

I/2014

NISHAAN

NAGAARA



'Mera Gobind'
Delhi Fateh Diwas
Sikh Social Activism
The Myth of Unity

Grant me this boon
O God, from Thy Greatness

May I never refrain

From righteous acts

May I fight without fear

All fees in life's battle
With confident courage

Claiming the victory

May my highest ambition be

Singing Thy praises

And may Thy Glory be

Engrained in my mind!

When this mortal life

Reaches its limits,

May I die fighting

With limitless courage!

Guru Gobind Singh Ji

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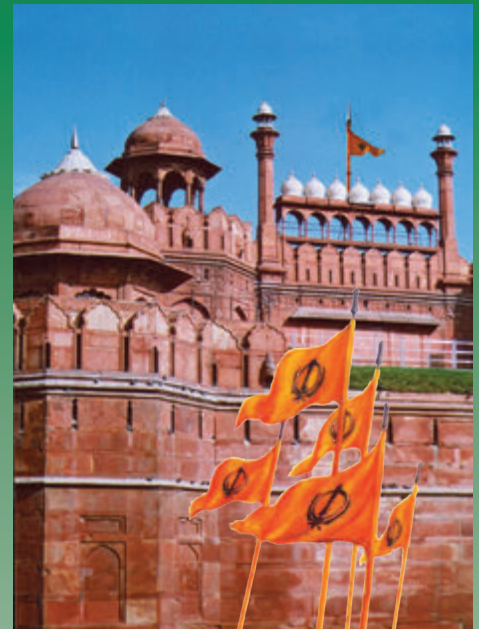
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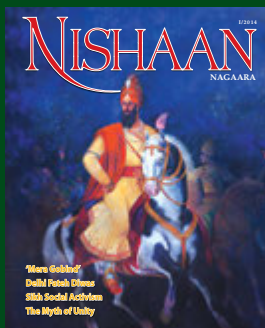


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SIKHI: The Global Vision That (Was) Is

*“Beng ke Bengali, Farang ke Farangawali, Dilli ke Dilwali teri agya me chalat hae(n)
Roh ke Ruhele Magh, des ke Maghele, Bir Bun si Bundele paap punj ke malat hae(n)
Gorkha gun gaave, Cheen Matcheen ke sees niyavae, Tibatee dhiyae dokh deh ko dalat hae(n)
Jinae tohi dhiahyo tinae pooran prataap paayo, sarab dhaan dhaam fel fool so falat hae(n)
Payee naa paar tej punj mae apaar sarab bidya ke udaar hae(n) apaar kahiyat haen”*

---Dasam Granth (pages 89-90)

“**B**eng ke Bengali, Farang ke farangawali dilli ke dilwali teri agya me chalat hae(n)
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Payee naa paar tej punj mae apaar sarab bidya ke udaar hae(n) apaar kahiyat haen”

---Dasam Granth (pages 89-90)

Literally rendered, these lines tell us:

“The Bengalis of Bengal, the Phirangis of Phirangistan and Dilwalis of Delhi are your followers.

The Rohelas of Rohu mountain, the Maghelas of Magadha, the heroic Bangasis of Bangas and the Bundhelas of Bundhelkhand destroy their sins in thy devotion.

Gorkhas sing thy praises, the residents of China and Manchuria bow their heads before thee and the Tibetans destroy their own sufferings by remembering thee.

Those who meditate on thee obtain perfect glory, and prosper greatly.

One cannot know thy limit, O Infinitely Glorious Lord! Thou art the Giver of all, therefore thou are Boundless.”

This verse is from the work popularly known as the Dasam Granth. Many Sikhs swear that every word in it is in fact the authentic writing of Guru Gobind Singh. Others reject this thesis either in toto or, at least, in significant parts. Dasam Granth has a controversial place in Sikh psyche, history and tradition. It is a large body of over 2300 pages of poetry. Scholars as well as the larger Sikh community agree that many parts of it are the authentic writings of Guru Gobind Singh but that they also appear mixed with compositions that may not be his but come from various sources of that time.

It is also true that, as universally accepted by most Sikhs, the repository of our spiritual heritage is the Guru Granth and not the Dasam Granth. However, what cannot be denied is that the contents of the latter work are a significant part of Sikh culture and literature, hence deserving of Sikh conversation and dialogue.

I readily concede that I don't really know who the author of the above cited lines is; it may be a matter of furious disagreement. But I don't intend to step into those murky waters today. The authenticity of the Dasam Granth is not the topic here; I have briefly reported my non-scholarly take on it elsewhere. Today, let us set aside the question of who may have penned these lines.

Why then do these particular lines catch my eye today?

To me they speak of the universality of the Sikh message far beyond the territory and self-limiting boundaries of Punjab. And this universality is

entirely consistent with Sikh teaching and practice from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh.

In the first line the poet speaks of *farangees*; in common Punjabi parlance the word stands for foreigners, usually Whites. This verse was surely written before the influx of Europeans, the vast majority of whom came by sea sometimes in the 17th century. A limited number of Greek invaders had come with Alexander the Great but centuries earlier in about 325 BC. The remaining lines, too, focus on the common theme of a diverse humanity, somewhat like the theme inherent in the time honored motto *E Pluribus Unum* of the United States.

This colourful verse also echoes a hymn ascribed to Guru Gobind Singh that, in translation says "As out of a single fire millions of sparks arise, arise in separation, but come together again when they fall back into the fire; so from God's form emerges all creation" (*Akal Ustat*, 87).

And then contrast this poet's vision with the limited perspectives of our national (and wannabe international) leaders, particularly in the United States today.

In the United States a national election is coming soon that will anoint a new President – leader of the free world.* I can't but cringe when I look at the slew of candidates. A decade ago George W. Bush didn't know where Iraq or Pakistan were when he became President in 2000; Sarah Palin, hoping to become the Vice President eight years later claimed to be able to see Russia from her house in Alaska, and that was the extent of her experience of the world. And then there was Herman Cain who unabashedly brandished his ignorance of the nations that may be trouble spots for us. And let me leave untouched the blind spots in Ron Perry's perspective of the world.

These people want to run the world, while they know not what the world is and proudly flaunt their incoherence.

So I ask you to pause a moment and admire the worldview of the unknown poet who composed the lines that we started with today and think of the ordinary people -- his Sikh listeners about 300 years ago. The words are meant to be all embracing.

I bring this to you today because over the past decade or two I have been increasingly confronted with a very uncomfortable reality – of a narrowing definition and limited expanse of the Sikh worldview that our scholars and spokespersons often spout these days.

* This was written in 2007

Look at Sikh history. Guru Nanak traveled widely. He often conveyed his message through music that transcends the bounds and context of language, time and culture. But he must have also engaged the people wherever he went. What language do you think he used? The local argot or the Punjabi of his native village? Keep in mind that he traveled as far as Tibet, Sri Lanka, the Middle East (Iraq and neighboring territories); other Gurus, particularly Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh traveled in Southern (Nander) and Eastern (Assam, Bihar) parts of India as well.

The Gurus traveled well beyond the limits of Punjab as well as Punjabi language and culture. We get some idea of how many languages, cultures and dialects the Gurus encountered in their travels by their compositions in the Guru Granth.

The Guru Granth gives us poetical output in many of the Indic languages as well as in Arabic and Persian. There are Muslim and Hindu poets represented, many of whom would never sit together, break bread together or be caught on the adjoining pages of the same holy book – until Guru Arjan in 1604 brought them together in the Adi Granth, the precursor of the Guru Granth.

If Judeo-Christian sacred literature had been as easily available in the India of that time I am sure some would have found commentary and inclusion in the Guru Granth. History suggests that a Muslim saint, Mia(n) Mir laid the foundation stone of the Golden Temple (Harimander Sahib) at Amritsar, the defining marker of Sikh history and psyche today.

So when we speak proudly of the catholicity and universality of the message of the Sikh Gurus it is not just idle chatter.

Why then do we find granthis and so called experts on Sikhi aggressively insisting that within the gurduara premises only Punjabi may be spoken, and a speech in any other language, such as English, is unacceptable if not blasphemous? In this potent equation keep in mind that many young people, born or raised outside India, neither speak nor understand Punjabi beyond a rudimentary conversational level, if that.

I say this and yet I recognise that if we don't emphasise Punjabi language it will soon be relegated to the dustbin of history. The end of a language is nothing to celebrate for it also means the demise of a culture and its worldview. And that surely is not my intent today or ever.

Look at Guru Amardas who established 22 diocesan centres (*manjis*) to spread the message of Sikhi far and wide. Forget not that they covered the expanse of the Indian subcontinent; heaven only knows how many languages were represented. In the *manji*-holders there were eight women.

Guru Gobind Singh welcomed Hindu as well as Muslim allies like Pir Buddhu Shah. Cast a look at the seminal events of the Vaisakhi of 1699. When the Guru established the institution of the Khalsa by initiating the first five Sikhs (*Panj Piyaray*) where did they come from? Only one was from Punjab, the other four represented different castes and regions of India. How about Banda Bahadur whom Guru Gobind Singh deputed to lead his mission in Punjab? What were his antecedents? He was certainly no Punjabi.

But what do we see today?

Women are the forgotten half. Briefly put, they have almost no place within majority of the gurduaras today. In fact, we seem to have written them out of our history. I recall when we invited an unusually excellent woman granthi, Sat Kirin Kaur, to officiate at a wedding at a gurduara in New York, two asinine objections surfaced. Why a woman? And secondly, she was not of Punjabi descent, being a White Caucasian American.

In fact this last objection is how we often dismiss those who have converted to Sikhism but are not of Indian-Punjabi descent.

Sikhi, to me, is a message that is unique, universal, timeless, and a thinking person's way of life but today we seem to have reduced it to Sikhi by inheritance and limited to Punjabi culture, cuisine, music and ambience.

Yet, the fact remains that it is largely Punjabi immigrant Sikhs who have founded gurduaras in the diaspora often to address their own nostalgic need of connecting with home.

The new Punjabi immigrant, perhaps not well or extensively schooled, is conscious of his Indian accent, his poor command over the local language and how it is handled by the natives; he is often unsure of his footing in the society around him and seen as an easy mark by the sharp local businessman. The immigrant is often paid less for the same work than his native born colleagues; often he is socially isolated and financially pressed. His attire, body language, conversation, and ignorance of issues that drive the



Young American girls, who have become Sikhs, seen at the Miri Piri Academy in Amritsar

local community betray him; even his Sikh appearance appears as a handicap. And the post 9/11 reality does not help. His insecurity craves a social setting where he too can be himself. He needs his own comfort zone. And that's why our gurduaras continue to look and run they way they do.

So, gurduaras in the diaspora function as they do in India to capture the sights, smells and sounds of home and the home is Punjab. But for the children of immigrants who are growing up outside their extended families in a very different society it is a markedly different reality and for many of us the Punjabi connection does not hold; for many the home is now different as are its sights, smells and sounds.

Parenthetically, I note that, at least in theory the larger mostly Hindu Indian culture has a very different, almost a paradoxically xenophobic, attitude to religion, culture and foreigners. I know it is rapidly changing in the global village that we all inhabit, but even now there are multitudes of Hindus that undergo a ritual purification whenever they return from travel beyond the seas. Even today, there exist Hindu temples where neither a non-Hindu nor a Hindu convert from a different race, such as White or Black, may enter.

I am astounded at the tolerant, wide and rich world view in old Sikh literature. So, once again, please peruse the citation we started with and salute the inclusive and commanding vision of the unknown poet – a man way ahead of his times.

Dr IJ Singh

Lotus in the Pond Ambassadors of Sikhi



complete jurisdiction in decision making, collection of revenues as well as preaching to congregations. Today these 7 young women follow in these illustrious footsteps. The best missionary of Sikhism can only be that Sikh who leads a Sikh way of life. Our missionaries cannot be modeled on those of the Christian or Islamic faiths. Both these religions preach that only they possess the truth and those not reposing faith in their creed shall suffer eternal damnation. Nothing of the sort is claimed in Sikhism. So we have to think differently. Moreover Sikh missionaries are needed not so much for others but for acquainting Sikhs with Sikhism. The path these young Sikhs are showing us just might be the way.

Sikh Foundation International, California

10 young ambassadors of Sikhi, 7 girls and 3 boys, were recently on a mission to inspire and enthral audiences with their melodious Gurmata sangeet and inspiring poetic presentations. These young torchbearers are a living indication that all is not lost in the Punjab. They are the rays of a new dawn taking shape in our homeland. And this is possible through the efforts of organizations like the *Satnam Sarab Kalyan Trust*, which supports Gurmata Education for school children in the villages and towns of Punjab. How wonderful to learn about the intricacies of Pythagoras and the simplicity of Guru Nanak ji's message all in the course of the same day. The balance of the temporal with the spiritual is after all true Sikhi.



Guru Amar Das trained missionaries to spread Sikhism throughout the country. Of the 146 missionaries Guru Amar Das trained and sent out, 52 were women. At one time the country of Afghanistan and Kashmir were under the jurisdiction of women masands (priests). These women had





Gurdwara Sahib at Craigieburn, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.

Sikh Social Activism

Ruminate, No Talk, No Walk

Social responsibility involves an ethical or ideological recognition that all our endeavours must be informed by a sense of responsibility to Society. In recent years the subject came to receive renewed attention because of its emerging focus on corporate business behaviour that was seen to be driven exclusively by its profit motive to the exclusion of consideration for other stakeholders. Progressively, social activism has been successful in generating pressures to extend application of similar criteria to several other areas. In the West, religious leadership has been actively involved in such activism. This has resulted in adoption of various religious and multi-religious statements on social responsibility as well as increasing grass root involvement at congregational levels.

Sikh theology may perhaps present a very developed paradigm of socially responsible religious life. This paradigm was translated into an example by the way the Gurus lived and led. Early Sikhs in the post Guru period were possibly able to, fairly effectively, check the tide of continuing oppression by the ruling elite and restore a sense of security to the harassed citizenry as they struggled through a very trying period. This brought them not only success but also some recognition, if grudgingly.

From that high point the trajectory of Sikh social involvement over time seems to have gone rather erratic. One of the reasons for progressive Sikh social disengagement could be regression of the socially activist role that the institution of Gurdwara played

in religious life of the community. Sikhs also seem to have shown some inability to hold on to or build on their achievements, again impacting on their potential for social activism.

While there are some signs of reviving Sikh social engagement in India, the diaspora Sikhs present a disparate picture of insularity: hunker down attitudes and random initiatives that seem aimed more at re-engaging with the societies they left in preference to their newly adopted social environment.

This article examines the medley of strong Sikh belief in a socially responsible religious life, pride in their historical role as subduers of anti-social forces but also the apparent lack of direction in their contemporary social involvement.

Social responsibility involves an ethical or ideological recognition that all our endeavours must be informed by a sense of responsibility to society. In recent years the subject came to receive a lot of attention because of its emerging focus on corporate business behaviour which was seen as to be driven entirely by its profit motive to the exclusion of other stake holders in the business. Not all agree with the concept. Nobel economist Milton Friedman asserts that businesses have no social responsibility other than to increase profits and refrain from engaging in deception and fraud. He maintains that when businesses seek to maximise profits, they almost always incidentally do what is good for society.

Social activism is generating pressures to extend this criterion to several other areas. In the West, religious leadership has been actively involved in this activism - more so since the Vietnam War that sharpened the debate on the need for congregational involvement to influence public policy changes. Dana Wilbanks writing on the subject in 1974 framed the issue thus: "many denominational bodies and leaders protested vigorously against our government's Indo-China policy [but]—by and large the local churches failed to confront the theological and moral issues of the war—socially concerned clergy were encouraged to look elsewhere for support of their concerns—implication being that significant social action occurs almost anywhere but in the church—church leaders have not given adequate attention to the local congregation as a significant context for addressing social issues—unless [an] issue is placed in the

context of worship— members are effectively educated to regard it as relatively unimportant".

Social activism by religious groups has grown and their voice is heard loud and clear in public policy debate. Such activism is rooted in and sustained by concern of all traditions in human equality, common good, compassion, justice and controlling of evil forces that may affect the society. This has led to adoption of statements on social responsibility by various religious and multi-religious groups as well as growing involvement by laity at the congregational levels. Various denominations adopted their own programmes for social action and encourage their denominational churches to get involved with those projects. Some interfaith groups also launched some initiatives. For example United States Conference of Religions for Peace has adopted a Multi-Religious Statement on Social Responsibility in pursuit of need to affirming diversity in the USA.

At the local level several congregations have continuing socially activist plans, programmes and projects. As an example we are citing the case of the First Parish Church Unitarian Universalist of Duxbury, Massachusetts. The Habitat for Humanity Committee of the Church is engaged in helping to bring affordable housing to the town of Duxbury and the Social Justice Committee coordinates several charitable, social service and social justice projects and initiatives including:

Preparing and serving meals one Saturday each month at the Soup Kitchen at St Paul's Church in Brockton, from September through May.

Providing basic necessities such as food, household supplies, clothing and furniture to needy families on the South Shore.

Organising Social Action Tables on social issues like shopping with a conscience; drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; the Massachusetts Clean Election Law; sweatshops' and increasing the minimum wage; campaign finance reform as a civil rights issue; slavery and civil war in Sudan; causes and consequences of environmental racism.

The Committee donates a portion of its annual budget to organizations like the Boston Women's Fund, Common Cause, Planned Parenthood, Oxfam America, the South Shore Women's Centre, the Southern Poverty Law Centre, and Doctors Without Borders.

The Sikh precept for socially responsible religious life



The Sikh precept has very clear markers regarding human social responsibility. Believers are persuaded that a devotee has to be a man of the world and a man of God, a saint and a soldier at the same time. This implies that it is not enough to understand and espouse the moral and ethical principles but one has to live by them in the real world and, if needed, be ready to defend what is righteous.

Guru Nanak was deeply troubled by the pervasive presence of corrosive influences at all levels of the society. He lamented that the religious leadership was actually interested in amassing worldly possessions and did not inspire trust, spoke untruths, engaged in petty squabbles and committed grievous hurts to people. At another level *kshatriyas* who were traditional protectors of the societal mores, had abjured their role and those whose job was to administer justice had turned corrupt and would do anything for graft. While the rulers forgetting their roles and responsibilities had turned into butchers, lay citizens were content to be apathetic, almost blind in ignorance and dumb like effigies filled with straw. Nanak also describes unwelcome effects of and concern over alien influences on culture, language and the way of life.

In his compositions generally referred to as *Babarvani*, Guru Nanak has condemned greed and pleasure-seeking ways of people and has strongly deprecated the ruling elite for their failure to protect the country. He has ridiculed the attempt to fight the invaders by using miracles and casting spells. The Guru has also commented that if one beats up his equal, it might not be a cause for grievance... (but) if a tiger mauls herding cattle, the Master must answer the innocent and weak must be spared. Even though the Guru seems to chide God for not showing compassion when the suffering screamed in pain, the answer is obvious – it is for the humans to resist individually and collectively all that may ail the society.

Guru Arjan has talked about a vision of an ideal society and called it *halemi raj* – ruling through humility, modesty and *seva* (service). This ideal of societal transformation is founded on the individual struggle of a person to fight and win over evil propensities. Those who lead are mentored into giving up their evil propensities and demonstrate fitness by undergoing a rigorous, transparent test – like a wrestling bout. With truth as its foundational principle, the inner working of this society is not oppressive, coercive or degrading of the dignity of the individual. *Gursikhs* (Sikhs of the Guru) are its pace setters, exemplars, role models as well as mentors for others to be better citizens.

Guru Gobind Singh in *Zafarnama* or the Epistle of Victory, a verse in Persian addressed to Aurangzeb makes several comments reflective of the Guru's thoughts on conflict, its inherent ethical dilemmas and ingredients of righteous rulership. We will look at these briefly – the numbers in parenthesis refer to the verse as numbered in the original text:



One who proclaims to be a true believer and faithful to his faith must demonstrate that his belief is not merely a verbal protestation but also guides his societal behavior. He must not break a promise made in all solemnity. If such a person were to make a swearing declaration on his scripture or give an assurance to another in the name of his beliefs then I having been given

a sworn solemn undertaking of safe passage he ought not to have pounced on the party assured to leave and then imprison them when having left their defenses they were vulnerable.

His decision to join the battle was not easy. He questions *'what kind of chivalry is this in war that countless hordes should pounce upon just forty of us? I had perforce to join battle at that stage and I too fought with the muskets and arrows as best as I could, because when a situation is past every other remedy it is righteous to unsheathe the sword to defend and to dispel the aggressor. I would have had nothing to do with this battle otherwise. But even as we fought we did not hurt or molest those who had not aggressed against us.*

The Guru makes several comments about what a ruler should or should not do. *'He must be cognizant that God could not have wished for him to create strife but instead to promote peace, harmony and tranquility among the people. Nor should the ruler use his strength, power and resources to harass, suppress or deprive the weak. This will only weaken the society, erode his ability to rule effectively and make the State unsafe. He should not recklessly shed blood of others lest heaven's rage should befall him'.*

In spite of all that happened, the Guru is gracious, kind and compassionate and wants the matter to be brought to close without any lingering resentment. He says *'if only you were gracious enough to come to the village of Kangar, we could then see each other face to face. Come to me so that we may converse with each other, and I may utter some kind words to thee. You are bound, indeed by your word on the Koran, let, therefore, the matter come to a good end, as is your promise.'*

The Gurus variously related these precepts to temporal living for the individual, family, local community and their web of relationships. A brief look at such teachings follows.

Relating to the Temporal

Sikhs are guided to relate the precept to their temporal living. A true devotee sees God's light in all and therefore judges not others; endeavours to develop morally, ethically and spiritually; relates to his environment in a state of inner harmony and is a productive and constructive member of society contributing to amiable relations.

Each house is a *dharamsal* - a cradle for prayer and cultivating righteous values. The family supports itself by honest and earnest endeavor, gives some for



the common good and helps promote moral, ethical and spiritual development of each member without impeding their temporal pursuits. Men and women are enjoined to be steadfast in marital fidelity and their parental responsibility.

A habitat or a community is the mini world in which a person grows up; sets up his own family; earns his living; relates to others and deals with those passing through. This is the conglomerate that offers him choices of the company that he picks that may determine his destiny, in here and beyond.

The social order in this setting must promote equality. No institutionalised discrimination based on ethnicity, beliefs, class, caste, economic status, gender, etc., is accepted. What is discriminatory, oppressive or unjust should be resisted – absent that one must have sagacity to accept life as it unfolds. Persons in positions of power must be held accountable. Their decisions must be made after deep deliberation and should be able to withstand moral scrutiny and tests for justice and being equitable. At an extended plane, all the above activities are carried out in and as a part of the totality of our surrounding ecological environment. This world and this life are important and one should bring the two in harmony to comprehend inter-connectedness between God and nature, attain inner peace and experience the ecstatic beauty and joy in divine dispensation.

Developing the Praxis

The mnemonic expression *degh, tegh, fateh*, going back to the Guru's time, inspired Sikh living. Sikhs also adopted these three words for inscription on their seals and coins when they succeeded in establishing suzerainty over parts of North India in the early eighteenth century. The word *degh* carries the connotation of general benevolence, *tegh* of protecting the good from evil and *fateh* of victory in this righteous endeavor. This twin concept of charity and valour and the supplication for *sarbat ka bhala* (well being of one and all) in the concluding line of *ardas* (ritual Sikh supplication) gives expression to the Sikh prayer that their day should be filled with deeds to secure the well being of all.



Gurus promoted *seva* to help the devotee to grow spiritually even as one works for the betterment of others. *Seva* has the connotation of devotion to the divine and altruistic service. It must be an expression of love, not of pity or reciprocity, for as the Guru says 'one who is good if good is done unto him and not otherwise, does not love but only trades in love.' Make your supplication in ever so many ways to the divine that such love is for the low of the lowest – all not limited to the like-minded or co-religionists or in return.

Gurus also instituted *Daswandh*, an obligation, similar to tithes. While giving continued at the

individual level, the tradition of *daswandh* provided the much-needed resources to support collective *seva* at the community level by the Gurus.

There are several anecdotes about Nanak's personal inner compelling urge for helping the needy. As a young lad in his teens, his father gave him some money to go out and conduct business. On returning home when asked about the business transacted and profit made, young Nanak said that having met a group of pious people who were hungry, he used up the money to feed them. The father was distraught and admonished him that one should make deals that are profitable. Nanak replied that this was indeed a real deal – *sacha sauda* – that will yield gain in the court of the Lord. The episode so often narrated to the young by the parents underscores in a simplistic way the importance of *seva* in service of the virtuous. Unlike ritualistic feeding of Brahmins considered as *daan* (charity) that was decried by Guru Nanak, feeding the hungry is – *parupkar* – altruism, a value highly commended.

In his later years, Nanak settled down at a place that came to be known as Kartarpur, and set up a *dharamsal* – where the devotees used to gather every evening to sing God's praises and share a community meal. Breaking caste restrictions and other inhibiting prevalent practices, none was excluded or not made welcome to the *dharamsal*. Association of women signaled involvement of children and families. Building of bathing pools, shared food in *langar* and encouragement of sporting activities by successor Gurus strengthened the social bonding and the importance of spirit of sharing, *seva*, community hygiene and physical fitness in religious life.

The community grew and the *dharamsal*, over time, became the centre where prayer and *seva* moved in tandem. Characteristic features of *dharamsal* from the beginning included providing shelter and food for the needy and wayfarers by the Guru and the congregation. Thus in addition to *seva* by individuals at personal level and of their own volition, Gurus gave impetus to collective *seva* by the community in supporting projects and services for benefit of the people and gurdwaras became nodal points for organising such activities.

Gurus interceded with the rulers seeking relief for the farmers hit by drought. The multi-dimensional message that actively involved, ethical and inclusive



Sikhs at the new Sikh Dharamsal at San Antonio, in Texas



community living was conducive for spiritual progression caught imagination of people and became its own strong message of inclusiveness at a time when other models were seen to be withdrawn, exclusive or elitist.

The Gurus had to make tremendous sacrifices to secure freedom, security and safety of the people. Guru Arjan when forced to act against his beliefs chose to face gruesome tortures and die rather than submit. The Guru did not give up his resolve nor did

Guru Har Krishan, when just eight years old, contracted small pox tending to the sick in Delhi and died. Guru Tegh Bahadur gave his own life so that Hindus could have their freedom of faith. This he understood to be his creed that all men, without distinction must have this freedom even if it meant for him to give up his life to arouse people's consciousness. The ultimate sacrifice of Guru Tegh Bahadur to protect the right of Hindus to practice their religion is possibly the only one of its kind in religious history.



Every Sikh Gurdwara maintains the langar

he utter a word of hate. He just raised the bar. Guru Hargobind and successor Gurus maintained a retinue of armed followers to protect the nascent community and others from oppression by officials, raiders and foreign invaders. He transformed Sikh activism to take to armed defence in the face of force. He did not initiate any fight but did not evade it when it was inevitable. Bhai Gurdas points to the Guru's valour as vanquisher in battles fought for the common good.

With Guru Gobind Singh, the process of acculturation of Sikh resolute activism saw its culmination. The Khalsa had a visible identity and purpose. *Ranjit Nagaara* sounded loud and clear that the Sikhs were determined to no more accept oppression, intrusion, insults or intimidation. They were now ready to protect what was righteous and resist what was not with the use of arms, if needed. The call of Guru Nanak that 'step onto my path with your head in your hand if you desire to play this game of love - once on, care not for what anyone says but hearken the call' was understood and internalised by the Sikhs.

A chronicle from that time shows that apart from making sacrifices for shared humanity, some Sikhs had imbibed the message of treating friend and foe alike even as the Imperial army frequently invaded them at Anandpur. After a day of skirmishes as the weary sun was going down, an elderly Sikh, Kanhaiya was tending to the wounded of both sides and ministering sips of water to the thirsty. Seeing this, the Sikhs were upset and asked Guru Gobind Singh to stop Kanhaiya from comforting the enemy. The Guru asked them to call him and ask - why? Brought before



Bhai Kanhaiya, on reaching Kavha (district Attock, now in Pakistan), established a dharamsal, providing much sought-after clear water.

the Guru, Kanhaiya humbly said, "Lord you told us to recognise all human race as one. When I go tending the wounded and I look at them I see your image in each of them. If you pervade in all, I see only you and no enemy!"

Guru Gobind Singh also set examples so difficult to grasp and emulate. He persevered not to withdraw in spite of mounting odds and pressure from his mother and Sikhs during the fifth battle of Anandpur. Later at Chamkaur after his two elder sons were martyred it is said that his 'mental composure showed glow of divinity upon the glorious end of his sons.' Maybe he was contemplating the irrevocable play of the Divine will or perhaps had concluded that this was the way protracted conflicts in pursuit of righteousness may come to end.

Verses 77-80 of the *Zafarnama* perhaps offer an explanation. The Guru told Aurangzeb that thoughtless acts of tyranny might stoke fires rather than put out a spark. By their reckless treachery and killing of minor children of the Guru, Muslims made the seeds of resistance spread to sprout far and wide. This was no victory for Aurangzeb. It was the beginning of defeat. Sikhs did not forget the winter of 1705. The saga of Chamkaur, Sirhind and Machhiwara became an unforgettable part of the Sikh lore and the spark lighted that cold winter soon turned into a raging fire against Muslim rulers and foreign invaders who tried to intrude into the land of their Gurus.

The Sikh lore, symbols, rituals and artifacts surrounding religious observances do not let Sikh sense of social responsibility easily suffer dilution

and help in its transmission. The contours of Sikh activism, its scriptural basis, the way Gurus' responses influenced and defined it has two facets:

—a proactive urge to blunt the ill effects of institutionalised societal discrimination and ameliorate human condition through encouraging social equality, self-reliance, sharing and *seva*;

—a reactive response not to give in to oppression or injustice but to resist it through non-violent means



The Sikh Dharamsal is a place to learn spiritual wisdom and serve all humanity

even if it means making supreme sacrifices and if all else fails resort to limited use of force to obviate the immediate cause of dissonance.

Early Sikhs

Guru Gobind Singh, a little before his passing in 1708, invested Banda with authority to carry on the struggle in Punjab and a *Hukumnama* from the Guru instructing Sikhs to join Banda Bahadur in war against Mughal tyranny was provided. This was the start of a new phase of Sikh engagement to transform society reeling under inapt misrule that was marked by ascendancy of a see-saw armed struggle to carve out space that could bring some sense of safety and security in an environment where disparate forces were jostling for power.

Banda received enthusiastic support in his mission from Sikhs who were highly inspired by the Khalsa doctrine and motivated to avenge those who had committed tyrannous acts against the Gurus. He also got sufficient support of zamindars who had taken to armed resistance against Mughal authority during the last phase of Aurangzeb's rule as well as the deprived classes who were not beneficiaries of the existing

order. Many groups of Hindu Jats, Gujars and Rajputs aligned with Banda for plunder.

Banda took over the Government treasuries at Sonapat and near Kaithal in late 1709 and gave it away to his rank and file. He attacked Samana, village of the executioner of Guru Tegh Bahadur and put its inhabitants to sword. Similar retribution was meted out to habitats of Muslim Ranghars notorious for rape and rapine, Pathans who had deserted Guru Gobind Singh and the hated town of Sarhind to take revenge on Wazir Khan.

The strong and resolute military action by Banda had a salutary effect in bringing down lawlessness. He abolished zamindari and declared cultivators as owners of land. His injunction for troops was strict observance of rules of conduct laid down for the Khalsa of not using tobacco, drugs or intoxicants and not committing theft or adultery. He came down hard on the known tyrants and wanted to once again usher in the mythical Satyug. This brought him the goodwill of vast majority of population.

The armed actions initiated by Banda had a salutary effect in bringing down lawlessness. He abolished zamindari and declared cultivators as owners of land. His injunction for troops was strict observance of rules of conduct laid down for the Khalsa of not using tobacco, drugs or intoxicants and not committing theft or adultery. He wanted once again to usher in the mythical *satyug*. This brought him the goodwill of vast majority of population.

Banda's role, a mix of benevolence and ruthlessness was however, short-lived. Finally defeated, taken captive he was killed in a gruesome manner. He was conscious of mercilessness he had inflicted. It is



Kirat Karo: Sikh farmers in paddy fields

reported that one Mohammed Amin Khan, who was standing near him asked him, "From your manner so far you appear to be a man of virtue, who believes in God, and in doing good deeds. You are also very intelligent. Can you tell me why you are to suffer all this here?" His reply was, "When the tyrants oppress their subjects to the limit, then God sends men like me on this earth to mete out punishment to them. But being human, we sometimes overstep the laws of justice, and for that we are made to pay whilst we are still here. God is not being unjust to me in any way."

The reactive Sikh social engagement had started in earnest. John Surman and Edward Stephenson of the East India Company who had witnessed how the Sikhs of Banda were massacred, wrote to their governor at Fort William: "It is not a little remarkable with what patience Sikhs undergo their fate, and to the last it has not been found that one apostatised from his new formed religion."

This scenario was re-enacted several times during the tumultuous 18th century. Sikh bands actively fought the rulers and invading forces in a series of drawn out guerrilla encounters and progressively succeeded in gaining the upper hand. The conflict was seen as struggle to subdue evil. Sacrifices made by Sikh men, women and children are part of history and also memorialised in Sikh *ardaas*.

During this difficult period too, the gurdwara continued with its proactive activities to the extent possible. Additionally, it became the centre for deliberations by the community, for taking consensual decisions, for coordinating strategic and logistic effort and keeping the community abreast of developments. Sikhs in fact developed a tradition of *sarbat khalsa* (corporate collective of Sikhs) that decided by adopting gurmattas (Guru's directive] in presence of Guru Granth Sahib giving their decisions religious sanction, accepted as binding on all the devotees.

Even though late in the century Sikhs succeeded in bringing significant parts of Punjab in their control but there is evidence that their endeavour was not always driven by motive to establish their rule. To cite one example, in the 1780s Sikhs had gained control over Delhi, but agreed to retire most of their soldiery back to Punjab on an understanding that Baghel Singh would be allowed to build seven gurdwaras in Delhi to commemorate Sikh sacred sites. He was given charge of city octroi posts and could keep 6/16th of

Sarbat Khalsa at Akal Takht, Amritsar



revenue collection to pay for construction and his troop upkeep. He diligently completed his mission while remitting the balance cash to treasury regularly. His troops also kept peace and order in the city.

There are many other recorded anecdotes about the way Sikhs conducted themselves. We will cite a couple that reflect on our subject:

James Browne, who was an employee of East India Company recorded that the misaldars were not rigid about their levies and accepted what the farmer could pay of the moderate rent mostly in kind. The cultivators were thus treated with empathy and never molested by their soldiers.

A Brahmin girl was forcibly abducted by Mir Hassan Khan, the Chief of Jalalabad. Sikhs under the command of Baghel Singh rescued the girl but her parents refused to accept her back because she was considered defiled. The Sikhs warned that the

property of anyone who discriminated against the girl would be confiscated and given to the girl. They also gave the girl title of 'Daughter of the Khalsa'.

Forster who travelled through India at the time wrote, "Being at the time in Rohilkhand, I saw two Sikh horsemen who had been sent from their country to receive the tribute which was collected from the revenues of certain custom houses. The manner in which these people were treated or rather treated themselves, I frequently wished for the power of migrating into the body of *Sicque* (Sikh) for a few weeks - so well did these cavaliers fare. No sooner had they alighted, then beds were preferred for their repose, and their horses were supplied with green barley pulled out of the fields. The 'Kafilah' travelers were contented to lodge on the ground, and expressed their thanks for permission to purchase what they required; such was the difference between those who were in and those who were out of power."



Anahat Kaur aka 'Azad Sherni'

Towards the end of 18th century, young Ranjit Singh emerged as the Sikh leader who in a systematic manner worked to create a well-governed Sikh rule. He also was able to bring order to the western frontier and stop further invasions from across the border. Population in the region was thus able to enjoy relative peace for the first time in several centuries.

During the half-century of Sikh rule, the Sikh social activism received State patronage and it thrived as well as diversified. Sikhs had earned a lot of goodwill through their sacrifices and conduct. As the ruling elite now, they displayed the sagacity to be non-discriminatory, just and generous. It was a period when for a short while the society did not need reactive activism from them – it was ensured through good governance.

Coming of the British

The coming of the British created new challenges for the Sikhs. Under their rule Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were soon joined in a three-way struggle in an

environment that did not seem to lend any abiding advantage to anyone group. A couple of developments however seem to be relevant to our review. Firstly the British tended to acknowledge Sikh martial traits and reinforced their self-image of valour. This provided a continuing link with their immediate past experience and sublimated into Sikh readiness to continue to espouse causes that they held dear or in patriotic fervor unmindful of sacrifices that it may entail. The Kuka movement was one such case in 1870s followed by the Gurdwara reform movement of 1920s though the likes of Ghadr movement, Jallianwala Bagh, Bhagat Singh episode and the INA possibly fall in the same genre with dominant Sikh involvement.

The other development was the growth of competitive as well as assimilative pressures that Sikhs began to experience, especially from Hindus. This brought the question of Sikh identity into forefront that turned the confident, gregarious Sikh psyche into an increasingly obsessively defensive mindset.

Both these developments have played into the way Sikh activism has since taken shape. It seems to have been hit by the recognition that under the new political dispensation, being small in numbers and with limited resources, Sikh's ability to espouse social causes and to make a difference in the social arena was severely constrained. The sacrifices they made during the various causes mentioned above did not help their becoming participants in the mainstream political or social conversations. Even their successful non-violent movement has not received any recognition by the political pundits and historians because it might have taken some sheen off the icon of ahimsa that they were trying to project to the rest of the world. They turned inward in a self-critical mode, not quite sure how to position themselves in and engage with the emerging social milieu. What we witness today is a legacy of what transpired before.

Contemporary Scene and Issues

As we have seen institutionalisation of *sewa* among Sikhs centered around the *dharamsal* which in the time of Gurus served not only as a place of worship but also as a vehicle for community building and channelising their altruism. All offerings and *daswand* came to the Gurus who used the resources for the common good. Considering the state of societal development at the time, these practices were highly egalitarian and served the pressing needs of

people without any distinction or discrimination. The traditions developed also integrated social responsibility into the Sikh way of life.

Over the centuries, Sikhs have continued to channel most of their offerings in the name of the Guru to the gurdwaras. Experience however seems to suggest that gurdwara as an institution has not been able to deliver upon the promise of the *dharamsal* underpinning the integrated concept of socially responsible involvement inherent in the Guru's teachings and praxis. Whereas the Gurus displayed deep sensitivity to serve continuing as well as emerging needs, in more recent times most of the funds have begun to be used up to pay those providing liturgical services and *langar*, with the bulk of capital expense being incurred for construction of ostentatious gurdwaras to the neglect of societal problems and needs.

Professional *ragis* and *kathakars* do fulfill a need but they seem to have become a strong vested interest constantly on the move offering their fare to the congregations globally. Without going into the complexity of issues surrounding this development, it can be said that an increasing share of giving by the laity is going to support these activities.

The character of *langar* has also changed. Starting as a symbol of social equality, sharing and feeding the needy it seems to be becoming more of a signature Sikh practice. Shared mainly by the congregants, it is acquiring the character of an elaborate fellowship meal in place of its egalitarian social and altruistic purpose. So, even as its associated costs have soared, its social impact has more likely declined.

The elaborate building structures do look good when new but generally suffer from lack of



Panj Pyaras lead a procession : symbolic of the faith



At the Guru ka Langar

maintenance and in any case mostly the total decor may not go with the outward glitz and expensive building materials used. There is a shared apprehension that the *kar seva* Babas have failed to preserve the heritage value in most of the reconstruction projects. Most of gurdwaras, historical ones included, have hardly any great collection of artifacts compared to their equivalents in other faith traditions.

If we look at the Sikh Code of Conduct, *Sikh Rehat Maryada* (SRM), we find that notwithstanding its extolling the Sikh collective activism, it has remained a pious declaration of intent. The SRM says that 'the concept of service is not confined to fanning the congregation, service to and in the *Guru ka Langar*, and so on. A Sikh's entire life is a life of benevolent exertion. The most fruitful service is the service that secures the optimum good by minimal endeavour. That can be achieved through organised collective action. A Sikh has, for this reason, to fulfill his/her Panthic obligations, even as he/she performs his/her individual duties' (Article XXIII). The code also enjoins on the Khalsa Sikhs to pay *daswandh* to the Guru (Article XXIV).

Clearly *seva* is not constrained within any specific bounds and its simple forms including caring for congregation's comfort, offerings and *seva* in the *langar* and various sweeping and cleaning jobs in the gurdwara do not add up to the sum total of Sikh *seva*. These examples if at all reflect the common denominator of *seva* practices in all gurdwaras and thus serve as easily understood illustrations.

The call to contribute *daswandh* to the Guru and for collective effort to achieve optimum good with minimum endeavour points to other *seva* projects undertaken by the gurdwara. That *seva* is Panthic

obligation. It is intended to be effective and has to aim at and realise results. It must contribute to amelioration of human condition and have clear markers to assess its effects.

Thus viewed, *seva* as popularly understood and practiced in gurdwaras is not what it is intended to be either in terms of *gurbani* or its more pragmatic temporal application as enunciated in the SRM. What we witness in the gurdwaras is ritualistic replication that has little merit spiritually and does little to serve the needy.

There are several needs and problems in various societies that call for collective effort by the community. These include helping the poor and needy; environmental degradation; disaster relief; education and research; advocacy, discrimination issues, media relations; promoting arts and culture and developing relations with the mainstream society. Some issues that tend to be particularly stressful for families but have not received any active support or even attention from the gurdwaras include:

- Marital maladjustments, divorces, single parenting
- Dysfunctional families, domestic violence, extended family tension
- Youth alienation, teen suicides
- Loneliness, isolation, absence of support system
- Cultural inhibitions

Some of these issues could be traced to structural problems. Committees elected by the congregants - generally for a short term of one year, now manage most Gurdwaras. Apart from being focused on the short term this structure has some serious flaws. Gurdwaras as an institution delivered in Guru's times because the authority was vested in the Guru who had demonstrated abilities to provide spiritual guidance and leadership. In the present set up the liturgical staff has no authority or even voice in the Gurdwara and the committee members, who may be astute politically, mostly have little understanding of *gurmat*.

This problem becomes critical when we try and relate to other faiths or to the agencies in the secular world. Taking the interfaith issues first. Now these are a major concern of the religious activists if for no other reason than the negative influence of religion as a social divider. One can join in inter-religious conversations but to bring about reconciliation and



to move beyond historical animosities the dialogical engagement would benefit if the interlocutors could influence change. In our case it is an accomplishment if we can get a gurdwara functionary to come to a meeting let alone talk of forgiveness or reconciliation or even agree to have an interfaith service in the gurdwara precincts because of the fear of – *maryada ulanghna* – breach of tradition.

The situation gets murkier when we come to agencies dealing with issues confronting the global society. The faith of *miri-piri* and *manas ki jaat sabhai eko pehchanbho* is totally out of depth here. The most pressing problems facing humanity are broken homes, human rights violations, environmental degradation, armed conflict and the like. Where and in what activist manner are we seized of these issues as a faith community? Who should the agencies working in these areas get in touch with to get our position or involvement as a concerned group? The problem of female infanticide has just received promise of active interest from SGPC when the directive against *kurimars* has been part of Sikh ethos from the time of Guru Gobind Singh. The cleanup of the Bain Nadi has been accomplished by a lone volunteer and till today we have not heard a word of concern from the SGPC

or the Akal Takhat regarding the poisons running through the water resources of this land of five rivers where the Gurus sang songs extolling water as *pita* and *jit harya sabh koe*.

One reason is that gurdwaras presently do not afford any opportunity for community to consult internally and the *sangat* is not in the loop on decision processes, choice of projects or asked to actively get involved in any socially responsible intervention with the world external to the Gurdwara. This explains why initiatives of the type at Duxbury are not even heard of in our *sangats*.

Social engagement of religious groups is not bounded within the confines of beliefs, rites and rituals or esoteric symbolisms. Faith traditions grow within certain cultural milieus and some culture related characteristics come to be associated with religious groups. In our case instead of trying to unravel our cultural heritage and showcasing it we seem to act as if cultural influences can only pollute religious purity. This is also inhibiting our potential for effective social engagement in a world where the other faith groups use all the cultural trappings that help the cause they are pursuing.

I also sense that our inability to consolidate our gains and build on our successes has contributed to our declining ability to make an impact socially. We are endowed with an excellent theology on social responsibility. We were the last religious group to cede rule to the British. In independent India we achieved early economic success by taking avidly to the green revolution. However we either kept our advantage under sacred wraps or squandered it away.

Thankfully in India there is a growing sense of buoyancy among Sikhs and they are now more visibly engaged in eradication of social evils and improvement in the condition of their fellow beings. I am quite impressed with the range of gurdwara based programmes like hospitals and schools that I have seen grow over the last two decades. Sikhs have also responded to the problems arising from the 80s to develop activist forums, and their help to disaster victims has been quick and visible. There are several other initiatives that are reassuring that Sikh activism is reviving.

Situation relating to the Diaspora however is not as comforting. Their involvement with issues of social concern is only marginal, if so. Their main focus has been to establish gurdwaras and organise Sikh camps for the youth. In recent years, some initiatives to reach out to the mainstream gained urgency because of post-11 September experiences. There also have been some projects to establish Sikh chairs in a few universities, exhibitions of Sikh art and artifacts at some well-known galleries and film festivals. The core issues that remain the concern of social activists have not witnessed Sikh involvement as a faith group. The reasons for this phenomenon are the same as in the Indian situation, only a bit more pronounced. At the individual level too Sikh giving has found its way more to India than to local causes ostensibly in a nostalgic bid to reconnect with their roots or possibly because of other pragmatic considerations. There too most of contribution is intended for religious projects with only a small portion going for other socially relevant initiatives.

Beyond Ruminating

We do have problems in our social activism at the present time. This lapse possibly does not seize our attention weighed down as we are with internal identity issues and growing alienation among the youth. We also are still struggling to figure out how to position ourselves as a minority to be able to effectively engage the mainstream as a faith group on issues of broader social concern. In the process we are turning inwards, with a hunker down mentality talking more about what the Gurus said and did rather than trying to carry their example and mission forward.

We have to move beyond ruminating. We can recall our acts of social responsibility a million times in our *ardas*, it will not enable us to engage effectively in causes that are of importance in today's context. That ability will only be enhanced if we talk about what is impeding us presently to become more engaged and involved as a faith group. Once we are able to think through I have no doubt we would succeed in repositioning ourselves as concerned social activists very quickly and effectively. Sikh transition from ruminating to talking will not come easy. Walking is not a problem once they get to know the way – if at all they will have to be dissuaded from plunging headlong !



The author, Colonel Nirmal Singh has been writing for several years on the Sikh faith, culture and values in the contemporary setting with the larger American community through promoting and participation in dialogues, discussion groups, seminars, events, media appearances and writing, etc. He is the Author of 'Exploring Sikh Spirituality & the Paradox of their Stereotyping in Contemporary American Setting' published (2003) by Sanbun, New Delhi. He has delivered a number of talks on Sikhism all over the world. He is an Adjunct Faculty with the Hindu University of America, is a former Business Executive and Professor, Chair Operations Management & Dean Administrative Staff College of India.

New Icons for Sikh Youth Today

My admiration for the *sikhchic.com* choice of Waris Singh Ahluwalia and Bhai Gurbaksh Singh as the "Chic Sikhs of the Year" for 2013 has only reinforced my long held conviction, which I have been preaching to audiences of Sikh youngsters in Canada, India, Switzerland, Japan, the UK and wherever else that I have met them, to focus on two professional fields as their choice of profession: media and finance.

Wherever I get the occasion to talk to Sikh families with young children, I request them to motivate their sons and daughters to choose media and finance as their preferred professions.

The recent fast by Bhai Gurbaksh Singh in India for the release of detainees having already completed their jail terms was literally a case study for further convincing me that media and finance are not only appropriate but also desirable choices for Sikh boys and girls.

Why so?

I watch three or four Indian TV channels blaring out 24 hour news, debates, panel discussions and interviews with experts. I did not see any report about Bhai Gurbaksh Singh's fast on any of these channels. There was no panel discussion or interview about the cause for which Bhai Gurbaksh Singh was risking his life. He did not exist for these channels which were all the time going on about the Aam Aadmi Party, Rahul Gandhi, Narendra Modi and the like.

None of the shrill and aggressive Indian TV anchors bothered to even mention Bhai Gurbaksh Singh's cause or the problem of so many prisoners



Waris Singh Ahluwalia



Bhai Gurbaksh Singh

rotting in Indian jails after having completed their full prison terms. His fast unto death was a non-event for them.

The only channels from which I was able to get news about Bhai Gurbaksh Singh on TV were the three channels being telecast from outside India: the *Sikh Channel*, the *Sangat Channel* and the *Akaal Channel*, all of them established by Sikhs.

I was able to see for myself the fortitude displayed by Bhai Gurbaksh Singh in his sayings. I was moved by his simplicity and devotion to the ideals of Sikhi. His transparent sincerity came through in his belief in the justice of his cause.

It was such a refreshing change from the blatant hypocrisy amply displayed on mainstream Indian TV channels by Sikh and other politicians mouthing ideals in such total contradiction to their own lives and actions.

Bhai Gurbaksh Singh shone like a beacon of sincerity and honesty amongst this ocean of false prophets and leaders who

hog the limelight on most Indian TV channels with their aggressive anchors.

We have so many rich and intelligent Sikhs spread around the world. However, I find it difficult to comprehend why hardly any good movies have ever been made about the lives of Sikh households or stories written by Sikh novelists about Sikh culture and tradition.

Bollywood has traditionally caricatured the Sikhs as bumpkins, buffoons or drunkards in innumerable Hindi films. A film like "Nanak Naam Jahaaz Hai" was about a Sikh family but with a heavy dose of religious belief.

The moment any film touches upon Sikh religious aspects, it becomes subject to all kinds of objections from self styled Sikh 'priest', sants, politicians and fundamentalists who make more people see such films by creating controversies about them. Their own daily lives might be in total contradiction to the principles of Sikhi but they become fervent guardians of Sikhi in such matters.

My wife, a non-Sikh, has asked me several times about the flagrant paucity of good, non-religious films about Sikh history and culture. She feels it is a pity that handsome-looking Sikhs are not shown in films about Sikh heroes of which Sikh history has such shining examples.

Frankly, I do not know why this is so.

A Hollywood film, *The English Patient*, generated more interest about Sikhs in Switzerland than any action undertaken (if at all) by any Sikh jathedar or leader.

This film showed a Sikh as a capable army officer in a sapper unit doing efficient work in removing mines and unexploded bombs in Italy in World War II. I got so many questions about my religion from several Swiss people who had watched this film. Many of them would walk up to me in trains or on the street in the days after the release of this film in Switzerland to tell me with a touch of pride, "You are a Sikh".

It showed me the necessity of making more such films showing Sikhs in every day life situations, having nothing to do with religious themes.

Why are rich Sikhs not financing more such films?

Even at the cost of sounding banal, I cannot help but cite the example of the presence of Jews in media and finance as a contrast to that of Sikhs in these fields.

Jews and Sikhs are both minorities in most places where they live. Of course, the Jews have the sovereign state of Israel since 1948. The number of Jews is slightly less than the number of Sikhs in the world. But just look at how they are perceived, thanks to their strong presence in the fields of media and finance and how we are perceived.

The cause for which Bhai Gurbaksh Singh put his life at risk should be a universal human right, yet I did not see any coverage of this at all on any channel other than the three channels set up by Sikhs.

Now contrast this to what happens in Israel or to events affecting the Jewish community in France or other countries around the world. Both Jews and Sikhs have been and are the victims of gross injustice and physical attacks in so many places.

Just observe the difference in the attention the media devote to events concerning them.

Just bemoaning how badly Bollywood films depict Sikhs will not serve any purpose unless Sikh boys and girls start going into media in a big way and projecting a different image of Sikhi through their creations.

I believe a start has already been made in this direction through the holding of Sikh film festivals in



A still from the movie 'Bhaag Milkha Bhaag' based on the life of the 'Flying Sikh' Milkha Singh.

Canada and the US but this trend has to be generalised. This will require financing which is precisely where the other string to the bow comes in: finance.

We need a strong presence of Sikh men and women in the financial world to ensure that media projects envisaged by Sikhs obtain the necessary funding without which films about Sikhs cannot move to the next level in terms of quality.

Once Sikhs become strong in media and finance, Sikh youngsters, both boys and girls, could be provided better job opportunities in these sectors. Once such opportunities start appearing, it could motivate more Sikh youngsters to focus more on education geared towards entering these fields. The armed forces and agriculture have been two domains in which Sikhs have been traditionally present. Both these sectors are now limited in scope.

The Indian government follows a policy of linking recruitment in the armed forces to the percentage of different communities in the Indian population while overseas governments impose severe restrictions on Sikhs with turbans being able to serve in their armed forces. However much such restrictions appear unjust and unjustified, which they are, we cannot wish them away.

Agriculture is becoming more and more capital intensive everywhere. There has been severe fragmentation of land holdings in Punjab. From what I have been personally able to see in the Indian Punjab, more and more Sikh youngsters spend their time in cities, enjoying the "good" life by selling off land at high prices rather than personally cultivating their lands.

Sikhs in Punjab keep complaining about the influx of Biharis, totally ignoring the fact that there would be severe shortage of manpower in the agricultural sector if Biharis were not to come and work in their fields.

Alternative sources of employment have to be found for Sikh boys and girls. Media and finance should be their priority choices of profession. For this, the quality of education imparted to them needs to drastically improve. Competition in both these sectors is fierce. They will need to be amongst the best candidates available for positions with internationally reputed firms in media and finance.

Good work is being done by Sikh educational trusts, foundations and similar organisations by

setting up educational institutions especially for Sikh girls. Many such institutions concentrate their curriculum on imparting knowledge about Sikh religion by making students participate in early morning prayers and meditation.

This has to be accompanied by improvement in the quality of education which needs to be up to international standards of excellence. For this they need good teachers and facilities which need proper remuneration which comes from proper financing which comes from donors and financing institutions providing funding which implies that such funders need to be convinced of the validity of the project which they are being asked to fund which would become easier if there was a much stronger presence of Sikh men and women in deciding positions in media and finance.

We can turn this paradigm around whichever way we want. There is no escaping hard reality. Unless we have a strong presence in media and finance, Sikh demands for justice and correct media image will continue to suffer the way they are suffering till now.

During my travels to various countries I do come across many Sikhs working in the financial sector but very few active in the media. Also, those active in the media in India are not exactly shining lights to be emulated. Some of them just seem to delight in projecting the image of Sikhs as whisky guzzlers as if drinking copious amounts of alcohol were a badge of honour to be worn with pride.

It is a mark of shame.

We need responsible journalism which will come with sensible, well educated Sikh boys and girls entering the media in large numbers. Many of them will be motivated to set up new journals, TV companies, film making companies. There will be several failures and not just successes. What is essential is to make media and finance as priority professional choices for aspiring Sikh boys and girls.

A Jewish friend told me that Jewish families used to choose successful Jews having lived through not just one but two bankruptcies as desirable matches for their daughters since such men had proven their resilience by losing everything but still getting back on their feet not just once but twice.

This story might not be true but it shows the right spirit.

The role of parents becomes crucial here. They have to first themselves be convinced that media and finance are desirable choices of profession for their children. I know of several cases of my contemporaries who were pushed by their parents to go in to the bureaucracy or the police in India.

Media and finance should start outranking the bureaucracy, armed forces, the police and other career choices in the minds of Sikh parents when they envisage professional futures for their children. Only then could the drivel being dished out by Bollywood about Sikhs be effectively countered.

Just consider some of the recent films released about Sikhs like 'Son of Sardaar' or 'Singh Sahib the Great'. The level of imbecility of such films as to be seen to be believed. 'Singh is Kinng' was another shining example of undiluted stupidity. A surprising contrast was 'Bhaag Milkha Bhaag' which showed the hard work and dedication put in by the finest athlete India has produced till now, Milkha Singh.

Just imagine how many more such examples Sikhs have to show.

The rise of the internet offers several new avenues to Sikh youngsters to display their creative talents in the media but unless they occupy a major place in mainstream film industry, Sikhs will continue to suffer from a distorted image perception.

The way ahead is not going to be easy. Nothing has been easy for us in our history till now. It will need concerted efforts by Sikh parents and educational institutions to motivate Sikh youngsters to focus on media and finance as career choices.

For this, Sikhs who have succeeded in these two fields should take time to set examples for Sikh youngsters by talking to them. Different Sikh organisations should invite such successful professionals to talk to Sikh youngsters to show that success can be achieved without abandoning their articles of faith.

On the positive side, Sikh organisations in the US are doing very good work in informing Americans about Sikhi and what it stands for. This has already led to a reduction in cases of harassment inflicted at airports in the US on Sikh passengers because of ethnic profiling.

Politicians in countries where Sikhs live will also be more receptive to acceptable Sikh demands if

they know that Sikhs are well represented in media and finance.

Once again, the example of Jewish organisations acting as major financial contributors and lobbying groups in the US comes to mind. Sikhs will be taken more seriously if they are strong in media and finance.

There are some extremely successful Sikh bankers and financial specialists. Their achievements should be highlighted by the Sikh media as an example to Sikh youngsters for future career choices.

Such developments will not happen overnight. They will take time, maybe even a generation. But they are essential if we are not to continue to wallow in our present situation of being the butt of jokes, distorted images and misconceived perceptions.

Our future orientation lies squarely in our own hands.

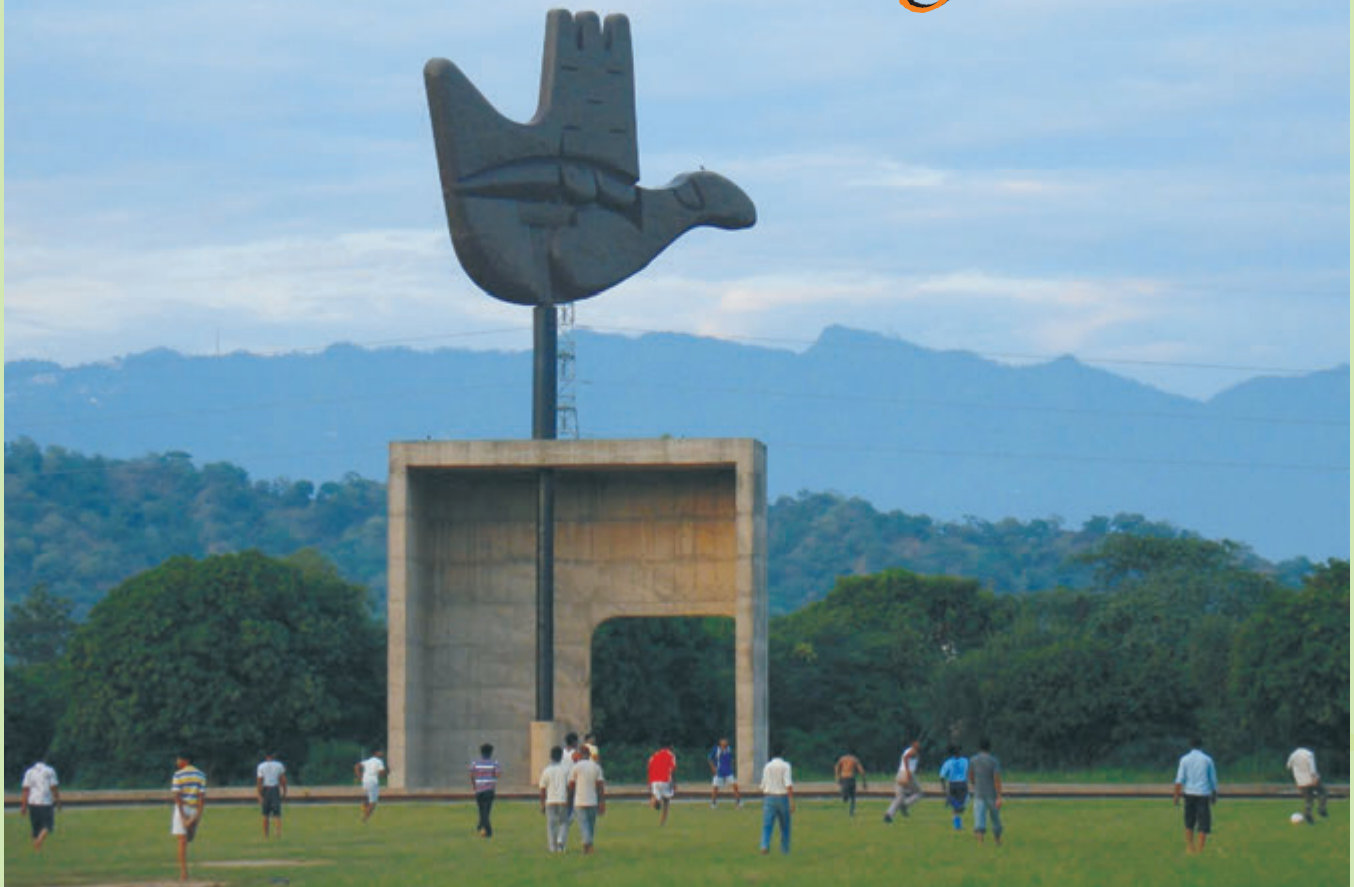
It will be a test of our collective wisdom and sagacity whether we manage to guide our youngsters towards media and finance as preferred career choices or not.

Jogishwar Singh



The Sikh sapper officer on motorbike (scene from 'The English Patient')

The myth of unity In diversity



Against backdrop of the Kasauli Hills, symbol of Chandigarh which was conceived and built to be capital of Indian Punjab after Lahore was 'lost' in 1947.

The dominant culture often develops a nucleus that organically becomes the hub for economic, cultural, academic and mass media pursuits. It also attracts infrastructural and intellectual development, thereby diluting the talent gene pool available to the fringe cultures

India is a plural society, which has over the ages been witness to a continuous synthesis and where the diverse social, linguistic and cultural elements have more or less been in peaceful coexistence. The Indian

movement for freedom bore testimony to the fact that unity and diversity are not mutually exclusive terms; rather nationalism and regionalism correspond to intersecting sects in a Venn diagram. Many regions like Bengal and the Punjab were in complete unison whilst participating in the national movement for freedom, but at the same time were proud and passionate about their respective cultural distinctiveness.

Over the years, the notion that nationalism and regionalism can be promoted only at the cost

of each other came into being. The connotations for nationalism changed shades from “We are one” to “We are the same” which did not go down well with a number of regions. The chagrin generated by this change of notion led to the birth of regional parties which then started pitting themselves against national parties and vice versa.

Notions of identity

Such imposed uniformity was met with resistance in most regions, and in some coupled with other factors, became fodder for conflict zones. Both unity and diversity became victims as diversity in the form of philosophy, literature, music, dance, cinema, handicrafts and sculpture can only flourish in an atmosphere wherein differences are celebrated and where cultural issues are not centrally manipulated and controlled by a few people or by the dominant culture. Dominant culture normally encourages people to choose safety over risk and sameness over diversity and that is what has been witnessed across the northern part of the country. The imposition of one language and one culture by diluting or denigrating others has dangerous political implications and has changed the milieu of the northern part of the country. Socio-political fatalities also caused a vast economic impact as they wiped out local enterprise.

Economics of dominant cultures

Every dominant culture has a nucleus which organically becomes the hub for economic, cultural, academic and mass media pursuits and for all kinds of development whether infrastructural or intellectual gets concentrated around the same. Moreover, it becomes an investment magnet and starves the smaller regions of the same and hence leads to lopsided growth. The dominant nucleus naturally attracts talent, intellect and capital from all regions thereby further diluting the cultural, intellectual and talent gene pool of those regions. The regional language and culture gets suffocated or slowly merges into the dominant language, environment and culture, thus either marking its own end or beginning of a non productive existence.

Such capital, talent and intellect drain not only stalls financial growth of the regions from which the efflux takes place but also causes infrastructural, logistical and environmental problems because of over population in the hub of dominant culture.

Now, the question that arises is whether anything has been or can be gained from “sameness”? Is unity a natural corollary of dwindling diversity? According to the People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI), a private endeavour, the country has “lost” nearly 250 languages and dialects in the last 50 years, and the same number of indigenous cultures associated are likely to have vanished as language forms the backbone of any indigenous culture. Apart from the languages that have become extinct, there are several others that have been diluted to an extent that they fail to be a source of wealth both culturally and economically and are dying a slow death.

Can we say that the country has become more unified or more tolerant than it was sixty years ago? The answer is most likely “No”. So, it can be inferred that, the view that had been promulgated over the decades, that diversity and unity are indirectly proportional to each other, does not hold much water. So does that mean they are directly proportional? No, rather they are independent of each other because unity emanates from patriotism, tolerance, acceptance, a sense of belonging and above all a sense of purpose. These qualities have disappeared even from homogenous sections of society.

A less diverse, but not a more unified country, is where we stand today. The portrait of India has fewer hues and a lot many are fading away or being watered down. But, is the brush carrying regional culture leadership, if at all it exists, filling in any new colours?

The Punjab story

The quintessential example of a watered down culture and language is that of the Punjab. There has been dissipation of the shared values, beliefs, customs, jargons and languages along with its colloquial phrases and subtexts. Prior to India's independence, Lahore, besides being the administrative capital of Punjab was also the cultural, culinary and fashion centre which also earned it the epithet ‘The Paris of East’. Post Partition, East Punjab lost Lahore and till date, is without a cultural capital.

Outside Punjab, the second and third generation Punjabis living in cities like Mumbai are completely removed from ‘Punjabiati’, the only remnant being their surnames. In Delhi, written Punjabi has vanished

and spoken Punjabi will also meet the same fate soon. Same is the case with those settled down in other non Punjabi speaking cities like Meerut, Karnal, Lucknow, Kanpur, Jamshedpur and Kolkata. This is an archetypal example of the above mentioned slow merger into the dominant environment, which along with the language and literature has gobbled up even the traits and nuances, leaving behind a few, that too, not necessarily the pleasant ones.

spoken Punjabi is also restricting itself to a certain geographic, age and gender demographic.

The crisis

The nucleus of the much larger contiguous belt, also the capital of the country has been and continues to attract Punjab's intellectuals, writers, academicians, literati, artists, chefs, photographers, designers, sportspersons, curators and many more, making the



Lahore's main railway station. Capital of undivided Punjab, this city epitomises all that was Punjbiyat.

It is likely that a minority adapts to the culture and language of the majority but the declining readership of Punjabi publications and the recent discontinuation of Punjabi journalism course at the Panjab University, Chandigarh, for lack of students, tells us another story— that of the fish drowning in the sea. Just as a fish drowns and dies even in the sea if the latter is not oxygenated enough, the Punjabi language and culture is gasping for help in its own land. The truth is that even in the Punjab,

former creamier and the latter drier. Moreover, the absence of a cultural nucleus imparts velocity to the drain. The culturally more vibrant and intellectually richer nucleus of the dominant belt attracts more infrastructural investment, tourism as well as business, which again attracts more talent, intellect and capital, thus the cycle goes on and for the smaller region the crisis deepens.

Both the extent and effect of the crisis is reflected by the list of people 'fleeing' to Delhi. It includes kith

and kin of businessmen who move out for want of more dining out /lounging options and 'A-list' shooters, who in spite of a world class shooting range in Patiala and plum posts in the state police force, decide to reside in Delhi. The list also features political leaders and representatives who thump their chests and swear by their 'Punjabiya', get elected by Punjabis to put Punjab's economy on track but they themselves "contribute to its economy" by shifting their base to Delhi !

The contrast

The contrast to the above watered down culture lies in the southern region of India. They might have been criticised initially, but their resistance to the dominant language and culture has paid off both culturally and economically. Their choice to welcome the medium of instruction but resist the dominant language has also reaped rich academic and business dividends. The C V Ramans, Narayan Murthys, Satya Nadellas and C N Raos testify the same. The Rs 15,000 crore film and television industry tells the region's success story. The industry has in place infrastructure to take care of all processes that go in for filmmaking, from pre-production to post production and marketing. Another commendable aspect is that all the four states have held on to their cultural and linguistic identity despite being contiguous.

In contrast stands the pale Punjabi film and television industry, not because of talent deficit but talent drain. Since the 1940s, many Punjabis have been making a beeline to that 'Maximum city', never to look back, and rather have submerged their identity in the melting pot. Not only have Punjabis made great Hindi film makers, technicians and actors but also avid viewers. The top grossing films in the East Punjab circuit are all Hindi language films. Punjabi films though, of late, have been able to shake the monopoly of 'Bollywood' to some extent in the East Punjab territory but whether the trend continues will depend on the content and versatility of the films. The TV scene though remains dismal, even the few popular channels that are in the fray, are run not from Punjab but Delhi !

Post independence, no city has been able to become the cultural, academic or media centre in

the Punjab. Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata were big political, economic and cultural centres under the British-ruled India and they continue to be so even today. But the moral of the story lies in the new names that have assumed significance post-independence and no guesses, they all come from a certain part of the map of India !

If the strength of India lies in the 5Ts, the strength of these Ts i.e. *talent, tradition, tourism, trade* and *technology* lies, directly or indirectly, in the number and distribution of cultural hubs. The tourism industry is a gold mine and the latent tourism potential can be tapped by investing, developing and promoting such cultural hubs. Everybody would like to walk into a garden with many flower beds of different hues rather than a garden with some half empty and some over grown and crowded ones.

Silence of the surveys

- ❖ The first Linguistic Survey of India was carried out between 1894 and 1928 by George A. Grierson. Conducted by teachers, it referred to 733 languages and dialects. Lack of trained linguists led to several deficiencies in the survey.
- ❖ Post-Independence, the Government of India initiated the first linguistic survey during the Fifth Five-Year Plan in 1984. It is yet to be completed, with only a part of the mandate having been achieved in 2010.
- ❖ A revised Linguistic Survey of India was initiated as part of the Eleventh Plan under the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore. The project was expected to involve over 54 universities, 2,000 investigators and 10,000 linguists for over a period of 10 years. The work on it has not commenced so far.
- ❖ The Dar Commission (1948) and Dr B R Ambedkar had endorsed the formation of linguistic provinces in independent India. The States Reorganisation Commission report (1955) suggested it's not desirable to reorganise states on the basis of the single test of either language or culture.

Sukhpreet Kaur Dhindsa
(Courtesy: The Tribune)

“I Paint My Dream”

Nishaan’s interview with artist Anup S. Chitrak



AS Chitrak in his conversation with Nishaan

The inimitable Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh has said, “I dream my painting and I paint my dream.” I felt that the extremely sensitive and down-to-earth artist, Anup S Chitrak (ASC), must be feeling the same about his art and creations considering the extreme passion he has for his work. A unique blend of mythology and philosophy, his evocative paintings dwell somewhere between the real and ethereal.

I got an experience of his multi-faceted art work when visiting ‘Mera Gobind’, the Gurgaon-based painter’s latest collection, exhibited at AIFACS Gallery, Rafi Marg in March 2014.

So touched were we at the *Nishaan* by the artist’s vivid imagination and stunning work based on the life and times of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh Master, that we invited Chitrak for a discussion on his work and inspiration on a balmy spring afternoon in March. Following are some excerpts from the interaction:

N: Please share with us something about your childhood and growing up years.

ASC: I was born at 1944 at Siddapur, which is the last *tehsil* of the Karwar district of Karnataka in a family brimming over with art and culture. My grandfather and uncles were renowned sculptors and painters and were deeply connected to mythology and Hindu scriptures. My first lesson in Hinduism was imparted by my grandparents in the form of Pauranic tales. Since then, I have been extremely inclined towards religion and philosophy in general but have not restricted myself to just Hinduism.

N: Give us an insight into your education and training years.

ASC: My schooling was mostly in North Karnataka and owing to a propensity towards the arts, I realised that I had to move to a city like Delhi or Bombay to pursue my further studies. My mother hailed from Maharashtra and after completing my intermediate schooling, I decided to shift to Bombay



Monica Arora of Nishaan in conversation with the artist.

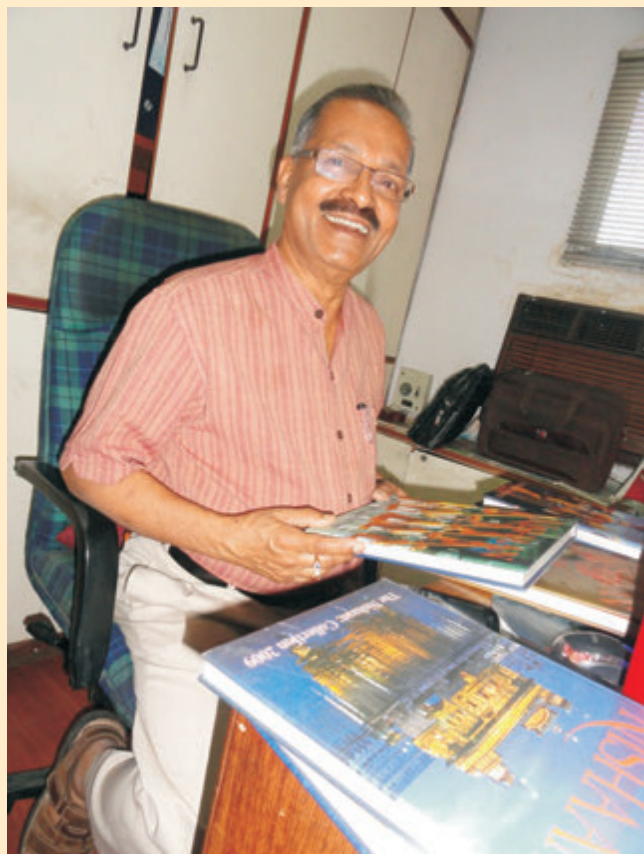
in order to study Commercial and Fine Art at the Sir JJ School of Arts in the year 1964. And there has been no looking back ever since despite my family's initial apprehensions of my ambitious plans! In 1969, I topped my class in the entire state of Maharashtra and soon thereafter embarked on my career as an illustrator in advertising agencies and then moved on to publishing firms. Next year in 1970, I moved to Delhi where I met my wife, Pushpa Chitrak, who is also an ex-student of Sir JJ School of Arts and happened to be an artist. We were married in 1971.

N: How did you manage to balance your work and creative instincts in the formative years of your career?

ASC: In Delhi, we started life as a newlywed artist couple with many dreams and very few resources. Along with my job, I also worked as a freelance artist on frequent commissions for designing layouts of exhibitions and painting assignments on wide canvases. Pushpa was much enamoured by the flamboyant colours of Rajasthani culture and golden-hued sandy landscapes of the desert and both of us would embark upon our individual projects with much fervor and mutual admiration and respect for each others' creations. Gradually, my inclination towards ancient Indian fables and mythology drew me further into its realm and I started imbuing the philosophical resonance behind every saint, religious teacher or guru who dwelt on religion. I firmly believe that God had a plan for me and I just played along. Luckily for me, my paintings started getting appreciation and everything fell into place. Thereon, from the year 1978, I became an independent artist and delved wholly into my personal creations.

N: What is the inspiration behind your myriad works, be it on Ganesha, Krishna, Rudra Shiva Shiva Shakti, Madhushala, Sufism and your latest works based on Sikhism?

ASC: Art is not only the best medium of self-expression, but also the answer to one's inner seeking that speaks beyond religion and rituals. My life-long interest in mythology has given me energy to recreate myths and legends in pictorial form. I plan to continue to paint mythology for a long time to come as I consider this as an infinite subject and one which is very close to my heart. Indian mythology is iconography-based where all Gods and Goddesses have particular characters. While painting, you cannot separate the icons from those characters. In



AS Chitrak browsing through 'Nishaans' at the editorial office

my paintings, you will find the mythological theme but minus the ritualistic aspect. It is connected to the philosophy of Indian mythology.

N: Tell us something about your style of working and your medium of painting.

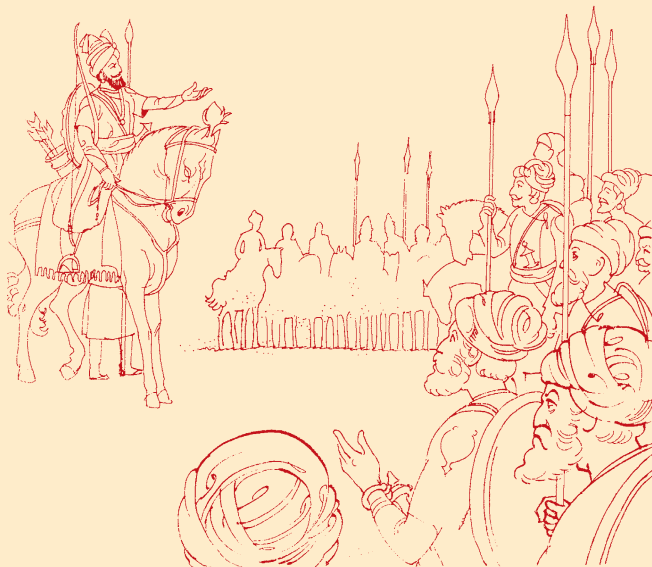
ASC: I create pencil sketches besides working with oil and water colours on canvas. Indian classical music has always been very close to my heart and offers me inspiration whilst I am visualising my next series. Music literally has the power to elevate me to a higher plane and I feel connected to the supreme power. Even while painting in my studio, I always work with my music system humming in the background.

Moreover, when I zero in on a subject, I immerse myself fully into it and research it thoroughly before picking up my brush. In 1979, I had illustrated a comic series for 'Dus Guru Sahebaan', which drew me to research Sikhism further and unfold its philosophy as a belief and not only as a religion. Since then the subject had been sitting at the back of my mind. Five years ago, I revisited the study of Sikhism from a fresh perspective. I would listen to

Gurbaani Kirtan every evening and ended up reading every book written on Sikhism over a few years.

One day, while having tea on the terrace of my studio, I spotted a falcon sitting on the water tank, and every morning I would find it perched at the same spot for the next one week. The falcon, symbolic of the tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, proved to be my final move towards designing and executing 'Mera Gobind'. This, thus, is literally my 'labour of love' to which I have devoted five whole years full of focussed reading, sketching, late nights and marathon, uninterrupted painting sessions. Incidentally, the exhibition coincides with Hola Mohalla, a tradition established by Guru Gobind Singh, which also happens to fall in the month of March.

Like I said earlier, this is all a part of God's larger plans!



About the Exhibition 'Mera Gobind'

Place : All India Fine Arts & Craft Society (AIFACS), 1 Rafi Marg, New Delhi 110 001.

The novelty of 'Mera Gobind' lies in the subject. For their canvas artists often take recourse to Indian philosophy and spiritualism; their metaphors mostly remain Krishna, Ganesha and Buddha. At times there is Sufism and Christian iconography too, but rarely do we come across artistic endeavours — except a few like Arpana Caur's — inspired by the Sikh faith. Gurgaon-based artist AS Chitrak's 'Mera Gobind' is



The artist at his exhibition 'Mera Gobind'

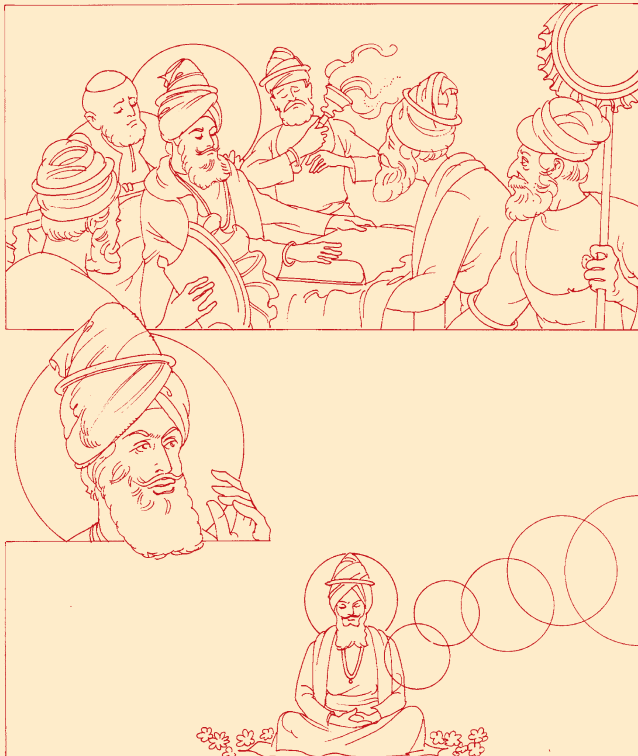
one such unique body of work, which was on display at AIFACS Gallery, Rafi Marg in March 2014.

Huge canvases laden with rich colours portray the life of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and the last Sikh guru. Not in chronological order, the artist has simply picked up various episodes of the Tenth Guru's life to highlight the philosophy he followed. "It is not about a particular religion but a philosophy. Every time with such work, the intent is to propagate and share the great thoughts and ideas of these people. I have created series like Krishna and Manav Sambandh, Devi, Rudra, Ganesha, and Sufism, which shouldn't be viewed from the lens of religion. My work is the interpretation of their philosophy which isn't one man's asset," recalled Anup Chitrak, an alumnus of Sir J.J. School of Arts, Mumbai.

The deep colours do not overawe the flowing figures bearing distinct expressions in each canvas. In the process they are only highlighted. Expressions hold forth especially in the work where Guru ji is seen being met by two pathans Nabi Khan and Gani Khan in the forests of Machchiwara in Punjab, after



Entrance to the AIFACS gallery in New Delhi, where the exhibition was held



having successfully resisted the onslaught by Emperor Aurangzeb who had attacked the fortress of Chamkaur Sahib. In another work, Chitrak plays with his favourite colour blue to create a bewitching effect. The nihangs on horseback are in awe having spotted a falcon in the night. The falcon being Guru Gobind Singh's pet becomes the metaphor of the Sikh Guru. "I read up a lot of Sikh literature, Guru Granth Sahib and many other sources but I didn't take any references from Sikh miniatures because I wanted this to be a unique interpretation. In one work where the imagery has come from a Sikh miniature, it has been converted into a realistic rendition," said the artist.

Giving an overview of Guru Gobind's life which was fraught with struggles, Chitrak includes crucial moments such as his first meeting with his father Guru Tegh Bahadur, who returns from Assam after three and a half years; Guru ji getting ready for Guru Gaddi, him leaving Anandpur at midnight and the Panj Pyaare. In a particularly interesting depiction of the latter, Chitrak shows a resolute looking Guru with his falcon while his Panj Pyaare or the five chosen ones—who stand for five principles and a class-and caste-less society in Sikhism, move astride horses in the background. Chitrak also represents them as the five elements of earth, water, fire, air and space in geometrical forms. Chitrak is quick to grasp any such opportunity where he is afforded artistic freedom to experiment.

Some pencil sketches were also on display which demonstrated Chitrak's immense skill in the discipline.



The artist illustrates a point at the exhibition

'MERA GOBIND'

A photo essay

Anup Chitrak's creations are born out of a deep spiritual pursuit and he paints with faith and inspiration. The medium, colours, canvas are merely a means to an end. Inspired by the Sikh faith, the novelty of 'Mera Gobind' lies in the unique subject, dedicated exclusively to the Tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh ji. Held through the month of March 2014, in the heart of New Delhi, at AIFACS Gallery, Rafi Marg, 'Mera Gobind' was Gurgaon-based artist AS Chitrak's labour of love, based on

five years of exclusive dedication to the subject. Following extensive research of the Granth Sahib and tomes on the Guru, besides submerging into the renditions from the Gurbani at dawn, the artist has produced huge canvases brought alive by rich colours portraying the life of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and the last Sikh Guru.

Although not in chronological order, the artist has chosen to depict certain episodes of the Sikh



In this painting, a deeply troubled group of Kashmiri Brahmins under the leadership of Pandit Kripa Ram reach Anandpur to meet Guru Tegh Bahadur. In the wake of mass conversions to Islam being ordered by Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, these Brahmins are meeting the Guru and with folded hands explaining their predicament. On hearing their plight, Guruji was lost in deep thought when his son, the young Gobind Rai clambered onto his lap and enquired the cause of his father's worry. On being explained the situation, young Gobind remarked, "They can be saved only if a great soul can offer himself for martyrdom - and who is greater than you?"

Guru's life to highlight his vision and philosophy. Amongst the paintings whose highlights are impeccable expressions and vivid details, Chitrak illustrates important incidences in the tenth Guru's life including his first meeting with his father Guru Tegh Bahadur on return from Assam after three and a half years; getting ready for *Guru Gaddi*; leaving Anandpur at midnight and his overall philosophy as a Sikh wherein he is depicted with a glowing calm and resolve on his face with his *baaz* (falcon) while

his *Panj Pyaare* or the five beloved ones, representing five principles and a class and casteless society in Sikhism, are astride horses in the background. Moreover, the artist shows them as the five elements of earth, water, fire, air and space, indicative of his huge bent towards religious philosophy.

The *Nishaan* features an exclusive photo-essay of his evocative paintings with each of them expounded upon in some detail.



Two wealthy Rohila Pathan merchants Gani Khan and Nabhi Khan used to visit Guruji quite often to sell horses. Guruji had bought many horses from them. At Machhiwada, they discovered that Guruji was at Bhai Gulab's house and immediately went for darshan. However, they were disturbed to see his condition with no trappings of family, royalty, gaddi, horses, and so on. He sat with a peaceful countenance like a fakir and the pathans were moved to tears. They immediately suggested, "It is not safe here. Put on a blue robe like a fakir and we will escort you to Malwa and look after you. We are ready to even lay our lives down for you". To this, Guru Gobind Singh ji replied, "O men! have patience. Everything happens according to God's orders".





In 1699, the Guru sent hukmanamas (letters of authority) to his followers, requesting them to congregate at Anandpur on the day of Vaisakhi. Then, addressing the congregation from the entrance of a small tent pitched on a hillock (now Keshgarh Sahib), he said that the Guru needs something from his Sikhs and drawing his sword asked, "From the disciples of Guru Nanak Devji, who will come forward and sacrifice his head for protection of the religion and break the shackles of slavery? I need a head!"

No one answered his first call, nor the second, but on the third invitation, Daya Ram (later known as Bhai Daya Singh) came forward and offered his head to the Guru. Guru Gobind took the volunteer inside the tent and returned to the crowd with blood dripping from his sword. He then demanded another head. One more volunteer came forward, and entered the tent with him. The Guru again emerged with blood on his sword. This happened three more times. Finally, the five volunteers came out of the tent in resplendent uniforms and unharmed. Guru Gobind Singh thereafter poured pure water into an iron bowl and adding patashas (sweeteners) stirred it with double-edged sword (khanda) accompanied with recitations from Adi Granth. He called this mixture of sweetened water and iron as amrit (nectar) and administered this to the five men.

These five, who had volunteered to sacrifice their lives for their Guru, were given the title of the Panj Pyare (five beloved ones) by their Guru. They were the first (baptised) Sikhs of the Khalsa: Daya Ram (Bhai Daya Singh), Dharam Das (Bhai Dharam Singh), Himmat Rai (Bhai Himmat Singh), Mohkam Chand (Bhai Mohkam Singh), and Sahib Chand (Bhai Sahib Singh).

The numerical Five has great significance in Indian philosophy as it depicts the five elements. Depicted in this painting are Guru Gobind Singhji with his five warriors on their steeds as a backdrop.



In this ethereal blue-toned painting, Chitrak depicts the baaz (falcon), which dramatically appears to inspire those with faith and is intrinsically symbolic of the Guru himself.

The most significant story concerning the baaz is from the year 1699 when Guru Sahib had prepared amrit (holy nectar) for the purpose of initiating the Khalsa brotherhood. A few drops of amrit had fallen from the iron cauldron, which were readily consumed by a few sparrows. The sparrows turned against a nearby baaz and repeatedly assaulted him to such an extent that he took flight, followed vigorously by the sparrows. This episode exemplified how the amrit created by the Tenth Guru gave immense power, as after drinking a few drops a small sparrow not only had the courage to take on a bird of prey but to harass it until it fled.

Guru Gobind Singh ji said "I will create my Khalsa of such courage and vigour that he will take on armies of the enemy, he will stand up for the poor and the downtrodden – Sava Lakh sey ek ladaho (One will confront a lakh and a quarter of the enemy)."



When Guru Tegh Bahadur returned to Patna from Assam in 1670, his son Gobind Rai was three and half years old. In this painting, father and son meet for the first time, flanked by Mata Gujri, Gobind Singhji's mother and maternal uncle Kirpal Chand, who experienced spiritual joy at this sweet re-union. The house at Patna in which Gobind Rai was born and where he spent his early childhood is exactly where Sri Patna Sahib Gurdwara was erected.

Guru Gobind Singh ji's succession to the divine throne at the tender age of nine followed his father's martyrdom in 1675. On Baisakhi day Gobind Rai sat on Gurugaddi. New clothes and decorated pagri, along with weapons added to his radiance. Young Gobind Rai was very mature for his age and observed all rituals on 'ascension' to the 'throne'. After consultations with his uncle Kripal Chand, return gifts in the form of horses and weapons were offered to the devotees.





During 1700, the deceptive hill Rajas proposed that Guru Gobind Singhji leave Anandpur for a while. The Guru, aware of their treacherous wont, still agreed and left for Nirmoh, a village situated a mile from Kiratpur. As expected, Raja Ajmer Chand and Raja of Kangra launched a two-front attack. Fierce battles ensued in which the Sikhs were ultimately victorious. Meanwhile, the Imperial Mughal army attacked simultaneously but inspired by the Guru, the Sikhs stood faithfully and fought back valiantly. When Wazir Khan gave an order to his troops to make a sudden assault and seize the Guru, he was protected by his son Ajit Singh and other brave warriors, who stopped the advance of the Imperial forces and inflicted heavy losses in the



fight that continued through the night. Next day Guru decided on retiring to Basoli whose Raja had frequently invited him to his capital. The Guru with his troops crossed over the river and reached Basoli. Daya Singh and Ude Singh soon requested the Guru to return to Anandpur. After staying a few days at Basoli, he marched back to Anandpur and inhabitants of the city were overjoyed to have him again amongst them. The ruler of Anandpur, Raja Ajmer Chand thought it most wise to pursue peace and sent his family priest with gifts for him. Other hill Rajas also followed Ajmer Chand's example and sought good relations with the Guru. The scene where hill chiefs are seen paying homage to Guru Gobind Singhji is depicted in much detail with Guruji patiently listening to their promise of peace despite being aware of the hatred in their minds.





Guruji crossed river Godavari in the Deccan to visit the place where Guru Nanak had sown the seeds of Sikhism. Gurdwara Hira Ghat Sahib is on the left bank of the river Godavari some 9 km northeast of Nanded city. This is where Guru Gobind Singh first set up camp on arrival at Nanded.

As legend goes, Emperor Bahadur Shah came to call on him and presented him a hira (diamond) but Guruji cast it into the river. Bahadur Shah felt offended and thought that being a faqir the Guru did not know the value of the stone. The Guru invited the Emperor to look into the water. The latter did so and was astonished to see heaps of diamonds lying at the bottom of the river. Cleansed of his pride, he bowed at the Guru's feet. On that site today stands Gurdwara Hira Ghat.



On 21 December 1704, Guru Gobind Singhji, accompanied by the Panj Pyaras and 40 Singhs camped in an open space in Chamkaur where they had vowed to fight against the oppressive Mughals. Guru Sahib and his entourage moved into the house of Chaudhari Roop Chand and Jagat Singh, which was situated on a mound. This haveli with its high perimeter mud brick wall now became their fort.

In the early hours before sunrise (amrit vela), a Mughal messenger came to negotiate with the Sikhs. However, Guruji sent the messenger back and then from inside the mud-house Guru Sahib declared war on the oppressors. Six valiant warriors, Muhar Singh, Kirat Singh, Anand Singh, Lal Singh, Kesar Singh and Amolak Singh then went forth into battle. Despite overwhelming odds the Sikhs inflicted tremendous losses on the Mughals but inevitably, one by one they were fatally wounded.

Finally Guru Gobind Singh's son Baba Ajit Singh begged his father to permit him to go onto the battlefield. Guru Gobind Singh hugged his beloved son and gave him a shastra (weapon) and guided him on the nuances of warfare knowing that there were slim chances of his survival.

This scene is beautifully recreated by Chitragy in this painting. While fighting, Baba Ajit Singh's kirpan broke. He then began to fight with a neja (spear). However, while combating a Mughal chief, this got embedded and thus lost. Defenceless, Baba Ajit Singh remained ever buoyant in his faith and eventually succumbed to his wounds, attaining martyrdom.





Guruji left Anandpur at night in the first week of December in Samvat 1761. At dawn, which is amrit vela, Guruji and his entourage reached the riverbank and the Nagaara was sounded announcing his arrival.

The Guru's mother, and his two younger sons, Fateh Singh and Zorawar Singh, had strayed away from the main group. The Guru and remaining followers marched towards Kotla Nihang near Ropar, to stay with his trusted acquaintance Pathan Nihang Khan. From there, he proceeded to Machhiwara and Raikot, halting at Bur Majra. He was informed that a large body of enemy troops from Sirhind were on the chase behind him. He decided to confront the enemy troops at the fortress of Chamkaur.

The painting depicts Guru Gobind Singhji in all his regal glory on his famed 'blue' horse which inspired the title 'The One with the Blue Horse'.



*I have surrendered my mind, heart and soul to God
I am the smallest instrument of God
I will pay homage to no one but God
I will not follow any tradition but truth, which is God
I am a messenger who will deliver the message of God
I will lovingly sow the seeds of the pure love of God
(Bachitra Natak)*

Guru Gobind Singh's dynamic philosophy is universal and completely democratic. It rallies the spirit to proper action, just as he aroused the spirit of his disciple Banda in the famous dialogue of destiny they had just one month before the Guru's passing. The dialogue between Guru Gobind Singh and Banda Singh Bahadur took place in circumstances similar to those of the great dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna, which is recorded in the Shrimad Bhagvat Geeta. The purpose of both dialogues is to inspire the disciple to uphold dharma and attain spiritual fulfillment.

The message of Guru Gobind Singh is universal, inspiring and based upon the practical expression of divine love. Its essence is as relevant today as it was in his time, for the dharma always needs to be upheld.



An important, but most tragic, event in Sikh history was live entombment of the two young sahibzadas of the Tenth Guru, on 12 December 1705, by the Governor of Sarhind, Wazir Khan. That location is commemorated by Gurdwara Fatehgarh Sahib, situated 5 Kilometres north of Sarhind.

Depicted in this heart-wrenching painting is the scene of Guruji's family in the minar of the fort at Sarhind. The place was very cold in winter and no covers were available. Mata Gujari took her grandsons on her lap and consoled them. "Do not be afraid" she kept saying, but in her mind she knew the inevitability of their martyrdom.





“If we consider the work which (Guru) Gobind (Singh) accomplished, both in reforming his religion and instituting a new code of law for his followers, his personal bravery under all circumstances; his persevering endurance amidst difficulties, which would have disheartened others and overwhelmed them in inextricable distress, and lastly his final victory over his powerful enemies by the very men who had previously forsaken him, we need not be surprised that Sikhs venerate his memory. He was undoubtedly a supreme person.” (WL McGregor)

Guru Gobind Singhji’s mission was accomplished with creation of the Khalsa and in investing the Khalsa with divine sovereignty. Guru Gobind Singh infused the spirit of both sainthood and soldier in the minds and hearts of his followers to fight oppression in order to restore justice, peace, righteousness (dharma) and to uplift the down-trodden. The Khalsa Panth (community/society) would challenge the tyrant Muslim rulers to restore justice, equality and peace for all of mankind.

As a prophet, the Guru is unique as his teachings were very scientific and befitting mankind and for all times. He strongly shunned those who referred to him as God or ‘the only son of God.’ Instead he called all people the sons of God, sharing His Kingdom equally. For himself he used the word ‘slave’ or servant of God.

“Those who call me God, will fall into the deep pit of hell. Regard me as one of his slaves and have no doubt whatever about it. I am a servant of the Supreme Being; and have come to behold the wonderful drama of life.”

Delhi Fateh Diwas



Victory at Delhi : 11 March 1783

The Legacy of Sardar Baghel Singh

Sardar Baghel Singh (1725-1802) was one of the greatest Sikh warriors of the eighteenth century, who was not only amongst those who prepared the foundations for Sikh rule in the Punjab and beyond, but also conquered Delhi in 1783 and thereafter established seven historic gurdwaras in the capital city, perpetuating for all times, legacy of the Sikhs in Delhi.

Born in village Jhabal in Amritsar District of Punjab, he was the descendant of Chaudhary Bhai Langha Dhillon, the Sikh chief of 84 villages in the Majha, who along with his younger brother Bhai Pero Shah Dhillon, grandfather of the famous Mai Bhago, had converted to Sikhism during the time of Guru Arjan Dev in the 1580s. From humble beginnings he arose to create a formidable force in the area between the Rivers Sutlej and Yamuna. He aligned himself with the Karor Singhia misl led by Sardar Karora Singh. After the early demise of Karora Singh, Sardar Baghel Singh succeeded him as a leader of Karora Singhia misl in 1765.

Sardar Baghel Singh is celebrated in Sikh history as the vanquisher of Mughal Delhi. On 11 March 1783, Sikh forces entered the Red Fort in Delhi and occupied the Diwan-i-Am (Hall of Public Audience), where the Mughal Emperor, Shah Alam II, made a compromise with them for Baghel Singh to establish Gurdwaras on historical sites in Delhi, cost of construction to be met by taking six annas from each rupee (37.5%) against octroi and other taxes (as their share) collected by the Mughal State.

Turmoil in India

However, going back to the mid-eighteenth century, the scourge which was Ahmad Shah Abdali, had haunted northern India for over twenty years, from his first invasion in 1747-48 till the ninth in 1769, until the Chiefs of Sikh Misls united against him. Their objective was to defeat this common enemy and finally repel him from the country.

Following the conquest of Sarhind in January 1764, the Sikhs under S Baghel Singh had extended their arms towards Karnal, occupying a number of villages including Chhalaudi which S Baghel Singh later made his headquarters.

In February 1764, Sardar Jassa Singh Ahluwalia and Sardar Baghel Singh crossed the River Yamuna from the 'Buria Dock' with 40,000 men and assaulted Saharanpur. This area was under possession of Najib-ud-Daulah, a Rohilla chieftain who had helped the Durranis when Ahmad Shah Abdali attacked India. After a ferocious battle, the Sikhs overcame the enemy on 20 February 1764 and captured the entire area around Saharanpur, including Shamli, Kandhala,

Ambli, Miranpur, Deoband, Muzzafarnagar, Jwalapur, Kankhal, Landaura and Najeebabad.

In 1767, Ahmad Shah Abdali attacked India for the eighth time with his massive forces and halted on banks of the River Beas. The irrepressible Sikh Sardars accepted this challenge and attacked the Durranis between the Ganga-Jamuna Doab. The Sikhs then reached Shamli after taking Ambeta, Nanauti and Meerut, on the northern outskirts of Delhi.

Both sides had suffered heavy casualties in the fierce fighting and S Baghel Singh was seriously wounded. However, Ahmed Shah Abdali was worsted in this battle and ultimately left the Punjab and returned to Kabul.

In order to maintain peace in the liberated areas, S Baghel Singh installed police *chowkis* in the area under his control and law and order was restored. S Baghel Singh was not only a great and fearless warrior, he was also an efficient administrator.

Warrior of the Faith

Baghel Singh's Karor Singhia Misl was operating in south-eastern Punjab. He was a very able leader



On 8 March 1783, under the leadership of Sardar Baghel Singh and Sardar Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, the triumphant Sikh forces captured the inner city of Delhi in preparation for taking over the Red Fort.

of men, a good political negotiator and able to win over many adversaries to his side. The Mughals, the Marathas, the Rohillas, the Jats and the British in turn sought his friendship but, above everything, he was a devout Sikh; *amrit prachar* was his passion. It was considered an honour to accept *Pahul* from his hands.

Karor Singhia was one of the strongest misls, having 12,000 well-trained horsemen. The combined strength under S Baghel Singh, including soldiers of some *sardars* who had joined him, was soon well over 40,000. He captured territories much beyond Delhi to include Meerut, Khurja, Aligarh, Tundla, Shikohabad, Farrukhabad, Agra and many other townships in the region, and collected tribute and *rakhi* from nawabs and rajas of these areas. He invested Saharanpur and overran the Rohilla territory in April 1775.

In March 1776, Baghel Singh's forces inflicted a crushing defeat on the Mughal army near Muzaffarnagar; now Sikhs had extended their influence over the entire Yamuna-Gangetic *Doab*.

Baghel Singh first entered Delhi on 8 January 1774 and occupied the area up to Shahdra and Patparganj. The second investment was on 17 July 1775, when they captured the area around the present-day Pahar Ganj and Jai Singhpura (today's Bangla Sahib). Bulk of the fighting took place where the present-day New Delhi is situated. The Sikhs temporarily withdrew owing to shortage of supplies, but they kept alive their objective of taking the Red Fort, and meanwhile continued domination and intrusions into the Emperor's territory all around Delhi.

Protection of Women

Sardar Baghel Singh maintained very cordial relations with various Sikh Misls and hence, received great cooperation from the armies of both Sardar Jassa Singh Ahluwalia and Sardar Jassa Singh Ramgarhia during his armed expeditions. In 1768, when Ahmed Shah Abdali was returning to Kabul with hundreds of imprisoned Indian women from Sialkot and other cities of the Punjab, the horsemen of Sardar Baghel Singh, Sardar Jassa Singh Ahluwalia and Sardar Charat Singh Sukerchakia interdicted Abdali's army and liberated these women, who otherwise would have been sold in the markets of Kabul, Kandahar and Ghazni. During this battle with the Sikhs, Ahmad Shah Abdali suffered heavy losses and was amazed as to how such few Sikh soldiers could harass him when the mighty Mughals and Marathas had capitulated to him so easily. The historian S Rattan Singh Bhangu states that "during the Sikh-Afghan and the Sikh-Mughal struggle, the Khalsa always stood against the brutality and oppression of the poor and weak". The people were with him.

S Baghel Singh's army reached Farakhabad after kneading through Aligarh, Khurja, Chandausi and Etawa. Nawab Essa Khan of Farakhabad faced the Sikhs for three days but ultimately disappeared, abandoning everything. The Khalsa army then occupied Farakhabad and returned to the Punjab after conducting administrative reforms in Muradabad, Anoop City, Buland Shehar, Bijnaur and many others, receiving tributes from them. But many Sikh warriors were martyred in the fighting.

The end of Abdali

Nadir Shah's brutal offensives (1739) and the eight invasions by Ahmed Shah Abdali had eventually made the Mughal Empire fragile and weak. The Sikhs now emerged as a strong and powerful force in northern India, and eventually halted Abdali's invasions. Under leadership of the Dal Khalsa chief, Sardar Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, S Jassa Singh Ramgarhia and S Charat Singh, the Sikhs refused any compromise and instead challenged Abdali in every battle. They were determined to avenge the killing of over 30,000 Sikhs, mostly women, children and elderly people in 1762, as also the destruction and desecration of the Golden Temple. Sensing defeat, Abdali finally called it a day, and returned to Afghanistan, never again to return to India.

As S Khushwant Singh has recorded, *Abdali made his ninth and final attempt to conquer the Punjab in 1769. But he was like a spent bullet and could get no further than the Jhelum. He returned to Kandahar, a sick and broken man, and died on 23 October, 1772. The epitaph on his grave stated with pride, '... the ears of his enemies were incessantly deafened by the din of his conquests'. The Sikhs were certainly his enemies, and they more than any other people heard of his conquests, but all they learned from the din was to turn a deaf ear to it.*

Abdali was the bitterest antagonist of the Sikhs but paradoxically, their greatest benefactor. His repeated incursions destroyed Mughal administration in the Punjab and at Panipat he dealt a crippling blow to Maratha pretensions in the north. Thus he created a power vacuum in the Punjab which was filled by the Sikhs. Abdali failed to put down the Sikhs because they refused to meet him on his terms. They were everywhere and yet elusive; they displayed temerity in attacking armies much stronger than theirs and alacrity in running away when the tide of battle turned against them. Fighting the Sikhs was like trying to catch the wind in a net. The Sikhs were able to resort to these tactics because the people were behind them. The peasants gave them food, tended the wounded and gave shelter to fugitives. The Sikhs were also fortunate in having leaders like Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, Hari Singh Bhangi and Charhat Singh Sukerchakia. By contrast, Abdali's son and generals were men of modest ability. Besides this, Abdali never had time to consolidate his conquests for he had to rush back to his own country to put down some insurrection or the other. Consequently, what he won by his military prowess was lost by the ineptitude of his deputies.

Abdali had spilled more Sikh blood than any other; but he also taught them that no people can become a strong and great nation without learning to shed blood.

Closing in on Delhi

The vast area of India's subcontinent between the Indus and the Yamuna thus became free from enemy occupation. With no enemy to the north, and Shah Alam II at the head of the decaying Mughal Empire at Delhi, the 12 powerful Sikh *misls* began to expand their influence in all directions, from the Indus to the Yamuna, seeking *rakhi* (tribute, protection money) from various chieftains, nawabs and rajas.

The Marathas, after their defeat by Abdali in the third battle of Panipat in 1761, had been marginalised, and the Rohillas were a spent force.

The English were in the process of finding their place at Delhi. It was at this time that the Sikh *misls* repeatedly crossed the Yamuna towards Delhi and beyond. The *misls* did not owe any allegiance to each other, except when the Sarbat Khalsa, through a *Gurmatta*, resolved to attack a common target.

Victory over Delhi

Before the climatic capture of the Red Fort in Delhi, S Baghel Singh had repeatedly attacked the Mughals in numerous cities of the Ganga-Jamuna Doab including the cities of Aligarh, Tundla, Hathras, Khuja, Shikhabad and others and received tributes, also much wealth and fortune. S Baghel Singh sent Rs 1 Lakh for construction of the Harmandir Sahib, which was practically destroyed by Ahmad Shah Abdali during his vicious great massacre, the *Vadda Ghallughara* in February 1762.

By now, Shah Alam, the Emperor of Delhi was weary of these frequent attacks and he instructed his ministers to negotiate with the Sikhs the terms of keeping peace. These dialogues resulted in the Emperor agreeing to admit the right of the protectorate to be exercised by the Sikhs over the territory between the Rivers Jamuna and Ganga. It was further decided that the Sikhs were entitled to receive one eighth of the revenue of the area and that they were to cease attacking and plundering that territory. Since the signing party (the Emperor) was not sincere in his move to grant such concessions this treaty did not last long.

So, the Sikhs once again crossed the river Jamuna on 12 April 1781 and sacked Baghpat, 32 km. north of Delhi. On 16 April they attacked Shahdra and Patparganj again before preparing to capture the Red Fort in the months to come. From 1765 to 1767, the Sikhs had entered Delhi 15 times, most of these attacks being organised by S Baghel Singh.

Finally, leading his large army of 40,000 warriors, Baghel Singh entered Delhi on 8 March 1783, crossing the river Yamuna from Burari Ghat. He divided his army into three parts : 5000 soldiers were left at Majnu ka Tilla, the second contingent of 5000 soldiers sent to Ajmeri Gate while 30,000, mostly horsemen, camped at what is now known as *Tees Hazari*, in the heart of Subzi Mandi and Kashmere Gate. This name was given to this place to mark presence of the 30,000 soldiers who had encamped here before the final assault on the Red Fort. This huge Sikh army were in camps spread over Malka Ganj, Mughal Pura and Subzi Mandi areas.



In this painting, Emperor Shah Alam, with his advocate and Begum Samru, is seen requesting mercy and concessions. The 'Panj Piaras' depicted are Sardar Baghel Singh, Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, Jassa Singh Ramgarhia, Tara Singh Gaiba and Maha Singh Sukherchakia.



The Mughals under Prince Mirza Shikoh sent by Emperor Shah Alam on 8 March 1783, tried to resist advance of the Sikh Army at Fort Mehtabpur, but were soundly defeated and they then fled back into the Red Fort. On 9 March, Fazal Ali Khan's attempt to check them proved to be of no avail. The Sikh forces then rapidly advanced towards the Red Fort, while a second element attacked the city from the Ajmeri Gate side and sacked the area of Hauz Qazi. Faced by inevitable defeat from the advancing Sikhs, the Mughal leaders, instead of giving a last ditch fight, hid in various buildings within the Red Fort. S Baghel Singh led his victorious Army, entering the Fort on 11 March 1783, moving towards the Lahori Gate, Meena Bazar and Naqarkhana areas, finally reaching the apex, Diwan-i-Am where Mughal Rulers regularly held their Court.

After occupying Diwan-i-Am, the Khalsa Flag was hoisted at main gate of the Red Fort. At the Diwan-i-Am, S Baghel Singh placed five chosen Sikh generals from the victorious Khalsa Army, as 'Panj Piaras' on the 'throne'. The very place from where Baba Banda Singh Bahadur and his 740 Sikh soldiers were martyred nearly 67 years earlier was now occupied by the Sikh Army and the Mughal Emperor was begging for his life from a Sikh Sardar !

After the Red Fort was occupied, Emperor Shah Alam, with his Advocate Ram Dayal and Begum Samru, begged for a compromise with the Sikh Sardars. Begum Samru was very intelligent, farsighted and a competent politician, and had enough influence among the Mughals. With honour and respect, Begum Samru termed S Baghel Singh as "her brother" and requested just two things : that Shah Alam's life be spared and that the Red Fort continue under his nominal rule.

Construction of historical Gurdwaras

As against the above two concessions, S Baghel Singh desired to establish various Gurdwaras in Delhi in sacred memory of the Sikh Gurus. He placed four conditions : the Mughals hand over all places which were sanctified by visits of the Sikh Gurus; where Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib was martyred, and places visited by Guru Nanak Dev Ji, Guru Hargobind Sahib, Guru Harkrishan Sahib and Guru Gobind Singh Sahib; and also places where Mata Sundri and Mata Sahib Kaur had lived over a long time.

S Baghel Singh required that Shah Alam issue an ordinance clearing the Sikh Army for construction of the Gurdwaras, initially at the seven places identified by him.

His third condition was for handing over of Delhi's kotwali to the Sikh Army plus 6 'annas' a rupee (37.5%) of the total revenue from the city, such funds being required for construction of the historical Gurdwaras and for salaries paid to the Sikh Army.



Baba Baghel Singh



Jassa Singh Ahluwalia



Jassa Singh Ramgarhia



The victorious Sikh Army led by S Baghel Singh installing the Nishaan Sahib on the ramparts of Lal Qila, Delhi's Red Fort, seat of the Mughal Emperor.



S Baghel Singh's fourth condition was that until such time as construction of the historical Gurdwara buildings was completed, a contingent of 4000 men from the Sikh Army would continue to camp in Delhi. The expenditure of this contingent was to be paid from the royal treasury.

All this exemplifies Sardar Baghel Singh's immeasurable devotion towards the Gurus and his faith. He preferred to establish and construct these historical Gurdwaras rather than rule over Delhi, the city he had conquered.

These lines from Sri Guru Granth Sahib sum up the Sikhs' infinite devotion and love for their Gurus.

Raj Na Chahon Mukat na Chahon

Man Preet Charan Kamlare ||

(Guru Granth Sahib, Page 534)

After Shah Alam agreed to S Baghel Singh's conditions, the Sikh Army vacated their possession of Red Fort.

Following finalisation of terms and conditions of the Agreement, S Baghel Singh appointed Lakhpat Rai as his representative (Ambassador) in the Mughal Darbar. Sardar Jassa Singh Ramgarhia, while leaving the Red Fort, took along with him from the Mughal armoury, to the Punjab five cannon and a coloured coronation stone slab. This stone slab is now installed in the Ramgarhia Bunga at the Darbar Sahib at Amritsar.



Ramgarhia Bunga at Amritsar today

S Baghel Singh met with a selection of citizens-Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs-who had settled down in Delhi during Guru Harkrishan Sahib's visit so as to exactly demarcate the places where Guru Nanak Sahib, Guru Harkrishan Sahib,

Guru Gobind Singh and Mata Sundri had stayed in Delhi. He looked for the exact place where Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib was martyred on 11 November 1675. S Baghel Singh then demarcated seven places where Gurdwara Nanak Piao, Gurdwara Manju Tilla, Gurdwara Rakab Ganj, Gurdwara Moti Bagh, Gurdwara Mata Sundri Ji, Gurdwara Sis Ganj and Gurdwara Bangla Sahib are today.

The other three Gurdwaras at Bala Sahib, Damdama Sahib and Baba Banda Singh Bahadur were established some time later.

To ensure speedy establishment of these Gurdwaras, S Baghel Singh stayed on in Delhi from April to November 1783. During this period, S Baghel Singh had full authority to function as Executive Magistrate of the city in addition to collection of revenues from traders. It was obvious to all that the writ of Mughal Emperor Shah Alam was now confined to within the Red Fort while the rest of Delhi was controlled by the Sikh Army.

Before returning to the Punjab, S Baghel Singh met Shah Alam II for the last time in November 1783. Akin to a meeting between two independent rulers, even as S Baghel Singh was leaving the Red Fort, Shah Alam honoured him with an elephant laden with precious gifts, five horses, a gem-studded necklace and other priceless items.

But this was another deception. Soon after the Sikh Army had returned to the Punjab, the perfidious Shah Alam began conspiracies to break his agreements, but did not succeed. S Baghel Singh once again returned in January 1785, accompanied now by Gurdit Singh and Jassa Singh Ramgariha. The Maratha Sardar Ambaji came to help Shah Alam but Baghel Singh overcame their combined forces. Then, according to an agreement signed on 30 March 1785, Shah Alam agreed to pay Rs 10 lakhs every year to S Baghel Singh in perpetuity.

While this agreement was being signed, Karam, Singh, Dewan Singh and Mehar Singh were present with S Baghel Singh.

Baghel Singh was advancing in years, and started staying longer at his capital city Chhalaudi (Karnal), Amritsar and Hariyana (Distt. Hoshiarpur). He went to Amritsar and Tarn Taran in the year 1800 to pay his obeisance at these sacred places. He soon passed away in 1802 but his priceless legacy will endure for all time.

The historical Gurdwaras of Delhi

Gurdwara Sisganj Sahib was established in 1783 by Baghel Singh to commemorate martyrdom site of the ninth Sikh Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur. It is situated in Chandni Chowk in Old Delhi and marks the site where the Sikh Guru was beheaded on orders of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb on 11 November 1675.

Before his body could be exposed to public view, it was taken away under the cover of darkness by one of his disciples, Lakhi Shah Vanjara, who then set fire to his house to cremate the Guru's body. This place is marked by another **Gurdwara, Rakab Ganj Sahib**, in the heart of New Delhi, close to the country's Parliament House and Central Secretariat.

Gurdwara Mata Sundri is where Guru Gobind Singh ji's wife Mata Sundri and Mata Sahib Kaur, mother of the Khalsa, stayed for some time at the Haveli of Bhai Jawahar Singh at Turkman Gate. It was here that Mata Sundri appointed Bhai Mani Singh ji as Granthi (head Priest) of Sri Darbar Sahib, at Amritsar.

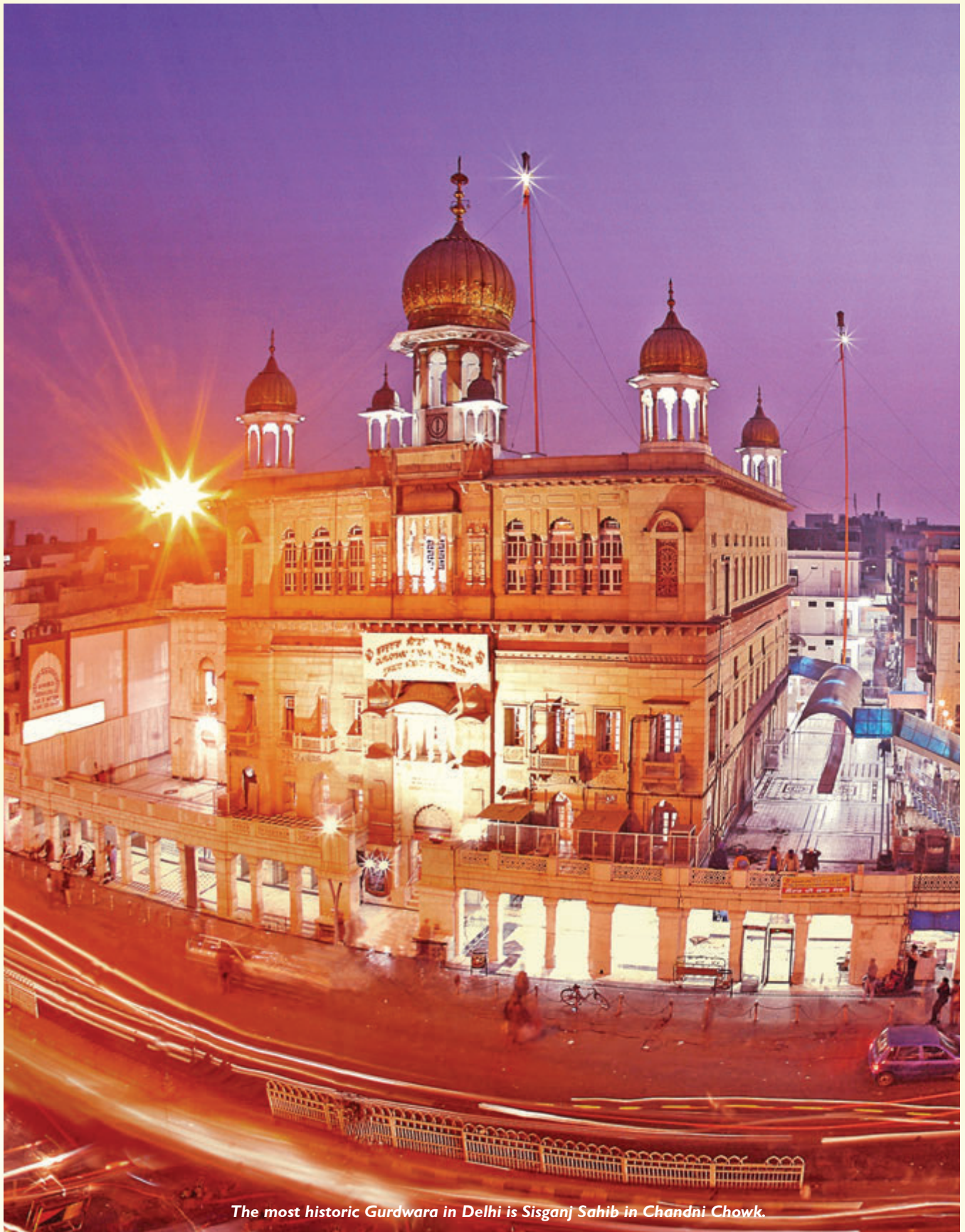
Gurdwara Bangla Sahib is associated with the eighth Sikh Guru, Guru Harkrishan Sahib. The water of the Sarovar inside its complex, is considered as holy amrit. This Gurdwara is close to Connaught Place in New Delhi.

Guru Harkrishan Sahib's last rites were performed at **Gurdwara Bala Sahib** situated along the outer Ring Road on banks of the River Yamuna.

Gurdwara Moti Bagh Sahib is situated on Ring Road in New Delhi between Dhaula Kuan and RK Puram (Shanti Path). Guru Gobind Singh ji had camped at this place in 1707 when the Mughal dynasty was in disarray after Auragzeb's death.

Gurdwara Majnu-ka-Tilla is situated on right bank of the river Yamuna, where during the reign of Sikandar Lodhi, a local Iranian Sufi mystic, Abdulla was named majnu (entrance), after he met Guru Nanak on 20 July 1505. In 1783, Sardar Baghel Singh built the Gurdwara here where the sixth Sikh Guru, Guru Har Gobind also stayed.

Gurdwara Baba Banda Singh Bahadur at Mehrauli is the place where Baba Banda Singh Bahadur was martyred on 9 June 1716.



The most historic Gurdwara in Delhi is Sisganj Sahib in Chandni Chowk.

'Fateh Diwas' Day, 8-9



'Fateh Diwas' march towards the Red Fort on 9 March 2014

March 2014



On 12 March 2014, Delhi's Sikh Sangat marked Baba Baghel Singh's historic victory over the Mughals during the reign of Emperor Shah Alam in March 1783, when the Nishaan Sahib was unfurled at the Red Fort.

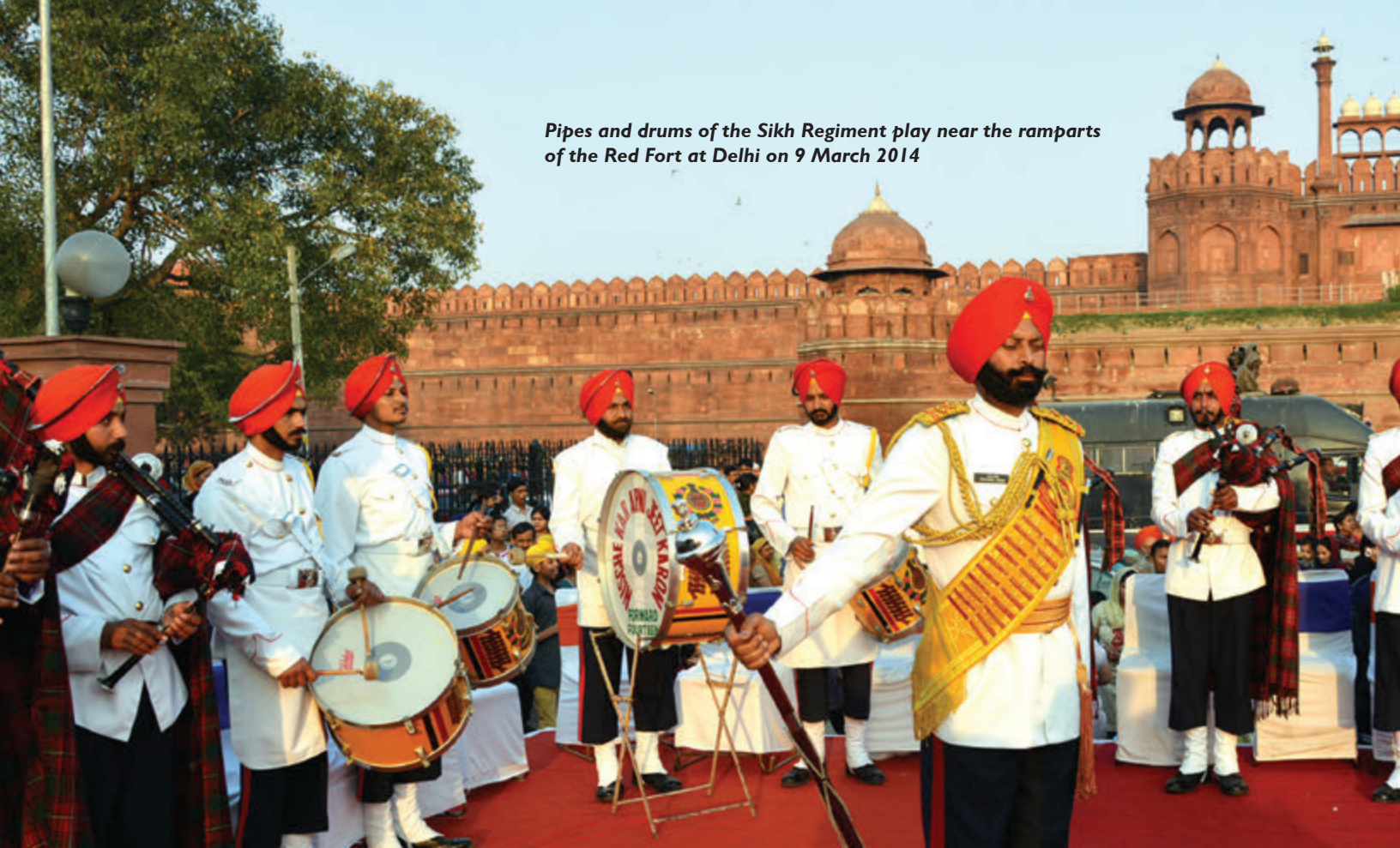
President of the DSGMC Manjit Singh GK stated that the Fateh Diwas had been organised to perpetuate the memory of Baba Baghel Singh, with celebrations held on 8 and 9 March 2014.

Beginning with an inspiring kirtan on the night of 8 March at the Red Fort, the next day a colourful parade followed the historic route from Tees Hazari to Red Fort via Fatehpuri and Gurdwara Sisganj Sahib. The march included Nihangs on horses and elephants along with Sikh ex-servicemen, bands of the Delhi Police, BSF and CRPF.

Recalling those historic times, Baba Baghel Singh had handed back the Red Fort with the condition that the administration identify the historical importance of seven sites where Gurdwaras — Sisganj Sahib, Rakab Ganj Sahib, Bangla Sahib, Nanak Piao, Moti Bagh Sahib, Majnu Ka Tila and Gurdwara Mata Sundri — were built and consecrated.

Punjab's Deputy Chief Minister Sukhbir Singh Badal, Jathedar Akal Takhat Sahib Gyani Gurbachan Singh, Jathedar Patna Sahib Gyani Iqbal Singh and former MP Tarlochan Singh were among those present at the 'Fateh Diwas' celebrations.

Pipes and drums of the Sikh Regiment play near the ramparts of the Red Fort at Delhi on 9 March 2014

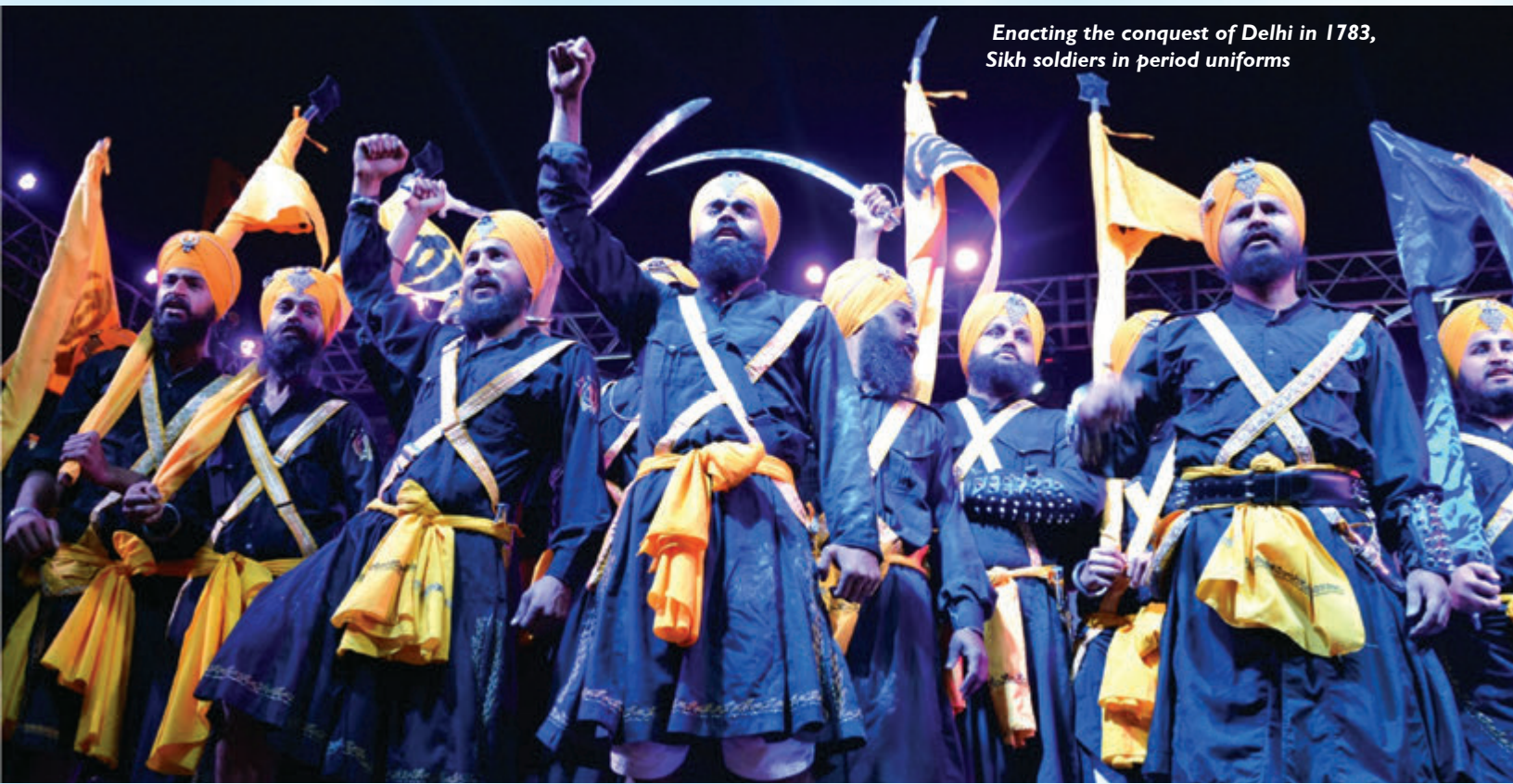


Symbolic of the 30,000 horsemen of Baghel Singh's army, which invested Delhi in 1783, are Nihangs on horseback as they approach Delhi's Red Fort on 9 March 2014





Harshdeep Kaur on stage, along ramparts of the Red Fort.



Enacting the conquest of Delhi in 1783, Sikh soldiers in period uniforms

Colours of Creation

"Painting is silent poetry, and poetry is painting that speaks" [Plutarch]

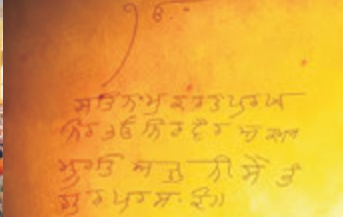
Colours invade my consciousness.
I see paintings even in my dreams.
I take the plunge and enter into the world of acrylic paints.
Of which I know nothing.
Yet, I want to paint my dreams.
The paints are kind.
They humour me.
They sense my ignorance.
Gradually, "Creation" materialises.
"What was the time, what was the hour
What was the date, what was the day
What was the season, what was the month
When Creation was born?" - Japji Sahib
Gratitude flows.



"Oceans" emerge.
I witness
The turbulence.
I hear
The roar
I dive
To depths unknown.
"Kesri" surfaces.
Consciousness rises
Virtue whispers
Life begins.
"The Source" appears.
Serenity descends.
Tears flow.
My creations pale my dreams
Yet, I persist
Maybe, one day
My canvas will truly radiate with my dream.

Painting by Inni Kaur

[Inni Kaur is on the Editorial Panel of Nishaan, and on the Board of The Sikh Research Institute. She is also the author of a children's book series, "Journey with the Gurus" - www.journeywiththegurus.com]



ਪੋਥੀ ਪਰਮੇਸਰ ਕਾ ਥਾਨੁ ।।

The Book is the Abode of God.

Guru Granth Sahib

T H E G U R U E T E R N A L



With Message from Dr. Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India
Dr. Mohinder Singh

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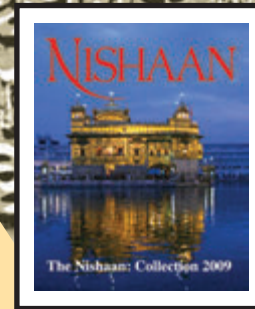
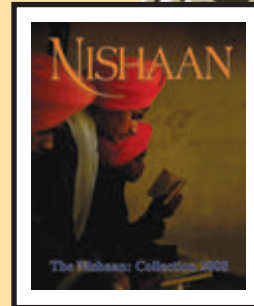
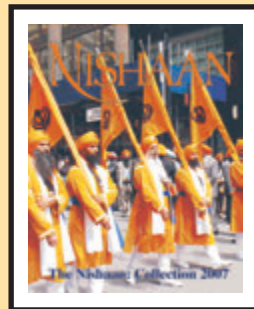
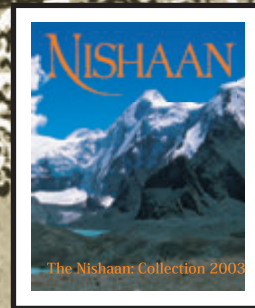
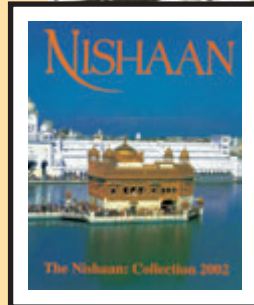
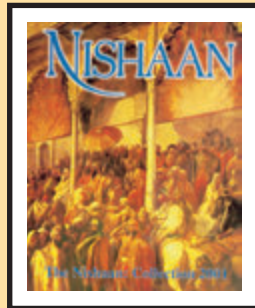
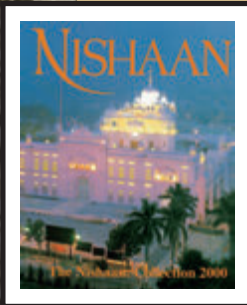


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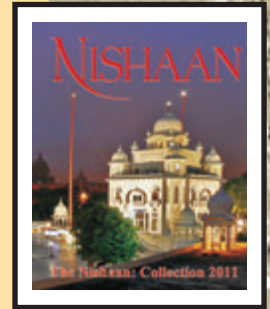
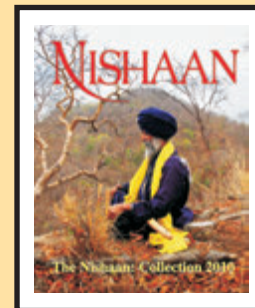
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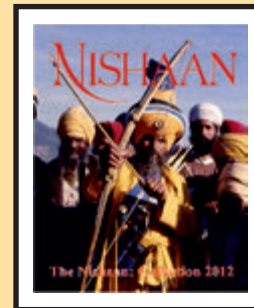
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