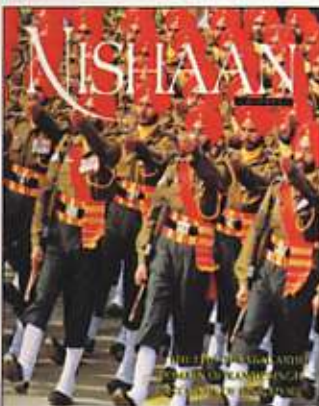


NISHAAN

III / 2000

THE EPIC OF SARAGARHI
DOMAIN OF RANJITSINGH
FIRST SIKHS OF SINGAPORE



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The Sikh Diaspora:

When we examine the Sikh psyche and its deepest urges, drives and dreams, among many another vital element in their make-up, there is the need to *affirm* its essence and uniqueness in all conditions and contingencies, in all climes and countries wherever it finds home and hospitality. Almost all significant accounts or histories of the Sikh Diaspora have, in one form or another, identified certain settled traits of character, certain spiritual energies and cultural *memes* which have helped the immigrant Sikh settler-communities retain that *clan vital* which has since the *annunciation* of the Khalsa as a sovereign community in 1699 through the visionary eye of the Tenth Master, *become* their mark of distinction and *commitment*, of engagement and enterprise. As a matter of fact, whenever the corporate Sikh spirit or identity is challenged, and the community drawn or driven into an existential crisis, or into a political pit as, for instance, in the dark decade of the post- "Operation Bluestar" tragedy, the sap of the spirit that's under siege rises in proportion to the magnitude of the challenge. In sum, the richest and the finest in that spirit manifests itself in action when it's stretched on the rack, so to speak. To be sure, during such interludes of intrepidity and daring, some darkneses or infirmities in Sikh character, acquired as a result of multiple historical, constitutive and societal pressures, also become more transparent, particularly, in Sikh leadership. But what's really amazing is the manner in which a hounded, humiliated community can, despite insurmountable problems, bounce back into life with a "Yes, in thunder". That, in sum, is the *spirit buoyant* of which the Sikh scriptures speak in soulful numbers, and of which a seer like Bhai Vir Singh and a poet like Puran Singh speak in accents of beauty and bliss, of power and glory.

Elsewhere in this issue, we carry two stories exemplifying the spirit *sui genesis*, joining history with contemporary times, and vindicating the abiding nature of the phenomenon. The inset write-ups on the legendary Bhai Maharaj Singh and Justice Choor Singh of Singapore are but a couple of symbolic stories from crowded history of Sikh sagas from generation to generation. And we hope to dramatise such lives in our future issues whenever possible. For it is only in flesh that the letter or the word acquires its full dimensions. Action, then, is the consummation of an idea that has possessed the spirit, the mind and the imagination of a person, a people or a community. And the two stories alluded to above have in rich measure all the ingredients of the Sikh spirit in trial and travail, in tragedy and triumph. To stretch the point would be, therefore, to indulge in truisms.

To understand the problems and issues confronting the Sikh community abroad one has, necessarily, to see the picture in the context not only of the countries of their adoption, but also of the country and community back home. For whatever the question of acculturation, and the quality of adaptation, the Indian communities settled in nearly all parts of the world tend invariably to nurse nostalgias, talk of *Mother India*, and indulge, often by proxy, in the "politics" of their land of origin. The Sikhs, in particular, seem to have a more direct and even forceful *involvement*, and their "*gurdwara politics*" — and hence the political culture — remain circumscribed, almost a copy if not a caricature, of the Sikh-Akali *mindset*. It's a pity that whilst the Akali Establishment in Punjab which continues to plague Sikh politics for certain reasons rooted in the feudal past, the Sikh communities in the U.K. in the U.S.A. and in Canada, to cite only three major congregates, too have been unable to *modernise* their responses to the changing

Promise & Problematics

human reality in the needed measure. Their "modernity", as I noticed during my stays and visits to those parts, is confined largely to the glittering and often vicarious aspects of Western culture. The *thought* and the modes of perception lag behind, making them "the dangling generation" abroad. How then to keep the Sikh heritage of religion, culture and observances alive and vibrant, and how to break their offspring to its deeper, undying truths is an issue which can only be addressed by the immigrants themselves. How they all have to achieve a viable world-view, a balancing of interests, and remain a community of commonalities, and still retain a prime position in the midst of scores of competing allegiances and hard choices would depend, then, on the kind of the new leadership which the community can throw up in the century now under way.

Earlier, I referred in passing to the Sikh mindset, and I take the liberty to reproduce a few lines from my column "On Target" which the *Tribune*, Chandigarh, has been carrying since 1991, and which in scores of edit-page pieces has sought to deal with the misery and wretchedness of the Akali politics, of the Congress game of ploys and proxies, of dark designs among other things. And I do so here in the hope that an anatomy of the Sikh mind and situation today would somehow help the Sikh diaspora to understand the pressing issues of the Akal Takht, of the Sikh identity as a constitutional necessity, of the controversy about the Nanak Shahi Calender etc. in a somewhat altered perspective

The passages quoted in part are from the edit-page of the *Tribune*, 29 April, 2000. The piece in question is entitled, "*The Sikh Mindset: The Akali Imbroglia*"

"...To return, then, to the question of the Sikh mindset, and its uniqueness, it's necessary to clear up some of the fog enveloping the Sikh image. For instance,

a certain looseness of thought and word in relation to the community is today a matter of agonising reality. The Sikh virtues—valour, the readiness to lift the sword where circumstances and necessity bring the question of *dharma* or righteousness into the picture, the spirit of *sewa*, a deep and conscious regard for truth, a certain amount of just pride in their ability to challenge orthodoxies, tyrannies and hegemonies, the spirit of *joie'd vivre* in day-to-day life and labour, a tendency towards openness or transparencies, the capacity to accept the challenge of modernity etc.—tend, at times, to turn into a sum of negatives in *other* eyes, reducing them into caricatures..."

"I am deliberately citing no examples, for the Sikh Establishment is particularly vulnerable to overreaction, wanton pride, a misplaced sense of its importance and infallibility. And any one wanting to suggest alternative, remedial and rational course of action is at once suspect in their eyes, proclaimed even a *tankhaya*, whatever his or her motives or feelings in the matter. One has thus seen pride turning into *hauteur*, valour into vainglory, transparency into obfuscation and obscurantism, generosity of pulse into a hardness of the heart..."

"It's, then, the time for the dialogical imagination of quality to get started. It's the time to effect changes in the grammar of ground-rules, and to codify a code of conduct for the keepers and pretenders of the faith. And it's also the time to reconsider the *Akal Takht per se*—its role and authority and jurisdiction in the context of the altered perceptions in India and abroad."

These are hard words for hard times, and are more an index of the common Sikh anguish today than of any desire to force changes. A great and vibrant community *has* to live up to its promise and potentials.

In the Domain of Maharaja Ranjit Singh

201 Years on

The land of the Five Rivers is historically, emotionally, and in a more practical manner than need be spelt out, intrinsically one, even if politically, it remains divided.

Punjabis from both parts of the "great divide" long to visit the "other side", with emotions which combine much nostalgia, curiosity and a sub-conscious hope that the barriers erected by a visiting English professor over half a century ago, will one day be lowered.

Visiting Western Punjab for a few days in May 2000 were Dr. Mohinder Singh, Director National Institute of Punjabi Studies at New Delhi, Rishi Singh, Research Fellow at the Institute and Sondeep Shankar, the well-known photographer and graduate of St. Stephen's College Delhi.

This account is by Rishi Singh, as also the photographs that illustrate his article.

There was both apprehension and excitement of going to Pakistan — to the land of the Punjab that was ruled by Maharaja Ranjit Singh. As soon as the PIA flight landed at Lahore's airport, 'excitement' remained, and 'apprehension' simply vanished! Lahore, the capital of Ranjit Singh's kingdom, was where I had arrived.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh took over the city of Lahore in the year 1799. The *ashraf* (elite in Persian) of Lahore had invited him, the prominent among them being Mian Ashiq Mukekkim, Mufti Muhammad Mukarram, Mian Mohkim Das, Mir Shadi, Hukam Rai and Gurbaksh Singh. Maharaja Ranjit Singh's forces had already encircled Lahore. Twenty five thousand men were in place, and every gun in position waited for the final assault. Maharaja Ranjit Singh left Sada Kaur (his mother-in-law) at the Delhi Gate on the eastern side and entered the



Main gate of the Lahore Fort.

capital from the south, where he was given a message of welcome by the citizens of Lahore. He rode around the city walls and carried out selective bombardment. As soon as the first breach took place, Mehr Mohkamuddin, leader of the Lahore Muslims, proclaimed by the beating of the drums that Maharaja Ranjit Singh had taken over the governance of Lahore. The Maharaja entered with his detachments through the Lahore Gate, located to the south. The fort of Lahore was thrown open to the eighteen-year old Maharaja on 7th July 1799, or almost exactly 201 years ago.

Lahore Fort seemed as prominent as it ever had been in history. The imposing Badshahi Masjid, opposite the main gate of the fort, attracts thousands for prayers everyday, not to mention the tourists pouring in from all over the world. The Princess Bamba Collection at the Fort, kept in Maharani Jindan's palace, is of historical significance as it throws much light on the life and times of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and those of his son Dalip Singh. Inside the Lahore Museum are kept clothes worn by Maharaja Ranjit Singh, a toy gun of Kunwar Partap Singh, and a sword with golden hilt belonging to Maharaja Dalip Singh.



Badshahi Masjid, the Samadhi of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and Dera Sahib.

It is here that the famous paintings by Auguste Schoefft and weapons of the Khalsa Raj have been kept. We were told that Japanese experts were engaged to preserve this collection, and their effort is really praiseworthy. The various paintings have been suitably treated, put behind glass, and the environment controlled with effective air-conditioning and perfect lighting. The Court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh comes alive when one stands in front of Auguste Schoefft's painting titled *Durbar of Maharaja Ranjit Singh*.

Then there is the small room, which towers above most of the buildings in the fort, where Maharaja Ranjit Singh had his own personal gurdwara. In front of the Royal Entrance to the Fort, there is another gurdwara which marks the spot where the cremation of Maharaja Ranjit Singh took place. Adjacent to this gurdwara is Dera Sahib, which marks the site of the martyrdom of the fifth Guru Arjun Dev Ji. The most fascinating aspects of

these gurdwaras are their original frescos and murals kept in the best state of preservation. However, they do need some more attention as far as conservation is concerned. At these gurdwaras, one sees *Sindhis* from other parts of Pakistan doing *sewa*.

I was told about an interesting trend emerging in Pakistan, most of the cities now having Sikh *hakeems*, who specialise in the Unani School of medicine. In Lahore too, there is a clinic run by a Sikh *hakeem*, and these have become symbols of compassion and love for which the Sikh gurus stood. Most of our Gurus had deep knowledge of herbal medicines, which they freely dispensed to those who needed them.

In front of the famous Lahore Museum on the Mall Road, is displayed the *Zam Zama* gun, symbol of victorious battles fought by the Sikhs. The cannon is 14 feet, 4.5 inches in length, and the calibre of the bore is 9.5 inches. The *Zam Zama* is one of the largest specimens of casting in the subcontinent, and is made of an alloy of copper and brass. It was cast at Lahore by Shah Nazir on the order of Ahmed Shah Abdali under the direction of Shah Wali Khan, his Prime Minister in 1757 A.D. The cannon was used successfully by Abdali in the battle of Panipat in 1761. After changing many masters, its possession was taken by the Bhangi Misal, and was then that it became famous as *Bhangian di Tope*.

Court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, inside Lahore Fort: the personal gurdwara towers above, to the right.



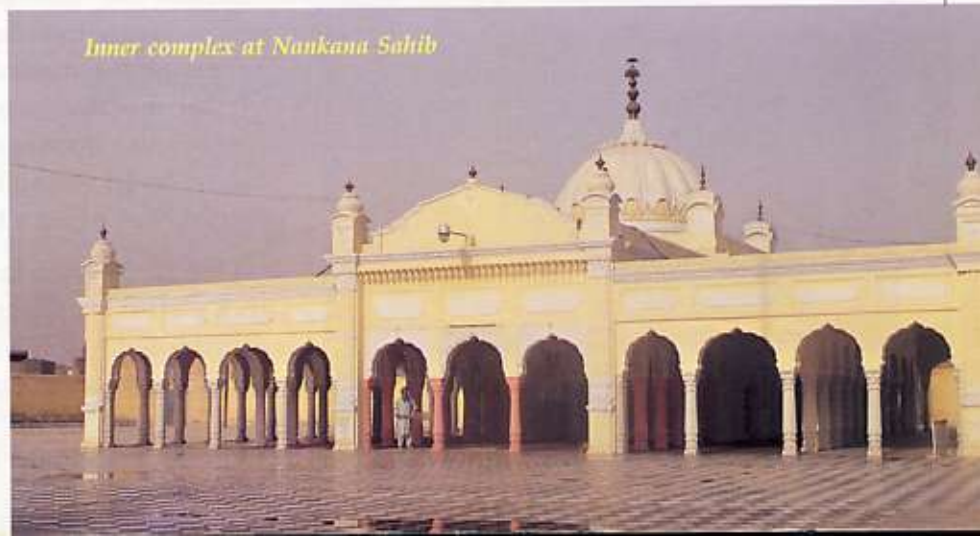
In the year 1802, Maharaja Ranjit Singh acquired the cannon when he took over Amritsar, and used the gun extensively during his campaigns of Daska, Kasur, Sujanpur, Wazirabad and Multan. The *Zam Zama* was damaged during the siege of Multan and was later removed to Lahore, but became unfit for further service in 1818.

The legendary Zam Zama Cannon.



Front view of the entrance to Nankana Sahib.

Nankana Sahib, which is some 60 miles (or two hours drive) from Lahore, is the birthplace of Guru Nanak Dev ji. There is a modern road (Motorway-2), linking Lahore with Islamabad, all this saves a lot of time in reaching Nankana Sahib, which is situated in the Shiekhupura district. The gurdwara complex of Nankana Sahib is very large, with all facilities within its premises including the well which was used by Guru Nanak Dev ji in his childhood.



Inner complex at Nankana Sahib

Nearby, there are other gurdwaras associated with Guru Nanak Dev ji's childhood: Gurdwara *Patti Sahib* where Guru ji had his initial lessons learning the alphabet (written on wooden slates called *pattis*), and *Bal Lila* are walking distance from the main Gurdwara Sahib. The other gurdwaras such as *Kiara Sahib*, where Guru ji made the ruined fields turn green, *Mal ji Sahib* where the king cobra protected Guruji from the scorching heat of the sun and *Tambu Sahib* where the Guruji hid to escape from his father's anger, are a little distance away from the main gurdwara. Apart from the main Nankana Sahib gurdwara, all the other gurdwaras are kept locked, and opened only when the *sangat* comes to visit. Some locals also visit these gurdwaras, but I must admit that I was emotionally upset to see that there was no water in the *sarovar* at Gurdwara *Kiara Sahib*; however, on reflection, my belief in the Almighty made me accept this *bhana* with optimism for the future.



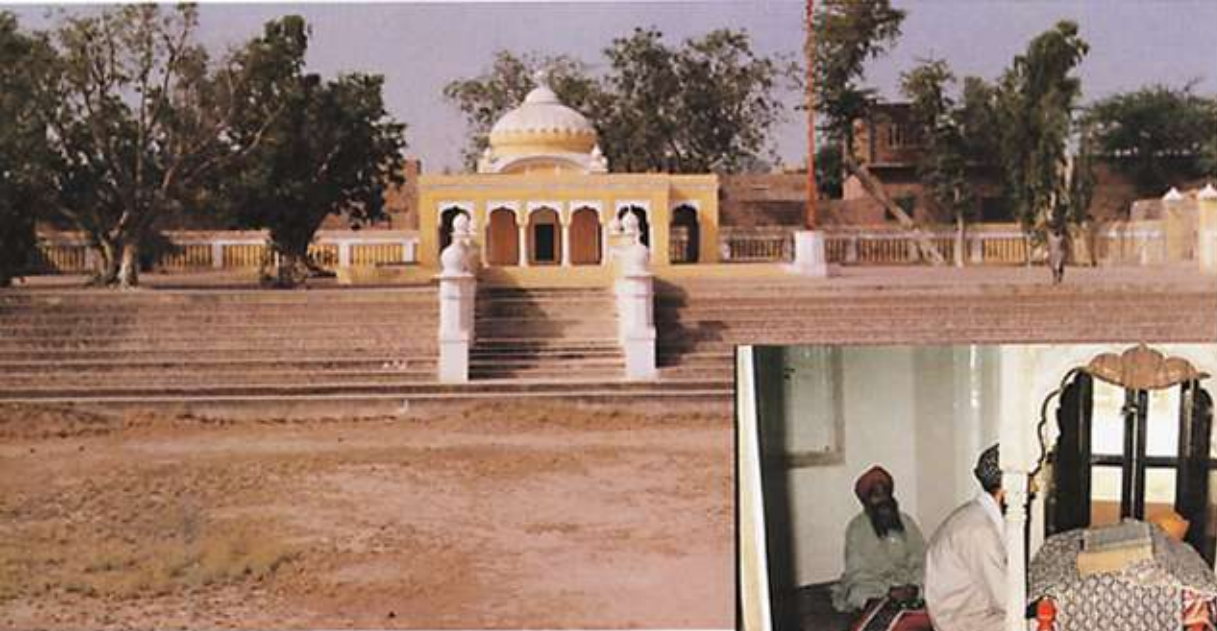
The Main Gurdwara at Panja Sahib.

Panja Sahib is located north west of Lahore. I took a "Daewoo Bus" from Lahore to Islamabad (fare Rs.280). The service is excellent, the buses are air-conditioned, there is a hostess on board who takes care of passengers. These only ply on the Motorway-2. In just four hours, I was at Rawalpindi's Daewoo Bus Stand, from where I took a taxi to Hasan Abdal (40 miles away) : Gurdwara *Panja Sahib* is located here. Again a big complex.

The *Panja* (palm) impression of Guru Nanak Dev ji on the rock surface is unforgettable. The water from this spring is truly blessed — it is so sweet! There are beautiful fish in the crystal clear water, fearless as they are safe here in Nanak's lap. There were a few Pakistani Sikhs from Peshawar who had come here on the occasion of *puran masi*, the full-moon



Palm impression of Guru Nanak Dev ji.



Sarovar at Kiara Sahib, near Nankana Sahib in the Sheikhupura District of Pakistan.



Guru Granth Sahib being recited at the Nankana Sahib Gurdwara.

day. I was surprised to learn that some five hundred Sikh families permanently live in Peshawar district and go about life and business normally. There are some shops belonging to Sikhs in Jamrud as well. I again noticed Sindhi devotees doing *sewa* at Panja Sahib.

After sight-seeing in Rawalpindi (once home for my grandfather) and Islamabad, I came back to Lahore by the same Motorway. All through the journey I had a deep sense of pilgrimage: going to one's ancestral land is indeed a pilgrimage. At times, I could imagine teeming *sangat* at the gurdwaras in Pakistan as one sees them in gurdwaras in Delhi — then I recalled the dried *sarovar* at Gurdwara Kiara Sahib, and was sobered.

The bus reached Lahore, and it was time to return to Delhi. I felt that I had had re-birth in the real sense of the term, having been to the legendary city of Lahore. ☞

Jinne Lahore Nahin Vekhia, O Jamia hi Nahin!
(One who has not seen Lahore is not born at all!)



Rishi Singh (seen above with Lahori bus crew)

Rishi Singh was born in Dehra Dun in March 1974 and schooled in Delhi. He did his M.A. from the J.N.U. in modern Persian, working on Persian correspondence during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh for his M.Phil programme from Delhi University. Presently, a Research Fellow at the National Institute of Punjab Studies, he has been working on "Project Relics".

The Bhai Sahibs of Bagrian



The Bhai Sahibs of Bagrian represent the earliest and perhaps the most respected continuous tradition of religious preceptors of the Sikh Panth, starting with the time of the fifth Guru Sri Guru Arjan Dev Sahib. Their most illustrious ancestor Bhai Rup Chand (1614-1708) was the son of Bibi Surati, daughter of Bhai Akal who was a well known disciple of the fifth Guru. Bhai Rup Chand was so named by Sri Guru Hargobind Sahib himself. While on a tour of the Malwa in 1630 A.D., the sixth Guru, in appreciation of young Rup Chand's devotion, founded the village of Bhai Rupa after his name. Later in the year 1631 A.D. when the sixth Guru visited village Bhai Rupa, he stayed with Bhai Rup Chand for over three months and bestowed on him the title of 'Bhai' - his own brother. Ever since, the family has the privilege of being called Bhai Ke with the head of the family known as the Bhai Sahib.

On the occasion of the coronation of Maharaja Ripdaman Singh of Nabha, in 1911. Left to right, seated is Sant Attar Singh of Mastnana. Standing centre is the Maharaja of Nabha (with kaigh) Bhai Sahib Bhai Arjan Singh of Bagrian, just behind is the young Bhayee Ardaman Singh

Sri Guru Hargobind Sahib appointed Bhai Rup Chand as his apostate in the Malwa region, giving him a *karchha* (long serving spoon) and directing him to maintain a *langar* (free kitchen) to feed the poor and the needy whilst preaching the Sikh tenets in that area. He also gave him a *khand* (double edge sword) as token of his blessings. Bhai Rup Chand became a close associate of the Guru and in the end, had the privilege of being one of the pall bearers during the last rites of the sixth Guru at Kiratpur.

Later, Bhai Rup Chand was given the supreme privilege and exalted honour to perform the *Anand Karaj* (marriage) ceremony of the Tenth Guru, Sri Guru Gobind Singh Sahib with Mata Jitoji at Guru-ke-Lahore.

After the battles of Chamkaur and Mukatsar, Sri Guru Gobind Singh Sahib went to Kangar in Malwa and stayed at Dina, where Bhai Rup Chand made offerings of money and war material to the Guru. In 1707, Bhai Rup Chand and his sons received *amrit* from the sacred hands of the Tenth Guru. Bhai Rup Chand gave two of his sons, Bhai Param Singh and Bhai Dharam Singh in the personal service of to the Guru. The *Dashmesh Pita* presented Bhai Dharam Singh with a kirpan and directed him to propagate the message of the Khalsa Panth, and carry out *Amrit Parchar* in the Malwa.

Bhai Dharam Singh of Bhai Rupa was one of the five chosen Sikhs to receive instruction from the Tenth Master on compilation of the *Adi Granth* at Damdama Sahib.

The two Bhai brothers went to Nander in the Deccan in service of Sri Guru Gobind Singh Sahib who later gave his personal prayer book, a *Gutka*, duly autographed, to Bhai Dharam Singh. After the demise of the tenth Guru, Bhai Dharam Singh returned to the Punjab. On hearing of the news of the passing away of the great Guru, Bhai Rup Chand also breathed his last in the village Bhai-ki-Samadh.

Bhai Rup Chand had brought the ancestors of the present Phulkian States in to the Sikh faith during the times of the Seventh Guru. Since then the descendants of Bhai Rup Chand, as also the descendants of Phul, have had very close relationship. The Bhai Sahibs have been the religious preceptors of not only the Phulkian States of Patiala, Nabha and Jind, but all the erstwhile Sikh principalities.

Bhai Dharam Singh who was a great scholar of Sikhism continued to command great respect amongst the Sikhs as a religious leader and led the Malwa Sikhs, along with his brother Bhai Karam Singh, during the battle of Sirhind under Banda Bahadur.

In 1708, his son Bhai Dayal Singh shifted his residence away from Bhai Rupa and founded a new village Dayalpura Bhaika, now in Bhatinda district. He brought the sacred relics given by the Gurus to Bhai Rup Chand and Bhai Dharam Singh with him, and established another *langar* as directed by the sixth Guru, which is being run by the family till today, three centuries on.

In 1754, Adina Begh Khan and Sadiq Begh Khan came to Dayalpura and impressed by the piety of the then Bhai Sahib,

Bhai Guddar Singh, presented him the territories around Bagrian. It was Bhai Guddar Singh who had intervened to save the infant Raj Kaur from infanticide at Badrukhan. She was eventually to marry Sardar Mahan Singh Sucharchakia and bore him a son who became the Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

Bhai Guddar Singh travelled widely, preaching the Sikh tenets and the *langar* was run by his wife- Mai Rajji. In 1765, they shifted their residence to the present family place at Bagrian, now in district Sangrur. The '*Langar*' started here has been run ever since and is known as *Mai Rajji da Langar*.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh visited Bagrian in 1808 and was persuaded by the then Bhai Sahib to enter into a symbolic brotherhood with the House of Patiala.

During the Anglo-Sikh Wars in 1846 and 1849, Bhai Bahadur Singh was the only Sikh leader of the Cis Sutlej area who did not oppose the Sarkar Khalsa of Lahore. Consequently, after the fall of Lahore Durbar, all properties of the Bhai Sahib were confiscated and only a small part was restored in the 1850s.

Throughout Sikh history, the Bhai Sahibs of Bagrian have been the epitome of devotion, dedication and service to the Panth and flag bearers of the Khalsa.

In the succeeding era, Bhai Arjan Singh was a most respected Sikh leader in the late 19th and early 20th century and was amongst the founders of the Singh Sabha Movement. Becoming the first president of the Chief Khalsa Diwan, he held this position for fifteen years.

Bhai Sahib Bhayee Ardaman Singh 1899-1976

The eldest son of Bhai Sahib Bhai Arjan Singh was Bhayee Ardaman Singh, who received rich religious and liberal contemporary education. Graduating from the Khalsa College Amritsar, he grew up in an environment of Sikh scholarship with personalities like Bhai Kahn Singh of Nabha, Principal Teja Singh and Baba Prem Singh of Hoti Mardan, besides his own father who was also a great scholar of Sikhism. His was an enlightened soul, deeply immersed in Sikh religious philosophy and its practice. His scholarly bent of mind and deep understanding of Sikh ethos reflected the depth of his views, rooted as it was in his illustrious heritage. His saintly disposition evoked reverence and gave him a place of eminence amongst the Sikhs. As an upright exponent and practioner of the Sikh dharma, or way of life, he was known for his uncompromising and forthright views. He provided direction to the Sikh thought during some of the most difficult days of the Panth in Independent India and provided an apolitical leadership to the community, in the most exalted tradition of over three hundred years of his family.

Bhayee Ardaman Singh passed away in 1976 leaving behind three sons, Bhai Haridhan Singh, Bhai Ashok Singh and Bhayee Sikandar Singh. The family institutions are now headed by Bhai Juhar Singh, son of Bhai Haridhan Singh, who expired in 1994.



THE MASTER'S GRACE

Extracts from "Thoughts of Bhayee Ardaman Singh"



Guru Nanak Devji with Bahlol, a Muslim seer in Baghdad, where a Gurdwara stands today.

A thoughtless, imitative historiography appears to have done incalculable damage to the pristine Sikh image, and for this sad state of affairs, Sikh historians in concert with unscholarly theologians are as much responsible as the ideological enemies of the faith. Sikhism was, therefore, naturally projected through tainted and blurred glasses. Happily, the writers and scholars now in labour have begun to dissipate the fog thus engendered and helped restore a certain kind of discipline in their work. The sarkari media and the ruling classes have in a way pressurised the Sikh imagination to establish afresh the Sikh identity. And the Sikh identity is largely the Sikh way of life.

Now this expression is comprehensive enough to subsume many a basic Sikh thought and the Sikh code of conduct and the Sikh world-view. It is not based on any set of mantras, rules and laws, edicts or commandments as such. There is no place in the Sikh way of life for any physical austerities, rituals, formalism, acrobatic postures, fasts or ablutions, trances or talismans, pilgrimages, penances or *karam kand*. Nor is there any room for mechanical practices and observances, for empty ritualism, masochistic yogic or other life-denying exercises. Furthermore, it steers clear of esoteric introversions, cobwebs of castes, incarnations and the like.

The nuclear energies of such a life are calculated to mould the human mind so that it acquires complete harmony with the will of the Creator. This can be achieved by submitting ourselves to the will of the Lord in thought and perceptions is the daily business and traffic of life.

It means, *ipso facto*, the extinction of our ego or "haumai". And this, in sum, is the dialectic of growth, and the creation of harmony and action in tandem.

This Way of Life took two hundred years to evolve and come to completion. Guru Nanak Dev sowed the seed towards the end of the Fifteenth and the dawn of the Sixteenth Century. His eight successors nurtured, cultivated, and fortified it. After 200 years of meticulous planning and preparation, the 10th Nanak, Guru Gobind Singh, brought it to blossom and fruition in 1699 when the Guruship was entrusted to the Khalsa under the sovereign direction of the *Gurbani* adumbrated and preserved in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. The spirit and the light (*jot*) were to be received from the *Gurbani*, and its implementation (*jugat*) in actual life was left to the Khalsa as the community or the new Commonwealth progressed from generation to generation, in tune with the essentials of the creed. Thus, a certain kind of resilience to deal with contingencies and crises formed an integral part of the process of "being and becoming". Thus harmony was to be created between our mind, soul and body, and between our functioning organs and intellect.

Equally, harmony is the hall-mark of Sikh familial life. Since a Sikh is to enjoy the life of a house-holder and partake of its riches and bounties and beauties, he is required to train his sensibility, and condition his mind accordingly. In the context of our life today, this order of harmony acquires a greater urgency. In fact, its orbit comprehends friends and relations, acquaintances and contacts where they live or work.

Ultimately, this harmony leads us to those spiritual heights where alone we can get peace of mind and stability. It is there that we get into perfect harmony and rhythm with Nature where the Creator is seen in action and where we experience eternal bliss. And that is the stage where the achieved equilibrium lifts us above fears and vain hopes. The *Shabad*, finally, vanquishes all falsenesses and all masks.

At this point we realise our insignificance and helplessness as compared to the Omnipotent Universality of the *Akal Purkh*. The human soul is just like a drop in the ocean of the Unfathomable and the Incomprehensible Universal Soul. As a consequence, we arrive at cross-roads, and one begins to slide towards utter helplessness, frustration, pessimistic inaction, renunciation, fatalism, and other classes of the spirit. This course propelled us into slavery, and all the suffering that India underwent by succumbing to this specious way.

The other way is of action, service, optimism, and taking pleasure in doing good to others. Sikhism affirms this way of positive action. We formulate our own *Karma*. That is our responsibility. Karma cannot be created by inaction. It results from our actions only. Action, therefore, is an essential part of life. If our actions are approved, the Master's grace will liberate us from the labyrinth of defeated thought. Action, then, becomes an imperative.

Guru Nanak Dev's paeans to peace, to fortitude in suffering have, generally been taken as the Master's message. It needs to be emphasised that there is an element of radical, revolutionary thought in his *bani* also, and that the true *dharma* implies and even demands action in full wakefulness of one's spirit. His poetry of pity in *Babar Vani* alone is enough to affirm his views.

In *Var Majh* Guru Nanak says

ਗਲੀ ਭਿਸਤਿ ਨ ਜਾਈਐ, ਛੁਟੈ ਸਚੁ ਕਮਾਇ ।

*By talking and discussing you cannot reach heaven.
Deliverance can only be had by living an active truthful life.*

The Tenth Master has himself prayed:

ਜਬ ਆਵ ਕੀ ਅਉਟ ਨਿਦਾਨ ਬਣੈ ਅਤਿ ਹੀ ਰਨਮੈ ਤਬ ਜੂਝ ਮਰੇ ।

*When the end comes,
May I die fighting in the thick of the battle.*

Our next duty is towards the Satguru. The place of the Guru in Sikhism is next to God. To get Light and Guidance, the need of the Guru is essential. All the gems and jewels lie inherent and dormant in us. They are only waiting for

the touch of the Guru to be energised and used.
(ਮਤਿ ਵਿਚ ਰਤਨ ਜਵਹਰ ਮਾਇਕ ਜੋ ਇਕ ਗੁਰ ਕੀ ਸਿਖ ਸੁਣੀ).

We have only to grasp and cling on to the Satguru's "Lotus Feet" with faith and devotion. If we persist with a singleness of purpose, in spite of the tests the Guru puts us to, the loving Guru will embrace, and come to function in us. Along with the Guru come his forces, strength, and powers. For us, God and the Guru are inseparable. Entrusting our body, mind, passions, and everything to the Guru, and abiding by His Will, we get the true realisation.

ਤਨੁ ਮਨੁ ਧਨੁ ਸਭੁ ਸਹਿਧਿ ਗੁਰ ਕਉ, ਹੁਕਮ ਮੌਨਐ ਪਾਈਐ।

Next comes our duty towards the Sikh community known as the *Panth*. Being entrusted with the Guruship, the Khalsa is the image of the Guru himself. To preserve its image and identity, and keep its colours high and aloft is a Sikh's foremost, sacred duty. *Keshas* (uncut hair) and beard are a spiritual link with the Guruship. It is *keshas* and beard that have saved the Sikhs from extinction. Otherwise, they would have been assimilated by the intolerant Hindu majority long ago. This responsibility has to be faced with courage and conviction.

To perform our duties and fulfil our responsibilities, we must have the requisite capability and capacity. For this purpose, besides the will and understanding, ways and means, intellect and knowledge, physical fitness and health are a necessity.

The Satguru's mission, and so the ideal of a Sikh, is to uphold and advance righteousness, and to emancipate the good, 'the saint in us' (ਧਰਮ ਚਲਾਣ ਸੰਤ ਉਗਰਨ). And to extirpate evil and evil-doers, root and branch (ਦੁਸਟ ਸਫ਼ਾ ਕੇ ਮੂਲ ਉਪਰਨ).

To fulfil this mission for self-preservation, and preservation of our way of life, of our *dharam*, traditions and our established institutions and organisations, the community as a corporate, integrated body has to create the necessary energies. The essentials were incorporated in this way of life from the very beginning. Guru Nanak Dev had himself established missionary centres even in as far-flung places as Ceylon, the Deccan, Multan and Baghdad. The selection and nomination of his successors proved a significant step in this direction. This established a precedent which continued to the last, and formed a lasting order. Our aims, therefore, are to be achieved in *Sangat*, and not by any way of renunciation. This is why *Sangat* (community gatherings) and *Pangat* (community dining) constitute the two strong pillars supporting the super-structure evolved over a tempestuous period of time.

As we have argued in this brief exposition, the Sikh way of life is unique, rooted in faith and deed, and catholic in its sweep of thought and understanding. And all this deified in Nature itself. "Nature is the Lord's spirit in grace and glory". Everything perceptible is the manifestation of the One Supreme Master. He can be perceived in His myriad, uncountable forms. It is in His manifest nature that His will, (*Hukam and Razaa*) can be observed.

In *Asa-di-Var*, the Satguru says

ਕੁਦਰਤਿ ਦਿਸੈ ਕੁਦਰਤਿ ਸੁਣੀਐ ਕੁਦਰਤਿ ਭਉ ਸੁਖ ਮਾਰੁ।

It is your will functioning in Nature, by which we see and hear, and are conscious of fear and comfort.

ਕੁਦਰਤਿ ਪਾਤਲੀ ਆਕਾਸੀ ਕੁਦਰਤਿ ਸਰਬ ਆਕਾਰੁ।

The nether regions, the heavens, and all the forms and bodies in Creation came under the course of Thy Nature;

ਕੁਦਰਤਿ ਵੇਦ ਪੁਰਾਣ ਕਤੇਬਾ ਕੁਦਰਤਿ ਸਰਬ ਵੀਚਾਰੁ।

So did the Vedas, the Puranas, the Semetic Scriptures and all the Schools of Thought.

ਕੁਦਰਤਿ ਖਾਣਾ ਪੀਣਾ ਪੈਨਣੁ ਕੁਦਰਤਿ ਸਰਬ ਪਿਆਰੁ।

Under your will come the ways of eating, drinking, dressing and all the ways of love and affection.

ਕੁਦਰਤਿ ਜਾਚੀ ਜਿਨਸੀ ਰੰਗੀ ਕੁਦਰਤਿ ਜੀਅ ਜਹਨ।

Thy Nature prevails in all the species, genera, the animal kingdom and colours.

ਕੁਦਰਤਿ ਠੇਕੀਆ ਕੁਦਰਤਿ ਬਦੀਆ ਕੁਦਰਤਿ ਮਾਨੁ ਅਭਿਮਾਨੁ।

Thy Nature works in the virtues and evils of men and in their feelings of honour and dishonour.

ਕੁਦਰਤਿ ਪਉਣ ਪਾਣੀ ਬੈਸੰਤਰ ਕੁਦਰਤਿ ਧਰਤੀ ਖਾਰੁ।

It is your Nature which works in the wind, water, and fire as well as in the particles of the earth.

ਸਭ ਤੇਰੀ ਕੁਦਰਤਿ ਤੂ ਕਾਦਿਤ ਕਰਤਾ ਪਕੀ ਨਈ ਪਾਰੁ।

It is all Your Will and Nature that work every where. You are the Creator and Master of Nature. Your Name is the holiest of the holy.

ਨਾਨਕ ਹੁਕਮੈ ਅੰਦਰਿ ਵੇਖੈ ਵਰਤੈ ਤਕੈ ਤਾਰੁ।

Says Nanak, Thou beholdest and pervadest all things under Thy Command and workest most intelligently.

In this Cosmos of His Presence, the insignificant human plays out his life and the Lord observes his conduct—the good (ਚੰਗਿਆਈਆਂ) and the bad (ਬੁਰਿਆਈਆਂ)

By man's own conduct is determined his nearness or otherwise to the Lord. He who contemplates on His Name receives acceptance in Him. (*Slok Japji Sahib*)

“From Our House to Your House”

A 4-foot high, 150-lb bronze sculpture was unveiled on 25 October 1999 at the Vatican, being a gift from the Sikhs of Canada to commemorate the commencement of the Third Millennium of the Christian Faith. It was even more appropriate that this was the Year of the Tercentenary of the birth of the Khalsa.

T.Sher Singh, a Guelph lawyer and a member of the 300,000 strong Sikh-Canadian community, presented the sculpture when he attended the 6-day Interreligious Assembly organised in Vatican City by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, as part of the great Jubilee celebrations. He was amongst the 200 participants of different religions from around the world who converged at the holy city-state during October 24-29, 1999 at the invitation of the Pontifical Council.

The bronze sculpture was specially commissioned on behalf of the Sikhs of Canada earlier in 1999 for this purpose. Renowned Canadian sculptor Hugh Russel calls his creation “The Column of Brotherhood”. It consists of an Ionic column inculcating figures and symbols from the two Faiths, and bearing the inscription *From Our House to Your House* in both English and Latin.

“The figures depicted on the sculpture, men and women of both faiths, as well as the use of traditional motifs”, explained Hugh Russel, “suggest the unity of spirit and support for their fellow man, affirmation of the understanding and appreciation of the individual’s religious beliefs, genuine and peaceful acceptance of their cultural differences”.

“It is important”, added T. Sher Singh, “that when a celebration of such magnitude occurs within a faith community, other faiths should willingly join in. Surely, we can share in each other’s joy. And, if we do, it will invariably become the foundation for building other, bigger things”.

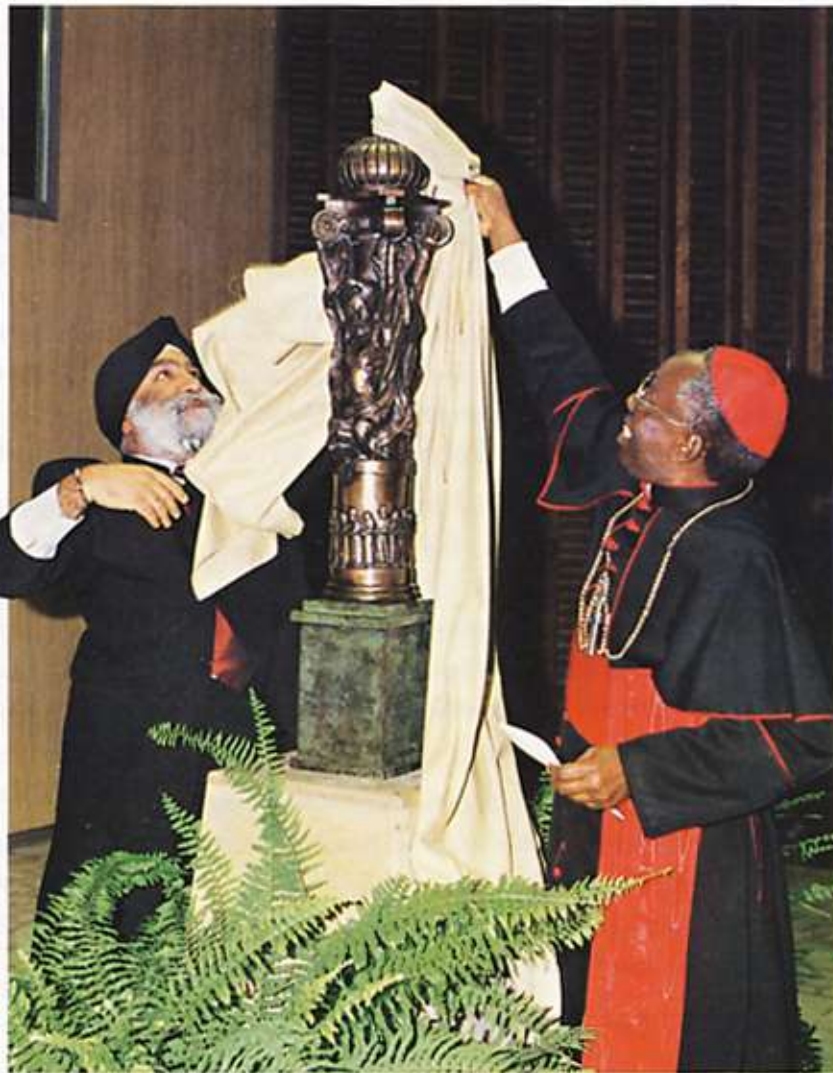
The statue has been placed in the atrium of the New Vatican Synod Hall, where it was officially unveiled by H.E.Cardinal Francis Arinze, President of the Pontifical Council, during the course of the ceremony for opening the Assembly on October 25, 1999.

A Jubilee Gift
from Sikhs
to the
Catholic Church



The concept devised uses a simple Ionic column, which at its mid-point has "morphed" into two figures, a Catholic priest on the one face and a Sikh on the other. Both figures are employed in the support of the column's capital, a symbol of the unity of purpose. Here the figures are grasping the four capital details, one in each hand, the effort showing in their bodies, their expression being of intense concentration but not meant to suggest pain or sadness. Around the bottom of the column is a repetitive grouping of four figures, a Catholic man and woman and a Sikh man and woman, each holding the arm and shoulder of the one to his/her right.

The figures circling the column, both men and women of both faiths suggest the unity of spirit and support for their fellow man, affirmation of the understanding and appreciation of the individual's religious beliefs, genuine and peaceful acceptance of their cultural differences. Hugh Russel chose to show the fundamental concept of the piece through the two figures supporting the weight of the capital. It just happens that they are both men, clothed in literally the same cloth, which wraps around the figures and the column alike. The drapery strengthens the symbolism, implying a strong link between the figures in addition to the common activity.



Cardinal Arinze unveiling the sculpture, assisted by T. Sher Singh.

Hugh Russel — the Sculptor

Created with a passion for movement and emotion, the sculptures of Hugh Russel are truly fine examples of figurative realism. Most often his compositions are rendered in rich deep coloured bronze, the perfect material to convey the strength, sensuality and fluid motion Russel strives for in his works. A slight exaggeration found in each work seems to draw a sense of empathy for the subject from the viewers, as though they were involved in a non-verbal conversation with the artist.

Hugh was born in Toronto in 1949, and began his life time devotion to art at the age of nine. After many years of commercial work, Hugh turned his attention to sculpture in the mid-eighties.

Among his most recent works are a series of sculptures

created for the Sikh Community of Canada in honour of their one-hundredth anniversary in this country. The first was a one third life size bronze depicting the Maharaja Duleep Singh. There is similar scaled work of his mother in progress, to be followed by the Maharaja Ranjit Singh and Maharaja Sher Singh, Duleep's elder brother.

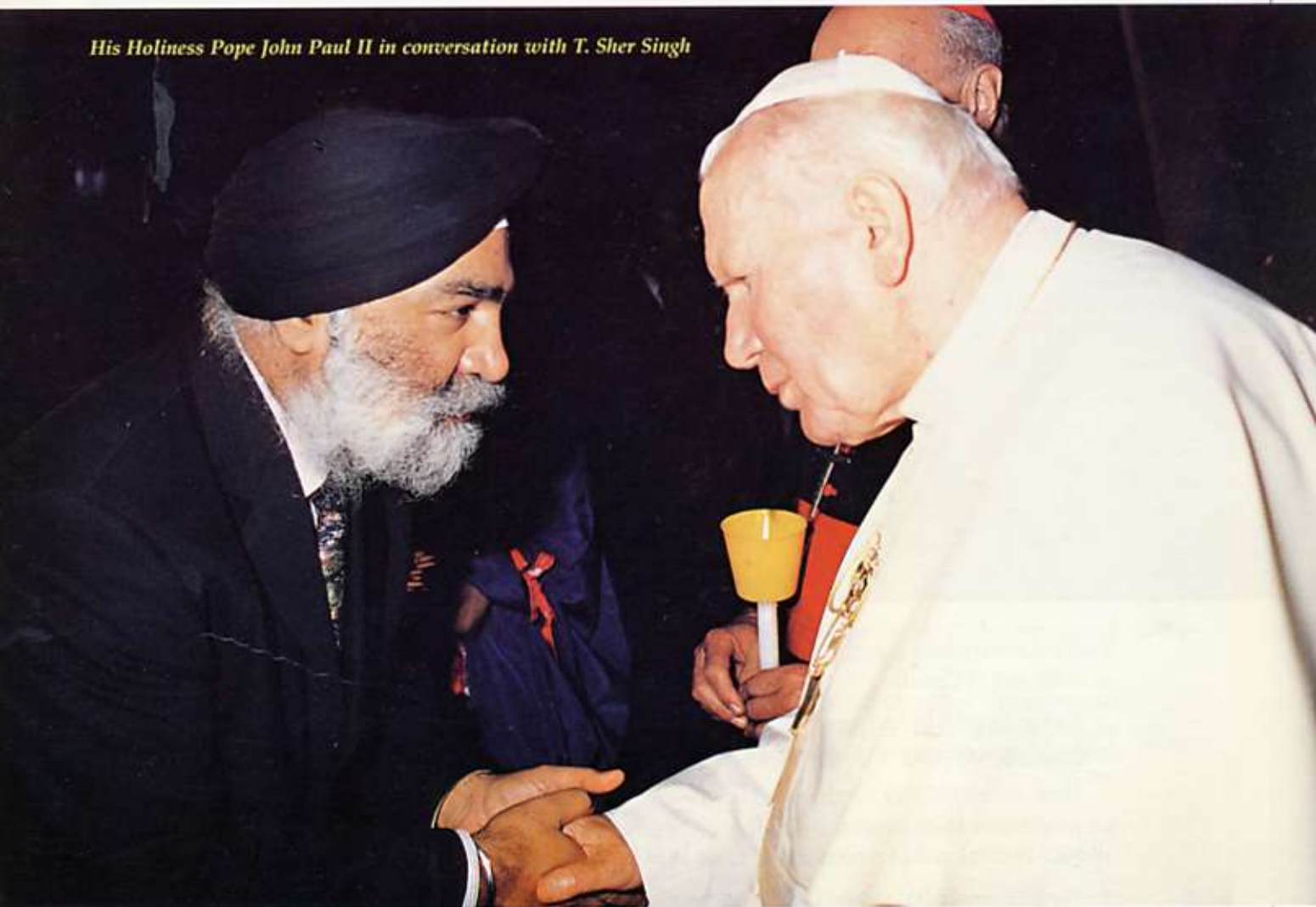
Fresh from the foundry was a work that was six months in the making. "The Column of Brotherhood" was a tribute to understanding and co-operation between faiths, presented to the Holy Catholic Church in Rome from Canada's Sikhs, which came about in response to an invitation extended to Mr. T. Sher Singh, a noted member of the Canadian Sikh Community, to travel to Vatican City to speak at a symposium in October 1999.

The presentation was inspired by **T.Sher Singh**, who turned 50 in September 1999, and is a litigation lawyer who practices from his office in Guelph, Canada. He obtained his LL.B. from the University of Western Ontario, London, Canada in 1983, was called to the Bar in 1985 after he completed articles at the Toronto law-firm of McCarthy & McCarthy, the largest law-firm in Canada.

Born and brought up in Patna, India, he has since lived in Canada now for almost three decades.

In May 1998, Sher was awarded the degree of Doctor of law, *honoris causa*, by Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Canada.

His Holiness Pope John Paul II in conversation with T. Sher Singh



In May 1992, Sher participated in a 7-day long "think-tank" conference entitled "The Nakoda Project: Conversations on Canada" near Banff, Alberta as one of 45 Canadians selected from coast-to-coast to discuss and review various aspects of Canadian nationhood.

During 1990-93, he served on the Ontario Police Commission which oversees policy and standards of the 120 municipal Police Forces in the province of Ontario. A year before his appointment, he was a member of the Ontario Task Force on Policing &

Night view of the assembly in St. Peter's Square.



Race Relations whose report led to sweeping changes in policing the Province of Ontario as well as in the rest of Canada.

Earlier, in 1987, he had served as a Special Advisor to the Government of Canada with respect to the refugee situation in Halifax the same summer.

Until recently, T.Sher Singh served on the executive and Board of Directors of The Edward Johnson Music Foundation and The Guelph Spring Festival, headed the renowned Eden Mills Writers' Festival, one of the leading festivals of its kind in North America.

He is a frequent TV and Radio commentator on various national networks and has, from time to time, appeared as a regular panelist on a number of shows. He currently hosts a weekly TV talk-show on Sikh issues and perspectives, entitled "Sat Sri Akaal" and, along with his daughter and host of the show, Gehna Singh, appears weekly on the TV-series, "Conversations on Sikhism".

He is the author of articles on various issues ranging from Law & Justice, Policing, the Constitution and Canadian Unity, to Religion, Sikhism, Race Relations and Human Rights & Civil Liberties.





Delegates to the assembly during a plenary session in the Vatican.

He is a regular columnist with "The Toronto Star" and "The Guelph Mercury", both on current issues, and writes a weekly travel column for the Kitchener-Waterloo Record.

In 1987, he produced Governor General's Award winner Sharon Pollock's play, "The Komagata Maru Incident", at a downtown Toronto theatre and in London, Canada. The following year, he produced two videos: "Sikh Canadians: The promise and the Challenge" and "The Durbar Sahib of Amritsar".

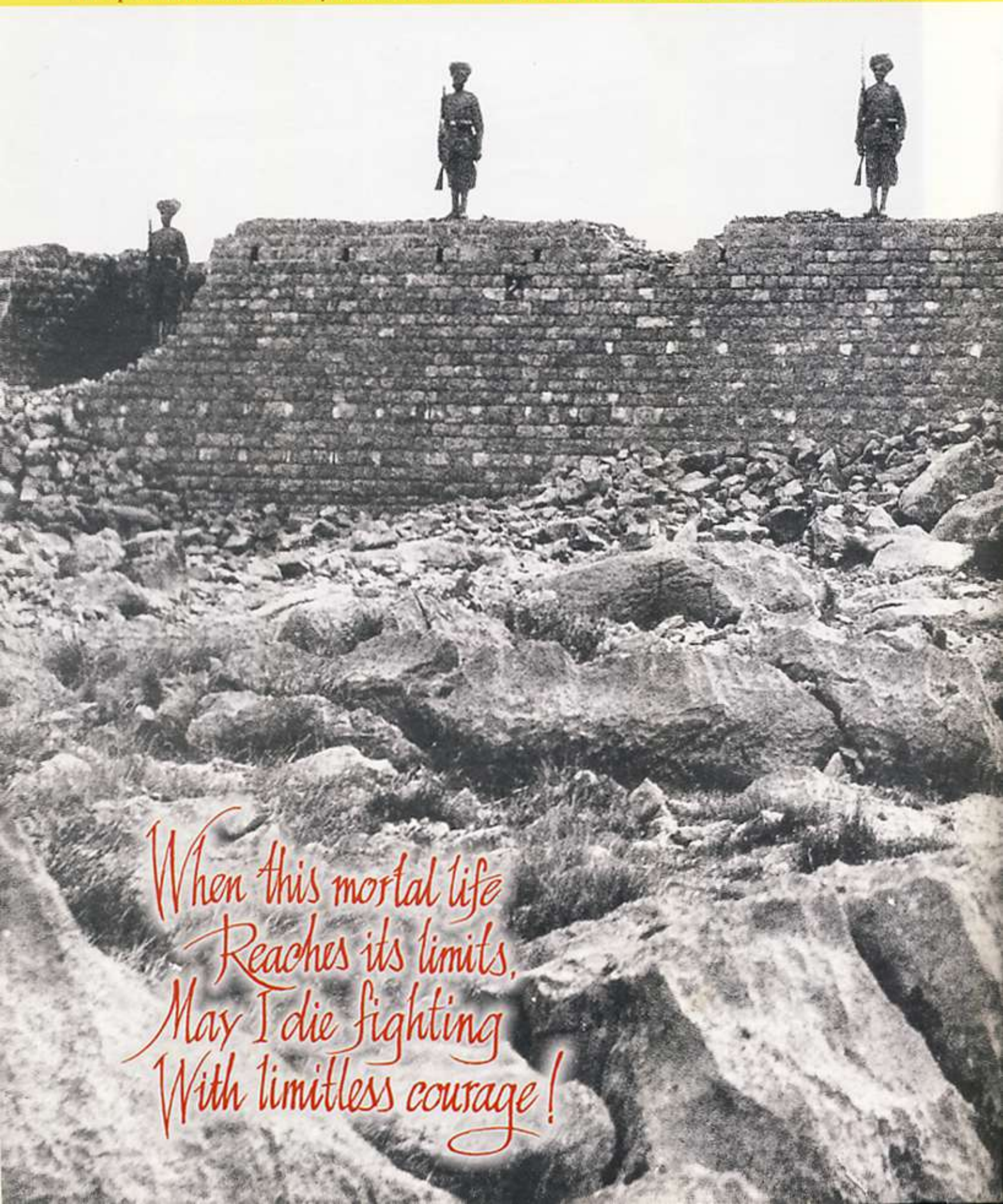
He has published writings on numerous topics, including a chapter each in "Faith in my Neighbour: World Religions in Canada" and "The Sikhs in Ontario".

Formerly a resident of Toronto (and, for shorter periods, of London and Thunder Bay), Sher Singh now lives in Guelph, Canada. At the end of 1990, the year he moved to Guelph, he was selected its "Newsmaker of the Year".

In 1997, he spear-headed the celebrations of the Centennial of the first Sikh settlement in Canada. Again, in 1999, he was on the vanguard of the Canadian celebrations of the Tercentenary, of the birth of the Khalsa including in the approval, design and issuance of the Canada Post commemorative stamp released on April 19 marking both the Centennial and the Tercentenary.



An epic of the Indian Army's most decorated unit, XXXVI Sikh of the Bengal Infantry, now



*When this mortal life
Reaches its limits,
May I die fighting
With limitless courage!*

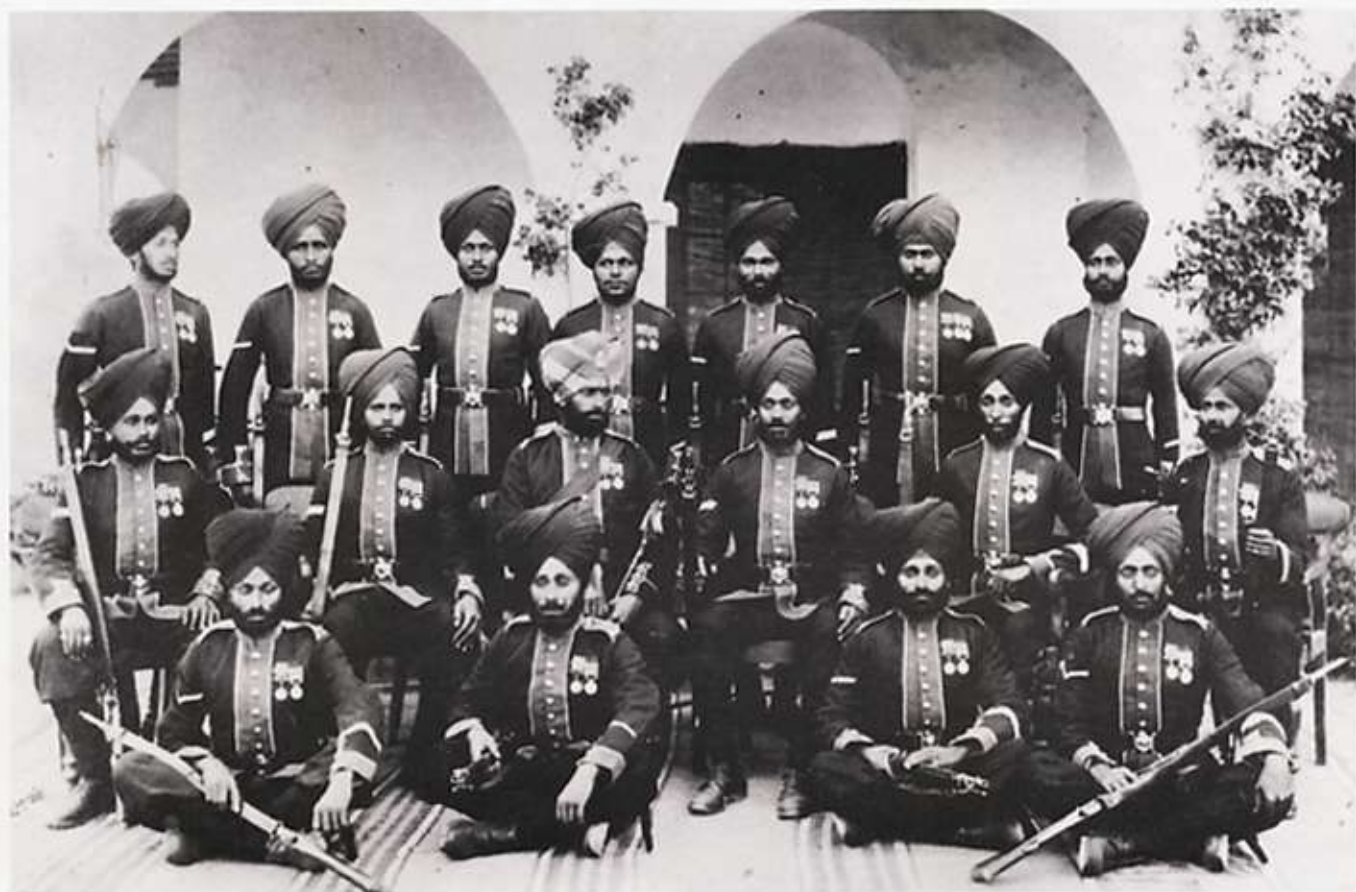
4th Battalion, The Sikh Regiment

Military History

SARAGARHI 1897

On 12 September 1897, in the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, 21 young men of the Sikh Regiment in a display of unparalleled courage and sacrifice, fought to the last man, last round, against the most fearful odds making this not only one of the most stirring episodes of the Regiment but also that in the history of the Indian Army.

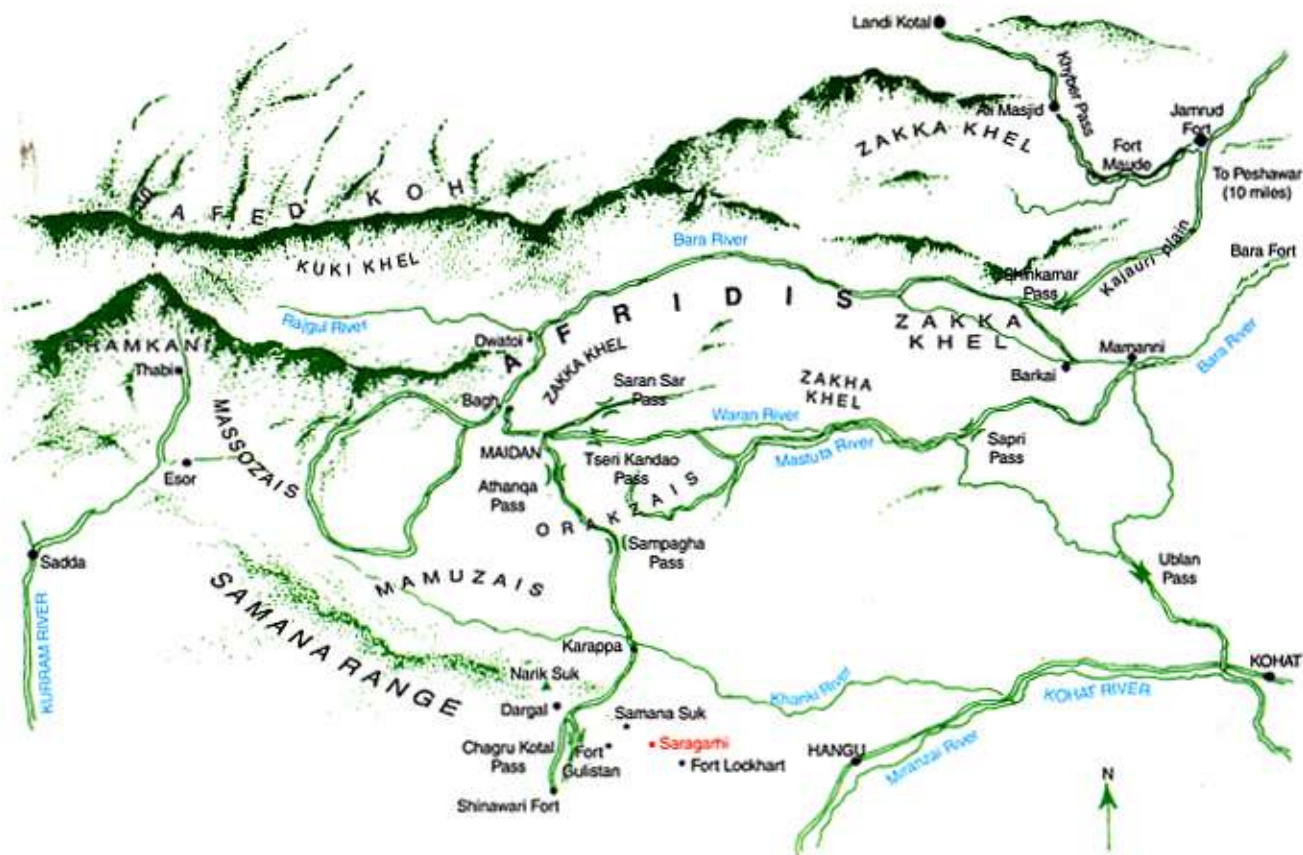
Those twenty one soldiers of the XXXVI Sikh fought it out to the end against thousands of tribesmen in India's North West Frontier Province, with incredible heroism and steeled resolve.



Men of the XXXVI Sikh in 1897.

This action was, in the words of the then Governor General of India: "A heroic devotion which has never been surpassed in the annals of the Indian Army". The Commander-in-Chief India said of them: "Fighting against overwhelming numbers, they all died at their posts, with unflinching loyalty and devotion to their oath while upholding to the very last, the traditional bravery of the Sikh nation".

In the North West Frontier Province, the Tirah area lies to the south of the *Koh-e-Sufed* and is approached via Kohat and then Hangu. To the north are the Afridis and in the south, the Orakzais. The British mounted many expeditions against these tribes ever since the annexation of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Kingdom in 1849, till India's Independence in 1947. The British had moved upto Samana but Tirah was not occupied till 1897. This made the Afridis and the Orakzais join hands to take on the British in the summer of 1897, apparently giving three reasons for the Tirah uprising of that year, being the imposition of salt tax, encroachments on their area and interference in their customs.



The Tirah Region of the North West Frontier Province.

Tribal discontentment was like simmering fire which, with a little gust of wind, could pick up speed to become an inferno and raze everything in its path. Sometimes there were warnings, as indeed was the case in 1897. Nevertheless, this rebellion against the British built up into volcanic proportions almost overnight. When the Afridi and Orakzai clans rose in revolt in August of that year, Lt.Col. John Haughton's XXXVI Sikh were holding the Samana Ridge, comprising a series of forts and fortified posts, running westwards from Hangu, an important nodal point situated twenty five miles west of Kohat. The main positions held by the Sikhs were the two fortified locations known as Fort Lockhart (now Fort Samana), nine miles west of Hangu, and Fort Cavagnari (later Fort Gulistan) another three miles away. These Forts had been erected soon after the Miranzai Expedition under Sir William Lockhart in 1891. Between them, perched at a height of 6000 feet was the communication post at Saragarhi, to maintain Helio and Semaphore communications between

the two Forts, which were not intervisible because of Saragarhi being in-between. Fort Lockhart could hold about three hundred men and Fort Gulistan about two hundred. The post at Saragarhi, capable of holding about twenty-five to fifty men, was about a mile and a half west of Lockhart and about a mile and three quarts east of Gulistan.

The action began with 30,000 Afridis investing Landi Kotal on 23 August 1897 and 25,000 Orakzais investing the Samana Ridge. Now the Government of India finally decided to mount the Tirah Expedition (see "The Restive Frontier").

From Swat to Waziristan, the tribes rose in the tens of thousands, Afridis, Orakzais, Mahsuds and Mohmands, their anger fanned by religious leaders, the Hadda Mullah and the Mullah Powinda. They preached *Jihad*, promising eternal bliss in paradise to those so fortunate as to die in the battle. First information of the uprising came from Fort Chakdara in distant Swat. Here the tribesmen had allowed the British officers to complete their afternoon's polo match before pinning them down in their fort. At Maizar in the Tochi Valley, the British officers who were having a meal with some tribal chiefs, were brutally killed there and then. At Fort Lockhart on the Samana Ridge, realisation came that the local tribes would soon join in the fray and attempt to capture the Samana Ridge.

Fort Lockhart was at a height of 6496 feet while Fort Gulistan was at 6152 feet. Fort Lockhart had been planned and constructed in 1891 as the site of a battalion headquarters, with two and a half companies. Fort Gulistan took another company plus and the remainder strength of the battalion was allocated to picquets and communication posts such as Saragarhi. The posts were built to 9 feet, with 4 feet parapets, giving a overall height of 13 feet. Two rifle-calibre machine guns each were placed on the parapets of both the forts.

Saragarhi is a small village on the Samana Ridge, beyond Hangu in the Orakzai Tribal Agency of the North West Frontier Province. The ridge itself is about 7000 feet above sea level. The village is located between Samana (Fort Lockhart) and Fort Gulistan (Cavagnari). These two forts along with the Saragarhi communication post in-between, had been constructed in 1891 and communications established by 12 April that year. In pushtu, *Sara* or *Sra* means red and *Garhi* means a small tribal fortress. The bloodshed of 1897 was to prove tragically true to the name of Saragarhi.

At Fort Lockhart were garrisoned 121 soldiers of the XXXVI Sikh under the Commanding Officer Lt.Col. John Haughton with Lt.Munn, his Adjutant. At Fort Gulistan

*Fort Lockhart, nine miles west of
Hangu, is now named Fort Samana.*



there were 175 men under Maj Des Voex with 2nd Lt. Pratt and Surgeon Capt. Prall with Lt. Blair dangerously wounded. Remainder of the 36th Sikh were distributed elsewhere with three Companies detached in the Kurram Valley, 21 men at Sartop Post, 37 with a native officer in Dhar Post, 44 at Sangar Post, 22 in Crag Picquet and finally the 21 men at Saragarhi Post.

Just before the Christmas of 1896 the 36th Sikh were moved from Peshawar to Kohat and in 1897, garrisoned the Samana Forts. In fact the CO's wife Mrs. Haughton was

Col. Haughton's force which too had forayed out, moved back into Fort Lockhart. No sooner that they did so, the Orakzais came back in an offensive. Apparently the Orakzais, discouraged by the seeming lack of instant success, were pressuring their Afridi cousins to join hands without further delay. The latter took this decision on 4 September and the combined tribal force, estimated at over twenty five thousand Orakzais and Afridis, was then launched against the 36th Sikh.

Haughton and his Sikhs had understood the Afridis,



Officers of the XXXVI Sikh, Tirah 1897. Seated in the middle is the C.O., Colonel John Haughton.

with him in Fort Lockhart till May 1897 when she left for England. However in Fort Gulistan Haughton's second-in-command, Maj. Des Voex's wife, her children and their nurse Teresa McGrath remained inside the Fort throughout these actions until relieved.

The tribal build up commenced on 25 August and by 27 August, the Orakzais started a general attack on the posts all along the Samana Ridge, initially indulging in minor forays. On 3 September, the tribals were seen advancing towards Fort Gulistan. After setting fire to thorn brush protective hedges, the Orakzais retreated and

who now joined the Orakzais, very well. As fighters they were amongst the best on the Frontier ... "good shots with sound tactics ... they retreat before their foe as he advances, and press upon him as he retires".

During this period, Maj. Gen. Yeatman-Biggs, the Kohat-Kurram Field Force Commander had assembled a force of some two thousand five hundred men, including Infantry, Cavalry and Mountain Guns at Hangu. Having received reports that a very large body of Orakzais and Afridis were moving eastwards towards the Khanki Valley, he apprehended an attack on the Kohat-Hangu Road and so

marched his force eastwards along the crest of the Samana Ridge. After fighting some rearguard actions but now short of water, he arrived at Hangu late at night. Unavoidable as this move was, it allowed the Orakzais and the Afridis to double back to direct their entire strength against the Samana Ridge. Their aim was to overwhelm those posts before arrival of the Field Force which was backed by artillery.

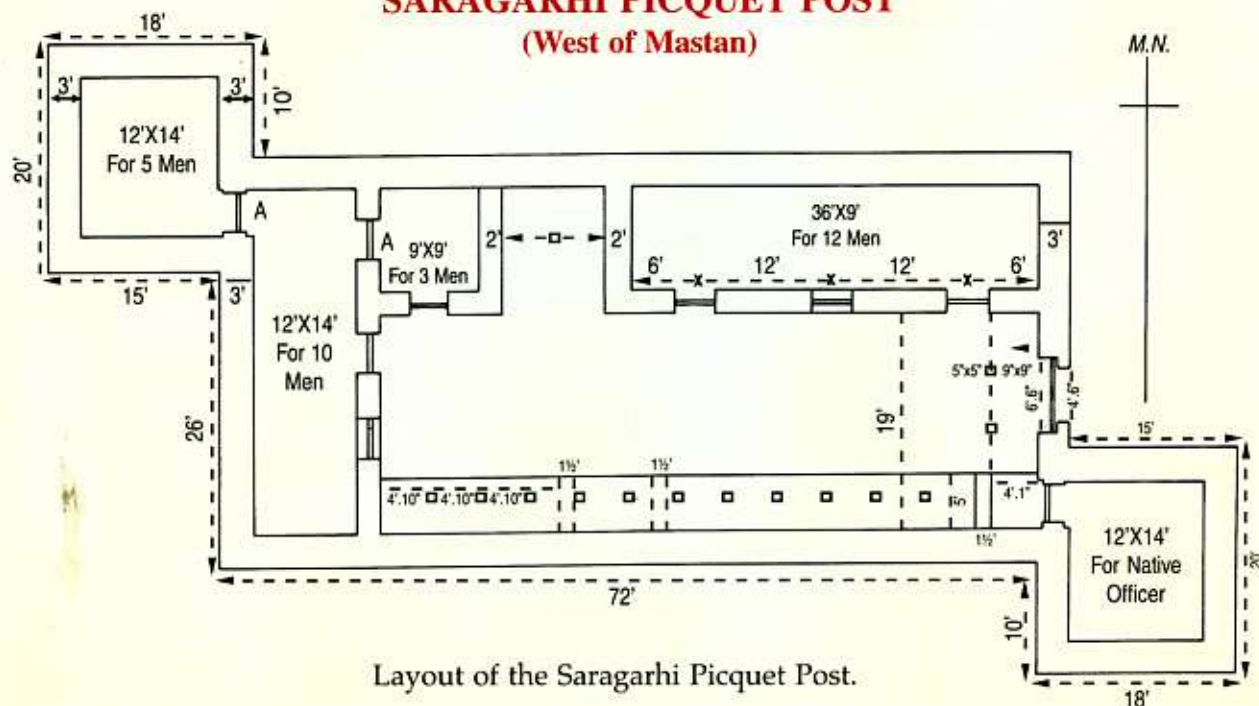
On 3 September, having done his best to support Fort Gulistan, Col. Haughton moved back into Fort Lockhart, on the way detaching some men to increase the strength at Saragarhi to 21 men, mostly from his Signal Platoon. The post of Saragarhi had some inherent disadvantages. First, a technical error in planning which went back to 1891: the main door was wooden, at best studded with iron. The second, the critical necessity of holding out at Saragarhi at all costs was perhaps not fully appreciated at that moment by Haughton, an otherwise seasoned soldier. Without the availability of communication via Saragarhi, the Forts Lockhart and Gulistan could not act in cohesion. Some pruning would have permitted providing this critical communication post with something nearer the fifty men it could hold. Such an action may just have permitted the garrison to hold out for enough time during the day and into the night till relieved as subsequent events were to show.

The post at Saragarhi itself was only a small stone blockhouse. On its southern side, the ground fell steeply into the Kurram Valley, three thousand feet below, but on the other three sides the slope



Men of the XXXVI Sikh reoccupied the ruins of Saragarhi picquet a day after the epic battle.

SARAGARHI PICQUET POST (West of Mastan)



Layout of the Saragarhi Picquet Post.

was less precipitous, although seamed and broken by numerous ravines, which together with huge boulders littering the mountainside and afforded perfect covered approach to within a few yards of the blockhouse walls. The planned clearance for fields of fire went a mere thirty yards. The planners had never envisaged a really serious sustained assault of the type that Saragarhi, in the event, ultimately faced. It was reckoned that help was available next door in Forts Lockhart and Gulistan which were within visual distance of Saragarhi.

The Orakzai-Afridi build up continued through 10 and 11 September, with the hills teeming with upwards of 20,000 tribals, who were impatient to launch all-out attacks before the main Field Force arrived. As day broke on 12 September, the Orakzai-Afridi *lashkar* with scores of standards flying, swarmed around the isolated post of Saragarhi, while others attacked Fort Gulistan and a third body cut off communications with Fort Lockhart. It was impossible for either Col. Haughton in Fort Lockhart or his deputy Maj. Des Voeux in Fort Gulistan to rally out in support of Saragarhi.

Saragarhi was now truly under vicious attack: 21 men of the 36th Sikh defending themselves against nearly ten thousand — fearful odds by any standard.

The command of Saragarhi had fallen on Havildar (Sergeant) Ishar Singh, a non-commissioned officer, a man always considered an unlikely choice as material for promotion or higher rank. A Jat Sikh peasant from the Punjab, with twelve years service, he had with him 20 young Sikh soldiers, none with more than five years service, now preparing himself and his band of youngsters to take on incredible odds. This was nothing new for Ishar. A somewhat maverick character, whose independent nature had more than once brought him into confrontation with his superiors, his character and survival instinct in a Sikh army unit epitomised, in many ways, the advice of the British Indian Army, still being given to young officers in Sikh units. "Work these men until they drop and you'll find they make the best soldiers. But if you relax and let them idle, there is no kind of mischief known to man



Men like Havildar Ishar Singh personified the Sikh soldier's legendary warrior tradition.

they will not become involved in". Ishar Singh was always ready to pick up scraps and had the reputation of being the best brewer of illicit liquor and great at commandeering

The Restive Frontier

The gradual movement of the Raj into the north-western tribal strongholds since the 1870s created much resentment amongst the tribesmen. In 1897, a faqir in Swat, dubbed as the "Mad Mullah", inflamed the tribes against the British and called for holy war against the infidils, proclaiming a *jihad*. On 25 August 1897, the British lost control of the Khyber pass and the entire Frontier was soon ablaze.

Sir William Lockhart, who had taken over as Commander-in-Chief, was equally determined to advance into the then unknown territory of Tirah and after showing them "the might of the Empire", announce his final terms for the tribesmen from the heart of their lands, at Maidan.

The heart of Tirah was the Maidan Valley, 15 miles long and 7 miles wide: fertile, populous and prosperous.

Tens of thousands of tribesmen, armed with tens of thousands of rifles provided by the Amir of Afghanistan, were soon united only to keep the strangers out, off their lands, off their grazing grounds, resenting intrusions by anyone, even other tribesmen let alone the Government of the Sikhs, or after annexation of the Punjab, the British. There was always self governance and the perception of independence, fear, suspicion and resentment, living in enmity as it were, amongst themselves, which could not truly be fathomed by the British.

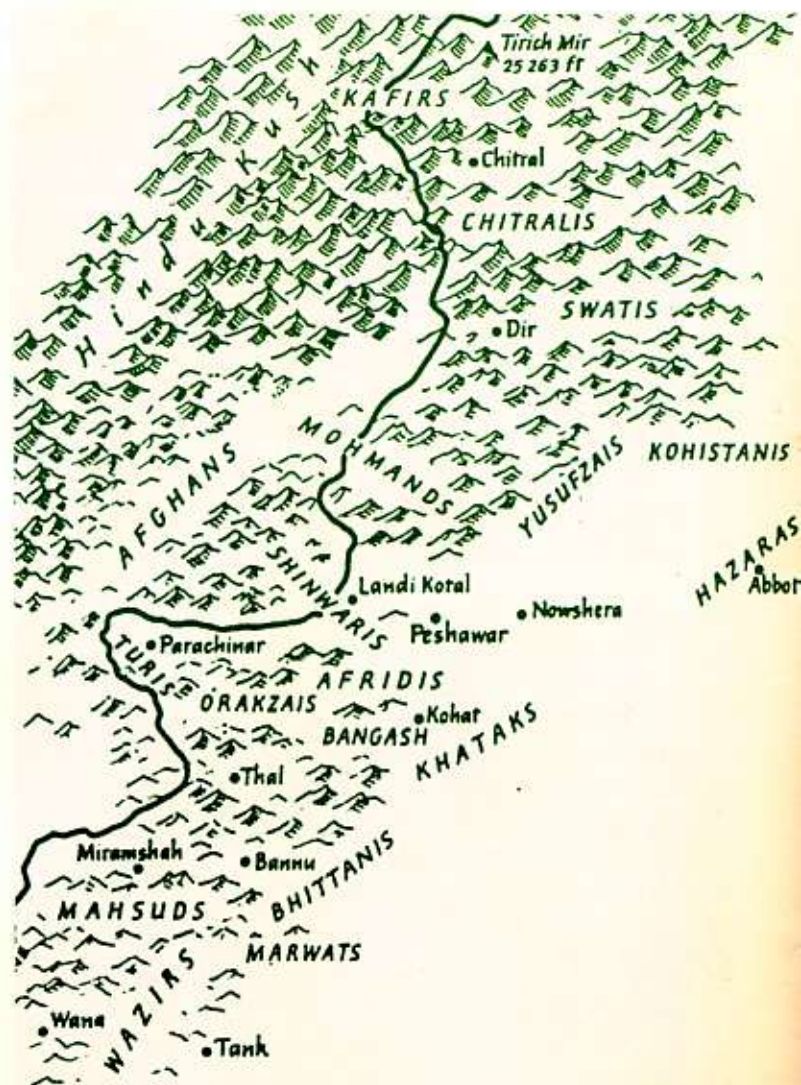
By the summer of 1897, the British-Indian Army had moved their field forces into Swat, the Tochi Valley and against the Mohmands while more troops were brought in to punish the Afridis and Orakzais who had committed the most egregious of outrages.

The Tirah was a large range of tribal territory, south-west of the Peshawar Valley, largely unknown and unsurveyed by the British. The northern section was where the Afridis came to during summer, while the Orakzais lived in the southern part. Some 44,000 troops took part in the Tirah campaign of 1897-98, even more than had fought in the Crimea.

The Army on this march was described as witnessing "roads in every direction full of gathering troops, Highlanders and Sikhs, Gurkhas and Lancers, camels, mountain guns, pipes and drums...wild and romantic".

However, the foul weather, rough terrain, hostility of every inhabitant made the campaign an arduous one.

Tirah became the cockpit of the "holy war" and the tribesman planned to concentrate their attack on the three so-called 'impregnable' forts built by the British on the Samana range earlier in the decade. Two companies of the XXXVI Sikh had occupied the key Samana Ridge since 31 December 1896, with Headquarters in Fort Lockhart and detachments at Dar, Sangar, Sartrope, Craig Saragarhi and Fort Gulistan.



NORTH WEST FRONTIER PROVINCE



The monument at Samana, dedicated to the gallant fallen at Saragarhi (picture taken in 1999)

the neighbouring unit's meat-on-hoof to give his men some extra rations. Equally strong of character, he was quick to take the underdog's side and was fated to give the enemy "his best". Ishar Singh took charge of his wards at Saragarhi and, inspiring them, was to give the most magnificent, final performance of his military career.

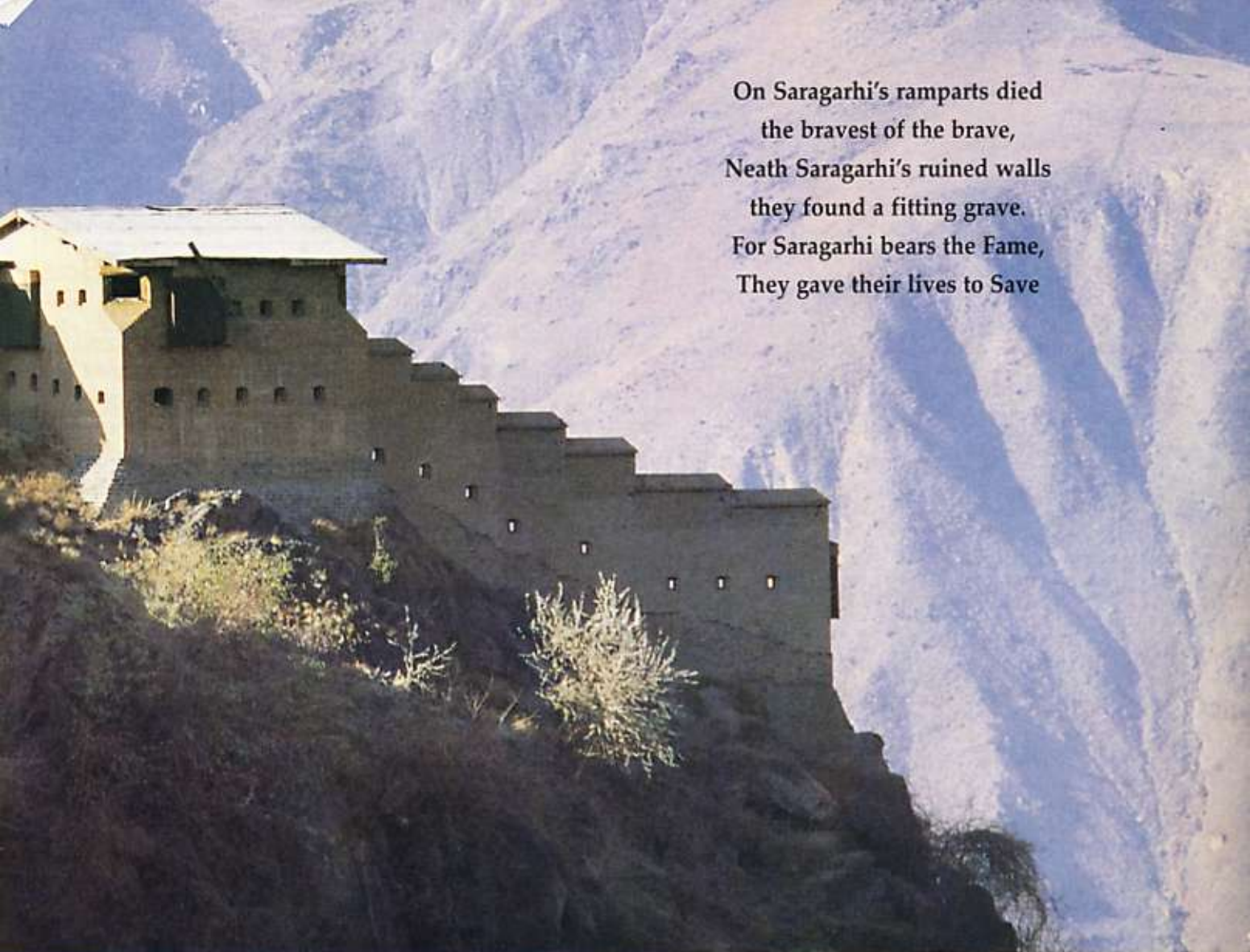
Ishar prepared the defences, even while faithfully transmitting messages between Lockhart and Gulistan, waiting for events to unfold. On the morning of 12 September, began the crescendo of tribal battle cries and drum beating, as the tribesmen started the assault on Saragarhi. To the garrison, the handful that they were, it seemed as if every Pathan in the Frontier was screaming for their blood. A proud and independent people, the tribesmen had historically felt resentment under the Sikh rule of Ranjit Singh and then the British added insult to injury, using the latter's former adversaries once again to subdue the Pathans. The Orakzais and the

Afridis were under the impression that the British Field Force with their artillery, communications and mobility had the capability of relieving Saragarhi, and so had to quickly overwhelm the Post.

At first the tribal leaders came forward to the defenders of Saragarhi with offers of surrender on easy terms, playing on the theme that their fight was against the British and not the Sikhs. Ishar's answer to this was certainly unprintable, as uncompromising as surely obscene. The tribal chiefs then turned to threats and taunts which did not make the slightest impression on Ishar Singh whose standard reply in *pushto* was again, unprintable. The lull was broken by unrelenting fire from many hundreds of muskets, with the tribal leaders anxious to reduce the garrison before the relief columns arrived. The tribals did not know what Col. Haughton knew — that there was no relief capability worth the name. The CO of the XXXVI Sikh himself was under extraordinary pressure, but Saragarhi had to be held by its defenders in some way. If there was a fighting chance, then in Ishar Singh, the Regiment had the right man — at the right place.



The tablet on the Saragarhi monument, with the names of the 21 heroes of XXXVI Sikh.



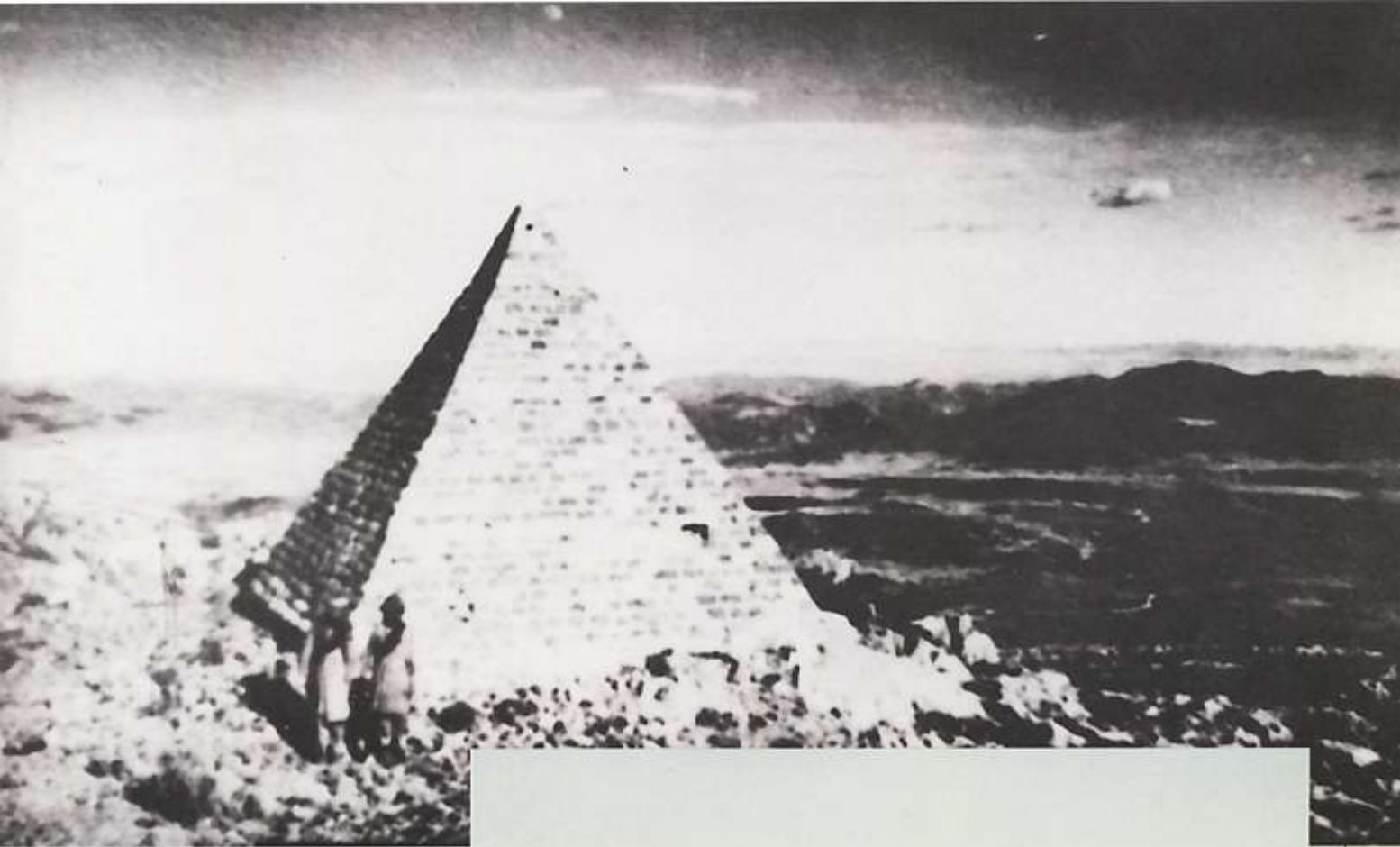
On Saragarhi's ramparts died
the bravest of the brave,
Neath Saragarhi's ruined walls
they found a fitting grave.
For Saragarhi bears the Fame,
They gave their lives to Save

Every soldier had to make a mark, make every bullet count. The defenders were under a fusillade of intense fire even as they kept up steady fire themselves, saw the attackers fall even as others rushed forward, crouching under cover of the rock outcrop, remaining at an angle to the fort where they were on dead ground, away from the view and fire of the defenders. It was an old Frontier ruse, well known to the veterans. Unknown to the defenders however, some of the tribals remained behind the wall while the others withdrew under cover of fire. The binding mortar, long exposed to elements like heat and cold, starts falling apart after being loosened. Having shaken out the mortar with long knives, the tribals now inserted crow bars between some stone blocks and removed them, to make a narrow opening into one of the lower rooms of the post. The moment the breach was sufficiently wide, a mass of tribals surged forward to deliver what they thought would be the *coup de grace*.

They had not reckoned with Ishar Singh : ever alert and

wily, he was watching all that and had already got some of his remaining men to fix bayonets to kill each attacker as they came through, thus choking the breach with the dead and dying. Once more, the Orakzais and the Afridis withdrew, suffering casualties, humiliation and frustration.

As their numbers dwindled, Ishar had Signaller Gurmukh Singh keep up a regular update to his officers in Forts Lockhart and Gulistan, sufficient to inspire them to attempt two more sorties to reach Saragarhi. Laconically, Ishar Singh transmitted: "I am down to half my men but the remainder now have two weapons each and so a larger share of ammunition!" Col. Haughton had seen two massive attacks repulsed with great casualties inflicted on the attackers. The battle had been on for three hours without respite. At midday, another foray was made under Lt. Munn and some volunteers to create a diversion and warn Saragarhi of enemy attempts to breach the defences. This did not provide any relief. At 1500 hrs., Col. Haughton, in a



Cairn built on the site of Saragarhi Post, from the stones of the ruins.

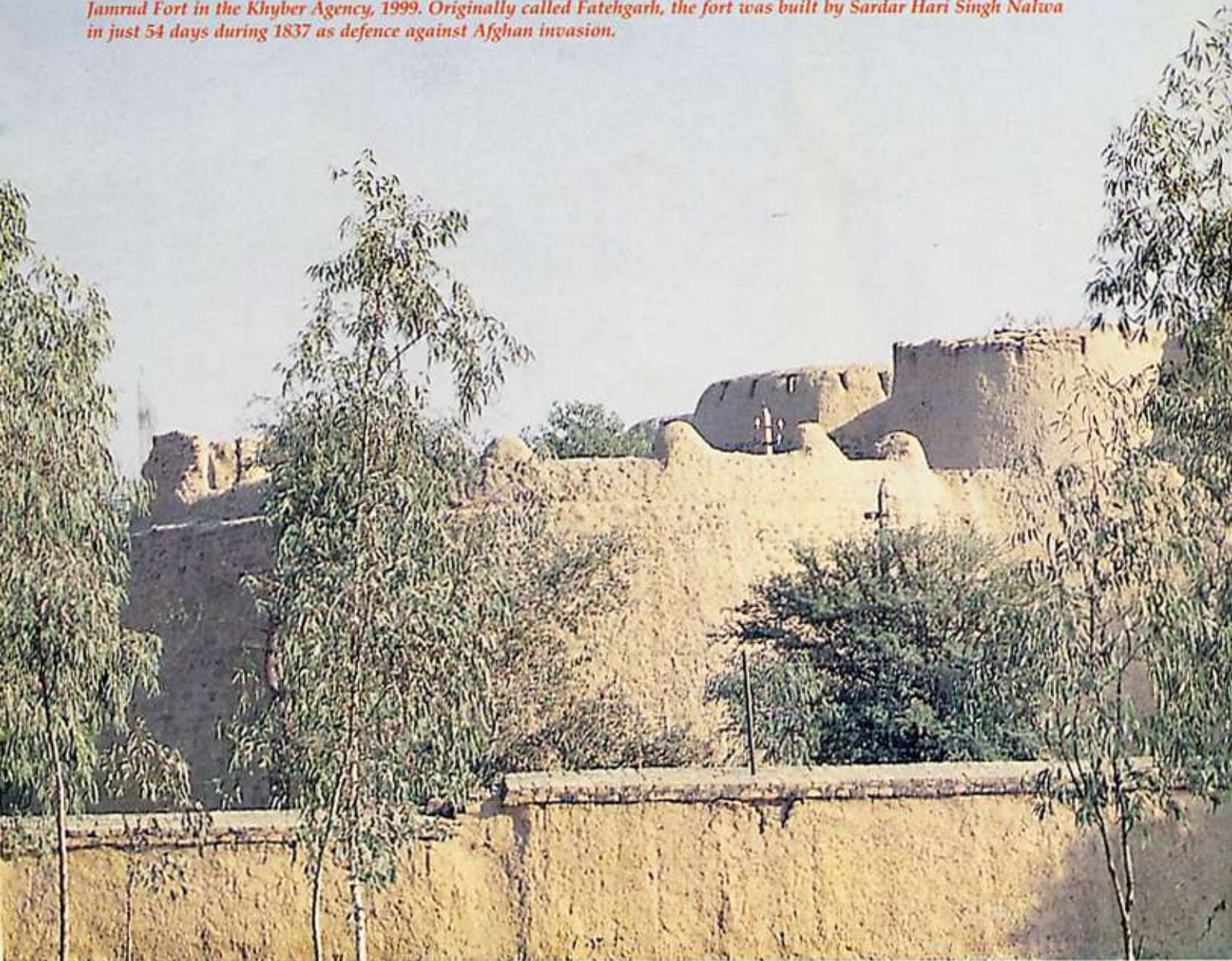


The cairn has long collapsed, but the stones of the Saragarhi Post remain, seen here behind the Frontier Scouts.

desperate last bid, with Lt.Munn and 98 volunteers from his garrison at Fort Lockhart, advanced for about a thousand yards against heavy fire to reach out to Saragarhi. In the meantime, as Col.Haughton moved forward, the attackers made fresh charges, bringing forward great bundles of burning brushwood, pushing these through the breach with utter disregard for their own dead and dying. To Ishar Singh it must have now become clear that the end was near, but he was not about to give the enemy any respite. Saragarhi post was by now a mix of friend and foe, the dead and the dying as Ishar's remaining soldiers lunged at the tribesmen to take as many as possible with them in their final moments.

At Ishar's command, Signalman Gurmukh Singh sent a final message on the helio. "We are being overrun, but will not surrender. Request permission to close down". The permission was given and within minutes Col.Haughton could observe the attackers go over the walls. Ishar Singh, supremely aware of his duty, as a last act carefully placed the heliograph in a corner where it was later found charred but intact.

Jamrud Fort in the Khyber Agency, 1999. Originally called Fatehgarh, the fort was built by Sardar Hari Singh Nalwa in just 54 days during 1837 as defence against Afghan invasion.



He then went down leaving Gurmukh Singh in the Guard Room. Fixing his bayonet and shouting *Wahe Guruji ka Khalsa, Wahe Guruji ki Fateh* he charged into the milling attackers to take many with him in a final act of heroism before joining his comrades in death. Saragarhi Post fell at 1630 hrs. on 12 September 1897.

Relief, just around the corner, came a little too late for the defenders of Saragarhi.

As the gallant end came, the frenzied tribesmen, with no regard even for their own dead and dying, brought in flaming bundles of brushwood to turn the entire fort into a sea of flames, engulfing everything and consigning everyone, including friends and foes to the flames. The tribesmen then melted away to the hills, to their villages, but after having paid a terrible price. They had lost in this

battle on the Samana Ridge an estimated 450 killed and wounded, mostly to the bullets of Saragarhi's gallant defenders. The XXXVI Sikh had lost 23 men in all, including the 21 at Saragarhi Post.

On that hallowed ground, the Saragarhi Post, made sacred by the supreme sacrifice of these 21 men of the XXXVI Sikh, was latter erected a stone cairn by the Army. This was from the dressed stones of the original post and could be seen for miles around, a tribute to those valiant defenders. The cairn was intact when last seen by Indian Army officers returning to India at the time of partition in 1947.

Time and the elements have taken their toll, Saragarhi being as it is, in a remote area. Over the decades and with the turn of events, Fort Gulistan was abandoned and the



Pakistan Army did not garrison Fort Lockhart in the changed scenario. However of late, Fort Lockhart has been reoccupied by Pakistan Army regulars, now renamed as Fort Samana and so this episode of military history continues to be protected. Fort Gulistan is in ruins. The cairn at Saragarhi has also come down, a casualty of time and understandable neglect not unlike many historic sites in India. However what continues to remain in good shape and well protected is the *obelisk* near Fort Samana. On it is fixed a plaque giving names of the 21 heroes from XXXVI Sikh. The inscription states that this is "a perpetual record of the heroism shown by these gallant soliders who died at their posts in defence of the Post of Saragarhi on 12 September 1897, fighting against overwhelming numbers, thus proving their loyalty and devotion to the sovereign, the Queen Empress of India and gloriously maintaining

Remainder of the XXXVI Sikh were distributed elsewhere with three Companies detached in the Kurram Valley, 21 men at Sartop Post, 37 with a native officer in Dhar Post, 44 at Sangar Post, 22 in Crag Picquet and finally the 21 men at Saragarhi Post.

the reputation of the Sikhs for unflinching courage in the field of battle".

The *Defence of Saragarhi Post* caught the imagination not only of the British Empire but the entire world. It became "Breaking News" and the high point in the Diamond Jubilee Year of Queen Victoria's reign. Saragarhi was subsequently included in French school text books

This is what was then written about the defenders of Saragarhi :

*On Saragarhi's ramparts died the bravest of the brave,
Neath Saragarhi's ruined walls
They found a fitting grave.
For Saragarhi bears the Fame,
They gave their lives to Save*

The privilege of raising the XXXVI Sikh had gone to Colonel Jim Cooke and Capt. HR Holmes while John Haughton raised the sister battalion, the XXXV Sikh, both in the summer of 1887. Holmes used to challenge all potential recruits, Jat Sikhs of Ludhiana, to wrestling bouts on condition that anyone that he worsted had to join up! This unique method so simulated recruitment that by the winter of 1887 the Regiment was considered fit to be presented to the C-in-C, with not a man under five feet eight inches.

At the time of the Saragarhi battle, the Victoria Cross had not been made applicable for award to Indian soldiers — this only came about in 1911. However a grateful Britain and the Queen bestowed on each of the 21 Sikh soldiers the posthumous award of Indian Order of Merit, the highest honour that could then be bestowed on an Indian soldier. With it came fifty acres of land each, plus the then princely sum of Rupees Five Hundred to the next of kin of each man. Never, ever before, or ever since have the equivalent of 21 Victoria Crosses been awarded to one single unit, in one action in the Commonwealth's military history.

The Government of India issued a formal Indian Army Order, active till today, proclaiming that the 12 September would for perpetuity be observed as a holiday for all Regiments of the Indian Army enlisting Sikh troops. To the spirits of Ishar Singh and his men it must give great satisfaction that *Saragarhi Day* reflects the greatest act of valour in a Regiment where valour has abounded as nowhere else. To his superiors, Ishar Singh's actions more than proved the fact that "Peacetime bounders make for men of courage in war".



An Orakzai elder who met the author at Samana in 1999.

as a lesson on one of the most remarkable sagas in military history.

As it was at the time of Trafalgar, when the Secretary of State for India now read out to the House of Commons the story of Saragarhi's defence, every Member of Parliament rose spontaneously on the feet to give standing ovation to the gallant heroes of the XXXVI Sikh. Never had so few done so much against such overwhelming odds (and this was more than 40 years before the Battle of Britain — a different dimension of war in a different continent).



An Orakzai jirga near Fort Samana, 1999. In silent admiration of the Sikhs, they too honour the sanctity of the salt they have eaten and the oath they have taken.

Over one hundred years later, and more than fifty after partition, it speaks for the magnanimity of the Government of the NWFP in Pakistan and the tribals — especially the Political Officers of the Orakzai Political Agency at Hangu — that the Saragarhi obelisk continues to be well maintained. It is perhaps both a desire to remind coming generations of the “subjugation” of the Frontier, as also a tribute to their former foes who had fought so gallantly. The author has twice visited the site of the epic battle, courtesy the then Governor of the NWFP, the then Political Agent of the Orakzai Agency in 1998 and in 1999. The Governor’s house at Samana, very close to the monument, has taken into its periphery the monument with a beautiful path leading to the obelisk, which as a result, is secure and well maintained. It has a strong base with beautiful Iris flowers growing around.

Thus, the Saragarhi monument may last for a long time. The base of the cairn can still be seen by walking up a path through a growth of trees, with the fallen dressed stones still around. These came from the original blockhouse. From here is an excellent view of Fort Samana (Lockhart) at a commanding height on one side and the ruins of Fort Gulistan some distance away. It is almost as if it were yesterday and in the mind, one can recapture the manner of that epic battle over a century ago.

Silent admiration came from the Orakzai Political tehsildar and a old man with him. The latter’s father from Saragarhi village had reputedly been engaged in carrying the garrison’s stores. They reiterated that for them there is a sympathetic ring in that, like these Sikh soldiers, the Pathans too value sanctity of the salt that they had eaten and so honour their oath. This, perhaps more than anything else, is the eternal lesson of Saragarhi.

Indian soldiers lie honoured in distant lands from Europe to the Middle East and China. Those monuments are cared for by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. The Saragarhi monument, however is looked after by the Government of the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan.

The author first visited Hangu and Saragarhi as a school boy while at Aitchison College Lahore in 1944. The memory remained green, as *The Tribune* published from Lahore (and now Chandigarh) carried an article on every 12 September to commemorate the Saga of Saragarhi. After retirement, he undertook research in Sikh Military History. Some of the crucial battle sites are in Pakistan, which took him to places like Saragarhi and Chillianwala, courtesy old friends and the Government of Pakistan.

This, perhaps the most authentic account of the Saragarhi battle, has resulted from personal visits to the actual site and is also based on original material, sketches and field despatches sent by Maj.Gen. Yeatman-Biggs, Commander of the Kohat-Kurram Field Force. Much material has been made available by The British Library, the Oriental and India Office Collections and the National Army Museum in London. He received material and guidance from Maj. Gen. James Lunt, former British Defence Adviser in India. He has much to be grateful to Maj. Muhammad Nawaz Khan (Retd) a dedicated historian in Peshawar and to the then Governor of the NWFP, Lt.Gen (Retd) Arif Bangash, Dr. Ahsan ul Haq, Political Agent of the Orakzai Political Agency at Hangu and his staff. Finally various Government Agencies and personalities in Pakistan for accepting his intentions and bonafides which were of pure historical nature.

Lt. Gen. Kirpal Singh Randhawa



Born in Lahore in 1932, Lt.Gen. Kirpal Singh Randhawa studied at the Aitchison College Lahore. Commissioned into the 7th Light Cavalry in 1952, he had two tenures in Laos and Vietnam as Secretary cum ADC to the Chairman of The International Commission for Supervision and Control of these States.

He is a graduate of the Defence Services Staff College and Britain’s Royal College of Defence Studies and has held prestigious instructional appointments at The Infantry School, The Armoured Corps School, The College of Combat’s Higher Command as a General Officer, with staff appointments as a Brigadier General Corps and at Army Headquarters.

He commanded the famous 7th Light Cavalry in action during December 1971 and was decorated. He commanded the 16th Independent Armoured Brigade and finally the elite 1st Armoured Division. He has served on deputation to Iraq’s Ministry of Defence in the late 1970s and was promoted to Lt.Gen. in 1986 to take over the reconstituted Mechanised Forces and the newly raised Army Aviation Corps. He was decorated with the AVSM in 1978 and the PVSM in 1988.

He is now Chairman of *Global Emerging Markets India Limited* and its allied firms as subsidiaries of *Emerging Global Markets Europe* based in London.



4th Battalion

THE SIKH REGIMENT (XXXVI SIKH)

The first decade

Known for posterity as the *Saragarhi Battalion*, the 36th Regiment of Sikhs was raised at Jullundur on 23 March 1887 — then styled as the XXXVI (Sikh) Regiment of Bengal Infantry — by Lt.Colonel J.Cook, and within ten years, had carved out a place of immortal glory.

Its composition was to be (Jat) Sikhs from Majha, Malwa and the Doaba, a core of 225 all ranks being received from twenty regiments of the Bengal Army and Punjab Frontier Force. The rest of the battalion was recruited locally from the districts of Amritsar, Ferozepore, Gurdaspur, Hoshiarpur, Jullundur, Lahore, Ludhiana, Nabha and Patiala.

The recruitment was carried out with such vigour that by 1 January 1888, the Regiment had been brought to a strength of 912 other ranks, commanded by Colonel J.Cook (formerly of the XIV Sikh), with Major T.G.Thomas (ex 25th Punjab Infantry) as second-in-command and Captain H.R.L.Holmes (ex-XXXXV Rattery's Sikhs) as Wing Commander. There were seven other British officers, including Surgeon G.H.Fink as the Medical Officer. The first Subedar Major was Sucha Singh.

After training in the vicinity of Jullunder till 1891, it marched to Delhi and after six months garrison duties, moved to Manipur in Eastern India to quell disturbances there. Back to Delhi after earning its first battle honours, the XXXVI Sikh remained there for 3 years till their move



The XXXVI Sikh on parade in 1922....

to Peshawar in November 1894, and thereafter to Kohat in December 1896. Shortly after, the Regiment was marched to occupy posts on the Samana Ridge in Tirah, the Regimental Headquarters and Right Wing under Lt.Col.J.Haughton occupying Fort Lockhart and the Left Wing under Captain W.D.Gordon at Parachinar, with detachments at Thal and Sadda.

The gallant defence of Fort Gulistan on the Samana Range and the detached post of Saragarhi, a small mud-brick blockhouse set on the knife-edge of the Samana for the purpose of visual communication between Forts



The blockhouse at Saragarhi before the attack & recreation by the 36th Sikh.

Lockhart and Gulistan, by nineteen men and two cookboys against thousands of Orkazis excited the admiration of the world, an awesome display of bravery in defence of their post against a cruel, fanatical and unrelenting foe.



...and Sikh Regiment's march past in 2000

The Next Century

For the next 17 years, the Regiment was involved in normal barrack routine, then escort duties as part of the Malakand Force and took part in the review held in Rawalpindi by the Prince of Wales. In 1911, they were part of the Coronation Ceremonies of King George V and the Queen Emperor in Delhi.

In May 1914, the XXXVI Sikhs sailed from Bombay to China, to be part of the British Expeditionary Force in the Tsing-Tao operations, earning a unique battle honour together with the South Wales Borderers. A Company also took over guard duties at the British Legation in Peking till April 1915. In February 1916, the Regiment embarked for Basra to take part in the Mesopotamia campaign against the Turkish Army, with severe fighting along the right bank of the Tigris, resulting in heavy casualties but earning great praise and the battle honour "Mesopotamia". Desperately heavy casualties were incurred during the battle of River Hai in January 1917 (620 in 5 days, or 83 per cent of the total strength, including 8 British officers) and the Regiment was led out of battle by the Subedar Major. After re-organisation, the Regiment joined the North Persian Force with which it remained till the end of the War, ultimately returning to India in October 1919.



Sikh machine-gunner in the North-West Frontier, 1930s.

Between the Wars (1919-1939), the XXXVI Sikh were stationed at various locations, and involved in various operations on the Frontier. Reorganisation of the Indian Army took place in 1922 and the XXXVI became the 4th battalion of the 11th Sikh Regiment, the 14th, 15th, 45th and 47th Sikh becoming the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 5th battalions respectively of the now formalised Sikh Regiment. At the same time, composition of the troops was also changed, with a Punjabi Mussalman (PM) Comp-any incorporated, such class composition remaining so till October 1947 with the partition of India.

On 11 March 1922, new colours were presented by the Prince of Wales at Rawalpindi. The 4/11 went to the Aden Independent Brigade in 1926-28 and in 1930, were part of the Peshawar Brigade, in aid to civil power during the disturbances and subsequent operations in the Kajuri Plain. The PM detachment effectively repulsed attacks by the Afridi tribesman and earned high decorations. The years 1932-39 saw the 4th Sikh at Waziristan, Aurangabad, Nowshera and Landi Kotal before they mounted guard at the Viceroy's Palace at New Delhi in 1939. On the eve of World War II, the battalion received its first motor transport in the form of trucks and motor cycles which were cheerfully inducted without much instruction.

The 4th Sikh were then moved to Poona to form part of the 7th Infantry Brigade of the 4th Indian Division.

The Second World War provided the Saragarhi battalion a vast amphitheatre for action: the XXXVI Sikh embarked for Egypt in late September 1940 where, in the vicinity of the Pyramids, they trained with new Bren-gun carriers and anti-tank guns. They went into action in December,



The Granth Sahib leads the Sikhs into battle, Mesopotamia, 1917.

deployed south of Mersa Matrah but were shortly re-deployed by ship to Port Sudan where they became part of the "Gazelle Force" with Skinner's Horse and 1st Field Regiment (R.A.). Operations against the Italians were launched in January 1941, fighting stiff actions against the well-entrenched and highly defended forts.

The 4th Sikh took part in the decisive battles for Keran which was finally captured after severe fighting which followed massive artillery bombardments. A curious affair was the capture of the "Samana Ridge", held by Italian Alpine troops, reminding the troops of the same-named feature in the Tirah where the XXXVI Sikh had earned imperishable fame nearly 40 years earlier.

Back to North Africa in May, the battalion went into a defensive role, preparing against the expected German-Italian attack but some months later, took part in an offensive to



Sikh soldier displays a captured German Army flag in Benghazi, 1942.

capture the Sidi and Libyan Omar, the 4th Sikh earning multiple gallantry awards including a Military Cross and Bar to Capt. Mohd. Saddiq and IDSM to Havildar Kishan Singh amongst others.

With furious tank battles raging around Sidi Rezagh and the violent counter attacks of the German 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions, the 4th Sikh moved up to El Adem, south of Tobruk and then set westwards, covering very rough country towards the key objective of Derna, and its vital airfield. In one of the most incredible and sensational actions of the war, 4th Sikh captured the airfield even as Junker Ju-52 aircraft were landing. "A" Company actually charged against the aircraft with the bayonet and eventually got over 2000 German and Italians in the bag, with a total of 183 aircraft captured or destroyed in the operation. The C.O. got a DSO, the 4th Sikh being honoured for multiple reasons, "providing defence to 1st Field Regiment (R.A.), the capture of Derna aerodrome and then Derna itself". Many MCs and IDSMs were awarded including those to Sepoys Dalip Singh and Ghazni Khan of the 4th Sikhs.

On Christmas Day, the battalion moved on and reached Benghazi where they occupied the aerodrome at Berca and Benina and the nearby port even before the rest of 7th Indian Infantry Brigade came up. In early January 1942, the Brigade laid out a defensive line south of Benghazi as the Germans although roughly handled, were still a formidable force, their armour reinforced.

In late January 1942, the 4th Sikhs, as part of 7th Indian Brigade, concentrated near Benghazi but with the enemy taking the offensive, were directed to withdraw cross-country fashion through Bir Hascim to El Adem. They were cheered by the anti-aircraft troop shooting down 3 of the 14 Italian aircraft returning south-westwards from a raid.

The battalion was back at Cairo after withdrawal from Benghazi, and an interesting interlude was their establishing relationship with the Royal Navy's destroyer HMS *Sikh* at Alexandria harbour.

The 4th Sikh carried out a short training stint in Iraq, returning to Egypt and the desert towards Mersa Matruk as GHQ reserve, and then to El Alamein, preparing defences even as the German Panzer forces began their major advance.

The Battle of El Alamein broke out in full fury and though they were not to know it then, this was one of the key battles of World War Two. Advancing under cover, preceded by heavy artillery bombardment, the Panzers smashed the Allied defence of the South Africans, British, Indians, Greeks, New Zealanders and Free French. The 4th Sikh, too, sustained heavy losses, many were made captive and the scattered battalion ordered back to Cairo for reinforcement before moving to Jaifa for general duties, mountain warfare and training against Parachute troops, seeing 1943 within Lebanon. They went to Northern Syria in April 1944 and in July were moved to Taranto in Italy as part of the 5th Infantry Brigade of the 4th Indian Division, moving forward to the Gothic Line through lofty, mountainous country. Moving very fast, the 4th Sikh fought for and captured the fortified village of Monte Caloro. The battalion were then successful in forcing the German defences about San Marino state, the fighting described as the bitterest since El Alamein and Cassino. The Sikhs got tumultuous reception as they moved through Rome and Florence. However, the Germans were still active and fierce fighting continued through the mud, cold and minefields.

In January 1945, the 4th Sikh took over defensive positions on the river Senio carrying out aggressive patrolling with offensive spirit against the crack German 1st Parachute Division, their old adversaries. In April, the

overwhelming assault of the Eighth Army broke through the Senio and Santerno defences and the Indian Divisions played a leading part in the pursuit. The German's surrendered but the 4th Sikh were retained to keep the peace between the Italians and Yugoslavs, staying on in Italy till November 1945, finally returning by ship to Karachi in December 1945 and thence to Nowshera for well-earned leave.

Partition While India gained independence on 15 August 1947, the Punjab was brutally divided, with masses wrenched from their ancestral lands and homes, faced with danger, and a future of uncertainty. The 4th Sikhs were deployed for internal security duties at Sargodha, with detachments at Mianwali and Jhang. Considering the mixed composition of the battalion, and in spite of the tense situation, the regimental spirit and comradeship remained firm through the crisis. The Punjabi Mussalman companies finally parted company and in September, the battalion moved to Eastern Punjab, escorting refugee trains, then deploying at Ferozepur. The last British CO. Lt.Colonel R.A. de Ashe handed over command to Lt.Colonel Kushalpal Singh in December and in lieu of the PM companies, the battalion got Sikh personnel from the 1/15, 2/15, 2/16 and 4/16 Punjab Regiments, thence moving to Ambala Cantt. for internal security duties.

In November 1948, the 4th Sikh moved to J&K, first to protect Akhnoor and then to the valley, deploying at Uri as part of 165 Infantry Brigade. In the summer of 1949, they became part of 161 Infantry Brigade till they moved to Alwar in December 1950. Back to the Valley in July 1951, the 4th Sikh vigorously patrolled different parts to prevent infiltration, while a self-contained Company flag-marched to Kargil and Leh then over the Changla Pass to Chushal in Ladakh to establish defences against intruding Kazakhs and Chinese, a remarkable feat of physical endurance.

And so through the fifties, the battalion moving to various locations in the Punjab, J&K, Ranchi and Ramgarh Cantt where they were located when the tension with China exploded into the frontier war of 1962.

Battle of Walong, 1962: Ironically it was on Saragarhi Day, 12 September 1962, that the 4th Sikh were ordered to move to the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), detraining at Jorhat and then being flown in small parties by Otter aircraft to Walong, concentrating by 21st October at Kibithoo on the Chinese border and in depth at Walong and Teju. They occupied positions on the east and west slopes overlooking the Lohit River, even as the Chinese Army launched their offensive across the MacMahon line.

The first encounter between a full battalion of the Chinese and a platoon of B Company 4th Sikhs took place

on 24th October, with heavy casualties inflicted on the surprised Chinese, who left over 200 dead left on ground. Repeated Chinese attacks in strength over the next few days were repulsed and in one encounter, young Kewal Singh, charged at the enemy, killed eight with his bayonet before being fatally wounded, (posthumously awarded the MVC).

The Chinese could not effect a breakthrough along the main track, the tenacious and stubborn defences of the 4th Sikh being described by the Chinese as akin to a "Tiger's Mouth". After another unsuccessful week, the Chinese shifted to the flanks and the 4th Sikh too adjusted their defences even as both armies brought in major reinforcements. The defences held firm for the next two weeks, with aggressive patrolling and grim firefights in the jungle hills over the Lohit. On the late evening of 15 November, after intense artillery and mortar shelling, the Chinese launched massive attacks. Desperate fighting held



Sikh troops man defences in the NEFA, October 1962...

the Chinese, "eat the enemy raw, do not give up" with many a "Saragarhi" repeated, but entire platoons were decimated while defending their positions. Cream of the 4th Sikh athletes and sportsman laid down their lives in distant NEFA, but inflicted terrible casualties on the Chinese. By the morning of 16 November, the situation all along the front had become very grave: a full Chinese Division had finally broken the defences of 11th Infantry Brigade and remnants of each company and platoon had to fight their way out even as Walong airstrip came under enemy shelling.

The 4th Sikh had fought tenaciously and continuously for 25 days, inflicting heavy punishment on the Chinese and capturing the only weapons by the Indian Army during the 1962 War. The ratio of casualties can be summed up with Kewal Singh's feat: "Eight for one, dead".

The spirit was alive.

December 1962 – September 1965 After the Battle of Walong, the 4th Sikh moved to Lekhapani in Assam. Conducting various long range patrol exercises before moving back to NEFA this time Rupa in the Kameng Division, with numerous long-range patrols upto the MacMahon Line: the emphasis always being to thrash the Chinese the next round around.

The 1965 War: The battalion returned to the Punjab in August 1965, but there was no time to relax, as they got zeroed in with new weapons, training with fervour to meet the new challenges. The 4th Sikh were to be in



... and on the offensive in the Punjab, September 1965.

the thick of battle again, moving to their concentration area on 5 September, going to war the very next day. The battalion captured two Sutlej Ranger posts, moved to Hudiana drain, then made preparations for the assault to capture the key defences on the vital Ichogil canal.

On 10 September, the battalion was given the task of capturing Barki, a stronghold of the enemy. Supported by tanks of the Central India House, the 4th Sikh launched attack against intense enemy fire. Battalion mortars then engaged Barki, furious machine-gun firefights ensued and the Sikhs went into the final assault with the bayonet. The village of Barki was captured, and so ferocious was

the attack that the eastern bank of the Ichogil canal was also secured. Thus, 4th Sikh led the Indian Army operations in the Lahore sector, incurring casualties but notching an important tactical victory, in the face of heavy enemy shelling and strafing by fighters.

A day later, a further special task was given to the battalion which was pulled out of Barki and concentrated at Khalra at night. They moved to Valtho in the early hours of 12 September, advancing on Khem Karan, then under enemy occupation, and took up all-round defence short of the village as it became known that there were Pak. tanks plus infantry in strength in the area. The supporting elements of 4th Mountain Division had not fetched up and with daylight upon them, the battalion were ordered to move into Khem Karan in platoons or even sections. Unfortunately, an enemy brigade, plus an entire armoured regiment were now closing in and a number of officers and men were captured, the rest of the battalion breaking out and becoming mobile reserve for the brigade, re-occupying Barki before the cease fire.

1965-1971: With "Barki" as a battle honour and numerous gallantry awards, the 4th Sikh were back to the fore, this time on the sports field, five men playing for the Regiment which won the *All India Hockey Cup*, with one player representing India at the Asian Games in 1966. In early 1968, the 4th Sikh moved to Poonch and continued to excel in all sports, winning the Divisional and Command Championship in hockey, boxing, basketball, wrestling, the marathon, even football and swimming not to mention the professional tests including battle physical efficiency, winning the commando, mortar and MMG trophies.

After over 3 years at Poonch, where aggressive patrolling dominated the no-mans land, the 4th Sikh were moved to Ramgarh in June 1971 and shortly to West Bengal for internal security duties. The border with East Pakistan (soon Bangladesh) was getting "live" and the battalion were concentrated in the Boyra area in October 1971.

The War of 1971: As the year 1971 wore on, the security situation along the West Bengal-East Pakistan border got graver and by September, it was clear that war between India and Pakistan was imminent. Some of the villages along the boundary actually straddled the border and Pak. troops and artillery sought to offensively defend the nebulous boundary. In support of the *Mukti Bahini*, the Indian Army lent its muscle and inevitably, ground reconnaissance began, with teams infiltrating behind enemy lines across rivers and streams. Enemy border



4th Sikh were spearhead of the advance into East Bengal in 1971.

posts were isolated and eliminated and on 10th November, 4th Sikhs were given the task of securing Mahapur village. This was done after heavy exchange of small arms and mortar fire and, shortly, PAF Sabres came over and strafed 'A' and 'D' Company locations. No damage as the troops were well dispersed, camouflaged and dug in. As a result of the deep wedge the battalion had made, the enemy vacated a number of fortified posts and the 4th Sikh, joined by T-55 tanks of 65th Cavalry moved ahead, securing more areas to be greeted joyously by the villagers.

The enemy stronghold of Chaugarcha, on the river Kabadak was highly fortified and held by a Frontier Force battalion, with artillery and air support. Tough fighting continued for a few days and on the 22 November, four PAF Sabres strafed the battalion's position for about 15 minutes. Sepoy Nirmal Singh of 'D' Company continued firing on the aircraft with his LMG and finally scored on one Sabre whose pilot, Flt. Lt. Parvaiz Mehdi Qureshi ejected and was captured by the battalion before being handed over to "higher authority" : (the pilot remained POW and was later repatriated after the Accord. He is presently the Chief of Air Staff, Pakistan Air Force).

IAF Gnats claimed another two Sabres.

Chaugarcha was secured by 4th Sikh in the afternoon of 23 November, its capture being the deepest penetration into East Pakistan till then, and according to observers, led to rapid escalation of war in the East. The GOC remarked that the 4th Sikh were always ahead of everybody else by 24 hours : the capture of Chaugarcha was the "master stroke".

After another battalion had failed the task, 4th Sikh were assigned to capture Muhammadpur and Burinda, which was heavily defended by FF and (Pak) Punjab units. By now, full-scale war was on, both in the East and West. With great gallantry and sacrifice, the 4th Sikh captured Burinda which broke the enemy's back and led to their surrender in Jessore on

- ✦ The battle of Saragarhi figures as one of the eight collective stories on bravery published by the UNESCO.
- ✦ The epic defence of Saragarhi has been taught in schools in France since the past one hundred years.
- ✦ The history of Saragarhi battle has been introduced in School curriculum at Class IX and Class X levels in the Punjab.
- ✦ Memorials on the epic defence of Saragarhi post were built at Amritsar and Ferozpur nearly a century ago.
- ✦ The Saragarhi Dashmesh Public School is to be built at Ferozpur, to be managed by Anglo-Sikh Saragarhi Educational Society. The Mehenga Singh Trust at Hakumatsinghwal have donated 23 acres of land for the school and the boundary wall constructed for the school by the Punjab ex-servicemen's Corporation.

7 December 1971. The last battle was now to be fought at Khulna, which had river, marshland and the sea on three sides, and was defended by (Pak) Punjab and FF battalions. All four Companies of the 4th Sikh were launched for accomplishing the tasks in phases, with the entire Divisional artillery in support. All counterattacks were beaten back and an enemy tank destroyed by rockets. With road blocks set up, the Pak. defences soon

crumbled. The war was shortly over with Pakistan's Eastern Command surrendering in Dacca.

4th Sikh were given the signal honour of entering Khulna as victors, along with a squadron of tanks : the welcome was tumultuous "Joy Bangla". Three days later the battalion started the move back to Ramgarh, having fought many key battles, capturing vital objectives, earning gallantry awards and showing their mettle as brilliantly in offence as they had in defence.

Since then : After some time guarding POWs and routine activity, the 4th Sikh spent 1974-75 in Misamari and Mizoram for counter-insurgency work, then back to Ranchi during 1976-80, the longest of its peace tenures. To Jaurian in 1980-1983, Ferozpur till 1986 and then Pathankot in preparations for the forthcoming Centenary of the XXXVI Sikh. In the event, preparations came to a sudden halt in January 1987 because of the sudden near-war situation following *Exercise Brasstacks* and preparations for *Operation Trident*.

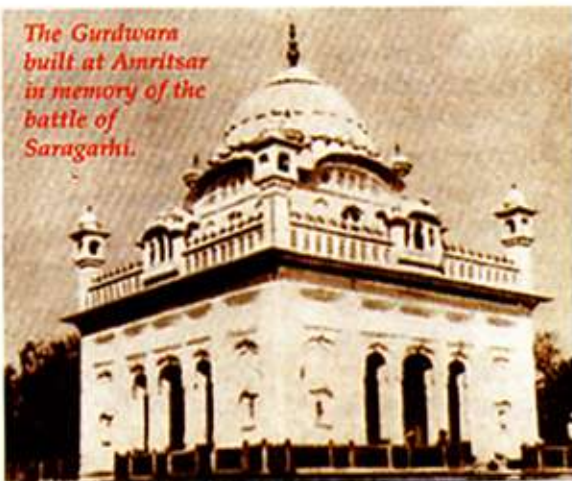
The decade of the nineties has seen the XXXVI Sikhs strenuously involved in various activities and actions with the elan and professionalism that is so characteristic in every officer and jawan of the paltan.

The Centenary Celebrations did take place — in April 1987 — and so the 4th battalion of the Sikh Regiment entered the second century of its existence.

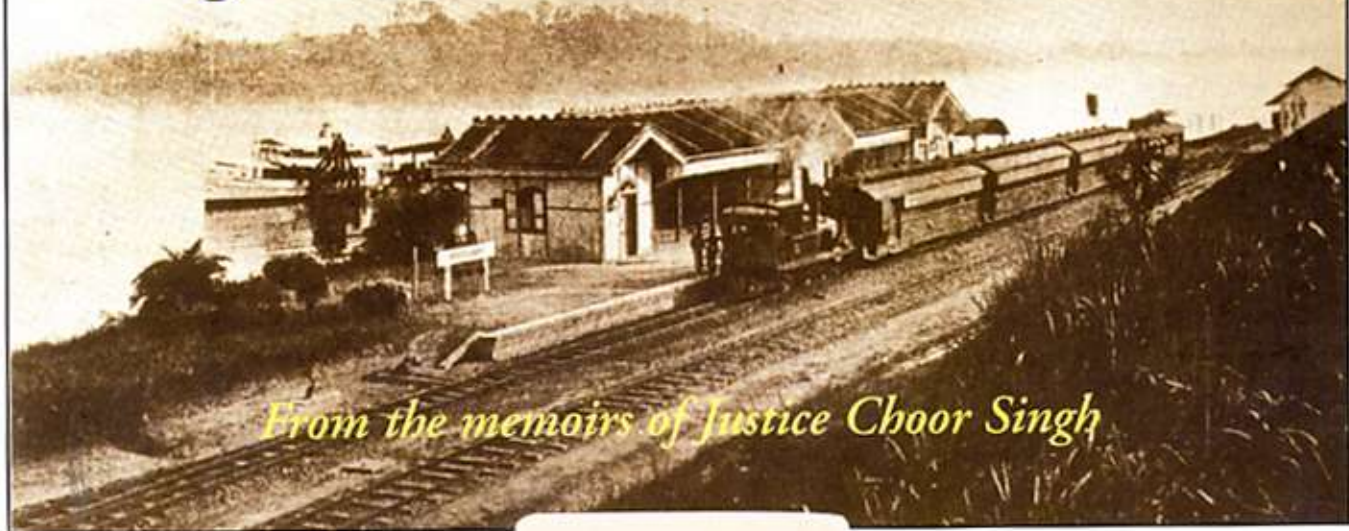
The Spirit of Saragarhi is strong — and forever.

Pushpindar Singh

The Gurdwara built at Amritsar in memory of the battle of Saragarhi.



A JOURNEY TO PARDESH



From the memoirs of Justice Choor Singh

The year was 1917, and I was six years of age when we commenced the journey from our tiny village of Khotch, a satellite of the much larger village of Patto Heera Singh. That journey brought me to Singapore where my destiny was to be fulfilled.

Some two hundred years ago, my ancestors had moved from Patto Heera Singh and established their own village, virtually next door, where we still have our farmlands, our community well known as *Khotch walian da khoo* in Patto Heera Singh. This village and its surrounding villages are Brar country with small pockets of Dhaliwals and Dhillons and during the British Raj this region was the recruiting ground for the British Indian Army, producing many high ranking officers, an area of great military tradition. Sardar Bahadur Captain Hira Singh Brar was a member of the Legislative Assembly of India, the only Indian for whom Katherine Mayo had a good word for in her book, *Mother India*.

I am also a Brar but prefer to use the clan name of Sidhu: the Sidhus, Brars and Phuls are all of the same clan being descendants of Jaisal, a Bhatti Rajput, who in 1213 A.D. founded Jaisalmer in the desert of Rajasthan. Sidhu was the sixth generation descendant of Jaisal. Brar was the ninth generation descendant of Sidhu. Phul was the twelfth generation descendant of Brar. Thus the Sidhus, Brars and

This article is extracted from the first Chapter of Justice Choor Singh's Memoirs. It has been reproduced to show how onerous it was for Sikhs to come to Singapore at the beginning of the 20th century from their distant Punjab, the difficulties and hardships they encountered in an era when there was no air travel and even journeys by sea were mainly on the deck of small cargo steamships.

Phuls were all Rajputs before they became the Khalsas of Guru Gobind Singh (*Mahan Kosh* page 819).

My father's two elder brothers were *Risaldars* (cavalry officers) in an Indian Cavalry Regiment. One died on active service, whilst the other, Sundar Singh resigned and came to Singapore in 1885. My father served with the North West Frontier Military Police for some years, before he too migrated to Singapore in 1915.

On that day in 1917, we moved out of our house in a *jakka* (kind of *tonga*) and travelled the 21 miles to Moga Mandi railway station, our immediate destination.

My mother's elder brother, Sham Singh, was with us; he had served as a constable in the Federated Malay States Police Force for 12 years, then on retirement, he returned to his village in Nabha State. My father at Singapore had asked him to escort my mother and her children on the adventurous journey to Singapore.

As they say in Punjabi, *Sanu sara agwarh toran aya* but there were tears shed by some relatives for fear that they may not see us ever again as, travelling to *pardeshi* (distant foreign country) was an arduous journey, neither easy nor safe in those days. "Why are you going to Cheen (China) — there are no Punjabis there!", (Singapore was referred to as Cheen then). These villagers hardly knew any geography. They probably thought that Singapore was a part

of China. "Kahey de baap ne sadya hai! Mainoo janna hi chahida hai!"

The train from Ferozepore to Ludhiana stopped at Moga Mandi for a few minutes. We disembarked at Ludhiana and waited to catch the train to Calcutta, boarding which, in third-class compartments, was quite an experience.

We were in the train for two nights and a whole day, the journey very uncomfortable. All I remember is that whenever the train stopped at a station, vendors of food and drinks would pass by the windows of the train, shouting "Hindu Pani", "Muslim Pani".

In Calcutta, I do not remember whether we first went to a *gurdwara*. It may be that we went to a *gurdwara*, where travellers usually stayed for a week or two, but what I do recall is that there was no ship for the journey to Singapore for the next two and a half months! We spent this long period living on the side of a railway godown, we had our *bistras* which we spread on the ground, and slept on the floor, below an overhang while mother improvised a stove, on which she cooked for us. My uncles would go first to the Shipping Office to enquire about the sea passage to Singapore, and come back with rations to last about a week. This was during the First World War, there were few ships going anywhere as the German battleship "Emden" was operating in the Indian Ocean and sinking British ships, even raiding Penang. Large ocean-going ships remained at anchor on the Hoogly river.

After two months my uncles and mother discussed the option of returning to the Punjab while at Singapore, my father must have been wondering why his family had not arrived, probably alarmed because of the sinking of some ships in the Indian Ocean. Fortunately my mother's views prevailed and we stayed on at Calcutta.

Some days later, my uncles returned from their regular visit to the shipping office carrying much larger parcels, and announced that they had finally managed to obtain tickets to Singapore thus brought extra rations for the long sea-voyage.

We finally boarded a small steamer which belonged to the Indo-China Steam Navigation Company. It was a cargo ship, also known as a "tramp" which proceeded almost along the coastline, loading and unloading at ports along the way.

We were deck passengers and did everything in the small corner of the deck that was allotted to us. We slept there, spreading our *bistras* on the deck floor at night. During the day the *bistras* were rolled up and tucked away. My mother did the cooking on a clay stove but only once a day. At other times we made do with dry rations, a helping of *pinjiri* (roasted concoction of flour, almonds, etc) or roasted *sholleh* (roasted nuts). There was tea, in the morning and evening, made with condensed milk.

The first port of call was Rangoon. My uncles went ashore and brought back fresh vegetables and fruits. The next was Penang. My uncles went ashore and this time took me along. As the ship did not berth alongside a wharf, we had to take a small boat (*sampan*) to go ashore. Uncle Sham Singh, the ex-policemen, was quite at home in Penang because he could speak some Malay, and on making enquiries, managed

to find the Sikh Police Barracks where he had a very emotional welcome from his old colleagues. We had a sumptuous meal and took some food back for mother and my little sister. Next morning we were on our way to Singapore, where we arrived after another day and a night. We disembarked. Uncle Sham Singh had no difficulty in finding a Sikh policemen of the Tanjong Pagar Dock Company and enquired about the whereabouts of my cousin Bishen Singh, son of my father's elder brother, Sundar Singh. Bishen Singh was sent for and he took us to his house at the Police Barracks of the Tanjong Pagar Dock Company, close to the waterfront. My father was no longer employed by the security force of Topham, Jones and Railton – the contractors who were building the granite sea-wall of the Singapore Harbour, at the time but was now working at Tan Kah Kee's Rubber Factory in Henderson Road, quite far away.

The next day Bishen Singh escorted us to the rubber factory on Henderson Road, which at the time was just a



As captain of the
Raffles Institution
Cricket team, 1929.

lane of red laterite cut through a hill leading to Tan Kah Kee's factory. Both sides of Henderson Road were flanked by high ground with tall rubber trees. There were about a dozen Sikhs employed by Tan Kah Kee as security guards for his rubber factory. The barracks of this security force were on higher ground. My father was, of course very pleased to have us with him, there was a lot of rejoicing and in the evening, a big feast.

My father got accommodation in the married men's quarters, just one large room with a verandah in front. We settled there, some in the room, some on the verandah. The kitchen area was separate. My uncles stayed there with us till they left after they found employment elsewhere.

I spent the next two years here in Henderson Road at Tan Kah Kee's factory with little to do but to play the whole day. The *mandore* (headman) of the security force was a man named Inder Singh whose daughter Dalip Kaur aged about ten years, was my playmate. She is now well over 90 years of age, the mother of the late Jernal Singh Khosa, Advocate & Solicitor.

I recall a big debate between my parents about my education. My mother wanted me to be sent to school. My father, who had earlier lost five sons, was not keen, arguing that I was a precious son, that we were living practically in the jungle;

Justice Choor Singh: A Profile in High Endeavour

There are in each community, race or nation countless stories of persons whose humble origin, instead of blocking the vision, became, through the energies of the spirit, an agent of cognition and action, of high endeavour and arrival. In all such cases, natural endowments are put to the wheel, and opportunities are turned to advantage, for the element of *dream* sustains them, and drives the imagination. And where a person is plucked at a tender age from the place of his identity and belongingness, and suddenly lodged in a wholly unknown, different cultural environment, his path of orientation and adaptation presents agonising problems of ethnicity, colour, and authenticity. To remain rooted in one's own culture and faith in the midst of all manner of challenges, and never to lose one's *mores* and moorings is to show an enviable force of personality.

It is in the background of such thoughts that one is tempted to view the life and work of Justice Choor Singh who after a remarkable career as a barrister and as a Supreme Court judge in Singapore, now remains, in his early nineties, a figure of adoration and reverence, still engaged in intellectual and social pursuits in consonance with the promise of his past. In thinking of him, one cannot but link his odyssey to those stages of man's mind which find their profoundest expression in the concluding *pauris* of Guru Nanak's *Japji*. To graduate from knowledge and action to truth, and therefore, to a serenity of the spirit, is to achieve a kind of earthly *nirvana*.



The Sikh diaspora is now a well-documented, settled phenomenon, and those men and women who made homes away from homes, across the seas, in lands inhospitable to their modes of thought and expression, to their religious doctrines and observances, have taken a good measure of the airs and aroma of the soil of their Gurus, of the bounteous and beautiful Punjab to the countries of their destination as a part of their ancestral cultural baggage. And men like Justice Choor Singh with their pioneering and adventurous deeds have helped create "a country of the spirit" for their own compatriots to be celebrated in song and story. Many a "little Punjab" thus materialised in both

the hemispheres, and today the Khalsa *nishaan* is a highly visible logo of Sikh identity in multi-cultural societies across the globe.

A boy whose father, a security guard in Singapore, was averse even to the thought of sending the child to school, could not have envisaged his high destiny as a judge of rare parts, acclaimed widely as an authority on criminal law, and dispensing justice in complete accord with the Statute Book, and with his conscience nourished on a diet of Sikh humanist vision and values. Justice Choor Singh, no wonder, is one of the finest flowers of the Diaspora garden. His example will always remain a high point of reference whenever the community abroad begins to stray and breaks the bonds of blood, bread and book.

Darshan Singh Maini



Justice Choor Singh at his home, February 2000.

that the nearest school was three miles away; that it was hazardous for a young boy to walk to and from six miles to school in rain and the dark. It was enough if I was alive and healthy, and maintained that I would grow up and find some employment or the other just as he had. This debate went on for about two years and finally when I was almost eight years old, my father relented.

On the first day of January 1919 he took me to the Pearls' Hill Primary School and got me admitted. Although I was almost eight years old, I found the school a very strange place. It was co-educational, and some of the Chinese boys wore pigtails. Going to school from Henderson Road to Pearls Hill, a distance of about three miles and back again on foot or in a bullock-cart was to become quite a strain. So my father decided to look elsewhere for employment, nearer to Pearls Hill School. Finally he became a watchman, at a Towkay's house in Killiney Road and we moved there, a great blessing because this was now just a mile from my school.

My journey to *Pardesh* had ended with my safe arrival at Tan Kah Kee's factory on Henderson Road. My admission as a student in Pearls Hill Primary School in January 1919 started a new journey, that in the field of education. It was to be a very long journey, lasting several years but this eventually took me to the peak of my profession, a seat on the Bench of the Supreme Court of the Republic of Singapore. It was the fulfilment of a destiny which had first brought me to Singapore ☺

Justice Choor Singh—The Fulfillment of Destiny

Retired Justice Choor Singh, born on 19 January, 1911 in the Punjab, came to Singapore at the age of 6, and started schooling when he was 8. The son of a poor security guard, he had to walk six miles to and from the nearest primary school. When his father obtained employment nearer the school, the young son used to sleep on the five-foot way, bathe at the roadside stand-pipe and study under the street light. The five-foot way was to be his home for many years, first in Havelock Road and later in Read Street which is in the now well-known Clarke Quay area.

Upon completing his Senior Cambridge Examination at the Raffles Institution in 1929, he started working life as a solicitor's clerk with the handsome monthly salary of \$ 20. The "Great Economic Depression" was then on and there was acute



Justice Choor Singh with J.J. Singh, presently President of the Singapore Khalsa Association (left) and Jarnal Singh.

unemployment all over the world. After four very difficult years, Justice Choor Singh obtained employment as a Government clerk at \$60 per month.

His abiding love for the law which he had acquired at the solicitor's office, had him burning the midnight oil and poring over law books for several years until April 1949 when he passed the Overseas Bar Final Examination held in Kuala Lumpur. This entitled him to be called to the English Bar as a Barrister-at-Law. In December, 1949 when Justice Choor Singh presided over the Third Magistrate's Court, he raised the prestige of the Indian community, for he was not only the first Sikh but also the first Indian to be appointed a Magistrate in Singapore. From there, an illustrious career took him all the way to the Supreme Court in 1963.

In felicitating Justice Choor Singh on his appointment as a judge of the Supreme Court in 1963, the Chairman of the Law Society said, *inter alia*

"Your Lordship has earned a special place in the history of this country as the symbol of a self-made man".

And the Advocate General added

"Yours is an example of a local boy who has made good. Your career will, I am sure be a source of inspiration and hope to all our youth in Singapore for your Lordship has shown that it is possible by hard work and perseverance to rise to one of the highest and most respected posts in the land".

In the High Court Justice Choor Singh heard all manner of cases when sitting as a trial judge, as gleaned from his 105 judgments reported in the Malaysian Law Journal. He was an all-rounder, sound in all branches of the Law, however, his forte was criminal law. Whenever he was not the trial judge in a capital case, he was often a member of the Court of Criminal Appeal convened to hear appeals from the judgements of the High Court. In such appeals, the judgment of the Court was sometimes delivered by Justice Choor Singh. In those days, appeals from the Court of Criminal Appeal were heard by the Privy Council in England. The record reveals that no judgment of the Court of Criminal Appeal delivered by Justice Choor Singh was ever disturbed by the Privy Council.



On retirement in 1980 : to Justice Choor Singh's left is the Chief Justice of Singapore's Supreme Court, Mr. Wee Chong Jin.

Much has been rightly said of the late Dato David Marshall's forensic abilities as a criminal lawyer. A brilliant persuasive advocate, he was, however, not able to obtain a single acquittal in a capital case before Justice Choor Singh. They were both contemporaries at Raffles Institution, the best of friends outside the Court, with great regard for each other.

It was apparent to everyone that Justice Choor Singh was a no-nonsense judge, quick to appreciate a sound argument and even quicker to jettison a flawed proposition. Woe betide the counsel who had to put forward a shaky or doubtful case as Justice Choor Singh would get to the core of the matter in seconds. Both prosecuting and defence counsels could earn his wrath quickly and it would be obvious to those present in court, who was at which end. His reputation had spread far and wide. Even Queen's Counsel from the United Kingdom did not relish the prospect of an appearance before him.

However, despite this stern and uncompromising exterior everyone knew that deep down here was a judge meticulously fair and firm, with a great sense of justice and of his responsibilities. His decisions and ruling were always given promptly and with his characteristic clarity. Judgments written by Justice Choor Singh not only displayed a depth of learning and research but were also delivered in good time.

Upon his retirement from the Supreme Court high tributes were paid to Justice Choor Singh

The President of the Law Society of Singapore observed:

"Mr. Justice Choor Singh has had a distinguished career by any standards. Few can claim to have risen from a solicitor's clerk to that of one of the highest judicial offices in the land. Mr. Justice Choor Singh has over the span of 17 years on the Bench delivered several written judgments which adorn our law reports. These judgments will no doubt be read and re-read by future generations of law students and lawyers alike for their learning and erudition of the Law. It has always been awe inspiring appearing before Mr. Justice Choor Singh. But those of us who have had the benefit of his displeasure have always come out of Court much wiser".

The Chief Justice in his tribute stated:

"Mr. Justice Choor Singh retired after 47 years in public service. Few men have had a longer career marked with a record of diligent and distinguished service. In his 17 years on the Supreme Court bench his comprehensive knowledge of the criminal law and procedure and his wide experience in the administration of criminal justice has been of immense help to me and to my colleagues and we will miss him. But our feelings of loss are tinged with a sense of gladness that he has now entered into retirement in good health and we wish him and his wife many happy and contended years in his retirement".

In spite of his heavy judicial duties, Justice Choor Singh had much time for service to the community. An active sportsman in his younger days (as an aggressive batsman, he scored multiple centuries for his team, the Raffles Institute and later, he captained the Indian Association team and finally the Khalsa Association team). He co-founded the Singapore Khalsa Association (SKA) for encouraging sports, social and cultural activities of the Sikhs. He was the Vice-Chairman of the National Kidney Foundation for many years and Chairman of the Probation Committee which supervises the work of Probation Officers. He was also a member of the Presidential Council for Minority Rights and Chairman of the Detainees Board until his retirement. He remains Patron of the Singapore Indian Association, Trustee of the Sikh Education Foundation,

the Sikh Welfare Council and the Singapore Khalsa Association.

He is well respected across the Indian community and was for many years Vice-Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Tamil Language Society. He was requested to lay the foundation stone of the gurdwara in Niven Road in Singapore, which is the highest honour that can be bestowed on a Sikh by his community.

Far from relaxing and enjoying his retirement after leaving the Supreme Court at the end of 1980, Justice Choor Singh has kept himself busy researching and writing books on Sikh history and religion. His first book, "The Lives of the Sikh Gurus" is a text-book for Sikh students. Another book, "Bhai Maharaj Singh" is a monograph containing a short account of this saint-soldier and martyr of the Sikh faith.

Justice Choor Singh's "Understanding Sikhism" is a masterpiece summary of Sikh history and religion in an illustrated compact monograph which has been widely acclaimed, all over the world. In his "Martyrs of the Sikh Faith" he wrote about Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindrawale.

A most recent work is on "Sri Harmandir Sahib" (the Golden Temple of the Sikhs) and it is the quality of his authorship, the command of the English language, and his elegant prose, which make his books so readable. These are his most precious contribution to contemporary society and will remain an inspiration to posterity.

Justice Choor Singh's life, the overwhelming odds he faced and how he overcame them will undoubtedly inspire young men and women to look confidently towards the future, ride the rainbow of success and thus fulfill their own destinies ☯



Justice Choor Singh continues his prolific writing from home in Coldstream Avenue at Singapore.

Bhai Maharaj Singh : Poetry of The Spirit

Indian history reaching down to antiquity has acquired the characteristics of folklore, amongst other things. And even where modern historians have used new tools of historiography, and evolved a fresh 'philosophy' of resurrecting and interpreting the past, they have had to contend with certain imponderables in the shape of *katha-kahanis*, oral traditions and sagas of heroism celebrated in ballads. Even in the relatively brief life-span of the Sikh history, we frequently come across such specimens and these "stories", often set to music, have thus become a part of the corporate Sikh consciousness. But where a person and his daring exploits of supreme courage and valour are a recorded fact of history and all the supporting evidence is available, one's imagination has to rise to that level where history turns into a great poetry of the spirit. This, in sum, is how the Sikhs in general see that dauntless Sikh revolutionary Bhai Maharaj Singh, who became a legendary figure during the dark period of the Sikh Empire's rapid and grievous disintegration after the demise of the leonine Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1839. The country songs around his person, the books written about him in that period and the monuments raised subsequently to his memory by a grateful community in India and Singapore, all become one long and sweet paean.

Risen from obscurity, Bhai Maharaj Singh, born in a Ludhiana village and christened Nihal Singh, in the span of 10 years or so reached the heights of glory reserved for the elect of the Lord. When the Sikh throne was in danger, what with the machinations and superior military might of the British forces and what with the shameful palace-intrigues, familial treachery, assassinations, and foreign quislings planted in the Lahore Darbar, a man of God possessed by a great dream and spiritually equipped to

deal with a redoubtable enemy rose like a huge column of fire and flame to baffle the mighty British commanders, engage them in battles of arms and wits and set their teeth on edge. How he changed his names and assumed guises, how he spread the winged word of revolt against the ruthless invaders in the Punjab country side, how he raised a huge guerilla force to save the Empire and how in the process, won the hearts of the Khalsa, then in a state of disarray, not to speak of the respect for his heroic deeds and military skills inscribed in the British documents of the day, is something that truly calls for an epical treatment. He had in the eyes of the laity acquired the status of "guru", and had come to be widely revered and greeted as "Maharaj".



His later arrest and deportation to the penal colony of Singapore in 1850, and his 6 years of incarceration which he spent in honour and *Chardhi Kala* amidst countless deprivations and indignities is well-recorded in a monograph by Justice Choor Singh. Whereas the name is seldom a theme for song and story in today's Punjab, it remains for the adoring Sikh *Sangat* of Singapore a figure of deep devotion and reverence, a saint-soldier in the highest tradition of Sikh thought.

Of the many eloquent tributes paid to him by his adversaries, the one by the Deputy Commissioner, Jullundur, Mr. Vansittart, evokes richly the aura and *mystique* that Maharaj Singh's image had come to acquire in the eyes of his worshipping followers and compatriots. "The Guru is no ordinary man", he wrote. "He is to the natives what Christ was to the most zealous of Christians. His miracles were seen by tens of thousand and are more implicitly believed than those worked by the ancient prophets".

Darshan Singh Maini



THE FIRST SIKHS OF SINGAPORE

Extracts from book by
Justice Choor Singh

Even though Sikhs had started migrating to Singapore in the fourth quarter of the nineteenth Century, the first Sikh in Singapore was in fact the martyr, Bhai Maharaj Singh who, along with his *chela* (disciple) Khurruck Singh had been deported there by the British in 1850. This extraordinary person had, during the years 1847-49 or the period between the Anglo-Sikh Wars, endeavoured to rally the community and maintain the sovereignty of the Sikh Kingdom.

Some years earlier, the British had, by cunning and deceit, betrayal by the Dogras and finally the force of arms, occupied the Kingdom of the Punjab. The infant Dalip Singh, and his mother Rani Jindan were sidelined, palace intrigues got worse. The Khalsa Army was still powerful but leaderless. The man who then came to the fore was Bhai Bir Singh, a soldier turned ascetic.

Bhai Bir Singh was the son of Sardar Seva Singh, an officer in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Army who followed his father's example by enrolling as a trooper with the Attari Sardars. However, being extremely religious-minded, he soon resigned and became a *chela* of Baba Sahib Singh Bedi of Una who had helped Maharaja Ranjit Singh considerably to consolidate his position as a Sovereign ruler of the Punjab, and was highly respected by all the Sikh Chiefs on account of his sanctity, courage and political vision.

His disciple, Bhai Bir Singh, who had his Dera at the village of Naurangabad, on the right bank of the River Sutlej, about 20 miles from Ferozepore, held the same position as his preceptor. Maharaja Ranjit Singh had great reverence for him, his Dera was a sanctuary for the nobles of the Court of Lahore, who for whatever reason, sought asylum in its precincts.

Bhai Bir Singh's Dera was virtually a military camp, for he had attending him a volunteer army of 1,200 musketmen and 3,000 horsemen. Over 1,500 pilgrims part took *langar* everyday. Bhai Bir Singh enjoyed the reverence of the whole Sikh people, and at times of national crisis, Sikh soldiers and the peasants turned to him for guidance.

Bhai Bir Singh's camp became the centre of Sikh revolt against Dogra dominance in the Punjab. Many dissidents such as General Attar Singh Sandhanwalia and claimants to the throne such as Prince Kashmira Singh and Prince Pashaura Singh sheltered in Bhai Bir Singh's camp. Hira Singh Dogra, the then *vazeer* (Prime Minister) of the Punjab did not consider his position safe as long as Bhai Bir Singh and General Attar Singh were alive. In 1844, Hira Singh Dogra attacked Bhai Bir Singh's camp with twenty thousand troops and 50 cannon. Several hundred men including General Attar Singh, Prince Kashmira Singh and Bhai Bir Singh were killed.

After this holocaust, Bhai Bir Singh's disciple Bhai Maharaj Singh was installed as successor. The British who had been waiting on the sidelines and bidding their time, now decided that this was the most opportune moment to intervene in the Punjab and establish their authority. They arrested Rani Jindan and deported her. Bhai Maharaj Singh who supported her rights was also arrested by the British but he managed to escape, eluding the police and addressing huge meetings in Central Punjab, exhorting the people to rise and expel the foreigners. During the Anglo-Sikh Wars that were to follow, at the battles of Ram Nagar, Chillianwala and Gujrat, Bhai Maharaj Singh inspired the soldiers to fight the enemy with courage and

determination. Apart from providing personal inspiration he took upon himself the arduous task of maintaining supplies of food and fodder to the men and animals in operations against the British. He opened a number of supply centres and had a large number of caravans of camels to transport the supplies. After the defeat of the Sikhs at Gujrat, Bhai Maharaj Singh and Bedi Bikram Singh wanted to continue the fight, now as guerilla warfare, but the other chiefs capitulated.

Bikram Singh Bedi was the son of Baba Sahib Singh Bedi and had taken *amrit* at the hands of Bhai Bir Singh as had Bhai Maharaj Singh. Thus Bikram Singh Bedi and Bhai Maharaj Singh were *Gur-Bhaies* or brethren-in-faith and in the campaigns of 1848-1849 against the British, they declared a *Dharam Yudh* (holy war) against the British and fought together valiantly exhorting the Khalsa to destroy the farangee *malechas*. The surrender of all other Chiefs left no alternative for Bhai Maharaj Singh but to continue the struggle alone.

With this fateful decision started the second phase of Bhai Maharaj Singh's revolutionary career. On hearing of Rani Jindan's deportation, Bhai Maharaj Singh joined the fray against the British which Mul Raj, the Governor of Multan, had begun. He exhorted the people to join Mul Raj's colours. It was during this period that Bhai Maharaj Singh established himself as a shrewd statesman, restoring confidence in the minds of the Sikhs.

Bhai Maharaj Singh, in order to succeed in his mission, was forced to fight on a number of fronts. He mapped out a programme of action, moving to the jungles and ravines of the Khumb Valley. At Sugowal he gave the finishing touches to his future course of action which included a plan to rescue Maharaja Dalip Singh from the Lahore Fort and spirit him to a place in the hills of the Punjab, and restart the freedom struggle in his name. He planned to organise a United Front of all persons and interests who had suffered at the hands of the British.

He developed a programme of disrupting the administrative machinery of the British by subversion and surprise attacks on their treasuries and cantonments. With total disregard for his personal safety, he mapped out strategic positions where he would institute surprise raids. To sustain his supporters during the impending struggle, he stored grain, fodder and ammunition in various places in the Doab, from where the struggle was to begin. He sent emissaries to the Amir of Kabul and various Pathan Chiefs in the North-West seeking their co-operation in the task.

The clever British who had by now conquered the whole of India, foiled his plan to rescue Maharaja Dalip Singh from the Lahore Palace and so took the young

Prince to a distant place, beyond the reach of the Punjab rebels. They then set after Bhai Maharaj Singh, branding him as a dangerous rebel and announced a large reward for a clue to his whereabouts.

Troops were sent in pursuit of Bhai Maharaj Singh who finally surrounded him near the Chenab, inflicting heavy casualties on his followers. However he managed to escape and joined Mul Raj. On the night of December 28, 1849, Bhai Maharaj Singh was captured with a band of 21 unarmed followers near Adampur.

Bhai Maharaj Singh was the man who during 1847-49 took upon himself the impossible task of saving the Sovereign Kingdom of the Sikhs from extinction. He kept up the struggle against the British even after the Punjab was annexed in March 1849. During Bhai Maharaj Singh's revolutionary career he demonstrated superb military generalship and knowledge of tactical warfare. What sustained him in this arduous task was his rich spiritual heritage.

From the Punjab, Bhai Maharaj Singh and his disciple, Khurruck Singh, were taken to Calcutta. There, the Governor General in Council decided that it was too risky to put Bhai Maharaj Singh on trial in India and decided to deport him, together with his disciple, to Singapore to be confined there as State Prisoners. From Calcutta, Bhai Maharaj Singh and his disciple Khurruck Singh were sent to Singapore on board S.S. *Mohamed Shah* escorted by a guard of one sergeant, one corporal and six privates, all Europeans, the ship specially chartered for the purpose. On 7 May 1850, the Secretary to the Governor General at Calcutta wrote to the Governor of the Straits Settlements that Bhai Maharaj Singh's safe custody was of paramount importance, that he and his follower should be treated "without unnecessary vigour" but placed "under personal restraint".

The ship arrived in Singapore on 9 June 1850 and the State prisoners, Bhai Maharaj Singh and his disciple, Khurruck Singh were locked up in one of the upper rooms of the New Jail at Outram Road. The two State Prisoners spent the rest of their lives confined in Her Majesty's Jail in Singapore.

Examination of the correspondence between the Governor of the Straits Settlements and the Governor General in Calcutta shows that the conduct of Bhai Maharaj Singh was "unexceptional" but that of Khurruck Singh evinced a "little of the untoward demeanour".

Although the Governor General, Lord Dalhousie, was concerned at the matter of confinement, the authorities in Singapore were not so kind. They complied with the suggestion of the Governor General that Bhai Maharaj Singh and his disciple should be locked up "in one of the upper rooms" of the new jail in Outram Road which was considered by him as "both healthy and secure" but they went much further and overdid the security precautions.

The result was that the upper room, which had been seen by Lord Dalhousie on a previous visit to Singapore, and described by him as "healthy and secure", was converted by the local authorities into a dungeon; it was here that Bhai Maharaj Singh spent the last six years of his life. With solitary confinement, Bhai Maharaj Singh was not only practically blind but had also developed rheumatic pains in his feet and ankles.

Bhai Maharaj Singh's health deteriorated further. The Civil Surgeon, Singapore recommended in 1853 that Bhai Maharaj Singh should be allowed an occasional walk in the open, but unfortunately this suggestion was turned down by the Government of India. The result was that his health got worse, and he died in prison on 5 July 1856.



Sardar Kartar Singh Dalamnangal at the Memorial to Bhai Maharaj Singh.

On the grounds of the old Singapore General Hospital, on the side of the road which led to the old red-bricked maternity hospital on the hill, there used to be a small tombstone which looked more like a roadside mile stone, but I do not remember seeing anything written on it. I passed by it several times in 1925 on visits to a relative at the maternity hospital and again in 1940. After the Second World War, some Tamils started putting flowers at the foot of the tombstone. Some Sikhs followed suit but it was the Tamils who put up some masonry on the ground around it. Some green flags and poles were also stuck around it, probably by Muslims who believed the tombstone was a *Kramat* (memorial for a Muslim Saint). Some Sikhs started believing that it was the tombstone of Bhai Maharaj Singh while others believed it was of Baba Karam Singh.

It is true that after Maharaj Singh, the person who succeeded to his *guddhee* (throne) at Naurangabad, which was known as the *Hoti Mardan Wale Sant Khalsa Sampardai*, a religious order, was Bhai Ram Singh. His

successor was a Baba Karam Singh but this Baba Karam Singh never came to Singapore. Incidentally, the *Hoti Mardan Wale Sant Khalsa Sampardai* still exists and is now at Gurdwara Karam Sar (Rara Sahib) in district Ludhiana and the present day spiritual descendants of Bhai Maharaj Singh are still addressed as Maharaj.

In 1922, when I was a student in Outram School, I heard from some members of the Sikh Contingent, whose barracks were next door to my school, that the tombstone in the General Hospital grounds was originally at the site where Bhai Maharaj Singh was cremated. It was on a plot of land in Outram Road and later, probably when Outram School was built, was shifted to high ground which later became the compound of the old General Hospital. In 1922 on the present grounds of the General Hospital, adjoining Outram Road there was a Malay kampong (village) and at the site of the General Hospital mortuary there was a large Hindu Temple which was later demolished to make way for another structure.

There is support in the writings of some Punjabi writers who are of the view that Bhai Maharaj Singh's *samadhi* was first erected on vacant land outside Outram Road Prison.

Bhai Maharaj Singh was undoubtedly one of the great Saint Soldiers of the Sikh tradition, leaving behind a rich spiritual legacy in Singapore. What better memorial could there be than to rename the rebuilt Silat Road Gurdwara, as Bhai Maharaj Singh Gurdwara. It is hardly a kilometre from the place where he was detained for six years, where he died and where he was cremated.

It is the martyrdom in Singapore of this great Saint which warrants a memorial and in the Sikh tradition the most appropriate memorial to a *Shaheed* (Martyr) is a Gurdwara.

Most importantly, this will help Singapore Sikhs understand the legacy of Guru Gobind Singh, since Bhai Maharaj Singh was in ways a spiritual descendant of Bhai Daya Singh, one of the five *Panj Payares* (five beloved) of Guru Gobind Singh.

THE GURDWARA AT SILAT ROAD

In the early days, there were only two *Gurdwaras* in Singapore—the Sikh Contingent of the Straits Settlements Police Force had their *Gurdwara* on Pearl Hill, while the civilian Sikhs had their *Gurdwara* in Queen Street.

Upon completion of the new building of the Queen Street *Gurdwara* in 1921, members of the Sikh Contingent, seeing that the civilian Sikhs now had a large new *Gurdwara*, petitioned the Government for the grant of suitable land for the building of a new *Gurdwara*, their original *Gurdwara* building on Pearl Hill having become too small and inadequate for the Contingent which had grown in size. Another reason was to have a building not only with a prayer hall, *langar* and dining hall but also with rooms on the ground floor to accommodate new arrivals from the Punjab, until they found employment or moved to other destinations, including Malaya, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Indonesia or Manila.



Gurudwara Sahib Silat Road, Singapore in its early years.

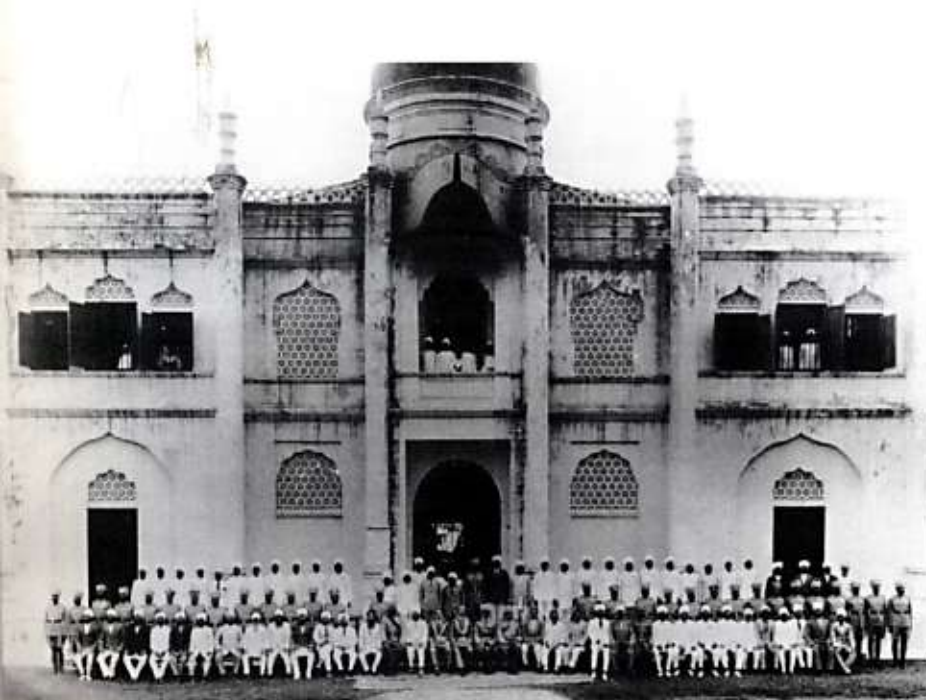
In December 1922 the Singapore Harbour Board leased, for 20 years, to the Inspector General of Police, the site of the present Silat Road *Gurdwara* comprising an area of 23,725 square feet. The *Gurdwara* building was completed in 1924 at a cost of \$ 54,000 of which 70% was raised by members of the police forces in Singapore and Malaya and the balance donated by Sikhs in neighbouring countries. Bhai Wasawa Singh, a member of the Sikh Contingent, was greatly responsible for raising funds for this *Gurdwara*. He was given special leave to visit Malaya, Hong Kong and Shanghai on a fund raising tour. Later he performed the duties of *Granthi* at the Pearl's Hill *Gurdwara*. He was the father of Master Bakshish Singh and grandfather of Kartar Singh, a graduate teacher later employed in Tampines Secondary School. Bakshish Singh retired as a Primary School Principal and later moved to the United States. The first *Granthi* of this *Gurdwara* was Giani Nand Singh, a graduate of Mahindra College in Patiala, especially recruited from India. He was a preacher from the Panch Khalsa Diwan, a reformist movement based in Bhasaur Village in Patalia State. Giani Nand Singh was a native of Bhasaur. He was the father of Mehervan Singh, the well known public accountant who did sterling *sewa* (service) as the Sikh representative on the International Inter Religious Organisation.

In October 1926, the Singapore Harbour Board withdrew all lease fees on payment of \$16,800. Although this *Gurdwara* had been built by the members of the

Sikh Contingent, the *sangat* (congregation) at this *Gurdwara* were mostly civilian Sikhs and hence money for the maintenance of the *Gurdwara* came from the civilians. The management of the *Gurdwara* was in the hands of a committee of policemen with the *Subedar* as the Chairman but after some time, there was some agitation for civilian representation on the management committee.

I was present at the official opening of the Silat Road Gurdwara in 1924, when I was 13 years old and a student at Outram Road School. The honours at the opening ceremony were done by the Inspector General of Police, a Britisher, in the presence of Subedar Sunder Singh, the President of the Gurdwara and other British and Sikh police officers. Originally known as the *Police Gurdwara*, it was much later that the name was changed to *Gurdwara Sahib, Silat Road*.

In 1937, the Government vested the *Silat Road Gurdwara* property to the Board of Trustees on payment of \$ 16,800. The Board of Trustees was to be nominated by the Sikh Advisory Board and consist of ten members, three to represent the *Majha Sikhs*, three the *Malwa Sikhs*, three the *Doaba Sikhs* with the tenth member to be a Sikh member of the Singapore Police Force or the Naval Police Force.



Sikh Sangat at the Gurdwara Sahib, Silat Road in 1931.

This was the position until enactment by Parliament of the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board which is now the governing authority of both the Central Sikh Gurdwara and the Silat Road Gurdwara. It was at the request of the Sikh community that the administration of both these Gurdwaras was vested in a single Statutory Board.

In the 1950s, attendance at the *Silat Road Gurdwara* had reduced, with only a handful of devotees as *sangat* at the weekly service on Sundays. There was no *Granthi* and so a resident at the Gurdwara, Sarban Singh performed the morning and evening service. The Committee found it difficult to maintain the Gurdwara, and there was no money to carry out necessary repairs. The Committee then requested the Government to amalgamate this with the Queen Street Gurdwara.

The Government of Singapore consulted the Sikh Advisory Board and all Sikh religious societies functioning as Gurdwaras. Convinced of the

general desire of the Sikh community, the Government introduced in Parliament on 19 November 1960, a Bill entitled "An Ordinance to amalgamate the Queen Street and the Silat Road Gurdwaras and to place them under an Incorporated Board". The Bill was referred to a Select Community of Parliament for views of the public.

A large number of Sikhs and Sikh societies made representations to the Select Committee and thirty of them gave oral evidence before the Select Committee. Eventually, Parliament enacted the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board Act which incorporated the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board which was then to govern the Queen Street Gurdwara as well as the Silat Road Gurdwara. This Statutory Board now administers both these Gurdwaras.

The Management Committee of Silat Road Gurdwara is now appointed by the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board.

Before the Second World War, some Sikhs lived in Silat Road Gurdwara as tenants, occupying small rooms on the ground floor and paying small monthly rents. In 1937, I visited a relative and his wife who occupied a small room on a rental of \$ 5 per month.

During the Japanese occupation of Singapore (1942-45) some Sikh widows, with their small children, were granted refuge in Silat Road Gurdwara. They were looked after by the Sikh Community throughout those three and a half years. *Langar* was prepared by the widows and served to all comers.

When the war was over and sea passages to India became available, the widows and their children in Silat Road Gurdwara were given free passage to India by the Sikh Community. Great humanitarian *sewa* (service) was by Sadhu Singh Khaira, the well known money lender, who was in charge of repatriation.

Soon after the end of the war, many young english-educated Sikhs came to Singapore from Malaya in search of employment, quite a few of them staying at the Silat Road Gurdwara. Some three or four would share a room and as and when they found employment, moved out, most of them



The Bhai Maharaj Singh Memorial, Silat Road Gurdwara and the new Sikh Centre.

becoming teachers while some joined the Police Force of Singapore.

It is only after the tombstone, found in the grounds of the General Hospital, was brought to Silat Road Gurdwara on 12th October, 1966 that this Gurdwara became very popular with the Sikhs of Singapore. The Samadh (tombstone) is believed to be that of the Saint-Soldier, Bhai Maharaj Singh, the hero of Sikh resistance to the British occupation of Punjab. The attraction of Silat Road Gurdwara soon centred around a "Shrine" to Bhai Maharaj Singh, containing his samadh. It is believed that prayers are answered and vows fulfilled when a devotee worships at this shrine. Thus the Silat Road Gurdwara, with Bhai Maharaj Singh's shrine acquired overwhelming popularity. At one time totally neglected, Silat Road is undoubtedly now the most well-known amongst the seven Gurdwaras of Singapore. Deep veneration of the Shrine and the adjoining Gurdwara has resulted in the belief that an Akhand Paath service performed at this Gurdwara earns the devotee great merit. Consequently there is great pressure for performance of Akand Paaths. At the Silat Road Gurdwara in Singapore langar is served all day, throughout the year.

A few words about Sardar Kartar Singh Dalamnangal. Politely addressed as Jathedar (Chief) he is often referred

ਇਹ ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰਾ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਸਿੱਖ ਪੁਲੀਸ ਕੰਨਟਿਨੈਂਟ ਸਿੰਘਾਪੁਰ
ਨੂੰ ਸਮਰਪਣ ਕੀਤਾ ਜਾਂਦਾ ਹੈ ਜਿਨ੍ਹਾਂ ਇੱਥੇ ਇਸ ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰੇ
ਦੀ ਪਹਿਲੀ ਇਮਾਰਤ ਦੀ ਸੇਵਾ ਸੰਨ ੧੯੨੪ ਵਿੱਚ ਕੀਤੀ।

**THIS TEMPLE IS DEDICATED TO
THE SIKH POLICE CONTINGENT SINGAPORE
WHO GENEROUSLY CONTRIBUTED TO
THE ORIGINAL TEMPLE BUILT
HERE IN 1924.**

Silat Road is now named as Jalan Bukit Merah.

to as Jarabhawale (the stocking man). For the last fifty years, I have always seen him in the uniform of what appears to be a Naval Admiral.

Sardar Kartar Singh has done yeoman service at Silat Road Gurdwara. Since the end of the Second World War, he has put his heart and soul into *sewa* at this Gurdwara, supervising its renovation and reconstruction. The Silat Road Gurdwara became his second home, and still is.

Humility is the essence of Sikhism, and Kartar Singh is a living example of that. Men like him serve to inspire.

Justice Choor Singh

SOVEREIGNTY OF SIKH IDEOLOGY

There is in the contemporary Sikh consciousness an unprecedented concern for the sovereignty of Sikh ideology. The concern assumes acuteness especially at the present juncture when the Sikhs apprehend attempts, both from within and without, to erode the identity and sovereignty of their doctrine. In fact, apprehension of such attempts is neither new nor unfounded. According to a *sakhi* or narrative in the Janam-Sakhi literature, Guru Nanak, the founder of the faith, was greeted with a bowl of milk filled to the brim sent jointly by all holy men of the town as the Guru, during one of his preaching odysseys, reached the outskirts of Multan. The message, as in the *sakhi*, was obvious: India that was over-filled with varied religious traditions would admit of no new faith. Guru Nanak took a petal of jasmine flower and placed it on the milk. What he meant by this symbolic gesture was that the new religion while having a relationship of harmony with the existing traditions will enjoy a distinct religious and social entity.

No doubt, all serious ideologies—whether religious or secular—have always come into being as the fruit of reflection upon lived and practised ideologies. Implicit in this statement is the fact that each new religion or religious ideology accepts something from the older faiths and traditions, and thus appears close to them. But at the same time it rejects a lot which it considers effete, and introduces a lot that is fresh and new. And it is this latter, which marks it, individuality and precipitates a new *gestalt*.

Sikhism, which happens to be the youngest of all major religions and which represents the highest human consciousness, is also obliged to certain older theologies, but the question of indebtedness loses all relevance when the differences reach a stage where departure becomes irreversible. The emergence and development of Sikh faith resulted from not the blind acceptance, in part or in whole, of the prevailing theologies, but a critical reflection upon them coupled with the genius of its ten spiritual preceptors, from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh.

The distinctness of Sikh faith from other Indian as well as Semitic religious traditions and theologies is evident from the metaphysical doctrines as contained in the Sikh Scripture and other canonical literature as well as from the social values advocated therein. Besides expressing itself through mystical experience, the Sikh canon also aims at instilling in human mind a deep awareness of the temporal scene wherein man has to pass his brief existence. Sikhism brought forth a new *weltanschauung* characterized by a this-worldly shift in the purpose of religion. The metaphysical doctrines of Sikhism in fact form the vis-a-tergo of the Sikh social thought. The stress on moral and ethical values in social and political life has been so intimately intertwined with the religious thought that any endeavour to isolate them would lead to the disintegration of the whole fabric.

It will not be possible for reasons of space to deal with all aspects of Sikh metaphysics and theology vis-à-vis other traditions so as to bring out its distinct features. This article, thus, limits itself to the essentials of Sikhism with a view to highlighting only those aspects which underline its distinct character.

Metaphysical Praxis

Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith, had his first revelatory experience at Sultanpur when he was still in his teens. The Bein episode in the Janam-Sakhi literature gives us a detailed account of Guru Nanak having a full insight into the existence as well as into the nature of God. The account does not postulate a physical presence or vision of God, and Guru Nanak only hears the command and drinks the cup of ambrosia of Divine Name offered to him. The direct 'encounter' of Guru Nanak with God is unlike the Islamic belief according to which Prophet Muhammad received Divine revelation not direct but through archangel Gabriel.

The Sikh Gurus were uncompromising monotheists. The idea of the unicity of God is central to the Sikh doctrine. The opening word of the "Mul Mantra" as well as of the Scripture is *ikoankar* which itself is a compound of three words or terms = *ik + oan/ oan + kar*. The word *om* has been used in the ancient Indian religious literature as well, especially the Upanisads where it conveys the means of meditation as well as the object of it. The Sikh Gurus have used it for God, the object of man's meditation, but they have prefixed *ik* and suffixed *kar* to it. The prefix *ik* is not a word but numeral. The meaning of a word may change in a changed socio-historical context, but there can be no ambiguity about the meaning of a numeral which is fixed for all. Also, this number-word combination is unique to Sikhism. The Indian religious thought deems Word as the essence of reality whereas the Western thought considers numbers or portion thereof as the essence of all things. This stress on the unicity of Reality in Sikhism is also unlike the various schools of Hinduism which believe in polytheism, pantheism, deism, etc. It is also unlike the *sramanic* traditions of Jainism and Buddhism which do not believe in the existence of any supreme, ultimate Reality.

As regards the suffix *kar*, it provides *om* or *oan* a dynamic nature-making Him the creator of the entire material phenomena. He is not only the sole creator but is also responsible for its sustenance and ultimate reabsorption unto Himself. *Ikoankar* alone is the *Kartapurakh*, yet He himself is uncreated and *Ajunjy*, beyond birth and death. The Sikh view of creation is manifestation of the Divine *qua* spirit, thereby lending spiritual unity to the created beings and maintaining essential oneness with them.

This essential oneness of the creation and the Creator leaves no place for dualism. Sikhism rejects both the static metaphysical system of Vedanta and the Semitic concept of the impersonal

nature of God. The Sankhya theory of dualism between Purusa and Prakriti is also rejected. Unlike these metaphysical systems, the Sikh dynamic ontology encompasses the 'otherness' of created elements within the all-comprehensive structure of non-dual Reality. All sentient and no-sentient elements are identified with Him *qua* spirit. These created beings are visualised as manifest units of the Real One. Thus, the entire manifest phenomena becomes intrinsically one with Reality, and is realized as relative reality—unlike the Vedantic conception of this world as *maya*.

Sikhism lays equal stress on the unicity of God as well as on His immanence in the creation. However, this poses no ontological contradictions, rather we find in Sikh ontology a fine synthesis of impersonal (transcendent) and personal (immanent) aspects of Reality. The supreme Reality is transcendent in the unmanifest (*nirankar*, *nirgun*) state, but becomes immanent in the material reality as a result of self-manifestation. There is no duality between these two postulates as the manifest plurality was latent within Him even before He willed to manifest Himself. Since impersonal Reality cannot be the object of man's devotion and obeisance as man cannot comprehend it fully with the help of reason, reconciliation and harmonization of the personal and impersonal aspects of Reality was an ontological necessity with the Sikh Gurus. This is absolutely unlike the different schools in Hinduism which stress either of the two aspects without making any attempt whatsoever on synthesizing these two aspects. It is also unlike Islamic thought wherein Allah retains His transcendence, and is not immanent in His creation.

One requires three things to enable oneself to see physical form of the object, an efficient medium (eye) and light. Since Reality has no form, one cannot see it with the physical human eye. The light required for his purpose is the inner enlightenment and the Reality being *joti* or spirit only the discerning minds can see it with their inner eye. The Sikh Gurus gave it certain personal attributes from contemporary social, cultural and political life since man can easily understand these socio-morphic attributes. Through his attempts to cultivate these attributes in his own life man becomes mystically one with Him. Guru Arjan refers to such a mystical union when he says that a Brahmgiyani (a man who realizes Brahman or God) is one with God (GG.273). However, this mystical oneness is not to be mistaken as physical identification of the two, or what Hinduism believes as Divine incarnation.

The Social Praxis

Before the advent of Sikhism, both the *sramanic* traditions and most of the Vedantic schools of philosophy in ancient India treated this material world as an unreal appearance. The result was escapist attitude towards the material reality of society. Spirituality got divorced from secular values, and concern for the social praxis of right religion was either completely absent or the bare minimum. The perennial question of the relationship between faith and human existence, faith and social reality, faith and political action, and the Kingdom of God and the building up of the material world had become practically irrelevant. The ideas of life-negation and world-negation were predominant.

Islam, no doubt, has a dynamic view of life, and considers the mundane world as worth living unlike those ancient Indian

traditions which advocate the philosophy of life-and-world-negation. Islam accepts human soul (*ruh*) and *qudrat* at large the creations of Allah. But Islam stops short of socializing the Divine : *ruh* and other material elements are, no doubt, the creations of Allah and they were latent within Him, but Allah still remains distinct from His creation by retaining His transcendent nature.

The views of the Sikh Gurus on the manifest material reality are obviously distinct and different. According to the Sikh Gurus, this manifest world is not *maya*, but the abode of the True Lord – *ih jago sache ki hai kothari* (GG. 294). Since the Lord Himself resides in it (*sache ka vich vasu*), it cannot be illusory. The Sikh Scripture makes a very categorical statement: *sache tere khand sache brahmmand* (GG. 463). God not only created this material phenomena, but also permeates through it : He becomes immanent in His creation through self-willed manifestation *qua* spirit. Thus, the postulates of reality of this world are based on the assumption that God pervades, *qua* spirit, throughout each being and place – *hasati kit bikhai basai sab thaur mai nirdhar* : (Akal Ustati, 181), and further forms the basis of the Divine concern for the amelioration of human condition in this world. But of this a little later. As of now, the idea of Divine *joti* pervading each being leads to two postulates : spiritual unity of mankind with the Creator Lord and ethnic and social equality amongst themselves.

As regards man's intrinsic and essential oneness with God, Sikh canonical literature is very obvious and specific to state that all beings, whether born of egg (*andaj*), foetus (*jeraj*), sweat (*setaj*) or earth (*urbhuj*), are spiritual manifestations of the Divine (Akal Ustati, 151). It is in this very context that Guru Gobind Singh declares men of all castes and creeds as one – *ek hi sarup sabai ekai joti janabo* : Akal Ustati, 85. This oneness makes man real like his Creator (though not His co-equal co-eternal) because the life-force force (soul) within is Divine in origin and nature.

All human beings are essentially the same and, therefore, equal : the outward differences are only an appearance – *manas sabai ek hai anek ko bhramao hai* : Akal Ustati, 86). All human beings are not only spiritually one with and equal in the eye of God, but are also equal among themselves. The manifestation of *param joti* into *sarab joti* is all-inclusive and not selective or exclusive. Sikhism does not separate people on the basis of different religious denominations, castes or classes from the larger human community in which all groups share the same radiant origin, but still maintain a relative distinction of their own. This is quite contrary to the idea of inherent inequality of mankind as implied in one of the hymns of the Rig Veda which refers to the emanation of human from four different organs of Brahma. This hymn provides a theological basis to the hierarchical division of society. The idea of equality of mankind in Sikhism includes woman as well. Sikhism accords her a place of honour in society as against the varied prejudices against her in Hindu and Islamic social structures.

Human Historical Action

The idea of Divine immanence in the manifest material reality implies spiritualization of the social and the secular. Human body is the temple of God and the mundane world is His abode. Thus, the *Weltanschauung* brought forth by the Sikh Gurus is

characterized by a successful attempt to keep close to each other the parallel streams of esoteric and exoteric life. Unlike the ascetic traditions, Sikhism stresses this worldliness without denying itself the spiritual and mystical content. Rather than exhorting man to renounce the world, Sikhism goads man to cultivate in his own life as well as in the social fabric as a whole all the anthropomorphic attributes of God, thereby transforming himself into God's knight (Khalsa), and this manifest world into an abode of moral and spiritual struggle (*dharamsal*) where the values of equality, fraternity, love, justice and self-respect prevail.

The Sikh view of God, as we have said earlier, is not that of an unconcerned transcendent Being. The *raison d'être* of the creation of the universe, according to Sikhism, is to make the entire creation remember the Akal, without anybody interposing between them. At different junctures of history when mankind failed to honour this moral commitment, God ordained different persons to spread righteousness (*dharm*) among men and to bring them to their sense of duty towards Him (*Bachitra Natak*, VI : 6-28). The implicit message herein is that Akapurakh wants man to realize this divine essence and make others do so. A realized self in Sikhism is compared to *paras* which can transform others not into gold, but into *paras* itself.

The Divine intervention in human affairs at different junctures of past human history is accepted, but Sikhism believes it to be through the instrumentality of human beings unlike Hinduism which believes (them) either gods or goddesses or incarnations. Guru Gobind Singh has even retold and reinterpreted some Puranic narratives to suggest that persons like Chandi, Rama, Krishna *et al.* were human instruments to serve the specific divine purpose of annihilating evil from the contemporary mundane world. The Guru does not deify them, and considers them human beings-enlightened and mystically attuned to the Divine Will. These narratives are retold with significant shift in emphasis and interpretation with a view to preaching that each human being has the inherent potential to re-enact the Chandi legend or Rama story in this very world and in this very life.

Another significant postulate of this action-oriented metaphysics of Sikhism is the unity of two sovereignties *miri* and *piri* which remained centred on the Guru-Persons: they were considered supreme in matters spiritual as well as secular. They were the spiritual preceptors under divine obligation to establish *dharm* in human social affairs by eradicating evil. This concept of the unity of *miri* and *piri* is unique to Sikhism. Most of the earlier indigenous religions were ascetic in nature. Even Christianity preferred to separate Church from State (give unto Christ Christ's and unto Caesar Caesar's), though once the Roman Pope did wear two swords signifying this unity of *miri* and *piri* powers. The only other instance of coalescence of the two authorities is found in the Islamic Caliphate.

This brings us to the all-important question of relationship between religion and polity in the Sikh thought. The wearing of two swords by Guru Hargobind and the building of the Akal Takht (symbolic of the temporal sovereignty) just near the Harimandir Sahib and within the same complex testify to the nature of co-relationship that they enjoy in Sikhism. In fact, earlier Guru Nanak also wanted to bring about transformation

in the socio-moral atmosphere and institutions. There are several references in his hymns, especially the *Asa di Var* and "*Babar Vani*" and anecdotes in the Janam-Sakhi literature which clearly bring out the Guru's attempt at demolishing certain degenerate customs and institutions which hindered the spirituo-moral development of man. Guru Gobind Singh's defence of armed confrontation when all other methods fail to protect and perpetuate the values of *dharm* (cf. *Zafarnamah*) also evidences the distinctness of Sikh thought vis-à-vis the ascetic Indian traditions which over-emphasise *ahimsa*, and prefer not to disturb the status quo however oppressive and exploitative.

The creation of the Khalsa Panth on 30 March, 1699 by Guru Gobind Singh has been a unique event in the history of religions. In his compositions, the Guru has declared the Khalsa as his own form. The *Panj Piaras* were given a place equal to the Guru-if not higher than him-when he submitted before them to receive the baptism of the double-edged sword. There are instances from the Guru's life when he submitted to the collective will of the *Panj Piaras*. When Banda Singh Bahadur was despatched by the Guru from Nander to the Punjab to chastise the bigoted and oppressive Mughal authority, he deputed five chosen Sikhs to advise and counsel Banda Singh. Thus, the Guru paved the way for collective leadership of the community: the idea of democratic republicanism was still a far-off thing in the feudal set-up of those times. However, the Guru's idea of republicanism was qualitative unlike the modern-day quantitative one.

In Summing Up

To sum up, we learn that Sikh metaphysical and social thought is different and distinct from other religious traditions. Sikhism is monotheistic unlike the *sramanic* traditions and Hinduism. The Real One in Sikhism is both transcendent and immanent : He is transcendent and *nirgun* in His unmanifest state but becomes immanent and *sargun* as He manifests Himself in varied material forms. This manifestation, *qua* spirit, spiritualizes the social, and lends reality to the latter. This doctrine is the vis-a-tergo of the Sikh social thought which stands for a radical transformation of the prevalent socio-moral atmosphere and institutions leading to the establishment of righteousness (*dharm*) in human affairs.

Religion is not just man's relationship with God and other related metaphysical questions; rather it encompasses the entire social being of man as well.

Dr. Dharam Singh

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GURDIAL SINGH:

The Jnanpith Award Winner of 1999

Every time a writer claims a major award or an honour, it is customary to reflect on his writings, and if possible, even offer a sustained critique of his major works as well. Now that Gurdial Singh has been declared joint winner of the prestigious "Jnanpith", along with redoubtable Nirmal Verma, it is important to look back on his work for two main reasons, neither of which is grounded in custom or convention.

One, it is after eighteen years that the Jnanpith has come to Punjabi, that too, for the second time in its long history of over 36 years. It may be recalled here that its first recipient was Amrita Pritam, who was bestowed this national honour back in 1982. Two, it is a moment of triumph for Punjabi literature that no less than Gurdial Singh, a man of singular talent, who like his characters believes that anonymity is a strength for those who want to effect social change, has been chosen for this honour. And in his case, as any serious reader of his work would testify, an attempt to reflect on his work would inevitably become an exploration of his times, even that of the rich cultural heritage he essentially belongs to.

As we sit down to reflect on the range and quality of Gurdial Singh's fiction, Plato's famous dictum inevitably comes to mind. He is believed to have stated in his *Republic* that he held a carpenter to be a better, a far better, a superior artist than a poet or a painter. For Plato, the carpenter had come to embody the image of a complete artist, or rather that of a total man. After all, wasn't he the one who imbued the formless with a sense of structure and form and infused the rugged material reality with untold creative possibilities?

By all counts, Gurdial Singh answers the Platonic description of a complete artist rather well. Born to a carpenter father, who insisted that his young son, too, should step into shoes, Gurdial Singh chose to become instead a carpenter of words, a sculptor of human forms and a painter of life in all its myriad hues. On being refused funding by his parents for education beyond Matric, he decided to be his own mentor, slowly toiling his way up

from a JBT teacher to a school lecturer, from there to a college lecturer and ultimately a professor at a Regional Centre of Punjabi University. He is a saga of courage, a profile in patience and gritty determination, which reads more like a work of fiction in progress.

Art and artistry, he firmly believes, have never been very far from life. For him, the only commitment worth a writer's attention is with life, the only real challenge is in facing its vagaries, and the only way of redeeming both his role as a man and a writer is to transform that world we all live in. A warm and earthy person, he has maintained an abiding contact with his own literary and cultural sources. Among other things, it is largely reflected in his insistence upon the primacy of the spoken word, and in his unquestioning affiliation, even fidelity to the oral tradition. A chronicler of the Malwa region, its people and their passions, Gurdial Singh possesses an unerring sense of history, and almost an intuitive grasp of its poetry.

In one of his novels, *Parsa*, a low-caste *siri*, Tindi, requests his benevolent master to tell him an 'interesting story.' On being asked as to what really makes for such a story, Tindi first hesitates, and then shoots off a counter-question: "Why are the stories always about kings and princes?" More than a mere rhetorical question, it is the very *raison d'être* of Gurdial Singh's counter-narratives. He is no less than a messiah of the marginalised and has consistently and tirelessly tried to put the dispossessed, the dislocated and the de-privileged on the centre map of his fiction. From a poor, illiterate farmhand, a small-time worker or peasant to an overburdened rickshawpuller or a low-caste carpenter, it is always the primal rawness of human life that strikes a sympathetic chord in him.

Conceived as victims of social/historical tyranny, most of his characters fight back even in face of an imminent defeat. He strongly believes that man's ultimate *dharma* is to fight the tyranny and oppression built into his/her own situation. This is what often imbues his characters, even his novels, with a definite sense of tragic inevitability. And



this tragic sense is certainly much more pronounced in his early novels such as *Marhi Da Deeva* (1964) and *Kuwela* (1968) than it is in his later works. While Jagseer in *Marhi Da Deeva* falls an easy prey to the machinations of a beguiling feudal power play, Heera Dei in *Kuwela* stands firm, refusing to cringe before a taboo-ridden society much too easily.

However, the heroic or revolutionary potential of his characters began to come fully into play and only with the creation of Bishna in *Anhoe* (1966) and Moddan in *Addh Chanani Raat* (1972). Unlike Jagseer, both Bishna and Moddan not only refuse steadfastly to become accomplices in the process of their own marginalisation but also make untiring efforts to rise in revolt against this process. They even go so far as to interrogate the dehumanising social/legal practices, but stop short of overturning them. It is their lack of self-awareness that ultimately makes failed revolutionaries out of them.

With Parsa, a Jat-Brahmin, moving centre-stage, the dialectics turns inwards. His consciousness becomes the ultimate battleground. For it is here that the social tensions and conflicts wage their most fierce and acute battle. Parsa seeks to overcome the tyranny of caste and class not through exclusion or rejection, but assimilation and inclusion. In his person, all forms of contradictions find a happy resolution. It is in recognition of this fact that *Parsa* (1991) has widely been acclaimed as an important cultural text, a real triumph of Gurdial Singh's life-long commitment to the art of fiction. For any writer to make an attempt to reclaim the diverse and complex strands of his cultural memory within the scope of a single work of fiction, with some measure of success, is indeed, extremely rare. And if such an example does exist in contemporary Punjabi literature, it is Gurdial Singh's much-celebrated novel *Parsa*.

There is both a touch of authenticity and self-absorption about Gurdial Singh's ability to fashion a wide range of human characters. But he does not ever allow his interest in or sympathy for his character(s) to either overwhelm or undermine his primary commitment to the social concerns. For him, man is essentially a social and historical being. As a natural corollary, his characters remain intermediate agents, individualised yet typical concretisations of the context in which they live and operate.

Almost all his novels, without an exception, are set amid the shifting contours of the Malwa region whose

economic backwardness sometimes obscures its cultural richness. With its insulated, apparently settled ways of existence, and its undying feudal affiliations, Malwa often comes alive in his novels both as a place in history and as a cultural metaphor. Its stubborn, unyielding land, sandy soil and prickly air, low-roofed mud-houses and vast, open fields mingle and overlap with stifling caste prejudice and land-related hostilities to form the texture of his fictionscape. What is significant is that despite his emphasis upon its local colours, sounds and smells, Malwa manages to become in his fiction a microcosm of the world within which a larger drama of human existence plays itself out.

Working within this framework, Gurdial Singh has managed to create richly evocative vignettes of rural life, complete with its distinctive code, its customs and conventions. Always alive to its throbbing pulse and rhythm, he sees a village not as static but an ever-changing, dynamic unit. Often the trauma of change is chronicled with an unnerving sense of verisimilitude. It is the dialectics of tradition and modernity that tends to give an overarching expression to his insistent social concern.

Marhi Da Deeva relocates the twin questions of ownership and dispossession within the ambit of "the green revolution", and redefines them. *Kuwela* probes into problem of widow remarriage in an orthodox Hindu Society. *Rete Di Ik Muthi* is a sensitive portrayal of how the blind pursuit of materialism leads to the slow erosion of human values such as love and fidelity. *Anhe Ghore Da Daan* bemoans the loss of kinship culture, casting an oblique look at the issue of shrinking land-holding and attendant problems of forced migration, unemployment and destitution.

Set in the pre-independence India, *Anhoe* records the impact of early forays into the industrialisation with a rare precision, of how dehumanisation creeps in, almost imperceptibly. Unlike his other works *Parsa* is not so tangibly located in time-space continuum. As the main focus of the novel is on reclaiming the rich literary/cultural sources and history of Punjab, social reality impinges on it very marginally. It is almost as if, after having created the narratives of oppression in his earlier novels, in *Parsa*, Gurdial Singh finally breaks free, moving rather self-assuredly towards a narrative of emancipation. For those readers who have walked with him through the fire and brimstone of inferno that Jagseer, Moddan or Bishna live through, *Parsa* brings the ultimate, much-awaited Dantesque vision of paradise.

Even when he does portray social reality in all its searing passion, as he does in his earlier novels, he takes care not to ever allow it to become either morbid or squeamish. A certain degree of poeticity helps him in smoothing out the jagged edges of social reality. All his novels function the way poetic metaphors do. Loaded with rich cultural signification, the titles such as *Marhi Da Deeva*, *Rete Di Ik Muthi*, *Addh Chanini Raat* et al sometimes acquire a suggestive power far beyond their immediate context. It is his poetic vision, which ultimately liberates, offering a transcendent edge to everything he so feelingly portrays.

Gurdial Singh's creative imagination is imbued with a rare sense of synthesising power. Like a true artist, he understands the dilemmas and conflict of both art and life exceedingly well. No wonder, his poetic effusions go so very well with a restrained expression and an economy of detail. He is a minimalist in the true sense of the word, as he manages to make it not just an expression of his style, but the very texture of his vision and thought. No wonder, he is able to strike a precarious, though fine balance between the narrative and the dramatic, the personal and the historical, the political and the artistic.

Nowhere does it become more conspicuous than in his all-enveloping view of life. On being asked about it once, Gurdial Singh is reported to have quipped? "Had I not taken to writing, I would have probably exploded. So, my life-view is nothing if it's not tragic." For him, tragedy is not a by-product of a fortuitous set of circumstances or an ingrained personal failing. It is immanent in the very condition of being human or rather becoming so, result of a constant dialectical struggle between the two. It is an expression, even a triumphant assertion of man's unending search for the classical values of honour, dignity and self-respect. Such a view of life confers no heroism; it can't even induce despair or defeatism.

In novel after novel, Gurdial Singh succeeds in renewing our faith in the irrepressible spirit of human nature and the undying power of human endurance. On being asked, how he felt on receiving the most coveted literary award, he said, "It's a recognition of those who live in my pages." Needless to say, only Gurdial Singh could have justifiably made such a claim. In his case, *Jnanpith* is not just personal triumph of an individual, but of all those who are still fighting rather desperately for retrieval of honour and dignity that history has denied to them through the ages.

P A R S A

by Gurdial Singh

A Critique by Darshan Singh Maini

Though in its conception, vision and values, *Parsa*, a late novel, belongs in a central way, to Gurdial Singh's oeuvre in which the *medium* is the *message*, and the technique an extended aspect of his fictive dialectic, it still characterises a certain poetic strain that remained somewhat subdued or even subsumed in his earlier books, waiting to be fledged out when the stay warranted such a dimension. It is, therefore, a product of his mature years when suffering is sublimated through the force of personality strenuously primed to meet the pressures of reality. With an unsurving faith in the humanist and abiding elements of Indian culture, and of the Sikh ethos imbibed in the process of "being and becoming". Oddly, enough I recall here the words of Henry James, a very different order of writer, to underscore the ethics of *Parsa*. In the novel, *The Tragic Muse* which dramatises in his late style, the conflict between politics and aesthetics, a painter called Nash observes: "Being is doing, and if doing, is duty, being is duty". Clearly, James's aesthetics were not, in a deeper sense, Wildean, or life-negating. Gurdial Singh's protagonist, almost an alter-ego, without understanding, anything of the true nature of art as such reaches a similar conclusion. Unlettered, and not given much to the life of the imagination, he instinctively knows that to be is to do, to act manfully, and to act thus is to fulfil one's *dharma* or moral duty.

And politics, whether of the state or the villages, are inevitably based on power and privilege, oppression and exploitation. This, then, is the tenor of the novel as also its core.

But the really astonishing and refreshing aspect of this impressive work of fiction is the fact that the hero is a *Jat-Brahmin* with a long lineage, and living in a Sikh village, holds the theme and the thought together by the hooks of his spirit, as it were. Thus, the dissipation of the decadent priestly tradition, and the emergence of a radically egalitarian world-view are effected in a *constitutive* way. To be sure, the Marxian lore and the Sikh scriptural song do somehow remain in tandem, and cause ideological dislocations, but Gurdial Singh seems to have found a point of convergence in some of the more demanding areas of societal and political life. And Pars Ram or Parsa, without being trained in either, strides the two worlds in considerable ease, or with unconcern. A charming

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GURDIAL SINGH

P A R S A

Translated by
RANA NAYAR



nonchalance, if you like. A poetic personality is shown in full plays rugged in fibre and weave, resilient in moments of choice and decision. *That is the importance of being Parsa* in the Malwa village of Bhaini, a towering peasant, rudely forbidding where massed or masked hypocrisies are concerned and sweetly pliant where the question relates to "the holinesses of the human heart."

Of the many strains, then, this long, chapterless novel, the most compelling is not the manner in which he confronts his two elder worldly "modernised" sons, one a preening *thanedar*, and the others an Indian star hockey player settled in England, but the way he brings up the orphaned Basanta, the youngest, true to his salt of his seed and salt. Also unique is the lyric vein of tenderness which we witness in his fairy-story summons to the Harijan urchin, Tindi, doing the household and farm chores alongside this figure of substance and authority. The same kind of deep human concern is dramatised by Gurdial Singh in Parsa's compassionate but forceful and transparent response to the overtures of a handsome Sikh widow whose hungers and sheltered wildernesses ignite a flame of desire that has nothing of expediency about it. Here an urgency seeks an urgency, a vacancy an intimacy, almost "mystical" in all and consummation. And that's precisely what Parsa understands by *dharma* and what he has received through word and deed from the village *ragi*. It's in the high tradition of the *rishi* and of the *darvesh*. And to hell with your brahminical *pothis* and *pother* and *patter*! Indeed, the realist, the folklorist, the country bard and the myth-vendour, all merge into Parsa who converts fables into usable tools, and allegories into homilies of the air and the waters and the land—his true progenitors and sustainers and mentors.

Conceived in the grand tradition, Parsa's moral growth is, understandably, a slow and incremental process. That is why the earlier pages consumed in village ways, idle talk and country *cliques* have an air of blandness. But, it appears that Gurdial Singh has the need to create a weight of such smallness and sillinesses to bring Parsa to a pitch of passionate thought, to rouse him to the full potentials of his innate energies, and to that level of *authenticity* where the brave and the true and the elect arrive. For one test of authenticity is to be able to stand *alone* and fast. He is, in fact, a visionary of the small and the beautiful enough in himself, a soul in peace even when the storms are blowing around his

head. His stoicism which, at times, seems to be sliding towards cynicism is, in reality, a stance rich in symbolism, a felt force.

The Hardwar *yatra* is not a pilgrimage to a holy place, for Parsa is, at the end of the journey, a person beyond the bounds of salvational theology or ritualism or liturgy. In fact, the great Ganga fascinates him as God's mighty spectacle of awe and wonderment. And as a poet of the senses and the scene, he is in the grip of a mystical emotion which has little to do with the business of the next world. It is the reality here flowing in front of him, flowing through his heart and soul, and that is enough to dispel his momentary gloom, enough to quicken his pulse, and make him

whole again. For Parsa, then wholeness is holiness-and happiness. And one extends the orbit of his thought, it contains everything that falls within the basin of his mind.

Of course, he is painfully aware of the fleeting nature of life and time, but so long as the poetry of the earth abides, he is there to reap a harvest of the senses in keeping with the requirements of his psyche. He has cast away all hoary, canons and codes, all prohibitions and inhibitions, to live like a lark in the sky with the nest in a tree rooted in his own sweet-smelling village soil. Throughout the narrative he is more often seen as a prickly inaccessible man, as a person whose ethics are not a clutch of worn-out canons, but a commitment to the vision that has been slowly ripening into his *karma*. It is the confluence of *dharma* and *karma*, a morality in labour and action at once.

Again, he is not a romantic in the traditional sense, and he seldom nurses a nostalgia for the past, for the things gone. His dead wife's luminous image is more a presence in his consciousness than an aching memory. His romanticism, indeed, is a question of enfranchising his spirit to be ready for freedom in all possible circumstances. Even the death of his dear son, a Naxalite killed in a police "encounter" is something that cannot shake him. The grim realities of the law and of the state *per se* are only a kind of hey to kindle his mind into a fuller awareness of the levels and structures of power. And he is not daunted, for all such sterile super-structures stand on stilts, and must, in turn, give away under the weight of their own organic weaknesses.

Such an argument which seems to inform this impassioned narrative, and has the author's poetic endorsement, nevertheless, causes a measure of philosophical disquiet. Gurdial Singh has, in his earlier classics, shown a deep understanding of the tragic predicament of man, and the Malwa lore of bloodshed, vendetta, venality and wrecklessness involving, sadly enough, the labouring and struggling peasantry itself would suggest the presence of evil in some form. But in *Parsa* this sense of evil, though present in the wings and transparent enough in some of the episodes, still finds no dramatic correlative. Parsa suffers, and he carries his wounds and scars; but his incorruptible spirit serves as his morning star, and it accepts no impediments. The death of the Marxian dream in Moscow could have widened his vision of evil which can take a utopian form to cause an unbelievable high tragedy. But if Parsa's *Charadhi Kala* or the spirit buoyant in the true Sikh tradition is any guide, then the questions which the collapse of communism raises remain dangling in the air, so to speak. Parsa does arrive at the end, and has learnt to live on the heights even in the midst of ruins. But his fate has not the tragic dignity of heroes standing straight in full awareness of the tragedy their own infirmities- the false alloy in the make-up and an implacable, inexplicable force of evil have wrought. And yet, as I have tried to show, Parsa's great humanism has heroic dimensions. That is the paradox which Gurdial Singh does pose without submitting it to the pressures of what Bakrtn calls "the dialogical imagination". Which is an imagination that sets up among other things, a ground for the anti-heroic even in epical situations. And it raises "a carnival of laughter" to cleanse the spirit of things blighted by power and authority.

Parsa is thus not perceived as a tragic figure conditioned by his ancestral past. From the start, he strikes us an unusual phenomenon, a village commoner who has taken his fate into both his hands, and has the ability to preserve his honour and his image on his own terms.

As for the *finale*, Gurdial Singh has judiciously elected to keep *Parsa* an open-ended book. When we last see him back in his village with Savitri, a maid, and the child, much to the bewildered excitement and subdued resentment of the village community, our hero is about to begin an exciting new chapter in his life. Mukhtiar Kaur, the Sardarni - widow has left behind a knot of problems for Parsa including that child conceived in the night of passion and beauty in a Hardwar *dera* lodge. The loud-mouths, the rumour-mongers and the stupidly inquisitive of the village know one thing for sure: Parsa, they know is Parsa is Parsa, and would not be crossed in any way. In what directions the

middle-aged protagonist and his new family can go, acquire place and esteem, or perhaps face a grim, tragic end is left to the imagination of the reader. For either way, Parsa's unimpeachable integrity will abide. And his spiritual reservoirs seem inexhaustible.

A word about the translation by Rana Nayar. Since his first major effort in concert with a University colleague *Adh Channi Raat* or "The Night of the Half Moon" (in the Macmillan India, Translation series), he has managed to get deeper and deeper into the Gurdial Singh corpus of classics. And in the process, he has not only well-honed his prose style and preserved the flavour of the Malwa dialect, its tang and bite and profanity, but also learnt to transcreate the text close enough to the *donnee* of the book, to its inner vision and its evolved dynamics. Also, Parsa's songs and Buley's *Kafis* have been linked and rendered in a pleasing manner.

Some printing errors do mar a fine script but the publishers the prestigious National Book Trust, India seem to have been indifferent to such lapses. And that is a great pity. Such a body is expected to set the norms.

Gurdial Singh's Literary Odyssey

NOVELS:

- ◆ Marhi Da Deeva 1964. (The Last Flicker, Sahitya Akademi: An English Translation)
- ◆ Anhoe 1966
- ◆ Rete Di Ikk Mutthi 1967
- ◆ Kuwela 1968
- ◆ Adh Chanini Raat 1972 (English translation is Night of the Half-Moon, Macmillan Madras, 1996)
- ◆ Aathan Uggan 1974
- ◆ Anhe Ghore Da Daan 1976
- ◆ Pauh Phutale Ton Pehlan 1982.
- ◆ Parsa (English Translation is from NBT, New Delhi, 1999)

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AWARDS & HONOURS:

- ◆ Best Fiction Book Award (Four times, in 1966, 1967, 1968, 1972)
- ◆ Nanak Singh Novelist Award 1975
- ◆ Sahitya Akademi Award 1975
- ◆ Punjab Sahitya Akademy Award 1979
- ◆ Soviet Land Nehru Award 1986
- ◆ Punjabi Sahitya Akademy Award 1989
- ◆ Shiromani Sahitkar Award 1992
- ◆ Bhai Veer Singh Galap Puraskar 1992
- ◆ Pash Award 1995
- ◆ Uttar Pradesh Hindi Sahitya Samellan Samman 1997
- ◆ Padam Shri 1998
- ◆ Jnanpith Literary Award 2000

Some Immediate Actions

Punjab, the State of India with the richest natural resources, the State which gave the largest number of martyrs for the independence of India, sacrificed its youth in various wars since 1947, fed India through the "Green Revolution", and gave the world great writers and artists is now on the verge of being brought to its knees economically, industrially, socially and culturally.

The main factors contributing to this tragic decline are:

- ✦ The unsophisticated political leadership who are devoid of vision, principles or leadership attributes
- ✦ Sikh religious leadership who lack comprehension of the humanitarian teachings of their Gurus and are capable only of generating frenzy among the devout—but uninformed—Sikh masses.
- ✦ Lack of a 21st century secular, economic, industrial and educational plan for the State.
- ✦ Reluctance of the Central government to put resources into the Punjab, allegedly because 'Punjab is a border state'.
- ✦ Corruption at almost all institutional levels — civil, administrative, educational, and in law enforcement.

Comparison with other states in India highlights some of the deficiencies. India has six Institutes of Technology, producing thousands of hi-tech engineers and entrepreneurs, while the Punjab has *none*. There are five free-trade zones in India hosting technology and training resources from foreign hi-tech corporations, but the Punjab has *none*. While other states have developed numerous industrial parks with modern facilities to host new hi-tech ventures, Punjab has *none*. Leaders of other states visit foreign industrialised nations to attract new industries and investment, while the leaders of Punjab only visit the Sikh communities, primarily to raise funds for their own electioneering. Punjab has the lowest NRI investment in the whole of India. The banking, venture capital and other facilities available in Punjab are inadequate to foster entrepreneurship and new ventures.

These and other deficiencies make it abundantly clear that urgent action must be taken to avert an impending social, economic, ethical and environmental disaster. Politicians in India in general, and the Punjab in particular, are incapable of evolving comprehensive plans to take the State into the 21st century, much less executing them. Hence, the time has come for well-qualified, experienced and visionary professionals from the industry, business, education and other fields to rise to the occasion and commit

to do all that is necessary to reverse the disastrous trend in the state of Punjab. Practical visions and plans must be executed — in spite of the present political and religious leadership — with vigour and determination.

Some examples of the immediate actions required are to:

- ✦ Develop industrial parks with modern facilities and infrastructure to host hi-tech, environmentally-sensitive new businesses and industries.
- ✦ Establish at least one free-trade zone in Punjab to foster international joint ventures.
- ✦ Embark on an aggressive crusade to attract appropriate joint ventures and industries from Western and other industrialised nations to the Punjab.
- ✦ Either establish an independent IIT or develop a hi-tech education and training programme in existing universities.
- ✦ Establish a new Bank to provide venture capital for new and small hi-tech entrepreneurs.
- ✦ Establish an international airport to provide direct links to a few appropriate foreign destinations.
- ✦ Establish training institutions to rapidly provide trained technicians and computer operators for new industries.
- ✦ Develop programmes for attracting non-resident Punjabi professionals in hi-tech, medicine, education and service industries and so commit a few months every few years on specific training and service projects in the Punjab.
- ✦ Build a strong interface between industry and the academia.

Achieving all of the above is an Herculean task — but it must be executed as a cohesive, multi-pronged programme if we are to prevent the State with the richest natural and cultural resources becoming a poor and backward one.

Time is of the essence!

India as a whole is at the threshold of a structural revolution. States will wield more power than the Central Government has hitherto permitted. However, the amount of power transfer will be directly related to the economic, industrial, educational and cultural performance and growth of the state. Herein lies both an opportunity — and the challenge.

Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany
Chairman of The Sikh Foundation USA
& "Father of Fibre Optics"



A Biographical Sketch

Narinder Singh Kapany

Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany is widely acknowledged as father of the revolutionary fibre-optics, the technology behind devices from endoscopy to high-capacity telephone lines that has changed the medical, communications and business worlds. He was named as one of seven 'Unsung Heroes' by *Fortune* magazine in their 'Businessmen of the Century' issue (Nov. 22, 1999).

Born in India and educated in England, Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany has lived in the United States of America for forty-five years. A graduate of Agra University in India, he completed advanced studies in optics at the Imperial College of Science and Technology at London, and received his Ph.D. from the University of London in 1955.

His career has spanned science, entrepreneurship and management, academia, publishing, and farming. His personal interests include philanthropy, art collecting and sculpting.

As a scientist, Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany's research and inventions have encompassed fibre-optics communications, lasers, biomedical instrumentation, solar energy and pollution monitoring. He has over one hundred patents, and was a member of the National Inventors Council. He has received many awards including 'The Excellence 2000 Award' from the USA. Pan-Asian American Chamber of Commerce in 1998. He is a Fellow of numerous scientific societies including the British Royal Academy of Engineering, the Optical Society of America, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

As an entrepreneur and business executive, Dr. Kapany has specialised in the processes of innovation and the management of technology and technology transfer. In 1960, he founded *Optics Technology Inc.* and was Chairman of the Board, President, and Director of Research for twelve years. In 1967 the company went public with numerous corporate acquisitions and joint-ventures in the United States and abroad. In 1973, Dr. Kapany founded *Kaptron Inc.* and was President and CEO until 1990 when he sold the company to AMP Incorporated. For the next nine years, Dr. Kapany was an AMP Fellow, heading the Intrapreneur & Technical Expert Programme and servicing as Chief Technologist for *Global Communications Business*. He has recently founded *K Optonics*. Dr. Kapany has also served on the boards of various companies. He was a member of the Young Presidents Organisation and remains a member of the World Presidents Organisation. As an academic, Dr. Kapany has taught and supervised research activity of postgraduate students. He was a Regents Professor at the University of

California, Berkeley (UCB), and at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC). He was also Director of the Centre for Innovation and Entrepreneurial Development (CIED) at the UCSC for seven years. At Stanford University, he has been a Visiting Scholar in the Physics Department and Consulting Professor in the Department of Electrical Engineering.

As an author and lecturer, Dr. Kapany has published over 100 scientific papers and four books on opto-electronics and entrepreneurship. He has lectured to various national and international scientific societies.

As a philanthropist, Dr. Kapany has been active in education and the arts. He has been the founding chairman and major funder of *The Sikh Foundation* and its activities for over 30 years. In collaboration with international institutions and publishers,

the Foundation runs programmes in publishing, academia and the arts. In 1998, Dr. Kapany endowed a Chair of Sikh Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His gift in 1999 of \$ 500,000 to the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco will establish a gallery in its new building displaying the works he has donated from his collection of Sikh art. In 1999, he endowed a Chair of Opto-Electronics at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He is also trustee of the University of California, Santa Cruz Foundation. He has served as a trustee of the Menlo School in Menlo Park, California.

As an art collector, Dr. Kapany has specialised in Sikh art. He was the prime mover and provided major loan of paintings for the internationally acclaimed *Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms* exhibition. The exhibition started in March 1999 at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, proceeded to the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco with the Sikh Foundation as its major sponsor, and opened in May 2000 for four months at the Royal Ontario Museum in Canada. The exhibition follows "*Splendors of the Punjab*" Sikh Art and Literature in 1992 organised by Dr. Kapany in collaboration with the Asian Art Museum and UC Berkeley to celebrate the 25th anniversary of The Sikh Foundation.

As an artist, Dr. Kapany has created 40 "dynoptic" sculptures which were first displayed in a one-man show at the Exploratorium of the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco in 1972. Since then, the collection has been viewed at museums and art galleries in Chicago, Monterey, Palo Alto, and Stanford.

Dr. Kapany lives in the Bay Area with his wife, Satinder. His son, Rajinder, is a hi-tech executive; and his daughter, Kiren is an attorney and filmmaker.



The "Father of Fibre Optics" in his office at Palo Alto, California.