

Singh Sabha Movement – A Revival

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INTRODUCTORY: In recent years some writings have appeared, which seek to suggest that the Singh Sabha Movement was a reformist movement, that made innovations in the Sikh thought and practices. Academically speaking, the method to determine whether a religious movement (Singh Sabha in this case) is reformist or revivalist is to study four aspects of it. The first aspect is the ideology of the original movement (Sikhism), and especially whether the movement under study created changes in that ideology or only invoked the original ideology of the system to bring about changes in the then existing practices. Second is the level of achievement in practices which the original movement (Sikh religion in this case), had made during its hey day and whether the leaders of the movement under study had invoked those achievements and the tradition as a model to follow. Thirdly, what was the fall, if any, in the state of things in the life of the community that was sought to be changed and how did it measure with the earlier high mark of the tradition, i.e. what was the then state of affairs and practices that were sought to be changed. Fourthly, how do the changes brought about by the leaders of the new movement (Singh Sabha in this case) compare with the earlier tradition and whether or not those were in consonance with it or entirely variant from it.

We are dividing our present paper into four parts so as to make a proper assessment of the Singh Sabha Movement. Side by side we shall be considering some variant views in the light of our discussion of the subject. We shall first state the fundamentals of the Sikh ideology especially those where Sikhism radically departed from the earlier Indian traditions.

SIKH IDEOLOGY: Sikhism arose in the 16th century as an entirely new ideology, opposed in its fundamentals to those of the contemporary religions. It challenged the fanaticism and religious hypocrisy of the Brahmins and the political oppression of the contemporary rulers. Guru Nanak, the first Sikh Guru, stressed the oneness of God, Immanent, Creator, 'who is the Timeless, Eternal Reality, Formless, Unborn, Unincarnated and self-existent without Fear and Rancor and who is realised by the Enlightener's Grace.' These attributes are incorporated in the 'Mool-Mantra' of Guru Nanak's Japji, which is the 'fundamental primal text expounding the beliefs of Sikhism'. He explicitly denounced all those religious traditions which denied the unity of God. He declared

that “the belief in gods and goddesses was the source of Maya (The great Illusion)”¹ which led people astray. The Gurus accept ‘Ek Onkar’ as a declaration of the unity of God. In Asa Rag, the Guru says: “Six are the (Hindu) Shashtras and six their authors who have laid down six different philosophical concepts. But the Guru of these gurus is God Himself.”²

Guru Nanak led a crusade against the caste system, idolatory, ritualism, asceticism and Brahmin’s claim to superiority. He put an end to the role of middle-men (Brahmins) in man’s relation with God. He advocated that man can be one with Him through his own good deeds. He emphasised moral virtues and considered rituals to be a hindrance in the salvation of man. He denounced idol worship of gods in most explicit terms: “The ignorant fools take stones and worship them, O Hindus, how shall the stone which itself sinketh carry you across?”³ He rejected asceticism and emphasised truthful living based on good deeds and righteousness. He impressed upon his followers that salva-tion could be attain, through the fulfilment of one’s duties towards family and society. For Guru Nanak social responsibility forms an integral part of the spiritual attributes of the ideal man. It is this element that constitutes one of the essential tenets of the Sikh faith. It is this element that gives Sikhism its distinctive and historic charcter, role and personality.

Guru Nanak laid emphasis on the brotherhood of man and strongly condemned social inequality. He declared: “The sense of high and low, and of caste and colour, such are the illusions created in man.”⁴ He raised his voice against economic exploitation and political despotism of his times. According to Guru Nanak, the world is not only real but it is a meaningful place where God’s Creative and Attributive Will works. That is ‘God being riches to the poor, milk to the child, and eyes to the blind’,⁵ the seeker has to follow the ethical path of values and virtues laid down by God and the Guru. It is clear that in Guru Nanak’s mission of love, two objectives become logically uppermost; and these he emphasized unambiguously in his Bani, namely that he was to establish equality and fraternity among men, and that it was the duty and responsibility of the religious man and the religious society he was creating to resist oppression and safeguard human rights and values. The life affirming faith founded by Guru Nanak attracted a large number of followers who found in it a welcome escape from the debasing caste discrimination, Brahmanical domination and empty

ritualism. It is a revolutionary system in which the dichotomy between the spiritual life and the empirical life of man was emphatically broken for the first time in the East. It was Guru Nanak who laid and led the path of universal love and the emancipation of man without distinction of caste and creed. The call for this mission was given by him in these terms:

“If thou art zealous of playing the game of Love,
Then come upon my path with head on thy palm
Yea, once thou settest thy foot on this way,
Then find not a way out, and be prepared to lay down thy head.”⁶

It is in this context that the importance of Guru Nanak’s criticism of the doctrine of Ahimsa should be understood. “Men discriminate not and quarrel over meat eating, they do not know what is flesh and what is non-flesh, or what is sin and what is not sin.”⁷ “Life”, he said, “is in every grain of corn or seed.”⁸

LEVEL OF ACHIEVEMENT: It is in this background that we have to charter the course of Sikh history from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh. After Guru Nanak, the period of the next three Gurus relates mainly to the creation, expansion, and organisation of a cohesive society or Panth Guru Nanak had started. With each succeeding Guru, Sikhism became increasingly crystallised and institutionalised into a distinct faith and society. The next major landmark was the time of the fifth Guru, who not only compiled the scripture of the new society, thereby weaning it away from all earlier beliefs, sought confrontation with the empire, and made the supreme sacrifice of his life, but also created in his life-time what Dr. H.R. Gupta calls “a state within state”. No wonder Emperor Jahangir took note of this mounting challenge and attacked the Sikh society.⁹ From this time onward, the Sikhs had to make tremendous sacrifices and undergo sufferings to preserve their faith.

Further, it is important to understand that the doctrine of Miri and ‘Piri’ proclaimed by the sixth Guru, Hargobind, is the natural and inevitable corollary of the path of love and true service of man, of the rejection of asceticism and monasticism, the acceptance of the householder’s life and responsibility, and of securing justice, equality and freedom for all, preached by Guru Nanak. The Guru justified the

use of force to uphold justice and righteousness and to defend the oppressed. The ninth Sikh Guru, Tegh Bahadur, carried on the Sikh tradition of martyrdom for the cause of justice and emancipation of man.

The tenth Sikh Guru, Gobind Singh, laid down baptismal (Amrit) ceremony for the Sikhs, initiated them into the Khalsa and prescribed the wearing of five K's. Those who went through baptism, became members of the Khalsa brotherhood. The organisation was committed to pursuing the right path and resisting and undoing injustice, tyranny and aggression, since in the Sikh society it was a religious duty and social responsibility to promote and maintain righteousness. The Guru also furnished the order of the Khalsa with the institutions of 'Panj Piyaras' (Five beloved ones or leaders) and Daswandh (voluntary contribution of one tenth of one's income to the exchequer of the Panth), thereby bestowing upon the organisation the character of a self-contained community. It is significant to note that of the five beloved ones (Piyaras) baptised by the tenth Guru, four belonged to what the Indian society then regarded as the Shudra caste. The Guru's object was to obliterate all distinctions of caste and creed and weld his followers into a cohesive society. The Sikhs and the five beloved ones were amazed when the Guru requested them to initiate him into the Khalsa brotherhood in exactly the same manner as he had initiated them. By this symbolic act the Guru invested the Khalsa with leadership of the Panth and the authority of his personality. Henceforward the Guru was the Khalsa and the Khalsa was the Guru. Sikhism, thus, emerged as the most democratic religion in the world.

The Gurus categorically rejected all those beliefs, rituals or ceremonies that implied the recognition of anything but one true Lord. In order to emphasize the complete independence and separateness of Sikh ideology, Guru Gobind Singh introduced the 'Nash' doctrine, involving 'Kritnash', 'Kulnash', 'Dharamnash', 'Bharamnash' and 'Karamnash' i.e. giving up of all those beliefs prejudices and traditions that stood in the way of the sole worship of the Supreme Being.¹⁰ In this way they made a complete break of the Sikh society with the past religious systems, traditions and customs. The Guru accomplished this many-sided transformation in bold defiance of the age old beliefs, dogmas and conservatism of the traditional Indian religions. The Khalsa created by Guru Gobind Singh was unique both in its internal features and external form and was to play a vital role in the Indian History. In the words of J.D. Cunningham, "A living spirit possesses the whole Sikh people

and the impress of Gobind has not only elevated and altered the constitution of their minds but has operated materially and given amplitude to their physical frames.¹¹

Let us here record the relevant and clean injunctions of Guru Gobind Singh, "He who keeps alight the torch of Truth and with love has faith only in One Supreme Being, and does not believe, even by mistake, in fasting, monastic life, or worship of graves or ancestors, is the true Khalsa."¹² Further, a few extracts from the report of a Muslim chronicler, Ahmad Shah Batala, as given in his book 'Twarikh-i-Hind', of the speech by Guru Gobind Singh given at the time of the Amrit (Baptism) ceremony are as follows: "I wish you all to embrace one creed and follow one path, obliterating all differences of religion. Let the four Hindu castes, who have different rules laid down for them in the Shastras, abandon them altogether and mix freely with one another. Let no one deem himself superior to another. Do not follow the old scriptures. Let none pay heed to the Ganges and other places of pilgrimage which are considered holy in the Hindu religion or adore Hindu deities, like Rama, Krishna, Brahma and Durga, but all should have faith only in Guru Nanak and his successors. Let men of four castes receive my baptism, eat out of the same vessel and feel no disgust or contempt or one another."¹³

The spirit of Guru Gobind Singh was carried on by Banda Singh Bahadur and his men, who fought against the Mughals under the most inhospitable circumstances. But they stuck to their faith and principles till the end of their lives. The Sikh devotion to their religion and their spirit is evident from the fact that out of 740 Sikh prisoners of war, who were executed in Delhi along with Banda, not one deserted the faith, even while given the choice to do so.¹⁴

SIKHISM IN 19TH CENTURY: Here it is necessary to give a demographic picture of the Sikh community from the 18th to the 19th century. The struggle and the persecution of the Sikhs was severest during the mid 18th century. A price was put on every Sikh head and three times it was reported to the authorities that the Sikhs had been exterminated root and branch.¹⁵ During this period of struggle, it is reported that at one time barely two thousand guerillas were left.¹⁶ This was spirit and character of the Sikhs, when they gained power in after half of the 18th century. The establishment of the Khalsa commonwealth, naturally, gave, opportunity both to Muslim and Hindu populations to seek conversion for reasons which were obviously

mun-dane. The Sikhs never started any proselytising campaign because it is not sanctified in their religion. Obviously, these new entrants were slow in shedding some of their old personal, family or customary prejudices and beliefs, which included faith in local gods and goddesses, saints, fakirs and Pirs. In the time of Ranjit Singh the number of Sikhs, thus, rose to 10-11 lacs.¹⁷ The first census in 1881 reports that the number of Sikhs was 17 lacs.¹⁸ It is evident that this large-scale increase in the number of Sikhs is certainly not due to the natural increase in the members of the faith, who had struggled to power in the 18th century. Regarding the Sikhs in the second half of the 19th century, Ibbetson reports that with the exception of the Akalis, who still adhered to the ordinances of the Khalsa, many of the original observances of the Sikhs had fallen in disuse but for the five external signs and abstinence from tobacco.¹⁹ Similarly, the Sehjdhari group of Nirankaris, who were sixty thousand at the time of the census of 1891 never believed in any god or goddess and adhered strictly to faith in Guru Granth Sahib as the sole scripture and guide.²⁰

A demoralising effect of the annexation of the Punjab was that some of the Sikh Gyanis, who were very learned in their special departments, did not find jobs for their talents. They, therefore, went over to the Hindus and taught their religious books. Apart from decline in the dissemination of Sikh thought, they, in order to please their employers, started giving Hindu tint to the Sikh doctrines and beliefs, casusing thereby great harm to Sikhism. Secondly, it is also true that many of the Hindu entrants of the Sikh faith who had naturally curbed or shed Hindu rituals and customs during the Sikh rule, reverted to their old prejudices and practices.

Before the advent of the Singh Sabha Movement in 1873, the Sikh society was, thus, passing through a lean phase. With their uncer-tain political future, Sikhs had become a prey to Brahmanical Hin-duism and the socio-religious fabric of the community was being damaged. Owing to the weakness of some of the Neo-Sikhs, the number of Sikhs embracing the other faiths was increasing steadily.²¹ A con-temporary observer noted, "Just as we do not see any Buddhist in the country except in images, in the same fashion, the Sikhs, who are now here and there, visible in their turbans and their other religious forms like wrist-bangles and swords, will be seen only in pictures and museums. Their own sons and grandsons clad in coats and trousers and supporting mushroom-like caps will go to see them in museums and

say in their Pidgin Punjabi, 'Look, that is the picture of a Sikh - the tribe that inhabited this country once upon a time.'²²

The proselytising activities of the Christian missionaries also alarmed the Sikhs. The historic conversion of Maharaja Dalip Singh (son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh) and Raja Harnam Singh of Kapurthala to Christianity came as a rude shock to the Sikhs.²³ The loss of political power (Punjab was annexed by the British in 1849) also left a demoralising effect on them. It was at this juncture that the Singh Sabha assumed the leadership of the Sikhs.²⁴

The Singh Sabha played a significant role in the socio-religious regeneration of the Sikh community. It made the Sikhs aware of their great spiritual and cultural heritage, and of their being the 'Khalsa is the pure. By emphasis on the Sikh practices, social laws, customs and Punjabi language, it welded the Sikhs, once again, into an independent community, bound together by faith in the teachings of their Gurus. The key-note of the Singh Sabha was 'Back to Guru Granth Sahib'. The object was to restore the purity of Sikhism by abolishing later accretions and superstitious practices, which did not stand the test of old Sikh Maryada or the teachings of the Gurus.

As stated earlier, the Sikh society consisted of the two distinct segments; those from the old Sikh stock who had struggled successfully through the persecutions and the revolutionary fire of the 18th century; and second, those large number of Hindu converts to Sikhism who had for the sake of convenience swelled the Sikh ranks during the Sikh rule. Ibbetson made it clear that the Akali section fully adhered to the injunctions of the Guru;²⁵ the same was the position of the old Sehjdharis or Narankaris.²⁶ Obviously, all the Hindu converts could not shed some of their old customs and prejudices in a generation or two. Almost three fourth of the Sikhs belonged to this stock. The position, so glibly talked about that in old days one member of a family was a Hindu and another a Sikh, related exactly to this converted section of the Sikhs, and not to the old Sikh families of the 18th century, when being a Sikh involved risk to life. It is this large section that carried a back-log of Hindu prejudices which the Singh Sabha was out to eliminate. There was also another problem. Some of the descendents of the Gurus, because of the wealth bestowed on them and the respect they commanded during the Sikh rule, started the cult of personal worship and collection of offerings. This practice, though in con-sonance with the old Hindu culture, was violative of Sikh doctrines, where the Gurus

“had prohibited touching the feet of so-called pious men and had stated that the religious path lay in working hard and sharing one’s income with others”²⁷ But, these wealthy Sikhs had got a vested interest in these cults, because personal worship brought them offerings from both their Sikh and non-Sikh followers.²⁸ Out of the sheer self-interest of maintaining their income and offerings from their Hindu followers, they started saying that the Gurus had preached the same religious system as in the Vedas, even though the Gurus had called “the Vedic doctrines to be misleading concerning caste, heaven, hell, etc.”²⁹ The Singh Sabha had, thus, not only to preach against Hindu practices, but had also to fight these Sikh vested interests who kept and patronised men like A.S. Vahiria and Gulab Singh, who wrote things which were palpably against the Guru Granth and its message.

Recently some scholars in the West have presented a distorted version of the nineteenth century Sikhism. H.S. Oberoi, (presently in the chair of Sikh and Punjabi Studies at the University of British Columbia, Canada) for example, is a clear instance of having mis-represented the Sikh Tradition³⁰ He has tried to romanticise the myths and glamourise the long-forgotten superstitions. His entire exercise seems to be devoted to projecting the late 19th century revival of Sikhism as neo-Sikhism. His evaluation of Sikhism is neither comprehensive, nor objective. In fact, it is obvious that his treatment of the subject betrays a major lapse in the methodology of study. Because, in his entire paper, he has completely ignored the two essential aspects of the issue discussed by us earlier. He has completely misrepresented the matter by harping only on some features of the late 19th century Sikhism and then wrongly projecting them to be the integral part of earlier or original Sikhism.

H.S. Oberoi in his paper entitled, ‘Re-reading Sikh Experience in the Nineteenth Century’, read recently at a seminar at Berkeley (U.S.A.), observes, “The word Sanatan derives from Sanskrit and has connotation of something that is ancient, almost as if out of secular time. The Sanatanist Sikhs, therefore, believed that these customs, rites and rituals had origins in the beginnings of time, when the universe came into existence and were beyond the pale of diachronic time’ ... ‘The fact that the Sikhs took part in the myths, worship and cults of miracle saints, goddesses and village gods does not imply that Sikhism was in a state of decline or irrational. These practices were an integral part of a coherent way of life and should not be judged from standards which were invented at the turn of the century.”

Let us now examine the position stated by Oberoi in his paper. He mentions four practices which he claims to be ancient and native to Sikhs of the times. These are the worship of Sakhi Sarvar, Guga Pir, Seetla Devi and village ancestors. A close examination of Oberoi's paper reveals that he has merely tried to conceal the reality by resort to vague generalisations and by giving unnecessary details of the concerned practices without specifying the extent of their prevalence in the Sikh Society.

We first take up the case of the worship of Sakhi Sarvar which is the only practice of which he has indicated some data in support of his argument by saying that less than 3% Sikhs had faith in Sakhi Sarvar. Otherwise, about twenty pages of his paper are filled with irrelevant verbiage giving just a journalistic description of the four practices. The entire structure of Oberoi's argument is based on the flimsy premises that these practices were native and ancient and no one ever prohibited them. He writes, "It was Sikh reformers in the 19th century who for the first time labelled many of the current beliefs and practices among the Sikhs as acts of deviance and expressions of a superstitious mind." This observation of Oberoi is a clear mis-statement. The Guru Granth is full of hymns rejecting the spiritual character of Devis, Jogis, Pirs, etc. "Afflicted are Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, afflicted is the entire world."³¹ "The Vedas do not know His greatness. Neither Brahma, nor Shiva have any clue of Him. The Devis and Devtas have sought to know Him but failed."³²

In the Sikh tradition there are four stories concerning the futility of Sakhi Sarvar worship. The first story is of a Sakhi Sarvaria, Bhai Manj, coming to Guru Arjan for religious guidance. The Guru's reply is very revealing of the Sikh thesis. He said, "You may go on with the easy path of Sakhi Sarvar worship, because Sikhism is a very difficult path and unless you are willing to be dispossessed of your wealth and to sacrifice your very life, it is no use coming to me." But, Bhai Manj did become a Sikh.³³ The second story also concern, Guru Arjan when he deprecated the Sakhi Sarvar practice of preparing a big cake and presenting it before the priest who read Durud (a verse from Quran) and then kept the cake, giving only a marginal part to the devotees. The Guru says, "Without the true Guru they must sit and Watch without eating until the Durud is read."³⁴ The Guru, thus, denounced the practice of seeking benediction of the priest, for, only a true Guru could lead one to the right path. The third story is of a Sikh's daughter having been married to the son of a Sakhi Sarvaria.

The bride seeks the blessings of Guru Hargobind and her husband also becomes a Sikh. A tussle develops between the groom and his father when the former demolishes the family shrine of Sakhi Sarvar. But the groom continues to be a Sikh. Later, his handsome son founds a village called now Bhai Rupa in Nabha State.³⁵ A similar story concerning the futility of Sakhi Sarvar worship relates to the time of Guru Tegh Bahadur, when he visited Patiala area.³⁶ In fact, Sikh writings and Rehtnamas or categorically prohibit the worship of Devi, Devtas, saints etc³⁷ Even Bhangu in his "Panth Parkash" (mid 19th century) specifically condemns the worship of Sakhi Sarvar. He says that the Sikhs did not believe in ghosts, spirits and graves nor did they have any faith in the Guga and the Sakhi Sarvar. He rather refers to the "frequent clashes between the Sikhs and the Sarvarias in the villages and towns of Punjab."³⁸ Therefore, in the face of a clear rejection of the Sakhi Sarvar practice by the Guru, the Sikh religious literature, and the tradition, the existence of a marginal residue of the Sakhi Sarvarias among the new Hindu entrants of Sikhism, only shows how insignificant is its value in drawing a correct picture of the Sikh society in that period. In fact, it is creditable that under the Sikh influence all except about 3% of the new entrants had given up their old Hindu practices.

In this context, Rose clearly endorses Bhangu's view, "com-paratively few Sikhs are followers of Sarvar and there is in fact a sort of opposition in the central districts between Sikhs 'and Sultanis. You hear men' say that one party in a village worships the Guru, the other worships Sarvar; that is that one party are Sikhs, the other ordinary Hindus who follow Sarvar. It has been suggested that the worship of Sarvar probably spread eastward among the Jats in the 15th and 16th centuries, and was the prevalent cult at the time of the great develop-ment of Sikhism in the days of Guru Gobind Singh; and that most of the conversions to the Khalsa faith were from the worshippers of Sultan. This appears a very probable account of the origin of such opposition as does exist between these two forms of faith. As between the Hindus generally and the Sultani there is no sort of opposition; there are instances in the popular legends of men opposing the cult of Sarvar, but in the present day the Sultanis are looked on as ordinary Hindus."³⁹ Oberoi while he gives irrelevant details of the miraculous powers attributed to Sakhi Sarvar and lavishly quotes Rose as evidence, seems to have deliberately concealed the above mentioned conclusion drawn by Rose and, instead, made the distortion that Singh Sabha leaders were the first to object to such practices. Such clear mis-

state-ments are generally made by partisan propagandists but never, we believe, by any academician. This indicates either a lack of in depth study or a conscious attempt to suppress facts with a view to mis-representing Sikhism.

There is another mis-statement when Oberoi says, “His-torians cannot simply reproduce these value judgements and employ categories invented by a section of the Sikh elite.” We have seen that prohibition of these practices was neither the invention of the Singh Sabha, nor was it the first to object to them. Nor is it true that leaders of the Singh Sabha formed a section of the Sikh elite. In fact, the pioneers of the Singh Sabha, namely, Bhais Ditt Singh and Gurmukh Singh were persons of extremely humble beginnings. Ditt Singh belonged to a poor Ramdasia family of a small village (Nandpur Kalaur) of district Ropar .⁴⁰ Gurmukh Singh’s father was just a cook in Kapurthala.⁴¹ As against that, the persons with vested interests in personal worship were Baba Sir Khem Singh Bedi, Baba Gurbakhsh Singh Bedi and Raja of Paridkot. Men like Vahiria were the proteges of wealthy persons, whom they had kept to propagate their point of view, even though clearly opposed to the Sikh doctrines in the Guru Granth Sahib. And who constituted the elite and who represented the voice of the people and the Sikh culture is evident from the fact that in the tussle between them, all the local and base Singh Sabhas in the country shifted their loyalty to the Ditt group, except three which belonged to the towns or places of these feudal kings.⁴² It is, therefore, just naive to suggest that these persons of small beginnings could achieve the tremendous success, they did achieve, by just innovations or Inventions, ‘unless what they promoted or preached had the clear sanction of the scripture and the Sikh tradition.

Regarding Guga, Sitla and ancestor worship., Oberoi has given no data at all in support of his argument, meaning thereby that the extent of these practices was even less significant than the practice of Sakhi Sarvar worship. Oberoi instead of being precise has written page after page of a journalistic account of the practices without suggesting the extent of these practices, their sanction by the Sikh tradition, or their existence during any earlier period of Sikh history. Every student of Hindu religion knows that the system, especially under Purva Mimansa, believes that spiritual and other benefits can be obtained by the practice of Yajnas, sacrifices, mantras, etc. On the other hand, even the most elementary student of the Granth Sahib is aware that all such

practices and worship of Devi, Devatas and the like are regarded as futile in Sikhism. Let us here just indicate two instances. Every scholar of Sikhism and Sikh history knows that the basic reason why the Hindu Hill Rajas refused to cooperate with the tenth Guru was his rejection of Devi worship and their rituals and caste observances.⁴³ The second instance is of a complaint made to Guru Hargobind about a Sikh having broken an idol of a Devi.⁴⁴ The Sikh explained as to what was the worth of a Devi idol if it could not protect itself. It indicates that no one respected the Devi or Devatas in the Sikh Society.

Without indicating any statistical evidence, Oberoi makes another assertion saying that “the popularity of Sakhi Sarvar among the Sikhs was matched by another Pir called Guga Pir.” It is necessary to understand that in the old Punjab, Sikhs were less than 14% and the Hindus were more than double the number of Sikhs; and even among the Sikhs about three fourth were 19th century Hindu converts of convenience. It is, therefore, highly misleading to talk in vague terms about some Hindu practices current among Punjab Hindus and then to relate them to the Sikhs on the mere ground that the Singh Sabha had also preached against them, as being contrary to the Sikh tradition.

Regarding Sitla worship too, Oberoi is equally irrelevant and vague. The Sikh position about Devi worship both in precept and practice, has already been indicated. In the article of the ‘Khalsa Akhbar’ of March 6, 1896, it is the entire Punjab population that has been addressed to give up Sitla worship, without even mentioning the word Sikh therein. And the advice to the people is to have themselves inoculated instead of suffering the disease.

About ancestor worship among Sikhs, Oberoi’s observations are even more far-fetched. He cites Dube’s, ‘Indian Village’ and Brubaker’s ‘A Study of South Indian Village Goddesses and their Religious Meaning’. The only reference to the Sikhs is a manual by an army officer mentioning that Satnamis, Hindus and Sikhs had a practice of ancestor worship.

From Oberoi’s own paper, it is evident that Sitla, Guga and ancestor worship among the Sikhs were even less significant than the worship of Sakhi Sarvar prevalent among less than 3% Sikhs. It is suggested by Oberoi that though the practice of Sakhi Sarvar worship was insignificant in 1911 it must have been wide-spread and native to the Sikh society before the Singh Sabha propaganda. The argument is quite meaningless. If in the earlier four hundred years of preaching by the ten Gurus themselves and others, the Sikh tradition could not

eliminate these Hindu practices entirely, how could the Singh Sabha workers, with humble beginnings, work this miracle in about one generation? It is quite significant that in order to prove his point that in the 19th century there was not much of an ideological difference between the Hindu and the Sikhs, Oberoi has quoted neither the *Gum Granth* nor any *Rehnamas*, nor any earlier Sikh Literature or traditions, but only A.S. Vahiria and Gulab Singh, both spokesmen of the Bedi group with vested interests in maintaining the cult of personal worship. So far as the loyalist Gulab Singh is concerned, his propagandist statement that the four Vedas are also the religious books of the Sikh”is quite understandable. But for Oberoi to quote him approvingly shows either poor scholarship and a gross ignorance of the contents of *Gum Granth Sahib*, the Nash doctrine of Gum Gobind Singh, the *Rehnamas* and the Sikh religious literature and practices, or a deliberate attempt at distortion by his avoiding all references to the *Guru Granth* and Sikh literature. Even in the article of the *Khalsa Akhbar*, dated March 29, 1901, it had clearly been argued by the Sikh paper, by quoting the *Guru Granth*, that the Gurus had specifically repudiated the doctrine of the Vedas. But by the use of pointless phraseology, Oberoi suggests that in the 19th century, Sikhs like the Hindus were believers in Devis, Devatas, Guga, Sakhi Sarvar and the like. His conclusion is that the key to understanding Sikhism is that it is a peasant faith as of a peasantry elsewhere in the world. Even a most elementary knowledge of the *Guru Granth* and the teachings of the Gurus, shows that the Gurus severely condemned these Hindu practices. The view of Vahiria or Khem Singh Bedi were, thus absurdly in contradiction to the Sikh religion. And, obviously, it was such clear misrepresentations of the Sikh Scripture, the leaders of the Singh Sabha were out to oppose. But, interestingly, it is these very distorters, and promoters of the malpractices whom Oberoi quotes as authorities so as to prove what, he asserts, was the norm of Sikhism. Oberoi has also failed to record the categorical contemporary evidence that the Akalis, the core of the Panth, were fully adhering to the norm prescribed by the Gurus. If his conclusion were correct and Sikhs like the Hindu peasantry were more superstitious worshippers of Devi, Devatas and Guga and Sakhi Sarvar Pirs, how does Oberoi explain that (i) the Sikhs, an insignificant section of the population, were able to supplant the Mughal Empire in the entire north-west and stem once for all the wave after wave of invaders that had plagued India for a thousand years, (ii) a leaderless community gave to the British the toughest

fight, almost to the point of their defeat and annihilation, on the Indian soil, (iii) the Sikhs were predominantly the people who organised and manned the first rebellion (Ghaddar rebellion) against the British, (iv) of the 121 persons executed and 2646 sentenced to life imprisonment during the entire freedom struggle during the 20th century, 93 and 2047 respectively were Sikhs⁴⁵ and (v) during the period of Emergency from June, 1975 - March, 1977, involving the suspension of the Indian Constitution and the abrogation of all human rights and individual liberties, it was only the Sikhs who conducted a regular civil disobedience movement (Save Democracy Morcha) suffering imprisonment of over forty thousand persons,⁴⁶ while in the rest of India, not even half that number courted arrest or imprisonment,⁴⁷

CHANGES MADE BY SINGH SABHA: Now, considering the fourth aspect of the Singh Sabha Movement, namely, the revival it brought about in the Sikh society, we find that every step they took and change they made had the full sanction of the Sikh scripture and tradition. One has only to read *Ham Hindu Nahin Hain* by Bhai Kahn Singh and *Nakli Sikh Prabodh* by Ditt Singh to find that almost every page quotes the Bani of the Gurus, in support of their suggestions.⁴⁸ The only new step they took was the establishment of educational institutions on modern lines and the publication and propagation of religious literature, not available earlier, because the services of the Printing Press had then become an easily available facility.

Oberoi denies that Sikh resurgence in the 19th century derived its inspiration from the teachings of the Gurus and the Sikh scripture. The greatest contribution of Sikh Sabha lies in projecting Sikh religion in its traditional perspective. Sikhism is a revealed religion and has a recorded scripture authenticated by the Guru himself. Oberoi looks upon Sikhism as a rural religion, which "by definition is a part of the oral culture of people and it is always difficult to reconstruct and recover all the elements which go into its making," Such statements completely misrepresent the reality in so far as there is a clear blackout, of the teachings of the Gurus, of Sikh tradition and practices, and of Sikh history in the earlier three centuries. In his entire paper, Oberoi has not quoted even one line from the Guru Granth Sahib, indicating he principles of the Sikh faith; nor has he mentioned any of its fundamentals on which the Gurus insisted. To talk of the characteristics of the Sikh faith and beliefs without reference to the Gurus, Guru Granth Sahib, and the Sikh tradition and history is something completely incomprehensible, if not deliberately biased. One wonders, how Oberoi

found a free and easy access to the so-called 'Oral tradition' to the exclusion of the actual Sikh history.

The burden of Oberoi's thesis is to highlight the points of deviation and departure from the Sikh tradition. In analysing the nature of Sikhism he forgets the historical perspective and the Sikh ideology. Marked by descriptive profusion and meaningless rhetoric, his thesis betrays an obvious ignorance of the basic tenets of the Sikh faith. By characterising the aberrations in the 19th century Sikh Society as the original or ancient Sikhism, he has identified Sikh norms with the Hindu practices of the neo-converts. He has made a particular black-out' of the Sikh history and the Sikh literature and injunctions that specifically prohibited pre-Sikh Hindu beliefs and practice. The author has taken it upon himself to select or reject any opinion; thus completely ignoring the traditional model and negating the original sources and opinions of many earlier or contemporary scholars. His contention that 'Sanatan Sikhism,' (a term coined by him to name pre-Singh Sabha Sikhism) constituted real Sikh tradition is self-contradictory and deceptive. This term has had no place or relevance in the entire history of Sikhism or any earlier writings pertaining to the Sikhs. A Sikh movement, Singh Sabha or any other, should be judged in terms of what the Gurus had taught and the Sikhs had practised in the Guru or the revolutionary period. Any attempt virtually to legitimize the Hindu practices or the aberrations against which the Sikh Gurus, the Rahtnamas and Sikh writings had launched a crusade, is nothing but misleading. Apart from the clear injunctions of Guru Gobind Singh quoted earlier, a near-contemporary source also records that 'Guru Gobind Singh rejected the paths of both the Hindus and the Muslims and created his own Panth.'⁴⁹ The Rehtnamas emphasized that 'The Sikhs should maintain their separate identity from the caste society.'⁵⁰ Rattan Singh Bhangu in his *Prachin Panth Prakash*, talks of "separate Identity of the Panth, its egalitarian character, and the plebian political objectives and character of the Khalsa."⁵¹ The testimony of earlier injunctions, writings and contemporary observers, cannot be ignored. Therefore, to designate the lean period of Sikh ism, when Hindu practices had crept into it, as Sanatan Sikhism is a misnomer. To assess and measure the significance of an aberration in the period of decline of the Sikh movement, without reference to the norms, the long standing tradition or the injunctions in the scripture or Sikh writings, suggests a lack of sense of proportion or an attempt at distortion.

The Singh Sabha leaders aimed at “restoring the pristine purity of Sikhism,”⁵² without propounding any philosophy of their Own or introducing a new practice un sanctioned by the ideology or the tradition. Any Sikh, who adhered to the injunctions of the ten Gurus and was ready to serve the community could be admitted to the fold of the Singh Sabha.⁵³ There was no ceremony to be gone through for this purpose nor was there any distinctive dress, badge or mark to be worn. The movement was not a new cult. It retained its democratic character, despite the efforts of some persons to style themselves as Gurus and wield control over its affairs. Baba Khem Singh Bedi introduced a new cult and tried to gain supremacy over the activities of the Sabha. Being a direct descendent of Guru Nanak, he virtually aspired to become a Guru.⁵⁴ He wanted a well-furnished seat (gadella) for himself, even in the presence of the Granth Sahib.⁵⁵ Baba Khem Singh Bedi wished his authority to be regarded as paramount and absolute in religious matters and himself to be looked upon as the Guru in succession to Guru Nanak.⁵⁶ Bhai Avtar Singh Vahiria, was a chosen associate of Baba Khem Singh Bedi. In his books, ‘Khalsa Dharam Shashtar,’ ‘Sikh Dharam Tat Darshan’ and ‘Gurdarshan Shastar,’ he writes that the Sikh Gurus did not prohibit the worship of gods and goddesses and it was wrong to remove caste distinctions.

Actually, it was such obvious mis-statements that Prof. Gur-mukh Singh, Giani Ditt Singh, Bhai Mayya Singh and Bhai Jawahar Singh of the Lahore Singh Sabha were out to controvert. They aimed at checking “outside influences and undesirable elements which had crept in Sikhism and thus to restore it to its former purity.”⁵⁷ Whereas the appeal of the Khem Singh Bedi and Vahiria group, who had their own vested interests, was mostly confined to their personal circles, that of the Lahore Sabha went further and touched the hearts of the general mass of the community.⁵⁸ Missionaries (*Parcharaks*) were sent even in the interior of the province to spread the message of Sikhism among hundreds and thousands of the village folks, who constituted the backbone of the Sikh community and without whose cooperation no movement could acquire a mass base. They made them aware of the fundamentals of the Sikh religion, thereby removing all doubts, regarding the identity and practices of the Khalsa. In the words of Giani Ditt Singh, “Having sprung from the Hindus, the Sikhs are yet a separate community, clearly distinguished from them in outward form, religious and social outlook, conception of God and Gurus, mode of worship, language of the scriptures and their ideas regarding caste,

pilgrimage and priesthood.”⁵⁹ In fact, the pamphlets and writings of the Singh Sabhaites profusely quote the scripture and religious writings in support of their views, exhorting Sikhs to shed the wrong practices that had crept in the Sikh fold following the political confusion after the defeat of the Khalsa. Bhai Kahan Singh’s book, *Ham Hindu Nahin*, (We Are Not Hindus) was a conscious reaction against the propaganda by some of the Hindus and Sikhs like the Khem Singh Vahiria group. Giani Gian Singh’s ‘Panth Parkash,’ Naurang Singh’s ‘Sikh Hindu Nahin,’ Jodh Singh’s *Sacha Dharmi*’ and many others, also quoted several passages from the Sikh scripture to prove that the Sikh religion was an independent religion and had nothing to do with Hinduism. In fact, Sikhism had controverted almost every fundamental of Hinduism.

Such writings inspired the Sikhs with self confidence and gave them a renewed sense of distinctiveness and direction.⁶⁰ The masses became sufficiently enlightened not to be misled by the Sikh vested interests and the Arya Samajists, who tried to say that the Sikhs were a part of the Hindus. The Singh Sabha leaders had a clear and firm grasp of the issues facing the Sikhs. They rightly realised that the form and spirit of the Khalsa could be kept intact only if the Sikhs conformed to the code of conduct prescribed by Guru Gobind Singh. Any laxity in maintaining the five symbols (the five K’s), they knew would mean a fall from the faith and would lead to the gradual erosion of the basic Sikh ideals.⁶¹ Bhai Kahan Singh in his books, *Gurmat Parbhakar* and *Gurmat Suddhakar* quoted several passages from the Sikh scripture in order to prove that the worship of images was contrary to the teachings of the Gurus.

The Singh Sabha leaders laid emphasis on the inculcation of such virtues as love of God, service of one’s fellow beings, purity of living, charitableness and truthfulness. They made it clear, as the Gurus had emphasized in their Bani, that the way to one’s moral and spiritual uplift lay through good deeds and not through miracles, mysteries and mantras. “The worship of the Almighty in homes is the best of all to obtain eternal happiness, rather than going to the pilgrimage, where one was bound to be misled by the selfish and greedy priests.”⁶² Misguided notions regarding the worship of graves, tombs, Samadhs and cremation marks, which were contrary to Sikh religious injunctions and traditions, were clearly condemned in the preachings of the Singh Sabha.⁶³ Giani Ditt Singh’s booklet, *Durga Parbodh*, was written primarily to dispel the belief in Pirs and Fakirs which was of no avail and diverted man’s attention from the path of righteousness. That is why, as indicated

already, all the thirty seven Singh Sabhas, except the three Sabhas of Rawalpindi, Faridkot and Amritsar which were personally connected with Khem Singh and Raja of Faridkot group, followed the lead of the Ditt Singh Gurmukh Singh group.⁶⁴

As a result, the period of diffidence was over and Sikhism regained its self confidence in its historic mission. The Census Report of 1921 noted: "Sikhism is a religion with a very distinct worship of its own and having attained a position of independence, is fully entitled to rank as a separate religion."⁶⁵

The passing of the Anand Marriage Act in 1909, legalising the Sikh form of marriage was a significant achievement of the Singh Sabhas. Various Sikh organisations and Singh Sabha, sent telegrams and petitions signed by lacs of Sikhs, demanding the passage of the Act⁶⁶ The Government was Impressed by this demonstration of Sikh unity in favour of this legislation which involved separate Sikh entity. It was an important step forward because the State was forced to accept the self assertion of the will of an independent socio-religious community.

The Sabha periodicals, the *Khalsa*, the *Khalsa Akhbar*, the *Khalsa Samachar*, the *Khalsa Advocate* and the *Sikhs and Sikhism* helped a great deal in projecting the true image of Sikhism. The influence of these periodicals was tremendous and they greatly helped in quickening the pace of revival. They succeeded in counteracting the attack of the Arya Samajists and the Christian Missionaries, who were misrepresenting the teachings of the Sikh Gurus. These periodicals were run by persons like Giani Ditt Singh, Bhai Gurmukh Singh, Bhai Mayya Singh, Bhagat Lakshman Singh, and Bhai Vir Singh who had been nurtured in the Sikh tradition.

People came in large numbers to receive baptism. A major plank of the Singh Sabha was a crusade of Amrit Parchar because to revive the institution of baptism and the connected doctrine of 'Nash', making a complete break with all earlier religious and social traditions, was the best means of eliminating the Brahmanical practices that had appeared among the Sikh ranks.⁶⁷ The Singh Sabha preaching being in line with the earlier tradition, and having the sanction of the Gurus and the scripture, no Sikh could ignore or defy them. In fact, the tremendous success the Singh Sabha revivalists had in bringing back dynamism in the Sikh life, was entirely due to their ability to invoke the authority of the Sikh Gurus, the Guru Granth Sahib and the Sikh tradition in support of everything they said and preached. The chief pillars of the movement,

workers like Giani Ditt Singh, Bhai Gurmukh Singh, Bhai Mayya Singh, Bhai Jawahar Singh and Bhagat Lakshman Singh, were very ordinary persons of hardly any consequence in the socio-economic or the political life of the community. There was nothing to recommend them except their devotion to the cause of the great tradition which the mass of people understood very well.⁶⁸ It would, therefore, be naive to suggest that these simple Singh Sabha workers could have the capacity to impose on the community a new system, or make innovations in the Sikh ideology or even a major reform, without their suggestions and programme being strictly in line with the thesis of the Gurus, especially when many socially and politically influential persons in the Sikh community continued to oppose them.⁶⁹

The Chief Khalsa Diwan formed a sub-committee to suggest ways and means to reform the Gurdwaras that had gone into the hands of Brahmanical priests and vested interests⁷⁰ But it could not take effective measures because *Mahants* and *Pujaris* who controlled the Gurdwaras enjoyed the support of the Government.⁷¹ After this tussle, the *Mahants* and the *Pujari's* became hostile to the Singh Sabha leaders.⁷² The Sikh public was rudely made conscious of the evil designs of the Pujaris when they condemned the *Komaghata Marn* Sikhs at the Akal Takhat and presented a robe of honour to General Dyer after the tragedy of Jallianwala Bagh.⁷³ This made the Sikhs furious. It took the Sikhs quite some time to get their shrines liberated from the *Mahants* and the *Pujaris*.

Nevertheless, the Singh Sabha succeeded in renewing a sense of self-awareness among the Sikhs. The movement, which derived its inspiration from the great spiritual heritage of the Gurus, did not 'invent' any standard of its own. It is highly incorrect, rather misleading, to attribute innovations to a movement which was wholly revivalist in its nature and character. In fact, to propound a new ideology was against the very basic principles of the Singh Sabha. A scholar who sets out to study and understand the true nature of Sikhism should do so in the context of the Sikh scripture and the historical background of the emergence of Sikhism. Oberoi's assertion that Sikhism is first and foremost a peasant faith or rural religion, displays a complete lack of knowledge and understanding of Guru Granth Sahib and the fundamentals of Sikhism. This deficiency is common with those who use social-science methodology in studying a religion and its history. No where in the history of India or elsewhere in the world, is there any evidence to suggest that the peasantry could, on its own, devise a

radically new religious system or sustain a social revolution of the kind that took place in the Punjab.

Throughout the ages, Sikhism has shown a remarkable potency and will to grapple with all crisis, without compromising the basic and enduring values of its faith. It is through tremendous sacrifices and sufferings that the Sikhs have maintained their identity, ideals and ethos and carried out the mission entrusted to them by their Gurus. Their birth, training, tradition and history have marked them out as a people separate from the rest. It is quite idle to draw simplistic conclusions about the Sikh religion and its history, without an in-depth study and analysis of the Sikh scripture and the role of each doctrine and institution in shaping the Sikh movement and the revolutionary changes it brought about.

The study of the Singh Sabha movement in isolation, and in complete disregard of the Sikh ideology and the earlier Sikh history, apart from being methodically inadequate and faulty, shows very clearly the failings of a narrow and lopsided approach. Lloyd has drawn a very interesting caricature of an anthropological view which would first magnify a very narrow aspect of a social phenomenon' and then try to draw inferences therefrom. The social anthropologist who views religion as a social institution, quite often, fails to take into account the socio-cultural complex, "constituted by institutions, rules, beliefs and intentions" and arrives at erroneous conclusions⁷⁴ Lloyd has provided a rather amusing account of what a tribal anthropologist might see if he visited the Brighton beach in the middle of summer. The anthropologist's account, he says, may read somewhat like the following:

"The people of England are religious and devout worshippers of the sun. Each year they leave their homes and travel to the coast for the purpose of worship and often take up small accommodation in tents or in what they call caravans, or live with other people during their short stay. Each day they begin worship by prostrating themselves on the shingle in the heat of the sun, which is often so hot that they wear shields over their eyes. Their bodies become burnt and some become ill, but few are deterred by this, such is their devotion. At various times people will baptise themselves in the waters, calling to each other and waving their arms in ecstasy. At midday, families group together when a symbolic ceremony takes place. Three-cornered pieces of bread, known to the natives as 'sandwiches', are passed around

and eaten. During their afternoon they throw symbolic, large, inflated, multi- coloured orbs to one another, illustrating the dominance of the sun in their lives. Throughout all this, elders lie motionless in their canvas seats with their faces covered, in deep and prolonged meditation. These observances may continue for a family for upto fourteen days, when they return to their work until the following year.”⁷⁵

Lloyd says that such an interpretation of what the people of Brighton beach were doing seems quite consist ant with their physical movements. That is to say, if these people really were sun-worshipping, instead of sun-bathing and enjoying themselves, their bodily move-ments may be no different. The difference lies in how they saw their movements. What the anthropologist did not do was to see things the way the natives did, to entertain the ideas they had, to understand the significance that these things had for them. If we wish to understand what a person is doing we have to understand not only his beliefs and intentions but also the socio-cultural context and institutions, norms and rules which provide the framework within which he forms his purposes in terms of appraisal of his situation. Oberoi’s study is equally narrow and inept in its vision.

CONCLUSION

Unless there is a conscious or unconscious effort to damage and erode the very roots of the Sikh ideology and the Sikh religion, a correct evaluation of Sikhism cannot be made by a lop-sided or isolated study of a few rituals and beliefs prevalent in a very small section of the community during a particularly lean period. The worshipping of a ‘Sakhi Sarvar’ by less than three percent of ignorant and illiterate villagers or a similar local aberration or belief cannot be regarded as the views and practice of the entire Sikh community, especially when the Sikh scripture, tradition and writings had specifically and repeatedly condemned them, and when there was hardly a trace of them in the Sikh community of the Guru period or of the 18th century.

People of different religions are quite often found harmonising together in social life and mutually respecting, understanding and taking part in each other’s modes, ways and doings. For example ‘Purdah’ system which crept into the Hindu society bore the stamp of Muslim culture. It is misleading to draw inferences about the form and dynamics of a religion on the basis of socio-cultural practices and usages, which are local and temporary in character. A visitor to a Christian Sunday worship in a Punjabi village observed that “many aspects of the worship were strongly influenced by Punjabi village

culture - the timing of worship, taking off shoes outside the church, the separation of the men from the women, the noise and informality of worship, the music and musical instruments.”⁷⁶ If some Sikhs and Muslims worshipped the Sakhi Sarvar, it does not mean that Islam and Sikhisms are not independent religions or that such worship is native to the two religions. “Saturnatia, the Roman winter festival of 17-21 December, provided the merriment, gift -giving and candles typical of later Christmas holidays. Sun worship hung on in Roman Christianity and Pope Leo I in the middle of the fifth century, rebuked worshippers who turned round to bow to the sun before entering St. Peter’s basilica, some pagan customs which were later Christianised,…” In short many pagan customs continued in Christianity in one form or the other for centuries on end.⁷⁷

There are features which are particular to Punjab and there are practices derived from the surrounding culture which give it a particular flavour not found in other parts of the world. Popular legends of ‘Heer-Ranjha’, ‘Sassi-Punnu’ and ‘Sohni-Mahiwal’ (men-mentioned by Oberoi) which found mention in the Punjabi literature placed no impediments in the recognition of Sikhism as an independent religion.

There are certain features of a culture which are local and temporal and cannot by any stretch, be deemed to be a part of the prevailing religious system. Just as the pop music that is a common feature of the urban life of the Indian community today, could not be called an integral part of the Brahmanical religion, in the same way it would be wrong to characterise folk fables and love stories of Hir Ranjha, Sassi Pannu, etc. as a part of the Sikh religion.

Our discussion of the four related aspects of the Singh Sabha movement shows that while it played an important and significant regenerative role during a lean period of the Sikh history, it was wholly a revivalist movement working strictly within the parameters of the Sikh religion and its tradition. In fact, the very reasons that it invoked the authority of the Guru and the Gurus Granth Sahib and placed before the public examples of the Sikh society and Sikh heroes who had suffered and sacrificed for the principles of Sikh religion, account for the success of the Singh Sabha leaders in safely and creditably steering the Sikh community towards its goals.

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