Quadricentennial Celebrations of the installation of Guru Granth Sahib as well as the Kar Seva at the Golden Temple in March 2004 are ample evidence of their latent devotion and commitment to the Sikh tradition and heritage.

During the past two decades, the Akalis have with the prevailing sentiment as a distinct advantage managed to gain power twice. The Akali government in 1985 was the product of Rajiv-Longowal Accord. This Accord, irrespective of what it contained in its promises, was with a 'guilty' authority which had displayed evil antecedents. This move sapped that emotive spirit of the Sikh masses which was intensely pervasive at that moment as a revulsion against the attack on their holy shrine. The Akali leadership, instead of converting the prevailing sentiment for a constructive political advantage, chose a path which entrapped them and simultaneously and simultaneously dissolved the Panthic response of the masses. Resolution of contentious issues through political solidarity, at this stage, could have extinguished the flames of future violence. On its premature dismissal in 1987, the Akali Government had entries only on the debit side of its balance sheet; one pertaining to "Operation Black Thunder" - a legitimizing index for "Operation Blue Star" - and the other of ignominiously undertaking the construction for completion of Satluj Yamuna Link Canal. The Akali dominated ministry of 1997 had assumed power when a raw peace prevailed in the state and the Sikhs rightly envisioned a Panthic revival. Quite the contrary happened. Blatant denigration of Panthic institutions and ingress of "Rashtriya Sikh Sangat" in the religious sphere, were the prominent entries in its record sheet (apart from rampant corruption and nepotism - with rare exception) and all this without any tangible gains during its full term of five years.

There are a few redeeming features beyond the desolation described above. The most significant one may be the possible contribution by the Diaspora. Much of the exodus of the Sikhs from Punjab can be ascribed to the sociological pressures emanating from contingent Dark Period. The migrant Sikhs broadly constitute a larger proportion of intellectually energetic, high profile social component within their regionally determinist circumstances. While they are distanced from the current trends of political and community acculturation in Punjab, the present generation of senior Sikh emigrants are deeply touched by the dismal situation at the 'roots' of their origin. They possess a viable aggregate of potential resources (intellectual, financial and lobbyist power) for genuine expansion of fundamental Sikh ideological domain.

However, in order to arrest any possibility of duality or segmented approach by the nested sub-groups, a broad based and participatory social communication with the heartland must be actively maintained. A heartland which has become unattractive for habitation, at least for the future generation of Sikh Diaspora. Noticeably a widening social discontinuity between the Diaspora and their brethren in Punjab is emerging; one, because of level of education (social and professional); and the other, because of the hiatus in economic status. Only the present generation of intelligentsia at both ends has the capacity to reverse this pattern and simultaneously wrest control of "Panthic wisdom", both official and formal, from the Jathedary grasp and clear the debris of unwarranted collateral controversies. The other redeeming feature is the impact of the prolific production of literature about Sikhism specifically highlighting its visionary ideology for a universal socio-cultural

ethical base in the post-modern world. These forces must be harnessed for a regenerative endeavor.

“All power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” If the ‘absolute power’ is individualized, neutralizing the “collective power”, then it is comprehensively damaging. Sadly, the Sikh affairs in Punjab correspond to this deduction. In the sphere of cognitive revolt against the *Jathedari* culture the concept of World Sikh Council had initiated what could amount to Panthic ‘collective power’. It had enthused many. However, the structure of World Sikh Council could not gain organic strength. Now an effort by the Institute of Sikh Studies is afoot to reclaim the vitalities of the sentient Sikhs. This opportunity must not be wasted.

