

Reminiscences of My Visit to Espanola (1993)

Real life impressions of the work culture of American Sikhs of Yogi Bhajan, memorable by the Khalsa women of the Ashram

During March 1993, Yogi Harbhajan Singh Khalsa visited Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar with his Jatha (group of followers) of American Sikhs. I was Dean Academics and deputed by the Vice Chancellor, Gurdip Singh Randhawa, to welcome the Jatha. This was my first encounter with Yogi Bhajan, as he was popularly called by his followers and media in Punjab. Before leaving, he invited both of us (VC and Dean) to visit Hacienda de Guru Ram Das, his Ashram in Espanola, New Mexico.

I was on Sabbatical leave for a year after demitting my office of Dean Academics on 31st March. I prepared for my trip of Europe, America and Japan by purchasing a "Round the Globe" air ticket with 11 stops in USA. I left India on 2nd July via Paris, where I visited my alma mater "Marie Curie University" for a week. On 9th July, I reached Washington DC to meet my brother, Daljit Virk and cousin, Gurbax Goraya. Dr. (Bhai) Harbans Lal had arranged my visit to University of North Texas in Denton as a Guest Professor for a full term but there was no honorarium offered for this assignment; hence I decided to leave it after one week. I was living as a guest of Bhai Lal who had just returned from Espanola and he motivated me to visit this Ashram on my way to California.



With Bhai Harbans Lal in Dallas, Texas

I landed at Albuquerque airport on 9th August before noon. Ms.

Manjit Tangri, an accomplished architect known to me as Visiting Professor in GNDU Amritsar, came to pick me up and left me in the custody of Prof. Harjit Singh Ahluwalia, a Physicist in the University of Albuquerque, who hosted my stay for one night. Bibi Inderjit Kaur Khalsa, wife of Yogi Bhajan, rang me up from LA during the night to assure me that all arrangements had been made for my boarding and lodging in Espanola. I was told by Bibi Jee that Yogi Bhajan had been operated for Coronary Bypass Surgery and he was recuperating in some hospital in LA. I realized that Bibi Inderjeet Khalsa is a good administrator as well as a good housewife.

Next morning, Bhai Dya Singh came to pick me up from Albuquerque. He understood Punjabi and acted as my guide on way to Espanola. We had lunch in an Indian restaurant at Santa Fe, the city famous for its exquisite beauty and Mexican architecture, which almost resembles our mud houses of 19th century Punjab countryside. In Santa Fe, there was a change of my escort. Dya Singh left me in the care of Guru Amrit Kaur Khalsa, who was a certified fencing champion of her University. I learnt later that she fought with two burly swordsmen with bare hands when Yogi Bhajan was attacked in Sis Ganj Gurdwara of Delhi. I held Guru Amrit in high esteem as she imbibed the spirit of a real Khalsa of Guru Gobind Singh, the Tenth Master.



Meeting with Akal Security Personnel in Santa Fe

and we jumped out in panic before the engine could catch fire. We were helped in cooling it down by a passing vehicle and reached Espanola safe and sound by grace of Guru Ram Das.

I was introduced to some prominent figures of Ashram. Guru Simrin Kaur Khalsa took me under her charge and we had a round of Ashram facilities. It was dinner time and most of the Ashramites assembled around the dinner table. We all prayed to Waheguru (God) before starting our dinner. I was lodged in the house of Gur Jai Singh, a totally stranger family to me. After some initial inhibition on both sides, I felt at home. The room where I slept was dimly lit but there was a melodious *keertan* (singing of divine hymns) being played on a tape in the house at a low pitch. It was a pleasant experience to be tuned to divine music in the ambrosial hour (*amrit vela*).

On 11th morning, Yogi Bhajan called me from the hospital and enquired about my stay and well being. It was a courtesy call and I did not want to trouble him with my problems. He told me that the number of Khalsa Sikhs has gone up to five hundred thousand in USA and more centres are coming up in Europe, including Russia. We had a nice chat in Punjabi for about 30 minutes. He told me about his triple bypass Heart Surgery but I found him in *Chardikala* (high spirits) as usual. Yogi Bhajan told me that he belonged to Gujranwala district, not far from my hometown, Kamoke, now in Pakistan.

My journey to Espanola proved to be somewhat adventurous. Guru Amrit took care to show me Akal Security office and other business interests of Yogi Bhajan. I was pleased to find young Sikh men and women serving in Akal security in full Khalsa regality. We were passing through rugged countryside of New Mexico on our way, resembling Aravali belt of our Rajasthan. Perhaps due to hot weather, our Jeep driven by Guru Amrit started emitting fumes,

After breakfast, Bibi Gursharan Kaur, a jewellery designer, drove me to Indian village, "Taos Pablo". She was driving her car in top gear and I asked her to be careful on a serpentine section of the road. She allayed my fears by pointing to an image of Guru Ram Das fixed on the bonnet of her car. I recollected that I used to recite a *shabad* of Gurbani to allay my fears in childhood " The hot wind does not even touch one who is under the

Protection of the Supreme Lord God: 'ਤਾਤੀ



A view of the Indian village "Taos Pablo"

ਵਾਉ ਨ ਲਗਈ ਪਾਰਬ੍ਰਹਮ ਸਰਣਾਈ ॥ (taatee

vaa n lagiee paarabraham sarannaaiee ||)". It is my belief that faith in Guru protects the Sikh in all situations and I found its reverberation vividly in American Sikhs of Espanola.

We had to buy an entry ticket to visit Indian village. The Red Indians want to maintain the old customs and keep the modernity out of bounds to keep the pristine glory of their culture intact. Electrification of homes is not allowed. The writ of US laws does not run in their villages. The life style resembles those of tribal Indians in my country. I was told that the Red Indians are remnants of old Indian races that migrated from India via Tibet, Russian Siberia, and Alaska to reach America. We had lunch in an Indian restaurant and returned to Espanola.

On August 12, my entourage included Guru Rattan Kaur, a professor of Chemistry, who acted as my guide during my trip to Los Alamos, the town where Atom Bomb was conceived, designed and fabricated before it was exploded in Nagasaki and Hiroshima in Japan. A team of hundreds of Scientists was working under J.R. Oppenheimer on a secret mission in Los Alamos. I visited the museum and some other spots to revive the old memories of nuclear era of 1940s. Guru Amrit purchased for me some books of my interest on popular science from local shops. On our way back, we had a tour of abandoned cave-like homes of Indians in the lowly mountain range.



*An Encounter with Khalsa Kaurs
of Hacienda de Guru Ram Das in Espanola*



A celestial view of Sikh Sangat inside the Sikh Temple in Espanola.

August 13 was my day of departure from Espanola. I rose up early and visited the local Gurdwara for participation in the morning prayers before proceeding on my onward journey to California. Guru Fateh Kaur Khalsa drove me to Albuquerque airport. My flight was going via Denver, Colorado, where Roman Catholic Pope was scheduled to visit some Church. The Governor of New Mexico was travelling in the same plane and sitting in the front row. I was surprised that in poor India, our Governors, PMs and CMs are a class apart from common Indians and prefer to travel in special planes putting lot of financial burden on the exchequer.

During my five day visit, I enjoyed the hospitality of Gur Jai Singh and the Guru Ram Das Ashram in Espanola. I had the real life impressions of the work culture of American Sikhs of Yogi Bhajan. My visit was made memorable by the Khalsa women of the Ashram who took extra care to show me all tourist spots around Espanola. I promised to maintain my contacts with my hosts and kept a list of Khalsa women for my ready reference.

In Sept. 1996, I was invited to present my research paper in an International Conference held in Albuquerque and visited Espanola again to revive my contacts. This time Yogi Bhajan and Bibi Inderjit Khalsa were my hosts and they extended an open invitation to me to settle down in Espanola. I was reluctant to leave my teaching job in India but later on, Prof. Balkar Singh of Punjabi University accepted the assignment and went to teach Punjabi and Sikh Theology in Espanola. My travelogue covers the details of my visits to USA, Canada and Espanola, and my encounters with American Sikhs; just have a glimpse of its cover page. I feel Espanola is calling me again!

ਅਮਰੀਕਾ ਕੈਨੇਡਾ ਦੀ ਯਾਤਰਾ



ਪ੍ਰੋ. ਹਰਦੇਵ ਸਿੰਘ ਵਿਰਕ

*Cover Page of My Book:
Travelogue of USA and Canada (in Punjabi)*



In the company of Guru Amrit Kaur Khalsa family