SIKHISM AND THE SIKHS TODAY

TOWARDS A NEW SIKH PRAXIS

(1)

(FOR A COMMUNITY RUNNING FAST ENOUGH TO KEEP IN THE SAME PLACE!)*

*Alice, in Lewis Carroll’s THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS, was astonished to hear the following utterance of the queen: “now here, you see, it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place”

The collapse of the Soviet Union has been declared as “the end of history” by Francis Fukuyama in the sense of history seen in Marxian sense as a clash of classes which would, according to Marxian logic, come to an end in classless communism. But for Francis Fukuyama history came to an end with inevitability of Western style liberal democracy which would bring in a new world order (marked by the clash of civilizations, according to Samuel P. Huntington). In the Western civilization, since the 17th century, science has played pre-eminent role. On the other hand Eastern civilizations remained intertwined with religions and religious traditions. In the clash of civilizations the role of class (an economic formation) has given way to community.

The Sikhs as a distinct community can play significant role in evolving a new world civilization, the seeds of which are present in Sikhism. But for such a historic role, the Sikhs would have to go beyond their existential concerns to rediscover and project the universal concerns of Sikhism. The former concerns have taken precedence over the latter as a result of the first Sikh reformation that arose in the last quarter of the 19th century, paving the way for liberation of the Sikh shrines from the hereditary mahants. The Akalis arose out of the struggle for the liberation of the shrines.

The first Sikh reformation addressed itself to the then urgent problem of survival that became uppermost after the regime of Maharaja Ranjit Singh which was the politically apogee of the Sikh struggle of the 18th century inherited by the Maharaja whose regime stretched
beyond the river Indus and went up to Kabul. But the anti-climax of the Sikh movement also started in the regime of Maharaja Ranjit Singh after whose death the Punjab was very soon annexed into the British raj: the politico-religious consolidation of Sikh community did not attract the focused attention of the Maharaja. The situation that arose put a question mark over the very survival of the Sikh community. It was in this context that arose the first Sikh reformation movement which also took over the correlative problem of revival by discarding the Brahminical inroads into Sikhism that overshadowed the Sikh society.

Attention of the Sikhs soon turned towards the shrines which under the hereditary mahants had become decadent with Sikh pseudo-religious customs and rituals- idol worship, for instance-country to the Sikh tenets. The Panthic agenda soon became the emancipation of the gurdwaras from the hereditary mahants backed by the British raj. The liberated shrines were taken over by the Akalis who later became organized into Shiromani Akali Dal with the correlative institution of the Shiromani Gurdwaras Parbandhak Committee which organization was, first of all, non-statutory body but became a statutory organization after the 1925 Sikh Gurdwaras Act. A living religion, in accordance with the needs and imperatives of the historical circumstances needs new organizations from time to time, For instance the masand system that was introduced by Guru Ram Das himself was discarded by Guru Gobind Singh when this system became decadent and out-dated. The relationship between the two organizations—the Shiromani Akali Dal and the Shiromani Gurdwaras Parbandhak Committee-has been quite often complementary and contradictory to each other—though their domains are distinct from each other but still these domains overlap each other. The Akali Dal now a political organization derives its legitimacy as a Sikh organization from its control over the SGPC which also needs the Akali Dal for its election; the two organizations today serve the existential concerns of the community-political and religious-primarily.

The universal concerns of Sikhism are not even articulated properly by the Sikh Diaspora; a conclusion is erroneously drawn that Sikhism has become a world religion. This is just an illusion; the presence of the followers of a religion in different parts of the world does not make it a world religion.

Sikhism would really become one of the major world religions when it addresses the concerns of a world religion. In other words, the existential concerns of the Sikhs as community have to be treated as distinct—though correlative- from the universal concerns of Sikhism. This is the task before the second Sikh reformation which should go beyond the existential concerns of the Sikhs which should also be faced. It should be understood well that the existential concerns of the Sikhs change with the changing times and the organizations that express the existential concerns of the community have also to undergo evolution without
which the Sikh community would end up as a sect of Hindu society and Sikhism as a species of the Hindu genus.

The universal concerns of Sikhism, in the present world context, are liberalism, humanism, universalism and pluralism.

Sikhism is essentially a liberal religion; it is not a totalizing ideology binding man from birth to death in a web of rituals. Sikhism is not a dogmatic religion; it is an open-ended religion without self-limiting categories encrusting the spirit of man. There is direct communion of man with God, without any mediatory role of the priest. In the Sikh doctrine there is no space for anointed clergy standing in-between man and his God; There is no clergy to interpret the Scripture, or to prescribe any code of conduct or to excommunicate any Sikh from the Sikh folds. All that is stressed is spiritual concentration on the Divine Spirit and ethically normative conduct. Apart from these aspects, man is considered endowed with free will in his personal and societal life. In Sikhism, there is no canonized Sikh jurisprudence, no formalized Sikh economics and no prescribed dress code. Social fraternity, without consideration of creed, class or caste, is also a cardinal value in Sikhism: Tolerance, open mindedness towards the views of the Other is another value in Sikhism. In the luminous state of mind, the Other is reflected in Me and the Me is mirrored in the Other. The ideas and opinions of the Other are to be listened first before responding, with expression of one’s views—Says Guru Nanak: ਜਾਂ ਕਹਾਣਾ ਹੋਵੇ ਤਸਵੀਰਾ ਕਰੋ ਜੀਤੇ ਸਤਾਵੇ ਸੂਰਤ ਪ੍ਰੀਤ ਮੂਹੀ ਕੀਰਤ ਜੀਤੇ। (So long as one lives in the world, one should first listen to the Other before responding and saying something).

Humanism is another essential cardinal principle of Sikhism. As against the old view of humanism, there is no contra-distinction between the terrestrial life of man and his transcendental concerns. Human spirit partakes of the Divine Spirit; all are common in Divine Spirit. The first Divine message of Guru Nanak was: “there is no Hindu, no Musalman”. Guru Gobind Singh expressed the same message:—

ਭਰਮ ਵੀ ਨਾਂ ਮਬੈ ਦੇਵਣੇ ਪਲਿਸ਼ਾਚੇ

(Recognize all humanity as one in spirit)

Hence there is no question of hierarchy of men, whether rooted in faith, caste, class, creed or country. The four doors of Sri Harmandar Sahib, in Sri Amritsar, symbolize that the then four castes in Indian society had equal freedom to pay obeisance from these doors. Sikhism, though treated as an Indian religion, was born in Pakistan, with the first Prophet of Sikhism, Guru Naank Dev Ji, having taken birth in Nanakana Sahib now in Pakistan. Sikhism is not bound with any country, territory or caste or ethnicity; the first five baptized Sikhs (Punj Pyare) belonged to different religions of India and different castes; they also belonged to different ethnicities, Sikhism has become ethnicized, bracketed with Punjabi ethnicity. De-ethnicization of Sikhism is essential for it to become a really world religion. Christianity became a world religion when St. Paul, getting it out of its original Jewish context spread it to non—
Jewish milieu and environs, Sikhism while remaining unifocal on religious level should evolve into being multi-focal on ethnic and cultural levels. This is a challenge before the second Sikh reformation. Sikhism would become really a world religion when it takes up universal concerns of humanity today, such as human rights, ecology, world peace, etc. The Sikhs should evolve also an international organization like Amnesty International.

Sikhism also emphasizes pluralism: religious, social and political pluralism Sikhism does not claim to be the sole and exclusive path to God, nor the full and final revelation of God. Co-validity of all religious revelations have relevance in their own circumstances, times and places of origin. Says Guru Amar Dass:-


(The World is ablaze
O Lord! shower Your benediction.
Through whichever door it can be delivered,
save it that way)
This is very significant in the inter-religious dialogue today.

Rejecting homogenization, in any form, unitarianism is not admitted in Sikhism. The concept of unitarian polity which is sought to be erected on social homogenization is contrary to pluralism. Unitarian polity is sought by nation-states, the days of which are numbered due to supranational forces of globalization. The place of nations has been taken by communities which have came to play vital role in the clash of civilizations. The Sikh community can play vital role in ushering in a new civilization, provided, going beyond its existential concerns, it re-discovers its essential values. This requires a new Sikh praxis.

Taking an overview of the 20th century Sikh praxis, it appears that, in a sense, the community has been running fast enough to remain in the same place! One would recall here how Alice, in Lewis Carroll’s THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS, was astonished to hear the following utterance of the queen: “now here, you see, it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place“.

In other words the 20th century Sikh praxis while serving the needs of the times, generated certain stereotypes that, unfortunately, have become embedded in the Sikh mind as the unchangeable, all-time valid, categorical imperatives, particularly the following, as I wrote
in my book *Liberating Sikhism from “the Sikhs”*(2006): coalescent, rather than differentiated, unity between *miri* (temporal authority) and *piri* (ecclesiastical power); symbiotic relationship between religious and political institutions; ascendancy of Sikh clergy as a class exercising Brahminical roles of exegesis, prescription of code of conduct, imposition of religious punishment; ex-communication; their functioning, as theocrats; most of the SGPC members acting as the legal *mahants*, in the words of Master Tara Singh) who replaced hereditary mahants in the management of the Sikh shrines treated as ‘property’ rather than as missionary institutions, predomination of the existential concerns of the Sikhs over the universal concerns of Sikhism, and the concept of sovereign self-expression of a community becoming determinate only in territorial dimension. Out of these, the most manipulative stratagem is the symbiotic relationship in which the religious and the political leadership sustain each other, strengthen each other, weaken each other, exploit each other, while all the time complementing each other. It is liberation from such stereotyped Sikh praxis that I, euphemistically, call *Liberation of Sikhism from “the Sikhs”* - a liberation from an obsolescent mindset; a liberation from the hardened dogma encrusting the spirit of Sikhism; a liberation from the self-styled custodians of the faith; a liberation from the theocracy of the Takht clergy claiming, virtually, regency of the Guru and God on earth; a liberation from the Jekyll-and-Hyde type of leaders who well qualify as *dramatis personae* of the political theatre of the Absurd; a liberation from mushrooming sants emitting scented stinks; a liberation from “pop intellectuals” of Sikhism; a liberation from theologasters delivering in the shrines shallow discourses with sprinkling of (little understood)sakhis; a liberation from *Stupid Sikhs* (in the words of Sirdar Kapur Singh).

Earlier in my book *Liberating Sikhism from “the Sikhs”* I had written as under: “A kind of Lutheran reformation- the second Sikh reformation- is needed without which Sikhism would survive, but not the Sikhs, in the same way in which in India today Buddhism is surviving without there being a reckonable distinct Buddhist community”.

But now I have re-thought the matter: Without a kind of Lutheran reformation- the second Sikh reformation leading to a new praxis- the Sikhs, observing growing *Brahminical ritualism*, would survive in different parts of the world but
Sikhism would not emerge as a world religion with its universal values and concerns. At the most Sikhism would become a species of the Hindu genus. At Kanyakumari one can see intermingling waters of three distinct shades: the water of Indian ocean, the water of the Arabian sea on one side and the water of Bay of Bengal on the other side. This seems to be a good analogy of Hinduism in which there are freely intermingling distinct creeds, whether monotheistic, polytheistic, agnostic or atheistic.
Bulldozing of heritage at Hazur Sahib.

300 मास गुरु से रास " द बड़ुआ बुड़वा' मंगल चुटिएते हे पवारनिवत्ती ' हिंदी नब्बे हरमाज राजवी '। मूल नाव चित्र दिखे रिनवाह भीख पीवां माह 20 अगस्तवर 2008 छूं भेंधी मासाला वेंचिका। मूल नाव चित्र दिखे रिनवाह भीख पीवां माह 29 अगस्तवर 4 ठाकुर 2008 देव भलपट गादी, जाी महसूल भेंध दिखी भिडी 'उ की मासाला रूबे हे मासाला।"300 मास गुरु से रास" दुनिया द रासबर रास बची हेरे मिंड उपरीतमे हे मान्य भोज अपने बिस्ते बिती दिनी बिंदी नींदी? चंडीगढ़ दे हप्टे 'पांचादी दिनियत' दे पहले मंडे देही गुरु जी गुरु नाव चित्र दिखे मासाला चारा द्वार चारा मंडे भलपट में मास 'उ की बंधन', मूल नाव चित्र दिखे चारा में द्वारमेंट।" चंडीगढ़ दे हप्टे क्रेडिट ' देह में ' अपने मार्ग के पाइले मंडे 'उ की बंधन भेंध दिखे रिनवाह रूबे हे मासाला। " गुरु जी नाव चित्र देव मासाला दी मेटें 'उ जी गादी गादो; ती 'हो। दौड़ पंडुवरास दे ही ट्राइडी 'बेमार'। दिन 300 मास गुरु से रास बहिए रा चंडीगढ़ दे? नां "300 मास गुरु से रा- शृद्ध चुराएं " दा बंधन है? भिडी 17 ठाकुर 2008 दे घेंचिका 'अनीट ' अप्याय दिखा दिखे दिव तेज अप्याय मूल नाव चित्र दिखे मासाला हे मासाला दी मासाला राजवी दिख मूल गुरु जी गुरु नाव चित्र दिखा। " गुरु " भेंधा द गुरु 'खर' रोम भेंधे बुड़वा चंडीगढ़ दिव, जी हूं गुरु जी बेलकित मिंड नींद भिडी मार्ग भी भार दी गुरु (गुरु) गुरु जी गुरु नाव चित्र दी गुरु- बंधन में आधी बंधन मासाला गादी, उ हेंधी मासाला दे भूपे (?) बंध छूं मूल नाव चित्र पृथ्वीबन्ध व्यक्ति दे पृथ्वीबन्ध के गुरुत्व भाषा बवाल द धुरा बीजू। (सिम भाषा हे भाषा लेंगा भाषा भाषा दे चिकित्सा मे )

चंडीगढ़ दे हप्टे मध्यमनी दिनियततिरीत हे भिडी 03.11.2008 दे 'में दे किलेह मंडे 'उ दिख बंधन है।
I am not an anointed ideologist with political leanings to any party in the political sense, though I have been playing ideological roles in matters of Sikh praxis, attempting to update it in the fast-changing circumstances.

The Anandpur Sahib resolution was approved by the working committee of the mainstream Shiromani Akali Dal on 16-17 October 1973 at Sri Anandpur Sahib (claimed to have been drafted by Sirdar Kapur Singh), the Sachi Sakhi of which is given in Guru Gobind Singh Foundation’s publication Sri Akal Takht co-compiled by Dr. H.S.Dilgir and myself. This resolution sought separate constitution (aaeen is the expression used in the resolution) for re-organized Punjab to enable the Sikhs to experience the glow of freedom (separate deshkal for Panthic Azad Hasti) (page 3). This resolution of the working committee was proposed to be ratified by the general house of the Akali Dal which was planned to be held on 28-29 October 1978 at Ludhiana. But there was no unanimity in the Akali Dal. Jathedar Gurcharan Singh Tohra came to my house and wanted to skip the
controversy; so he chose to move a resolution on the Nirankari issue which was very hot then. During discussions I brought him round to the question of the 1973 Anandpur Sahib resolution which, being controversial, he wanted to evade. I suggested to him that he might move a resolution seeking full autonomy for Punjab in federalized polity of India. Jathedar Tohra entrusted to me the task of preparing the draft of the resolution along with his speech that he would like to read out at the conference to be presided over by Jathedar Jagdev Singh Talwandi. I prepared the draft resolution and the elaborative speech which was later published both in Punjabi and English. The resolution was seconded by S. Parkash Singh Badal and approved by the general house. The text of the resolution, along with salient 15 points in Jathedar Tohra’s speech, is given in Guru Gobind Singh Foundation’s book *Sri Akal Takht* (English translation given in my book *Liberating Sikhism from “the Sikhs”* which also contains a 51-point chapter on federalizing Indian polity). My identity as the drafter of the resolution was revealed by the then editor of the Tribune in editorial note captioned as “A Draftsman’s Identity” by Sh. Prem Bhatia in the issue of 17 July 1979. I being then in the govt. service, the chief secretary at once called me for my explanation (If the chief secretary were a petty person he would have “suspended” me!). I took both the resolutions (of the working committee passed at Sri Anandpur Sahib and the general house resolution of the Akali Dal at the Ludhiana conference) to show the same to the chief secretary. I said to him, “Sir, supposing I drafted the 1978 resolution in place of the executive committee resolution passed at Sri Anandpur Sahib in 1973, which of the two resolutions is better”? The chief secretary was an enlightened personality; the issue was smiled away. It was the Ludhiana resolution that was the basis of the Rajiv-Longowal Accord and was published by the central government in its *White Paper* on the Punjab problem (page 52). The 1978 resolution brought about a new Sikh praxis in the Akali politics, that, among other factors, opened the way for the party for hand-shaking with the B.J.P, leading to co-sharing political power in Punjab and alliance with the B.J.P, at national level-the wedge between the Akali Dal and the Congress party has been too big to be bridged.

Now onto the All India Sikh Gurdwaras Act which was first sought by the S.G.P.C in November 1926 in a resolution demanding control over all the gurdwaras in India. The Akali Government appointed a committee headed by Justice(retd) Harbans Singh who prepared the draft for enactment of All India Sikh Gurdwaras Act which was also envisaged in the Rajiv-Longowal Accord (in its clause 5.1). After the passing away of Justice (retd.) Harbans Singh, the draft, with
cosmetic changes, was again sent by the central govt. to the Akali govt. in Punjab, headed by S. Parkash Singh Badal Ji who convened a meeting of the SGPC top functionaries, some Akali leaders, and some Sikh scholars, as well as the successor of Justice (retd.) Harbans Singh, who had prepared a new version but only with cosmetic changes in the draft prepared by Justice (retd.) Harbans Singh. The successor of Justice (retd.) Harbans Singh spelt out main features of the revised draft prepared by him. S. Badal Sahib turn by turn asked for the views of the participants. Most of the speakers praised the draft. When my turn came, I pointed out that the draft Bill proposes setting up of nine state/ regional boards and that the present SGPC was just one of these state/ regional boards, having control over the concerned gurdwaras in the Punjab and U.T, Chandigarh. Himachal Pradesh and Haryana would have separate regional board (Earlier there was proposed only one board for the gurdwaras in Punjab, U.T Chandigarh, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh). I further explained that a central board was proposed for managing Sri Harmandar Sahib, in Sri Amritsar Sahib, and the five Sikh Takhts, etc, to be elected by all the state/ regional boards in India. In other words the present SGPC was to be trifurcated and would no more be in charge of the management of Sri Harmandar Sahib and the Takhts (the three in the Punjab) and there would be eight other river state/ regional boards in India. Now there was only the Delhi Sikh Gurdwaras Board as a rival (?)body and after the proposed Bill becoming an Act there would come into being many other rival state/ regional boards, apart from the management of Sri Harmandar Sahib and Sri Akal Takht going out of the hands of the present SGPC, the fragmentation of which would be inevitable, instead of the extension of its control over the gurdwaras all over India. This came as a shock to Sardar Badal Ji who dispersed the meeting, telling the SGPC leadership to lock the draft Bill in an almira. Since then there has been no Akali demand for All India Sikh Gurdwaras Act. After the meeting Sardar Badal Ji patting me on my shoulder said to me: “You have saved the SGPC” - the very SGPC which has now suspended me (though by new leadership, of course). During those day, I along with like- minded scholars had been opposing the draft Bill of the All India Sikh Gurdwaras Act, from the forum of the Guru Gobind Singh Foundation that published three Booklets: *All India Sikh Gurdwaras Legislation, The Draft proposals; A Study of the Draft Proposals on All India Sikh Gurdwaras Legislation,* and *The 1999 Sikh Gurdawaras Bill: An Analysis* - all authored by me.

Reacting to this crusade, one evening Justice (retd.) Harbans Singh, highly upset, said to me on phone: “Tell me, how else do I liberate the gurdwaras from
these legal mahants who are worse than the hereditary mahants, as observed by Master Tara Singh“? Any answer to this question!