

# **SANT BABA VISAKHA SINGH: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY**(Punjabi)

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*A review by Prof. H.S. Virk\**

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"This book is in poetical format, written by the revered Babaji in 1920's. Professor Malvinderjeet Singh, editor of the book, collected the manuscript from the family of Dr. Sant Singh in a tattered form, collated and edited it for SGPC. It was a labour of love for the editor as he has engaged himself in digging up resource material about *Ghadar* movement and its votaries known as *Ghadri Babas*. Much has been written about *Ghadar* Movement by different authors with a Marxism bent of mind, highlighting the sacrifices of *Ghadri Babas* as harbingers of the freedom movement in India. Professor Singh has not given any such tainted version of the movement, and compiled the notes written by Baba Visakha Singh, a doyen of revolutionaries of *Ghadar* movement himself. Surprisingly, Babaji was an acknowledged revolutionary, a mystic saint who was held in high esteem by the Sikhs and other communities in Punjab. The book is a brief but an original version of the *Ghadar* movement as experienced by Babaji himself in USA and in India. I vividly remember the aura of his personality when my mother took me as a child to a congregation in Gojra town (now in Pakistan) in 1945.

Chapters 3-8 describe genealogy of Babaji's family and founding of the villages, Dadehar and Sarhali, an abode of Sandhu Jat Sikhs, a clan to which Babaji belonged. His ancestors were baptized by Guru Gobind Singh Ji and they fought many battles against the Muslim rulers of India. Later they saw action during the Sikh rule in Punjab and fought along with Hari Singh Nalwa against the Afghan invaders. Babaji was born in April 1877 in village Dadehar (near Tarn Taran), had no formal education except learning Punjabi to recite *Gurubani* and engaged himself in cattle grazing. As a young man of 19 years, he joined British Indian Army as a soldier in 'Eleven Horse' and was appointed a *granthi* in the regiment gurdwara. He resigned later from the army and proceeded to China in search of a job, and from there to USA to try his luck in 1909.

Baba Visakha Singh reached California in USA and settled down near Holt station, a few km. away from Stockton. The Sikh farmers had settled in the Imperial valley of California during the beginning of twentieth century and were known as "Potato Kings" in the area. Babaji persuaded the rich farmers to contribute for setting up the first Sikh Temple at Stockton. Sant Teja Singh from Canada also joined them in this sacred mission.

The Sikh Temple at Stockton became a center of religious and political activities before the First World War in 1914. Ghadar Party was established during 1912-13 in USA and the Stockton Gurdwara became the hub of its activities. Regular political meetings were held along with religious congregations to celebrate the *gurpurabs* where Indians of all hues (Sikhs, Muslims & Hindus) participated. Some students of University of California at Berkeley and San Francisco became leaders of Ghadar Party but the core leadership was provided by Baba Sohan Singh

Bhakna and Baba Visakha Singh along with other Sikh immigrants. The secular character of the Ghadar movement is described by Babaji in chapter 11.

During the January 1915, Baba Visakha Singh returned to India alongwith other members of Ghadar Party to start a revolution to liberate India from the slavery of the British. He was captured in 1915 and imprisoned with other revolutionaries. Their trial became famous as First Lahore Conspiracy case. Most of the Ghadarites were sentenced to life imprisonment and incarcerated in Andaman cellular jail, a virtual 'hell on earth'. The tortures inflicted on forty revolutionaries (mostly Sikhs from Punjab) is vividly described in chapters 14-19. Some of them died due to this inhuman suffering at the hands of British jailers:

During April 1920, Baba Visakha Singh was released from Andaman jail but was confined to his native village Dadehar. His health was shattered, but due to his will power and revolutionary zeal combined with his unflinching faith in *Gurubani*, he engaged himself in social and religious activities. He joined Guru Ka Bag morcha, set up a committee to help the families of revolutionaries, became Jathedar of Akal Takht for a while, joined communist movement during the Second World War, helped refugees to settle down after Partition and fought for the release of comrades in Indian jails. The hall mark of Babaji's strenght was his deep faith in God and Gurus. He personified the concept of a saint-soldier and was always absorbed in meditation (*Nam Simran*). Babaji departed from this world on 5 December 1957.

Most of our historians and politicians focus on Lala Hardyal, when they talk or write about the sacrifices of Ghadar Party revolutionaries, but this book has exploded this myth created by vested interests. Baba Visakha Singh was a colleague of Hardyal. He highlights the sterling role played by Kartar Singh Sarabha, Sohan Singh Bhakna, Master Chatar Singh, and many others, but does not rate Hardyal as highly motivated as a revolutionary.



## **SWORD: SYMBOL OF DIVINE AUTHORITY**

**By Prof. Sahib Singh and Dalip Singh**

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***Foreword by Surjit Singh Sidhu\****

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"*Sword: Symbol of Divine Authority*" is a work of immense importance. It is one of the most significant books about Sikhism that I have the good fortune to read. It begins with a discussion of the fundamentals of Sikhism - everything happens as God's doing because He is the only doer; no double dealings must be attempted with Him because he is all knowing and, in the end, one is responsible for ones doings. He who has fashioned us is also the provider and provides as He wishes; we cannot describe His greatness.

The Revered 10th Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singhji, addressed and referred to the Almighty God as: "O Sword, the Mightiest Lord of Authority." This address indicates that in Sikhism it is the Divine Authority of the Lord that is symbolized by the Sword, and not its characteristics as a weapon for human conquests. There seems to be no scope for doubt about it. The Sikh Gurus armed themselves and their followers in the interests of self-defence and the defense of others in need. They never used arms to conquer or to rule. They only fought back in response to unprovoked attacks. The two "*miri-piri*" swords, also referenced in Sikhism, symbolize the Authority of the Lord, one in respect of spiritual matters and the other in respect of temporal matters. The Sri Akal Takht was raised as a Symbol of the Authority of the Lord alone. Nowhere is it recommended to use the sword, or other arms for purposes of acquiring power or rule by force. Such an interpretation would run directly contrary to established Sikh teaching and principles. It is unfortunate that Sikhs after Guru Gobind Singhji have used the sword as a symbol to exercise authority and to conquer and rule. Sikh History after Guru Gobind Singh is a distortion of Sikhism by self-willed people who have sought to perpetuate their authoritarian and commercial interests rather than those of Sikhism or its Gurus. The Sword is indeed a symbol of Divine Authority, and we Sikhs need to understand it as such. The keeping of a representative or miniature sword on one's person has indeed the symbolic meaning of constantly seeking guidance and shelter of God, "the Almighty Sword."

For some, this book is likely to be viewed as provocative, but for me it is touching, challenging and stimulating. It shows that we Sikhs over a long period of time have persisted in the pursuit of wrongful, self-righteous goals in the name of Sikhism, but voicing principles contrary to the teachings of Sikhism. This is a critical work at a critical time in Sikh history, a time which may even be deemed a time of crisis. This book eloquently conveys the true message of the Sikh faith and its social and political implications. Sikh doctrines and teachings have been discussed and referenced using the words of the Gurus. This important task could only be performed by a man like Sardar Dalip Singh who possesses a profound understanding of *Gurbani* and who is able to write with ease on the vast expanse of Sikh tenets, traditions and history. Reading the book induces much introspective thought, and should encourage fruitful discussions among its readers.

Sikhism is a highly development-oriented religion. The creation of institutions and agencies for the betterment of society was, has been, and continues to be encouraged. Such institutions and related activities encourage self-respect, self-reliance, a sense of fairness and equality and, above all, the absolute need for self-protection and defense. These are the basic ingredients for economic and general development of a people and the development of a functional society. I truly believe that Sikhism seeks to bring about such a change in society and to achieve the betterment of the various people of the world. I also think that such teachings are consistent with encouraging social and political aspirations and discipline in others. Indeed, no society has ever existed without such aspirations and activities. Unfortunately, the politics of power, dominance of others and empire building have often dominated such aspirations and goals.

Modern political science literature has focused primarily on building principles, a rule of society based on rules rather than dominating individuals. I contend that Sikhism has sought, from its inception, to foster and encourage such principles and activities, which activities are truly beneficial to society and cultures in the broadest sense.

I have been a student of economics, especially the economics of development and developing societies. Connections between economics, politics and development are unavoidable. But it is only Sikhism that provides the nexus for this development process to proceed for the establishment of a functioning society based on divine authority. Viewed from this perspective, S. Dalip Singh clearly shows that Sikh policies and practices have largely been followed at cross-purposes, independent of the Sikh teachings themselves. His analysis of the development of these policies shows convincingly how they have remained at cross-purposes with Sikhism itself. Historical illustrations in his analysis show the utter lack of (an urgent need for) consistency between Sikh thought and the pursuit of power. Most western scholars have only spread an understanding of Sikhism suited to their own views and purposes, and thus have been a source of incorrect or inappropriate Sikh images and imagery, having been reinforced by centuries of British portrayals of Sikhs in a militaristic manner and encouragement towards militaristic pursuits, which, in turn, have contributed to a global perception of Sikhs as a warlike people. Unfortunately many Sikhs take pride in such representations. This work of S. Dalip Singh should be of tremendous value to Sikhs, scholars and the community at large. It is a unique book, quite different from the so called mainstream thought of the Sikhs. But it is most refreshing and should be helpful to realign Sikh thought and perceptions, which, in the humble view of this writer, seem to have deviated significantly from God's Will and teachings.

S. Dalip Singh has written in English about Sikhism as enshrined in Sikh Scriptures for the benefit of humanity at large. He had a close association with late professor Sahib Singh. He has written several books in addition to this one. His inspiring work places Sikhism in the proper perspective of comparative religion and theology. I have been fortunate to read most of his writings during the past ten or more years. I take great pride in having an association with him and to have had an opportunity to learn from him and his writings.

