

Born to Serve

Remembering Bhagat Puran Singh Ji

Pingalwara (lit. 'home for the disabled') is now part of the Punjab folklore. Its current President, the soft-spoken Dr Inderjit Kaur was in Calcutta on Vaisakhi last April. She had earlier visited Ranchi and Jamshedpur addressing congregation and reminding the people of the doctrine of "Daswand", in support of the cause dearest to the legendary Bhagat Puran Singh. She also had a session with Sister Nirmala, successor to the "Saint of Calcutta" Mother Teresa. One can speculate cheerfully about what they said to each other.

Even as powerful nations in pursuit of Machiavellian statecraft spend billion of dollars in deadly armaments, including the dreaded nuclear weapons, a small number of individuals everywhere remain dedicated to human welfare at the grassroots level. One is reminded of Guru Nanak's agonized plea for peace and social justice, while he identified himself with the lowly and the downtrodden. Through all ages an imbalance has characterized our world. Starving emaciated children of Darfur and the African sub-Sahara co-exist with fashion parades and beauty pageants in Asia and Europe.

The 'adopted' daughter of Bhagat Puran Singh does not despair. The last time I met her, she was on her familiar mission in Barcelona, Spain, in summer of 2004. The occasion was the Parliament of World's Religion. The Sikhs from United Kingdom, under guidance of Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh Ji, stole the limelight by holding daily Kirtan and prayers, and feeding over a thousand delegates of all faiths at the Guru-ka-Langar throughout the weeklong session of the Parliament. The Sikh celebration epitomized the validity of Scriptural maxim:

ਬ੍ਰਹਮ ਗਿਆਨੀ ਪਰਉਪਕਾਰ ਉਮਾਰਾ the God-conscious ever find joy in doing good to others. The precept had been a personal commitment for Bhagat Puran Singh long before he established the Pingalwara in 1948.

Inderjit Kaur speaks of the deep commitment that Bhagat Puran Singh demonstrated to the concept of dedicated Sewa. In United India of 1946's he was a familiar figure at Dehra Sahib in Lahore, the shrine that commemorates the excruciating martyrdom of Guru Arjun Dev in the torrid summer of 1606. It is ironical that when the Sikhs observe Quatercentenary of that glorious – if grim – event, they require permission of the Government of Pakistan to pay homage to the Great Martyr.

For Bhagatji, it is the Guruvani that opened the gateway to knowledge and enlightenment - a gift he inherited from his mother. He needed no university degree to grasp the power of compassion, or to develop the single-minded determination to espouse the cause of the disabled. Early years were the toughest for him, but there was no place for despair in his scheme of things. Pingalwara had become a reality even as the sick, the spastic, and the blind, the paraplegic and the polio-stricken, trickled in - as long term inmates - from near and far, irrespective of creed, colour or age. Bhagat Puran Singh was in his early 40's when he had to say good-bye to his beloved Dehra Sahib - to cross over the border into Amritsar - 'home to the virtuous' (is&ql dw Gr). One can have a glimpse of the vast universe of Bhagat Puran Singh from the illustrated Centennial volume compiled by (retired Group Captain) Rajinder Pal Singh at Inderjit Kaur's initiative.

Incredible as it may appear, Bhagat Ji has written lucid and graphic accounts of some of the most challenged and disabled of Pingalwara inmates. The story of Asha Devi - a Kashmiri Brahmin from Poonch and her four children, two of them paraplegics, is heart rending. Bhagat Ji picked her up from roadside one sunlit day in 1948, and brought her, in a tonga, to Guru Tegh Bahadur hospital, for the saintly Dr Manmohan Singh to take the X-rays of her lungs. Too late for any treatment, she died three weeks later, entrusting her children to the

Sage of Pingalwara.

The distinguished long time editor of the *Tribune*, VN Narayanan became a devotee and admirer of Bhagat Ji. He recalls Bhagat Ji's touch of Divinity – even as the Sage was admitted in coma to PGI Chandigarh in 1992. The frail man had become a phenomenon and a Movement. Narayanan quotes Guru Arjun's axiomatic utterance: “ਗਰੀਬੀ ਗਦਾ ਹਮਾਰੀ ॥ ਖੋਨਾ ਸਗਲ ਰੇਨੁ ਛਾਰੀ ॥” i.e. Humility is my mace, The dust on the feet of humans I touch is my shield. I am protected by those two weapons, So none can subdue me.

An overseas visitor to Pingalwara wrote: “I think that there is joy, a hope and a sense of optimism here that eclipses that tragedy behind the patients. Puran Singh, in my view, was a man of infinite compassion and wisdom.” No truer words were ever spoken!

This brings us to the bunch of publications that celebrate the work and writings of Saint of Pingalwara. The more striking among hard covers is Harish Dhillon's “The living Saint: Bhagat Puran Singh,” published (2005) by Unistar Books, SCO-26-27, Sector 34A, Chandigarh – 160022. Highly readable and informal, aimed at the younger generation, it captures the Spirit of Man, at the working level amid day-to-day realities, permeated with pathos and awash with milk of human kindness.

Then there is a bouquet of three books, in Punjabi by the Sage: derived from the Guruvani, which he had imbibed and exemplified throughout his life of fourscore and eight:

“ਪ੍ਰਭ ਕੈ ਸਿਮਰਨਿ ਸਭੁ ਕਿਛੁ ਸੁਝੈ ॥” is a collection of essays, studded with autobiographical details, which link the reader with gems of Guruvani. He talks of his love of nature (quoting John Ruskin and Wordsworth), his psychoanalysis of human nature and an amazing insight into the wisdom of Ramakrishna Paramhansa and Lala Hardayal, with a wealth of Guruvani quotations. An interesting footnote mentions that (after his departure) the daily expenditure of Pingalwara increased threefold, from Rs 70,000/- in 1996 to Rs two lacs in 2005, all accounted for by voluntary donations from across the globe. The essays pick up random themes, but their inspiration is rooted in (a) Guru Granth Sahib (b) Moral traditions of various faiths, and (c) Personal flights of fancy.

The twin volume “khwxIAW” stories are an anecdotal collection of personal experience, episode and real-life occurrences. Starting with account of his Mother, the memories of Lahore in 1940, the grim tragedy of partition, the death and devastation, which followed, and the key role of the Guru Tegh Bahadur Hospital. There are pen-pictures of Prof. Puran Singh, Master Tara Singh, Principal Bhai Jodh Singh, and - some of the more striking inmates of Pingalwara, Evidently, there has been extensive editing, which enhances the books' appeal without taking away their authenticity. Among other Pingalwara publications is a volume: gurbwxi dw SuD aucwrx by Sr. Dhanna Singh, running into 450 pages, as if to reinforce the axiomatic truth : ਸਰਬ ਰੋਗ ਕਾ ਅਉਖਟੁ ਨਾਮੁ ॥ - God's Name is the panacea for all sickness.

Much as one admires the gesture whereby all these publication are distributed free of cost, it would be more realistic that a price is put on each of these 'priceless books'.

Bhagat Ji's concern for environment finds expression in several of his writings. His love of nature is next only to his passion for ministering to sick. One of his stories indeed presages the danger to the human race spelt by HIV Aids, long before public health authorities in India showed any awareness.

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