

Why Sikhism Fails to Impact at Global Level? Some Random Thoughts

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This question has been revolving in my mind since long when I joined Marie Curie university in Paris as a doctoral student in 1970. I was the only turbaned Sikh in Paris and I was mistaken to be a Muslim. I was heckled in International Residence of Paris university for my participation in cultural events due to my turban (French culture considers it disrespectful to participate with headgear). No one understood who are The Sikhs? My Sikh identity was confused with a Muslim even by the Editor of Nuclear Physics journal when I published my first paper in 1972. All these events forced me to think why Sikhism fails to impact at global level?

I tried to answer this question during my lecture presentation organised by Chardi Kalaa Foundation [1] at San Jose Gurdwara in April 2018 during my visit to USA. I am not sure my presentation answered this question but it made an impact on listeners to explore this question further. We, the Sikhs, are claiming that Sikhism is universal because the message enshrined in Sri Guru Granth Sahib is universal and for the whole global humanity. It has no limitations of space and time but we have made it confined to the Sikhs only. The failure is not in the message but in its delivery.

While reading Taajudin's diary (Account of a Muslim author who accompanied Guru Nanak from Makkah to Baghdad) written by Sant (Syed) Pirthipal Singh [2], I came across a comment on the status of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism. Pirthipal recalls his meeting with a Christian priest in Quetta (Baluchistan) and asking him who is the best Messenger (Prophet) of God? The answer given in Urdu-Persian was: "*Guftam Bila Shako Shubha Nanak Wahid Paigambaro Tawheed Asat*", meaning: *I will say without any doubt or hesitation that if anybody has established one-ness of God while effacing himself, that one and only one person is Nanak.*"

In the Chapter "Had Nanak been born in Europe", Pirthipal recounts another meeting with a Spanish priest in Karachi who replied to his query as follows: "Sardar Sahib! I am disappointed that you got so easily impressed by stone walls. *Had Baba Nanak been born in Europe, there wouldn't have been any place on this earth without churches of gold in his name. I am sorry that the*

Baba was born in Punjab, and to make things worse, his mission has been left at the mercy of the Sikhs.” Pirthipal writes, "We were saddened by these comments from a white priest".



Guru Nanak on his visit (1520-21) to Mecca-Medina-Baghdad with Taajudin and other Sikh followers of Saudi Arabia

In 1983, while travelling to Triputi in Andhra Pradesh for participation in Indian Science Congress, I started reading a book " Spirit of the Sikh" by Prof. Puran Singh [3]. A fellow traveller in my bogey started showing keen interest in me and my book. After reading some Chapters, he asked me a very teasing question *"Dr. Virk: I do not find the reflection of these lofty ideals of Sikh religion as enunciated by Puran Singh in the manifestation of Sikh character anywhere in India"*. I had to accept his judgement on its face value without contradicting him.

There is enough food for thought in the above statements made by the strangers about Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikh religion, and the present day Sikhs. What has gone wrong with the Sikh practices in vogue? Here are some of my random thoughts.

1. Is there any dichotomy between Shabad Guru and Granth Guru?

The Sikhs are known as worshippers of the holy book, called Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS). It was compiled by Guru Arjun, the fifth Master, in 1604 and installed in Harimandir at Amritsar. Guru Arjun pays the highest tribute to this holy book in SGGS:

p]TI pr m[sr ka Tanu .
saWs;ig gavih guN g]ib;w pUrn bRh m igAanu

*This Holy Book is the home of the Transcendent Lord God.
Whoever sings the Glorious Praises of the Lord of the Universe in the Saadh
Sangat, the Company of the Holy, has the perfect knowledge of God.*
(SGGS, M. 5, p. 1226)

The most important decision taken by Guru Gobind Singh before his demise at Nander in 1708 was to declare the *Pothi Sahib* (Granth) as the future Guru of the Sikhs, thus banning the lineage of personal Guru-ship forever. There is no dichotomy between the Shabad Guru and the Granth Guru but some Sikh scholars have started juxtaposing one against the other. They believe that some aberrations have crept into Sikh beliefs and practices which may be the cause of the dilution of the Sikh doctrine [4].

Dr Devinder Singh Chahal of Montreal has written his book "Sabd Guru to Granth Guru: An In Depth Study" [5]. The author has come to the conclusion that the original message of Guru Nanak has been distorted and instead of contemplation on Sabd Guru, the Sikhs have started the worship of Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS) as an idol. Guru Nanak during his debate with the *Sidhas* recorded in SGGS confirms that Shabad is his Guru:

sbwu gurU surit Wuin c[la .

*The Shabad is the Guru, upon whom I lovingly focus my consciousness;
I am the chaylaa, the disciple.*

(SGGS, M. 1, p. 943)

The singing of hymns known as *Kirtan* is the best mode and easier route to contemplate on Shabad Guru. However, the continuous recitation of SGGS in Gurdwaras and Deras, known as *Akhand Path* (uninterrupted reading), has become a ritual in the present Sikh world view. It has been promoted by the clergy and Sant Babas and the Sikhs have been trapped in this ritual. It has been observed that most of the time no one listens to the ongoing recitation. No one dares to discard this practice as it generates abundant income for the Gurdwaras run by the SGPC and other Sikh organisations.

The other Sikh Gurus also recommended the use of Shabad Guru for the Sikhs. It has been made mandatory for the Sikhs to read and listen to the Shabad Guru recorded in SGGS to obtain the treasure of Naam:

hir hmra hm hir k[was[nank sbwu gurU scu
wlina jlxu .

*The Lord is mine, and I am the slave of the Lord. O Nanak, the Guru has
blessed me with the True Word of the Shabad.*

(SGGS, M.5, p. 100)

nam inWan itsih prapit ijsu sbwu gurU min
vUOa jlxu .

*The Treasure of the Naam is obtained by one whose mind is filled
with the Word of the Guru's Shabad.*

(SGGS, M. 5, p. 101)

sbwu gurU ka xucarih jugu jugu vrtavNhara .

*I recite continually the Guru's Shabads, which have been effective
throughout the ages.*

(SGGS, M. 3, p. 593)

In the 3rd Chapter on Granth Guru [6], Dr. Chahal deplores: "In the last century, several attempts were made by the Sikhs to translate into Punjabi the Word of the Guru, but all such attempts ended in an all-too-literal translation, leaving the seeker as uninitiated to the Guru's Word as he was before..... and it (Shabad Guru) started to be worshipped more than read, uttered as a magic formula or a Mantram for secular benefit than as a disciple of spiritual life for the achievement of ideals higher and beyond the world of sense and for the integrity of mind and soul in the world of the living." In concluding paragraph "Declaration of Granth as Guru", Dr. Chahal reiterates: "Therefore, the Granth is 'Guru' ipso facto the 'Sabd Guru' is enshrined in it".

I may sum up my understanding of this book by Chahal as follows. The concept of Shabad Guru enshrined in SGGS has been derailed and mis-interpreted, as a consequence, the Sikhs have been lead to worship the Guru Granth by adopting various types of practices and rigmaroles as being promoted by the custodians of Sikh institutions. Guru Granth is a holy Sikh scripture and a treasure house of *Shabad Guru*, hence deserves our respect but it is not to be worshipped as an idol.

Who did the mischief of calling Guru Granth as *deh* (physical body) of the Guru? This is also explained by Dr. Chahal in Chapter 3. According to Rehat Nama Bhai Prehlad Singh [7], the original couplet was as follows:

ਅਕਾਲ ਪੁਰਖ ਕੇ ਬਚਨ ਸਿਉਂ, ਪਰਗਟ ਚਲਾਇਓ ਪੰਥ।

ਸਭ ਸਿਖਨ ਕੋ ਬਚਨ ਹੈ, ਗੁਰੂ ਮਾਨਿਓਹ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ।

ਗੁਰੂ ਖ਼ਾਲਸਾ ਮਾਨੀਅਹਿ ਪਰਗਟ ਗੁਰੂ ਕੀ ਦੇਹ।

ਜੋ ਸਿੱਖ ਮੋ ਮਿਲਬੈ ਚਾਹਹਿ ਖੋਜ ਇਨਹੁ ਮਹਿ ਲੇਹੁ।

With the order of God the Panth was created.

It is ordained to all the Sikhs to accept the Granth as their Guru.

Accept the Khalsa as Guru and Khalsa as the body of the Guru.

Those, who want to meet me (may) search in the Khalsa.

(Rehit Nama Bhai Prehlahd Singh)

The distorted version of this couplet is attributed to Giani Gian Singh, author of *Panth Prakash* [8], written in 1874, and now being recited in all Gurdwaras after the *Ardaas* (prayer). It reads as follows:

ਆਗਿਆ ਭਈ ਅਕਾਲ ਕੀ ਤਭੈ ਚਲਾਇਓ ਪੰਥ।

ਸਭ ਸਿਖਨ ਕੋ ਹੁਕਮ ਹੈ, ਗੁਰੂ ਮਾਨਿਓ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ।

ਗੁਰੂ ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਕੋ ਮਾਨਿਓ, ਪਰਗਟ ਗੁਰਾਂ ਕੀ ਦੇਹ।

ਜੋ ਪ੍ਰਭ ਕੋ ਮਿਲਬੈ ਚਾਹੇ, ਖੋਜ ਸਬਦ ਮੇਂ ਲੇਹ।

(Panth Prakash, Giani Gian Singh)

The troubling line is "*Guru Granth ko maanio pragat guran ki deh*" which clearly mentions that Guru Granth be treated as *deh* (physical body) of the living Guru. *The Sikhs treat the Granth as if it were a living person, in flesh and blood, sensitive to heat and cold, who has to be put to bed for rest etc.* The source of corruption of original couplet has been well established by Sikh historians but who sanctioned this couplet to be read after the *Ardaas* is not well known. Sikh Rehat Maryada does not recommend reciting this couplet.

2. Is there any Wisdom in cutting the Roots of Sikh Religion?

This is a hundred dollar question to know where the roots of Sikh religion lie? Semitic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) have common roots but they differ vehemently in their creeds and concepts. Indian religions (Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism) have common roots with Hinduism based on Indian philosophy. Buddhism and Jainism belong to atheistic tradition and are non-believers in *Brahmn* (God). Out of these three, Sikhism is closest to Hinduism. During my study of Gurbani concepts in SGGS [9], I found that there is an overlap of more than 90% with concepts which have their origin in Hindu philosophy. For example, concepts of *nirgun-sargun*, *maya*, *haumei*, *sat(reality)*, *chetna*, *84 lakh junian*, *turia avastha*, *bhagti*, *dasam duar*, *sun*, and many more find their echo in Indian philosophy. That is the reason why most of the western scholars of Sikh religion consider Sikhism as an offshoot of

Bhagti movement or a branch of Hindu religion. At the most, some of them consider Sikhism as a syncretism of Hinduism and Islam. Despite books like "Ham Hindu Nahin" [10], it will be preposterous to deny our relationship with Hindu religion. Prof. Puran Singh, a votary of Sikh ideals of life and love, who advocates the distinct nature of Sikhism from the dead mass of Hinduism had to admit: *"In view of the political solidarity of India it is mischievous for anyone to suggest that we are not of the Hindu and not equally of the Muslims. It is mischievous to multiply the point of difference with the Hindu which are not fundamental"* [11].

It is not to undermine the contribution of Sikh Gurus to Hindu society that we find common roots between these two religions. In my view, Sikhism is the brightest star on the firmament of Hindu society. Almost 99% converts to Sikhism, came from the Hindu fold. This process stopped due to intransigence of fanatic Sikhs. The Sikh society differs from Hindu society in rejecting obnoxious rituals, idol worship, caste system and its approach to practical problems of life and existence. If Sikhism loses its intrinsic values of *kirat karna*, *vand chhakna* and *Naam japna* (honest means of earning, sharing fruits of earning and meditation on the Ultimate Reality), it will become fossilized Hinduism. The wisdom lies in keeping the communication channels with Hindu society open for the benefit of both religions.

3. Why Miri-Piri remained a theoretical Construct (Idea) in Sikh Religion?

When Jesus Christ was crucified, Christianity was confined to Israel and some surrounding areas. However, within three centuries it covered the whole of Europe and some parts of Asia. The Christian Saints were responsible for its rapid growth initially. The Islam was confined to Arabia when Prophet Mohammed died but it spread to most of Europe, Africa and Asia by the end of tenth century. How it happened? Roman Empire adopted Christianity as the state religion in 323 AD, Pope was given a royal status by most of the European states, and Papal states covered Italian peninsula for eleven centuries. Ultimately, Papal states were abolished and Rome was liberated from the Christian rule in 1870. Vatican city-state was created in 1929 as an independent entity from where Roman Catholic Pope controls the affairs of Christianity all over the globe.

After Prophet Mohammed, the political Islam was controlled by Caliphs (*Khalifahs*) who were both political and spiritual leaders [12]. This system continued till 1924 up to Ottoman Caliphate. When Islam spread throughout Asia, separate Caliphates were set up in Baghdad, Cairo, Istanbul and Cardoba in Spain. The Baghdad caliphate was most powerful and ruled for five centuries. This system was helpful in the spread of Islam despite the fact that Muslims

were divided into Sunni and Shia sects just after the death of Prophet Mohammed.

I wonder why the Miri-Piri [13] concept of Guru Hargobind was not put into practice by the Sikh rulers, in particular, by Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The Sikh Gurus had to defend Sikhism from the onslaught of Muslim rulers of India. Guru Gobind Singh created Khalsa for this purpose. As quoted by Prof. Puran Singh, historian Jaiswal opines that Guru Gobind Singh could create a state in the Malwa region, if he had wished to rule. Then Banda Singh Bahadur tried to establish his rule in Punjab which was demolished in less than a decade. The Sikhs continued to fight for their survival till the end of eighteenth century when Maharaja Ranjit Singh established the Khalsa rule in 1799. For namesake, it was Khalsa Raj but in reality, it was a secular state and no effort was made to make Sikh religion as the state religion. There were hardly any forcible conversions to Sikhi. On the contrary, when the Khalsa rule was abolished by the British occupation in 1949, the Sikh population of Punjab had an exponential drop from nearly half a crore to just eight lakhs as recorded in the census of 1861.

I was astonished to read Taajudin's diary and its account narrated by Sant (Syed) Pirthipal Singh. After Guru Nanak's visit to Arabia, Sikh religion spread to heart of Islam, namely, Mecca, Medina and Baghdad. Sikh followers were in abundance in the Indian peninsula from Kabul to Gauhati and from Kashmir to Ceylon. SS Dhanoa and other Sikh civil officers who served in Bihar narrate that Sikhism was a dominant creed and most of the Udassi controlled Gurdwaras were converted into Hindu temples fearing that SGPC will occupy under the legal provisions, if Guru Granth was kept installed inside the precincts. Since the Sikhs enjoyed the political power for less than half a century, the glory of Sikh religion was also short-lived.

Akal Takhat has been projected as an ecclesiastical substitute of Christian church. It was rendered ineffective during the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. There is no legal sanction for the authority of Jathedar of Akal Takhat. However, the present day rulers find an alibi to settle scores with their political opponents using Akal Takhat as a weapon. Unfortunately, Akal Takhat has lost its glory along with the glory of Sikh religion. In my view, the Sikhs should get their institutions out of the control of the Central Government, a legacy of the British rule in India.

4. Why the Sikhs flock to Deras and Sant Babas?

After the demise of Guru Gobind Singh, the lineage of personal Guruship was abolished and SGGS was declared as the living Guru of the Sikhs for eternity.

This was a revolutionary change in the Sikh religion. However, it created a vacuum in the Sikh society. Who will interpret the divine world (Sabd Guru) of Guru Granth? There were hardly any competent exegetes to interpret the message of Gurus. During the era of living Gurus, the Sikhs were blessed by the *Darshan* and congregation of the Guru. As discussed in Section 1, the Sikhs had to reconcile with the concept of Shabad Guru installed as living Guru in the form of SGGS. Shabad is a subtle reality but Sikhs wanted something palpable. This is how Sant Babas appeared to fill this vacuum and got prominence in Sikh society.

The Saints played a sterling role in the spread of Christianity. The universities of Europe, including Cambridge, Oxford and Paris, became centres of study for Christianity. The Bible was translated from Latin into regional languages of Europe. A similar role was played by *Khalifahs*, Sufi saints and Madrasas (Islamic Seminaries) for the spread of Islam. Nothing of this sort existed for the spread of Sikhism up till the advent of Gurdwara Reform Movement and creation of SGPC during 1920s. Sikh saints of Punjab have played a praiseworthy role in the spread of Sikhi. In my own life, my faith in Sikhi was kept intact in my younger days due to my association with Sant Isher Singh Rarewala and later on with Giani Narinjan Singh of Patiala.

Missionary colleges are training Sikh preachers (*Kathakars*) and there is no shortage of Sikh *keertanias* (hymn singers) of repute in Punjab. There is a need to orient them to preach in English and other foreign languages and update their knowledge of modern Science to interpret Gurbani in a logical and scientific way.

Some Deras have enormous resources and huge followings in Punjab. They have become a challenge to mainstream Sikhi. Without naming them, I may point out that the fault lies with our Sikh institutions which failed to preach the message of Guru Granth in the mode and manner in tune with modern times. There is a crisis situation in the affairs of Sikh society today and I wish the 550th anniversary of Guru Nanak creates an atmosphere of harmony and unity among the global Sikh community.

5. Does the Fault lies in the Exegesis (Interpretation) of Gurbani in SGGS?

Bhai Harbans Lal [14] calls Guru Granth as unique and all-embracing: "One of the greatest glories of the Guru Granth is its all-embracing character. It is a scripture completely free from bias, animus and controversy. Indeed, the uniqueness of the Guru Granth in this respect is all the more astonishing when we think of the obscurantism, factionalism and religious fanaticism of the periods in which it was composed. They were all counterbalanced by inclusion

of the songs and verses of a wide diversity of holy men, saints, savants and bards. Of course, their hymns and couplets rendered in their own language and idiom were so dovetailed as to find a complete correspondence with themes or motifs in the compositions of the Sikh Gurus".

Despite its all-embracing universal character Guru Granth remains confined to the boundary walls of Gurdwaras only. There has been a long tradition of Gurbani exegesis since the times of Sikh Gurus. There is a strong oral tradition that SGGS *katha* was held regularly in major Gurdwaras/*Dharamsaals* during and after the Guru period. The historical roots of Sikh exegesis are traced back to Damdama Sahib (Talwandi Sabo). This job was done by Taksals (seminaries) in Punjab. Damdami Taksal claims its origin from Baba Deep Singh, the Sikh martyr [15].

Gurnek Singh has discussed the various approaches to Sikh exegesis in his paper [16]. Dr. Taran Singh has given different modes of SGGS interpretation in his book [17]. The first Teeka (exegesis) of SGGS is known as Faridkot Wala Teeka [18] done by Giani Badan Singh of Nirmala sect. Most of the earlier exegetes were Nirmalas and Udasis, who were well versed in Sanskrit and Hindu religious literature. Hence, their interpretation of SGGS was based on Vedanta. Professor Puran Singh [19] lamented that due to Brahmanical environment, the Guru's message has been misinterpreted: *"It is to be regretted that Sikh and Hindu scholars are interpreting Guru Nanak in the futile terms and dissecting texts to find the Guru's meaning to be same as of the Vedas and Upanishads. This indicates enslavement to the power of Brahmanical traditions."*

It is interesting to know that Sikh Scholars have started using modern tools for interpretation of Gurbani. Sarjit Singh Sandhu [20] in his essay "Sikh Hermeneutics and Interpretation of Gurbani" has recommended the application of Hermeneutics [21] to resolve some of the fundamental issues of correct interpretation of SGGS, the Sikh scripture. Dr Gopal Singh [22] also laments: *"Sikhism is the most modern, yet the most misunderstood of all the religions.....The confusion of interpretation has occurred because the Sikhs themselves for historical and other reasons, have never seriously attempted a scientific and cogent exposition of the doctrine of their faith, based on the word of the Guru-Granth and related to the lives of the Gurus who uttered it.....It has never occurred to the community to define its basic tenets, and to answer the seeming contradictions in these tenets, in short to attempt an integrated account of the Sikh view of life"*.

Devinder Singh Chahal of Institute of Understanding Sikhism (IUS), Montreal (Canada) advocates for the logical and scientific interpretation of Gurbani in his

book "Nanakian Philosophy" [23]. Nearly, half a dozen scientists are involved in interpretation of Gurbani using modern scientific tools. DP Singh of Centre for Understanding Sikhism in Toronto (Canada) published recently his book: "Science and Sikhism: Conflict or Coherence" [24] which gives a scientific perspective to most of the concepts of Gurbani. Sarabjit Singh, a retired scientist from Department of Atomic Energy, Trombay has also entered the arena of Gurbani interpretation [25]. The author of this article, HS Virk [26] tried to do his bit in this domain during his service at Punjabi University, Patiala and after retirement from Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar. Late GS Sidhu of UK [27] and DS Grewal [28] have also made contributions in this field by their publications. Some medical doctors have also joined the band wagon of scientists in the recent past. I will like to mention Dr Pushpinder Singh [29] and Dr Avtar Singh Dhaliwal (USA) in this category but there may be many more in the offing.

6. Do we see some Light at the end of the Tunnel?

As they say, I see some light at the end of the tunnel. The Sikh diaspora is trying to project Sikhi at the global level by ingenious methods. Khalsa Aid group has made Sikhi popular worldwide by rendering help during disasters and even in the Syrian war zone. Sikh Research Institute (SIKHRI) group [30] lead by Inni Kaur and Harinder Singh are doing wonderful job by organising Khalsa Camps for the Sikh youth of diaspora. Sikh Foundation International [31] set up by NS Kapany, the father of Fibre Optics, is promoting Sikh art and culture in USA. During my visit to Chapman University in Orange County, California in March 2018, I happened to meet Bicky Singh, the chief architect of SikhLens [32] engaged in creating awareness about Sikh heritage. There are many other groups promoting Sikh philosophy of selfless service and organising free kitchens (*langar*) for the poor and destitute. I wonder if SGPC and DSGMC will come forward to provide financial support to Khalsa Aid and other organisations engaged in promoting Sikh values and culture? IJ Singh of New York has critically examined the Sikh issues and suggested some remedies to improve the situation [33].

During 1960s, Harbhajan Singh Puri, popularly known as Bhajan Yogi, created a wave of conversions to Sikhi. His followers, known as American Sikhs, visited Punjab and Delhi almost every year. It was a great motivation for the local Sikh youth to adopt Sikh way of life. I visited the abode of American Sikhs in Espanola in New Mexico (USA) twice and was impressed by their dedication to Sikhism. Bhajan Yogi claimed that his Sikh followers number half a million which may be an exaggeration. However, Sikh Net [34] is engaged in spreading awareness about Sikhism through internet services which is a useful activity.

I may briefly suggest what needs to be done to promote Sikhism at global level:

1. Availability of SGGS to all the Sikhs free of cost and without imposing any rigorous conditions during its transport.
2. Establish equality of Gender in all Sikh affairs including religious services at the Golden Temple (Harimandir Sahib).
3. Abolish practices in Gurdwaras which promote blind faith, for example, ritual bathing in sarovars which is against the teachings of SGGS, distribution of so called holy water (residual water of washing of sacrosanctum), booking of Akhand paths without the physical presence of devotees, etc.
4. Allow serving of *langar* on chairs and tables as was the practice in vogue till Jathedar Ranjit Singh banned it.
5. Allow voting rights to Sehajdharis as it was permitted in the original Sikh Gurdwara Act of 1925.
6. Putting a full stop to activities of SGGS Satkar Committee, which has brought disgrace to Sikhism by its actions.
7. Translating SGGS in major languages of the world.
8. Preparation of Sikh preachers using modern tools of Science and Technology.
9. Abolish Kar Sevas of historical Gurdwaras to preserve the Sikh heritage. The use of marble and gold for decoration of Gurdwaras may be strictly prohibited.
10. Setting up of a Global Sikh Network Organisation (GSNO) for coordinating activities of Gurdwaras all over the globe.
11. Make Sikhism inclusive by encouraging 50 million (5 crores) *Vanjaras and Sikligars* spread all over India to join mainstream Sikhi without imposing condition of baptism. A similar acceptance be accorded to Sindhis and Satnamis as both are Nanakpanthis but ignored by our Sikh institutions.

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