

A Life of Dedication: Sant Attar Singh of Mastuana

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NURTURED IN GLORIOUS SIKH heritage and nourished by its unperishable truth, Sant Attar Singh, the God intoxicated man, was yet modern in approach to life's problems and those relating to life beyond physical life. He was a fine figure of man, imposing, full of poise and dignity, sure of himself and his mission and, at the same time, full of dynamic and fiery energy to push his community as well as the whole Indian nation forward.

He was born on the 17th March, 1866 C.E. in village Cheema, situated at a distance of eight miles from Sunam on Sunam Bathinda road. He was not fortunate enough to receive modern education because, firstly, he belonged to the peasant stock who then wanted their sons to cling to the soil and, secondly, his father S. Karam Singh did not have the means to send him to some town to have education. Nevertheless the child was not an ordinary one. Though records do not speak much regarding his early childhood, yet it is clear that he was a prodigy.

At the age of eighteen, his father got him enlisted in the army as a sepoy. He joined No.4 Indian Artillery Platoon and after three month's training he was sent away to Kohat. Soon after he was transferred to No.54 Sikh Regiment.

The next few years were crucial in the life of Sant ji. In 1887, his father expired. In 1888 he was placed among the reserved soldiers. In 1886, he decided not to marry.

Those were the days when Punjab, like the rest of India, was experiencing various types of commotions, caused by different types of reactions and responses. Since 1849, the Christian missionaries had stepped up their activities to spread their religion and in this process they had converted quite a large number of people. They seemed to be specially interested in the conversion of peasants to their faith because of their conviction that if they turned Christians, they would become vigorous agents of their faith in the Punjab. To this purpose, they established their headquarter at Batala.

Arya Samaj, an organisation of the Hindus, was founded in the Punjab by Swami Dayanand Saraswati with a view to counter Christian propaganda and to defend and assert pure and original form of Hinduism which, in its reckoning, was the original Vedic religion. Swami Dayanand's urge to assert Hindu nationalism found expression in the Shudhi Movement to convert Christians, Sikhs and Muslims to Hinduism. This movement succeeded to a great extent in raising bulwark against the tide of Christianity and bringing about a new awareness among the Hindus. The Muslims of the Punjab reacted to the missionary propaganda, as also the Arya Samajists' Shudhi Movement. They became alert and took steps to resuscitate Islam by purging it of its unnecessary accretions. As a social group, the Muslims resented the Shudhi Movement as much as they did in the case of the Christian missionaries propaganda. To safeguard their interest, they set up different organisations and hence Punjab began to experience conflict between the Christian missionaries and the various native socio-religious groups besides in-group and Inter-group tensions.

The Sikhs in such atmosphere could obviously not remain insulated. Their reaction to the Western Impact in the first phase was that of confrontation in the political sphere, and so far as the socio-religious sphere was concerned, they were not inimical to the Christian ethics, because of its nearness to their own ethics. But as time moved on, they realised especially in the wake of the failure of the Kooka Movement that the course of confrontation with the British power will not serve any purpose. In the context of the Hindus and the Muslims trying to consolidate and extend their faith, it became essential for the Sikhs to bring into being their separate organisation to consolidate themselves as a socio-religious group to disseminate the message of Sikhism and to counter the proselytising activities of the Hindu and Muslim religious organisations, as also of the Christian propaganda. The organisation which they set up was named Singh Sabha. The Singh Sabhas overbrimming with the zeal fanned out to bring awakening among the people by exposing them to Sikh values.

Santji imbibed many elements from the situation. He disapproved of proselytising activities of some organisations through the method of arousing hatred for other religions, as such activities were obviously the negation of religious spirit. He strongly felt that there was need for rejuvenating Sikh religion as it not only had satisfactory solutions to varied problems of human beings but also it had adequate answers to the challenges posed by the Western civilisation. But he rejected sectarian approach and this was the reason that he transcended barriers based on social and religious prejudices and evolved all-comprehensive vision. He loved being rationalistic, but he did not relish reason unsoaked in love for human beings. This being his conviction, he saved the movement of Sikh resurgence, as Singh Sabha was, from reducing itself into a movement of few heartless zealous votaries engaged in evolving a new forum.

There was another factor which played an important role in shaping the psyche of Santji. The British, at that time, were ruling the country ruthlessly and primarily in their own imperial interest. Since Santji had been in government service, he noticed for himself the devastating effect of the British rule. The perceptive mind of Santji also observed that the Western people had certain qualities to be emulated. Their education system was definitely superior to the indigenous system of education which was theology-oriented, in stead of inquiry-oriented.

With these convictions, Santji decided upon the course of leavening the masses. To reinforce his belief, he went on a pilgrimage to the Gurdwara named Shri Sach Khand Hazur Sahib at Nanded where the curtain fell on the rainbow tangled life of the illustrious and mighty Guru Gobind Singh. He drank deep from the fount of inspiration drawn from the life of the Tenth Master and was ready for the mighty task of transforming the lives of the people and shaping time-spirit.

In 1892 he got his name struck off from the role of army and devoted himself solely to the propagation of the Guru's message. He toured extensively in Jammu-Kashmir, Sindh and North Western Frontier Province. In Pothohar region, such places as Shah Di Dheri, Thamali, Kanoha, Dera Khalsa, Sagri, Malakpurj, Rawalpindi, Haripur, Kahuta, Dhan Mangwal, Chakwal, Gujjarkhan, Loom and Bhaun were the main venues of his activities. Many of different religious allegiances took '*Pahul*' from him. Late Master Tara Singh and Bhai Jodh Singh were administered '*Amrit*' by Santji at Dera Khalsa. In Jammu-Kashmir, the divine

message was delivered to the people from the villages of Srinagar, Mirpur and Bagham.

The North Western Frontier Province also did not escape his notice. At Peshawar, he was received with warmth not only by the Hindus and the Sikhs but also by the Pathans. Sant Kalyan Singh of Peshawar resolved to devote the rest of his life exclusively to the implementation of programme of Santji. Similarly, Santji visited many places in the province of Sind. Sanora, Hyderabad and Karachi are some of the places which were sanctified by his sacred visit. He also toured different places in the Majha and Malwa regions of the Punjab. He visited Amritsar, Tarn Taran, Lahore, Gujranwala, and Mangla Head in the Majha region and such places as Longowal, Kattu, Anandpur, Fatehgarh, Talwandi Saboki, Bathinda, Alal, Kanla, Sangrur, Nabha, Malerkotla in the Malwa region. The most important centre of Santji's activities in the Malwa region was Gursagar Mastuana, wherefrom Santji radiated dawn-light which could guide Hindus, Muslims and men of diverse races to recover the lost link of union in the love of one God and the love of creation.

His religious tours were a remarkable success. Quite a large number of people imbibed Sikh ethos.

Santji laid great emphasis on raising gurdwaras. He regarded them as important training centres, for, the Sikhs could gather there in the form a *Sangat* and galvanise themselves into a distinct socio-religious group. He used to say that where there is a gurdwara, Guru Granth Sahib is recited and the Sikhs are automatically communicated the cause *Gurbani* stands for. He believed that as long as gurdwaras are there, the Sikhs would not feel shelterless, as they function like never-failing fathers.

After 1920, Santji focussed his attention on the propagation of Sikhism in the area around Damdama Sahib (in Bathinda district), a place made sacred by the sojourns of three Gurus; the Sixth, the Ninth and the Tenth. He made this place as his head-quarter. He raised a beautiful gurdwara to serve as a beacon-light to all those groping in the darkness of ignorance and also to all those hesitant of doing their bit for the cause of the people. He was so much enamoured of this project that, at Simla, he went from house to house holding the hem of his cloak saying "You will find no such beggar as I am."

The Sikhs settled in foreign countries also enjoyed Santji's care. He deputed Teja Singh, Amar Singh, Dharamanant Singh and Hari Singh Basra for twin purposes of receiving higher education and spreading Gurus' Gospel. Teja Singh organised Khalsa Jatha British Isles, with head quarters at London, to carry on the proselytising activities in United Kingdom. The Sikhs of Canada and U.S.A. also received due attention. Having received information that the Sikhs were in dire need of the message of Guru Nanak, Sant ji himself at one time decided to go to these countries, although later on the decision was altered, probably at the request of of the Sikhs of the Punjab who needed him more in their midst during the impending struggle for Gurdwara reforms.

However, Teja Singh, sometimes alone, sometimes along with Waryam Singh and Hari Singh, did his best to enlighten the Sikhs abroad. He visited many places on the Pacific coast such as Vancouver, Victoria, Portmudi, Malsact and Abbatsfar. It was owing to his efforts that the message of the Guru was delivered to the Sikhs in

Seattle, California, Washington and New York. His preaching had two-fold effect, i.e. removal of wrong notions about the Sikhs among the foreigners and reinvigoration of the Sikhs' faith in the Guru's Word. Teja Singh also attended World Religious Congress of Free Christianity and World Religion Congress and presented Paper on the cardinal principles of Sikhism

Santji went to Delhi along with the Maharaja of Jind and stayed in Patiala House in New Delhi. A day before the actual holding of the Durbar, a colourful procession headed by Sant ji was taken from Patiala House to the Red Fort in which, apart from people in general, the Sardars of Patiala and Jind States took part. When Santji was moving in the procession seated in the *Howdah* of an elegantly decorated elephant, he seemed emitting divinity all round and none could help feeling the soothing impact of his angelic personality. Neither the glamour of the Emperor nor the display of the might of the British Empire could over-awe him; he was reciting a sacred hymn from Guru Granth Sahib which was suggestive of allpowerfulness and omnipotence of God.

Ko-oo Har Saman Nahi Raja

Ih Bhoopat Sabh Divas Char Ke Jhoothe Karat Divaja

(Guru Granth Sahib p.856)

(No king is superior to God; All the worldly kings are subject to death and all their claims are false).

Santji was one of the earliest Indians who realised that without imparting education to the masses the progress of the nation could not be assured. His concept of education was neither of the Western type nor of the Eastern pattern. It was to be an amalgam of both. Santji 's objective as that the people should attain both technological advancement, and development of mind, because the technological advancement hand in hand with the active life of mind, could ensure the greatness of a nation. To put ideas into practice, he founded Khalsa High School, Lylalpur; Khalsa High School, Chakwal (District Jhelum); Missionary College, Gujranwala; Guru Nanak College, Gujranwala;; Malwa Khalsa High School, Ludhiana; Akal College, Mastuana. He also laid the foundaton stone of Khalsa Sewak Jatha, Patiala. He attended almost all the educational conferences organised under aegis of the Chief Khalsa Dewan and one of them held in C.E. 1915 at Firozpur was presided over by him.

In 1914, Sant ji agreed to go to Benaras to lay the foundation of Sanskrit College in response to the invitation of Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya. Maharaja Ripudaman Singh of Nabha, who was an admirer of Santji and a friend of Malviyaji, took Santji to Benaras in his special saloon. In the spacious pandal near the proposed building, *Akhand-path* was held. Having performed the *Bhog* Ceremony, Sant ji offered *Ardas* (Sikh Prayer) to God. Maharaja Ganga Singh of Bikaner offered concrete in a silver plate and Santji laid the foundation of the building by applying it to the six bricks of gold supplied by Maharaja Ganga Singh of Bikaner. At that time Santji in a mood of thankfulness to God exclaimed: "Eternal is the foundation, Eternal shall the building built on it"

For the past few years Sant ji had been planning to make Mastuana (in the district of Sangrur) a great educational centre. In all probability, the selection was prompted by his desire to educate the people of the Malwa region in the way he

deemed fit. In 1919, Sant ji along with Bhai Sahib Bhai Arjan Singh Bagrian, Teja Singh Badrukhan, Sardar Bachan Singh Nabha, Sant Gulab Singh and Sant Teja Singh laid the foundation of the college building. In 1920, the college started functioning. The first Principal of the college was Sant Teja Singh. At the suggestion of Santji to impart technical training to the students, Charanjit, Technical Engineer, M.Sc. Jhangi Ram, M.Sc. in Agricultural, were appointed to this purpose. Sant ji handed over the management to a committee of 25 persons headed by S. Sewa Singh Thikriwala.

At this juncture Sant ji convened an assembly of his co-workers called '*Bihangam*' - the Migratory ever' and told that if they had true faith in him, they should shed off all their belongings except Tasla, Kassi, Taulia and Kachhera, and leave the place forthwith to village Kanjla. Santji himself did the same and many of his disciples followed him. This was done with a view to impress upon them that the social workers should keep themselves above mundane involvement as also to curb the propensities of his followers to convert the place into centre of pilgrimage and form a vested interest.

Akal College, Mastuana, progressed for some time, after which it failed, chiefly owing to two reasons, viz mutual equabbles for office and the inimical attitude of the British government. From the following C.I.D. report the attitude of the then government is crystal clear: "The institution is only in name. It is not recognised by the Punjab University. There are neither regular classes, nor any teaching staff nor payments. Only worthless boys who cannot get admission anywhere else go to this place. Owing to reasons quoted above they do not get any education at all and, living in such extreme political atmosphere, it is only too natural that their energies are diverted towards revolutionary politics, an instance of which will be seen by the recent arrests made in Ahmedabad dacoity case. (Report of Superintendent of Police, CID, to Home Minister, Patiala State records Prime Minister's office file 556, Patiala, Punjab State Archives).

"The political department of the government of India was much concerned over Mastuana having become a 'centre of Communist and other Revolutionary propaganda' for which a major blame was thrown on Sant Teja Singh, M.A. of Gujranwala who was accused of having developed connections with the Ghadar Party while in the United States of America.

Santji's approach to the different problems was moral, and anything which was not moral was not looked up by him with favour. Sant ji favoured non-cooperation movement because he felt to rise against the oppressive rule of the foreigners was doubtlessly moral. He had his deep sympathies for Akali Movement because the Akalis were championing the cause which was obviously fair. The struggle for the reforms of Sikh shrines was perfectly justified from moral point of view. According to one C.I.D. report the 'Publicity Bureau of Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee was placed under the direction of Professor Teja Singh of the Akal College, Mastuana, and Master Tara Singh of Lyalpur. According to the estimate of Piara Singh Padam, 'if people in hordes offered themselves for arrest for undergoing any torture at the hands of the British government, it was primarily because of the spadework then done by Sant ji".

Santji paid visit to Nankana Sahib to attend the Dewan arranged by the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee in honour of the martyrs of Nankana Sahib . Nothing could deter him.

On January 31, 1927 Santji expired in the house of Gobinder Singh Sibia, Nabha Gate, Sangrur, as a result of snakebite in Gurdwara Bangla Sahib, New Delhi. His body was cremated at Mastuana where now a beautiful Gurdwara stands in his memory. As long as he lived, he lived for the people. Now he lives in the minds of the people. His work is a tribute to him and a monument to his memory.

