



Dr. A. Kumar

From Anandpur Sahib to around the globe!

(by Dr. A. Kumar on the auspicious day of Baisakhi)

**Mitr Pyare Nu Hal Murida Da Kehna
Tudh Bin Rog Rajjain Da Odan Nag Niwasa De Rehna
Sool Surahi Khanjjar Pyala Bing Kasaiaan Da Sehna
Yaarre Da Saanu Sathar Changa Bhatth Kheriyan Da Rehna**

Sikhism should have been a symbol of unity among human race. It should have been a religion of universal brotherhood. But what it is today and why, let us go for a little introspection. The journey began from Anandpur Sahib and spread around the globe. It was Anandpur Sahib where the lesson of Piri & Miri began. It was only Sri Guru Gobind Singh ji, who could imagine and brought into practice literature and kirpan (sword) together. This Saint-soldier decided to continue the message of equality initiated by Sri Nanak Dev ji and on the auspicious day of Baisakhi at Anandpur Sahib in 1699, this 33 yr old, the lord of the lords, the 10th Guru took Dayaram of Lahore, Dharamchand of Delhi, Mohkamchand of Dwarka, Himmatrai of Jagannath puri and Sahib Chand of Bidar under his wings and bestowed them with the name of Panj Pyaras (the five beloved of God) and baptized them with Amrit (nectar). But the unfathomable insight of his Karma and Dharma could be understood only when he himself took Amrit from these Panj Pyaras; thus a new symbol of equality, brotherhood and unity was created, a new dawn of democracy, in its true nature and sense was established.

Let us come to the core values of Sikhism. The two-word opening sentence of the Sikh scriptures reflects the basic belief of the Sikhs - Ek Onkar or One Creator. The Sikhs are ordained to follow the teachings of the Ten Sikh Gurus and other saints as scripted in 1430 page holy scripture, the world famous and most sacred Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the final Guru of the Sikhs.

Khalsa literally means, 'the pure', as taken from the Arabic word 'Khalis'. It refers to the collective body of all baptized Sikhs. The historical fact is that the Khalsa was originally established as a military order of Saint-soldiers by Sri Guru Gobind Singh. It was the name given by the Guru to all his disciples baptized in the Amrit Sanchar ceremony. Guru Gobind Singh describes in his book, the Sarbloh Granth the qualities of Khalsa :

‘The Khalsa is the reflection of my form, The Khalsa is my body and soul, The Khalsa is my very life’

Now the question arises, how far we go in accordance with what our beloved Gurus told us to? Have all the teachings and tenets of our holy gurus remain confined in the five-Ks and the suffixes ‘Singhs’ and ‘Kauras’ only? Has any change taken place in our basic thinking involving rituals, castes and creeds against which our first Guru Nanak explained us in detail and in a very practical manner?

The million dollar question is, who is a true Sikh? Merely a baptized (Amrit Chhakhna) person? I don’t think that just being baptized makes us a true Sikh. Today, it seems that getting baptized is simply as if we take admission in a school but - it doesn't mean that we will automatically become a graduate. To graduate, we need to have good teachers and we will have to study to perform. So in my opinion, Amrit Chhakhna or baptizing is just the admission but not the graduation or it is just the first step towards being a true Sikh but not the final destination.

Where are the true teachers and where are the true disciples? The holy Amrit Chhakhna has just become a ritual. In the presence of the holy Guru Granth Sahib, wearing five-Ks, one is administered the Amrit by the Panj Payaras. But first of all, do we know, who these Panj Payaras should be and what their credentials should boast? Undoubtedly only those, who have led a virtuous life and have strictly observed the Sikh discipline. And only a true Sikh should have the right to bestow and administer the Amrit Chhakhna sanskar and ceremony. But today, the Amrit Chhakhna has just become a ritual. Just one Sarab-loh bata, pure water, some pataashas, Panj Payaras sitting in Vir-aasan and finally mixing up of the mixture of Amrit with holy Khanda sahib while reciting the Panj Baanis.

This is very sad that we even don’t know the symbolic importance of all this. It hurts to know that those who perform this external gesture know nothing about the ideas being expressed under the philosophy of Amrit. They have no inner commitment to the holy meaning of this great gesture. Without practice of the teachings in life and without cleaning inside and outside, such holy ceremonies can be said merely ritualism and nothing else. The Amrit Sanskar ritual is not external. The cleansing of the soul can only be done internally by the subject himself. We forgot that the Sarab-loh-baata signifies the strength of heart and mind. The chanting of pavitar baani represents the strong faith and cohesion among the devotees. The Khanda establishes a spirit of valor and bravery.

On the other hand, is it right that without looking at the credentials of the seeker, he or she is bestowed with such a pious thing, the Amrit Chhakhna? Not only the Panj Payaras but the candidates for baptism should have clean credentials. Both must have the willingness to accept the pure and virtuous life as described by our holy scriptures.

According to Bhai Gurdas,

‘Whosoever gets initiation of the Guru and follows the Guru’s instructions is in fact a real sikh.’ (Bhai Gurdas Var 3.11) and

‘The life may become successful and blessed, if you take Amrit of double edged sword. (Bhai Gurdas Var 41)

Is just doning a kirpan and the visible baana is sufficient to be a sikh? Is Amrit Chhakhna the end of the purpose? No, it is not. It is actually the start of a truthful journey, full of values and virtues.

How far Sikh religion has been successful in getting rid of the caste system? In my opinion, just zero and a big zero. Our Gurus contradicted with Hindu system of casteism. Honestly, they wanted the Sikhism to delink itself from Hindus' Varn-asram dharma. The Gurus initiated a new version of dharma, which was, at least as far as caste was concerned, entirely at variance with the Hindu system. They made the Dharma perfect and universal by blending the four castes into one (Brahmin, Kshatiya, Vaishya & Shudra). This hymn by Guru Nanak speaks clearly:

**‘Jaan-hu Jot ‘n pooch-hu jaat, aagey jaat ‘n he’. (Gurbani page 349).
(recognize the Lord’s light within all, don’t consider social class or status, there are no classes or castes in the world hereafter)**

Actually the process of the creation of a classless society, had started in the days of Sri Guru Nanak, by himself. His first lesson was ‘There is no Hindu, no Mussalman’. He was such a great social scientist of his times that he (Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji) took clear-cut practical steps towards moulding a society of Sikhs, totally on independent and new ideological lines. He specifically condemned the perverse caste ideology of the Hindus and rejected the authority of the Vedas and supremacy of the Brahmans. He denied their (Hindus’) rituals and rotten centuries old social systems.

A Sikh is simply one who follows and practises the teachings embodied in Sri Guru Granth Sahib. I don’t think a person’s robe, appearance or background is to do something with his or her spiritual life. Anyone can read the Holy Granth Sahib. The key word should be follow and not just recitation. Most of the Sikhs can be seen chanting the holy Baani but it is of no significance as they don’t practice it. A true Sikh is one who puts into practice the teachings of our Gurus and he or she can be of any color, caste, creed, race or religion.

Then what was the importance of Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji 's giving us a special Baana (appearance) and initiating the ceremony of Amrit Chakna? ". Simple. Never forget to analyze the society prevailing in those times. The society was badly ridden and divided with caste system. Therefore, to make everybody equal (as actually we are in the eyes of God), Guru Gobind Singh Ji started the process of Amrit Chhakhna in a particular way as explained above.

Second important reason was to create a uniformed army to combat the evil forces of Aurangzeb who was the staunch enemy of non-muslims. He wanted to save the honour of the Brahmans who were forcibly converted to Islam or killed. He created successfully an army of the brave, like-minded, dutiful, skilled and committed Sikhs whom the Guru ji told to always raise the arms to protect the weak.

This was Sikhism, the dream of our beloved and most revered ten Gurus. Where we have reached now despite our global presence. Sri Guru Gobind Singh je declared that the Khalsa would be free from caste based religion, rituals and ceremonies, superstition, family lineage and the caste based occupation restrictions.

Are we really free from these five evils or have we, the Sikhs, actually inherited these evils from other societies? Where are the five pious vows taken at the time of baptism (Amrit Chhakhna)? Are we still not practising them. Have we adhered to the five major principals of Sikhism viz. 1) dharm nash, i.e. to sever relations with one's earlier religious belief, 2) karam nash, i.e. to get free former rites, rituals & customs, 3) kul nash, i.e. breaking ties with lineage and birth which were the basics of caste society; 4) shram nash, i.e. throwing away stigmas attached to trade or occupation, and finally 5) bharm nash, i.e. discarding superstition and taboos.

Today, the casteism is the most heinous social evil among the Sikhs. And getting worse every coming day. Not only in the civil society but among the religious Sikhs also, the various factions are flaunting proudly that they all are against the tenets of Sikhism. The various Sikh temples around us are a testimony to that. I don't want to name them. But we all know that they belong to different castes and communities among the Sikhs.

On one hand Sri Guru Nanak said, 'Gur peer sada-e mangan jae, thaa ke mool 'n laggiye paa-e, Ghaal khaay-e kichu haatha hu dayee, Nanak raah pachaanahi sayee.' Means 'Do not ever bow at the feet of those who claim to be gurus and spiritual guides but go begging at others' doors for subsistence. He has recognized the (true) path, O Nanak! Who earns his living through hard labour and gives something to help others' (Sri Guru Granth Sahib page 1245).

It is a shame that even today, Sikhs refer to themselves as Jat Sikhs, Ramgarhia Sikhs, Mazabhi Sikhs, Ravidasia, Ramdasia, Aroras, Khatris and what not. After all the efforts of our holy Gurus, Jat Sikhs profess surnames like Chauhan (Jagjit Singh Chauhan), Dhillon (Ganga Singh Dhillon), Arora (Jagjit Singh Arora), Oberoi, Saini, etc., that display caste backgrounds. Ramgarhias and Mazhabis have generally no surnames as Sikh tradition recommends. The Sikh regiments were caste based even when they were in the British army during the eighteenth century. It was so because the higher castes would neither mix nor take orders from lower castes.

All the teachings of our Gurus, the Sangat and Langar, the absence of a caste-based society and respect for manual labour have exercised nothing among the Punjabis in general and Sikhs in particular. The evolution of the Sikh religion did not result in the end of casteism but rather in the evolution of a Sikh caste hierarchy, parallel to that of the Hindu caste system. . According to Dr Jaspal Singh, Principal, Ambedkar Institute, SAS Nagar, Punjab has one of largest Dalit populations (nearly 30 per cent) in the country and a majority of these people work as agricultural labourers.

To elaborate further, one instance is important to mention here. In 1914, the Khalsa Dharam Shastra was published. It contained the rules saying that members of Mazhabi,

Rahtia and Ramdasia castes did not have the right to go beyond four steps inside the Golden Temple. The four varnas were instructed not to mix with the untouchable Sikhs. And those breaking the laws would be 'Patit'. During 1920 the religious body of SGPC was set up and they passed resolution to ban untouchability and took in low caste priests. But however, it was not very much welcome. Dr. Ambedkar's dalit story is known to us all that why he converted to Buddhism instead of Sikhism. In fact the caste system was so much so embedded in the Sikh psyche that after Independence the Sikh leaders demanded the same reservation rights as Hindu untouchables. Thank God! At least today, we have come a far way and all are allowed to enter in the Gurdwaras of the higher castes also. Where the essential anti-caste teaching of Sikh Gurus have gone that the nineteenth-century witnessed the Nirankari and Namdhari movements, finally ending into the age old gurudom and sectarian exclusiveness? The existence of the prejudices even today can not be understood by any logical mind. Why the initial momentum given by our Gurus has waned away within merely 300 years? Those ideological peaks our Gurus have shown us, changed to the slopes of degradation, why? What limitations and hurdles are there? I don't see any. The Sikhs are hard working, entrepreneurs, rich, own world's one of the best teachings and blessings of ten Gurus, then why this society failed in achieving the idealist human goals which no other religion ever taught. Why the shortcomings of the Hindu society are still lingering in the subconscious minds of the Sikhs? It is painful indeed.

To me personally, Sikhism as a religion with its adorable history, a long list of martyrs and the wonderful lessons and teachings by the ten gurus, is one of the best humane and liberal system of living. I wish, I could go to a Gurdwara which did not have a tag, a name or a surname. I wish, not only the 'visible' sikhs, but others like me, who believe in Sikh tenets and who practice sincerely the human values, were also heard, respected and loved. What is the difference then if the Muslims say non-muslims Kafirs, the hardcore Sikhs say Patits to others? I think, it is not important that the Prasad to first five should go to the 'Singhs' or 'Keshdharis' only but it is imperative to see the same divine light in all the creation which was shown by our revered Gurus.

The charity begins at home. Why we can not make Punjab the first state of India as a classless society? Why can not we come out of the shackles of this menace, which is the root cause of our divided society? Why can not we, the global Punjabis in general and the Sikhs in particular, take the message of equality of our Gurus further, for the generations to come?

(References and sources: Bhai Gurdas Ji, 41 vaaran, E. H. H. Blunt,, The Caste Systems of Northern India, Ibbetson, Sir Denzil Ibbeston, Punjab Castes. (Patiala, 1970), Marengo, E. K.Marengo, The Transformation of Sikh Society. Portland, Oregon, 1974, The Tribune, Chandigarh.)

Dr. A. Kumar
Vice President
Yorks College (Canada UK USA India)
www.yorkscollge.com
Email: info@yorkscollge.com