

The Power of Heritage: Connecting the dots in history

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JUST DAYS AGO I WAS AT A SIKH Youth Symposium in Boston. There were the ritual speeches. There were also the presentations by young people ranging in age from those that were barely starting at the portal of ideas to others who were amazingly uplifting in their maturity. I was simply awestruck at how well they understood life and with what exquisite sense they wove the teachings and traditions of Sikhism into the intricate pattern of their lives.

What captured my imagination was a play that children put up for the edification and entertainment of an audience of perhaps 250. Ranging in age from about 9 to perhaps 16 years, 25 young people – 15 of them girls - presented a vignette of Sikh history that most Sikhs know but would have rarely thought about or experienced in a live performance. If I were to single out any individuals for this treat it would have to be Sarbpreet Singh, Alep Kaur and their merry band of helpers, although the honor ultimately belongs to the 15 young people, who put on the show.

We all know the history. Shortly after the martyrdom of Banda Singh Bahadur in early 18th century, when a reign of terror was unleashed against the Sikhs, the local satrap, Zakaria Khan, had proudly declared that Sikhism had been wiped and no Sikhs remained in his domain. Two young Sikhs – Bhai Bota Singh and Garja Singh - hiding from the government heard the proclamation, understood the challenge and declared their presence by setting a toll barrier on a major road. The tolls were intentionally - and laughably - minimal; the purpose was not to harass the people and to take their money, but to assert the presence of Sikhs as a free people where the government denied them this fundamental freedom of life.

The government was, at first, slow to take notice of this public slight and challenge. So Bhai Bota Singh and Bhai Garja Singh sent a letter to the Governor. Governments then, as now, react to such actions with rage, and so did Zakaria Khan. The wheels of government grind slowly but exceedingly fine and they did. The two Sikhs became martyrs to the cause of conscience, courage and freedom. The Sikhs were not finished, as Zakaria Khan found out, and so did many governments that followed him.

I must have read the story a hundred times, but this was the first time it was being brought to life in the diaspora and that too by very young people. The presentation was electrifying for many reasons, and not only for its quality.

My thoughts went to another bit of history. Sikhs have been in North America now for over a hundred years, and for a country that traces its past to just over two centuries, our one century is a very sizeable chunk of it. Yet, it was only 58 years ago in 1946 that Sikhs (and other Asians) won the right to citizenship in the United States.

When I came to this country in 1960, people often looked askance at the few Sikhs in this country, not knowing what they believed and how they lived. Professional doors opened for us but not automatically and not easily. A whole generation of Sikhs struggled mightily, even compromised though not lightly, and often worked at jobs that were less than their qualifications deserved.

A new generation of Sikhs raised and educated in the North American culture has opened many of the professional doors that resisted our efforts, yet many battles remain. The right to serve in the police and army of Canada and United Kingdom is now ours; the right to serve in the police in New York and California is within our grasp. The American armed services remain recalcitrant, but that hurdle too will give way some day.

Intimately related to this progress that we celebrate are clearer indications of a growing maturity in the Sikh community. The early arrivals were fixated on, quite understandably and passionately so, with making a material success of their lives in a new land. Up until a few years ago, young Sikhs too were noticeably following the same dream and most of them were opting for professions like medicine, investment banking and financial services, information technology or entrepreneurship. These are the traditional routes to prosperity and respect. But they are not the routes to community involvement and development or to building bridges with our non-Sikh neighbors.

Now I notice that a lot more young Sikhs are opting for law, political science and social sciences. Now, this is the way to shape society. These professionals will determine the structure of society and how it operates. It is from these fields that the movers and shakers of this society emerge. It is through these that we will become a true part of this complex mosaic that is North America. Better yet, I should go with the analogy to an orchestra that I heard professor Diana Eck once make. In an orchestra there are many pieces and each contributes to the whole ensemble and its magic. Even the lowly cymbal and the triangle have a place. And each instrument listens to others while it seeks its place and awaits its turn and time, so that the instruments create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

When we look back to a stage play on the lives of Garja Singh and Bota Singh in diaspora, it brings home the distance we have traveled - from asserting our existence as a free people 300 years ago to defining our place as a free people in a complex and rich orchestra. We have come a long way. But the principles are the same that the Gurus enunciated and Sikhs need to live by. How to develop a sense of self, how to live a life so that one can place one's head on the line? How to live life fully? These are the questions that define the continuity between the imperatives of 18th century Punjab and 21st century global village in which we live today.

We have come a long way, but we have a longer way to go. We will define our greatness in terms of the future, not the past. The past nevertheless needs to be connected to the present and that will lead us into the future. The performance of these sub-teens and teenagers tell me that not only do they have formidable dramatic skills; they are also connecting the dots of our checkered history methodically and with skill.

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