

SEARCHES IN SIKHISM, THOUGHT, UNDERSTANDING, OBSERVANCE

By Nirmal Singh

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*Exploring Sikh Thought & Praxis: A Review by Jagpal Singh Tiwana**

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Prof. Nirmal Singh, who lives in the US, has been working for several years on sharing information on the Sikh faith, its history, culture and values with Americans, participating in inter-faith discussions and educating non-Sikhs about Sikh tradition and Sikh people. He has been presenting papers at conferences in several countries, offering seminars, giving interviews on American television, teaching classes as adjunct Professor of Sikhism at Hindu University of America and serving as Chaplain at Lebanon Valley College, PA.

The book, "**Searches in Sikhism, Thought, Understanding, Observance**", is a collection of eleven essays covering a wide range of subjects. Such topics as *Halemi Raj*, Culture of Resistance, Societal Peace and Harmony explore Sikh thought as it relates to societal issues that cause so much unrest and strife. The internal problems and conflicts afflicting Sikh people and their institutions today are discussed at length in the chapter Diversity or Conformity: Internal Sikh Tensions. Various facets of spiritual search have been explored under topics like *Dharti, Dharam & Dhur, Kul* Connection, Contentment for Inner Peace and others. The articles on bani of Guru Ram Das and the universal message of Guru Granth Sahib are in a devotional tenor.

Discussion on most topics is supported by quotes from the Sikh holy scriptures and incidents and examples from Sikh history. Nirmal Singh interprets Sikh history dispassionately. According to him, the Sikh resistance during the Guru period was not a militant response but drew inspiration from resolute espousal by the Gurus of compassion for all with recourse to use of force to defend righteous values as a last resort. He quotes extensively from *Babar Vani, Bachitar Natak, Zafarnama* to elaborate what the Gurus felt and thought about war and the suffering of the innocents and their clear position regarding the importance of moral and ethical conduct in both peace and war. Guru Nanak called Babar's attack as *paap ki janj* and questioned if the master should not be answerable if a powerful tiger mauls the poor herding cattle. Guru Gobind Singh in his battles before 1699 as described in *Bachitar Natak*, supported the weak and the oppressed or fought in self-defense. The Guru made a distinction between spiritual path and political path. "God as spiritual king and the latter as temporal king", ie, *Baabe ke, Baaber ke*.

The author has analyzed the Sikh-Guru relationship from the Bani of Guru Ram Das. The Guru urges Sikhs to persevere on, despite difficulties by assuring them that he is always there in support of their endeavors and places his Sikhs on a high pedestal, even asking them to guide him to connect with God - *mere pran sakha gur ke sikh bhai mo ko karo updes har milai milaya*. The Guru not only guides Sikhs along the spiritual path but also demonstrates a highly inspirational and motivational way of doing it. The leader in Guru Arjun's *halemi raaj* leads through humility and seva of those who he brings together as role models to motivate the society to change for the better. The way of leadership shown and commended by the Gurus is unique and its potential must be studied further.

While many articles go into the understanding of philosophy preached by the Gurus we are briefly mentioning about three. The author has tried to unravel the concept of dharma in Sikh thought. Starting with the reference in Jap ji to *dharti dharamsal* – that this world is an arena for *dharam* he has examined the multiple dimensions of the expression as used in Gurbani and concludes that it is not a set of codes but the individual's evolving understanding. He has linked the emerging concept of dharma to the five stages of spiritual development in Jap ji and as a person develops spiritually his choices become more righteous. The endeavor to improve must be made, though *mukti* only comes through Guru's grace.

Sikhism does not place value on individual quest for personal liberation that motivated the yogis, but promotes the concept of collective liberation in *sangat*. The same thought has been expressed several times in Gurbani in the words *aap tarai saglai kul tarai*. The author discusses this concept in Kul Connection and says that the benefit by association comes to those who are ready to receive the blessing. Those who follow evil ways and have no faith or virtue will drown and take others with them too. *Sangat* to be sacred has to be *sangat* of the righteous.

Citing *thal vich tin vastu paeo sat santokh veecharo*, he says that the Gurus considered contentment as one of the highest virtues. Attainment of contentment is a morally driven quest that makes no compromise with evil. It is not fatalistic acceptance of poverty and hunger or injustice and discrimination without effort at their removal. He concludes that 'the contented are — men of hope and peace perseveringly continuing effort for human welfare. They have abiding trust in the justness of God and His grace - and inspired by forward-looking optimism – *chardi kala* - they seek the good of one and all – *sarbat da bhala*. They are not content just to be content!'

The author has not tried to fit the Sikh concepts to the prevailing Western thinking or the ancient Hindu or Indian traditions. He has, in all cases, tried to define the concepts as they emerge from the Gurbani, further honed and supported by what the Gurus did and what has come down at the core of transmitted understanding of Sikhi. The emerging insights therefore in all his enquiries are well researched and sum up the understanding of Sikh thought very well. He has brought out the differences between practices from the precepts for the Sikhs to think about and correct.

A noteworthy feature of the book is that the author has commented on almost all the controversies that plague the Sikh community today, such as *Dasam Granth*, Hindu influence, concept of *Guru Panth and Guru Granth*, *Sikh Rehat Maryada*, definition of a Sikh, *Amritdhari Sikhs*, *Keshadhari Sikhs*, and tensions witnessed in Gurdwaras. Though the author himself is a turbaned Sikh and has had active involvements in local Gurdwaras of his place, he pleads for equal status and treatment to all Sikhs in the *Panth*. Discrimination and concept of superior and inferior classes of Sikhs is not only against the teachings of Sikh Gurus, it is divisive and counter productive too. "Sikhi is about lifting people, whatever their level - not an exclusive association of those who consider themselves already lifted", observes Nirmal Singh. "To use it to sub serve the worldly interests of any group, be they *be amritdhari, keshadhari, mona* or Punjabi is a disservice to the Gurus and their universal message. Concern for preserving the observance of *kakkars* is well placed but we should do our best to bring those who may have deviated back into observance through love and persuasion."

There is an excellent chapter on "**Seva, Sikh Precept and Praxis**" at the end. Seva though starts from volunteer work in Gurdwaras like distributing Karah Parshad, preparing langar, doing kar seva in building Gurdwaras, cleaning pools and giving donations for good

causes, it gets into Sikh character and Sikhs are beginning to do much more by going beyond the Gurdwara environment. It inspires a Sikh to lead a pious life based on Guru Nanak's triad of nam, dan and isnan seeking the well being of the humanity as a whole-sarbat da bhala. He briefly lists the activities of all those societies and organizations like Pingalwara, Kalgidhar Society, Nishkam Sikh Welfare Council, Ensaaf & Carnage 84, Sikh Human Development Foundation, United Sikhs, Sikh Coalition, Sikh Foundation, etc which are active in humanitarian causes.

Nirmal Singh is an academician. He has expounded Sikh concepts from scriptures with references to their applications and developments in Sikh history. He deals with the subject with open mind and quotes such reputed authors as Hew McLeod and Cole Owen where warranted. The author has kept himself well informed on the current topics not only from conferences and Gurdwaras he visits, but from the discussions on Gurmat Learning Zone and Sikh Diaspora, the two well reputed Internet Sikh discussion forums he has been following and participating in. Names of our forum members Harkinder Singh Chahal, Karam Singh UK, Harmander Singh (UK) and others figure in the text.

These forums have attracted members from all over the world - Singapore, Malaysia, Iran, Dubai, Australia, New Zealand, UK, USA and of course from India. Such forums are the best places to know about what is going on among the Sikhs all over the world. Several noted authors of Sikh studies are members of the forums and take note of the discussions.

Nirmal Singh has, earlier, given us "Exploring Sikh Spirituality & the Paradox of their Stereotyping in contemporary American Setting" in 2003. "**Searches in Sikhism...**" is another feather in his turban. The book is well researched and can be added to any academic, public and private library. It has a comprehensive index with a useful glossary, but no list of suggested reading. A little more attention to proof reading could have been helpful.

The book is available from South Asia Books, sabooks@juno.com.



THE STORY OF THE TURBAN (Punjabi)

dwsqwn-ey-d`sqwr

By Prof. Assa Singh Ghuman

Published by Lokgeet Prakashan/Unistar Books
SCO 26-27, Sector 34-A Chandigarh. 160022

Pages: 148 Price: Rs.170 (Hardcover)

A Review by Saran Singh*

** Editor, The Sikh Review*

What is common between the two-term Governor of California Albert Schwarzenegger and Indian Test cricketer Harbhajan Singh? Nothing, except that the former is best known as Terminator for his role in films, and the latter has been nicknamed the

Turbanator as an unerring bowler. However Professor Assa Singh Ghuman has produced a scholarly treatise on the glorious headgear by which the Sikhs are recognizable the world over. From the corridors of history to the sociological significance of turban, the author explores and analyses the turban tradition as an integral part of Oriental culture, before focussing on the **Sikh tradition which has sanctified the turban as its crowning glory**, best illustrated in the book jacket (the only pictorial illustration - that depicts eight

distinctive styles popularized by Maharaja of Patiala and Baba Kharak Singh. In addition, one is fascinated by the classical and modern Army and Air Force wear, the aristocratic turban and the distinctive Afghani Sikh turban.

Tracing the Biblical story of Adam and Eve becoming aware of their nudity on expulsion from Garden of Eden, the author examines the trends, with reference to Encyclopedia of Social Sciences: Seasonal and psychological needs for clothing, the sophistication and the style - in Europe and Asia. In classical times, the Dwapar Yuga, textiles and handloom had acquired great importance. The Mahabharata episode on forcible undressing of Draupadi - the Pandavas' consort, is mentioned, to add romance as well as sanctity.

