

Universality of Sikhism

Lines drawn in the sand?

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The year was 1699. We learn from history that when Guru Gobind Singh instituted the Khalsa in a distillation of Sikh teaching of the earlier 200 years, over 80,000 Sikhs amassed at Anandpur, a small town in the foothills of Punjab. He issued a dramatic challenge for sacrifice to his followers by flashing a naked sword. We know that he fashioned a new nation from this glorious beginning.

A Nation is born:

We celebrate the glory every year but often forget one salient fact. History tells us that perhaps 20,000 Sikhs became Khalsa during those few days. What happened to the remaining 60,000? Did they walk away from the Guru and his teaching? Did the Guru send them away?

We know that Guru Gobind Singh fought several battles, some against Hindus others against Muslims. He certainly didn't fight these battles with only 20,000 men and women who had become the Khalsa. In many of his battles, his allies were Hindus, in others it was Muslims who fought alongside the Sikhs. For a hundred years after Guru Gobind Singh, Sikhs continued to fight battles for control of Punjab. They could not have been waged by *amritdhari* Sikhs alone. The Sikh warriors were like a fish in the sea of Sikh and non-Sikh Punjabis who nurtured and protected the Sikhs, because they valued Sikhism and its teachings, even if they could not always live the Khalsa discipline. Some of Guru Gobind Singh's close associates like Bhai Nand Lal and other Sikhs like Dewan Kaura Mal may have remained non-amritdhari.

Sikhism - Basically inclusive:

It seems quite evident that Guru Gobind Singh remained entirely inclusive in his worldview, allowing his followers room to walk the path of Sikhism at their own pace. Yet, there was never any doubt about the clarity of his teaching or the path that he valued. The principles and the teachings were never compromised or bent to suit any individual, no matter how prominent.

Let's step back in time a couple of centuries earlier. Sikh lore tells us that when Guru Nanak passed away, his Hindu and Muslim followers – and both revered him – quarreled over how to dispose of his mortal remains. Sikhs of Muslim antecedents wanted Muslim rites, those of Hindu background insisted upon Hindu last rites. From this I conclude that Guru Nanak must also have been very tolerant of human diversity. Yet Guru Nanak did not install Hindu idols or holy

books, nor did he revere the Semitic scriptures; his way remained uniquely different. Although many scholars continue to debate and discuss whether Guru Nanak intended to start a new religion, we have little doubt that he did.

Humanism:

Guru Hargobind, the sixth Guru, built a mosque for his many admirers who kept one foot in the boat of Islam and the other foot in the house of Sikhism. The mosque – *Guru ki Maseet* in Hargobindpur - exists to this day and Muslim services are held in it. This Guru, too, was extremely tolerant of the varied pace that people have while on the same journey.

We are reminded of the fact that before 1947 the official *raagees* at Nankana Sahib, the birthplace of Guru Nanak, came from the lineage of his first follower – Bhai Mardana – who was a Muslim. Many of these *raagees* remained Muslim but also attached to the house of Nanak and his teachings. And now recently in the past few years there have been edicts from the Akaal Takht to bar those who are not Sikhs from performing *keertan* at gurdwaras.

We understand the need for encouraging the practice of only recognizable Sikhs on the stages of gurdwaras; after all they are the role models for Sikhs. But we cannot ignore the fact that the policies of the Gurus reflected in the continuous Sikh tradition, were always inclusive and non-judgmental, not exclusive, limited or elitist.

We also see that now many Punjabi Hindus who used to frequent gurdwaras no longer do so. Partially they have been turned off by our aggressive efforts at building fences around us; partly they have been brainwashed against us by nascent Hinduism and by the political shenanigans of successive governments in India. We know that fences are necessary around our religions as they are around our houses; good fences make good neighbors. But fences should never become such that they curtail communication.

Our Sindhi brethren and sisters, originally hailing from a part of India that went to Pakistan in 1947, have traditionally never known any religion but that of Nanak. Arguably they followed Sikh teaching but never entirely and many of their practices were usually mixed with Hinduism. But they were absolutely devoted to Guru Nanak, Gurbani and to gurdwaras. Now in the face of political strife in gurdwaras and our insistence on a more rigorous definition of Sikhism, most Sindhis have deserted gurdwaras and regressed into the Hindu fold.

Diaspora & Puritanism

In the diaspora where a significant number Sikhs have abandoned the articles of their faith and blended in with the majority that is primarily Judeo-Christian; these unrecognizable Sikhs rarely feel that they have a place in the Sikh community or a gurdwara. We agree that they operate largely at the fringes of Sikh belief and practices. But is exile from Sikhism going to be their lot in life? We doubt that

they ever think of themselves as anything but Sikh. How should we accommodate them in the Sikh fold without suggesting - or awarding them - our seal of approval for their 'mixed practices.'

How to include these people within the fold of Sikhism without diluting the essence of our belief? That is the question and to which we have no answer. It seems that the pristine purity of the Sikh message is like the tip of a pyramid that is supported strongly by a very wide base. The question here is are we shrinking the base? In a lighthearted mood interlaced with serious concerns, an engineer friend, Harvinder Singh, analyzed the issue as the mathematical relationship between the size of the base and the prominence (even strength) of the pyramidal apex. The question cannot be ignored when one looks at how the *sehajdharis* and *sindhis* are being marginalized in Sikh religion and culture today.

In some ways this is an issue of being inclusive, at another level it is a different matter altogether. In its worship and in access to its gurdwaras or participation in its practices, Sikhism has always been welcoming to all, no matter what religious label they may wear or how diluted or mixed their concepts and beliefs may appear. The difficulty of institutional definition comes in matters of institutional management. It is somewhat like limiting voting rights to those who are formal citizens of a state, although aliens too pay taxes at the same rate. (In exploring this analogy keep in mind that analogies go only so far.)

Universality:

That all humanity is one and should be treated in a non-discriminatory manner is so clearly the bedrock of Sikh belief that it needs no elaboration here. The question here becomes an institutional issue of where exactly to define fences between neighbors and how should they be. These matters will admit no easy solutions, hence the question.

Our efforts at constructing fences between "us" and "them" are understandable but they also raise some 'red flags'. They make us more inner directed and introspective and that is good, but they also make us more self centered, if not selfish, and that is not. They produce a siege mentality where we look for enemies everywhere and under every stone, and that is not the Sikh way.

Sikhism was nurtured with a philosophy that says, "Let each walk to the different beat of his distant drummer." How to make it happen is the question?



1 I.J. Singh 2001. Did Nanak intend to start a new religion? *In The Sikh Way: A Pilgrim's Progress*. The Centennial Foundation, Canada.