

## Crisis in Sikh Leadership

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Inaugural Address At the Annual Gathering of The All India Sikh Students Federation held in Patiala on 1st June 1971

**S**IKHISM is a distinct world religion in its own right and not a sect of Hinduism, and the Sikh society is likewise a distinct society having its own postulates of social organization and also, the Sikh people legitimately aspire to political sovereignty and an autonomous status, such as they had acquired in the eighteenth century after making tremendous sacrifices and which they lost in the middle of the nineteenth century through a combination of malevolent circumstances and inner weakness of their own political structure.

These points must be borne in mind before we come to consider whether Sikhism as an independent world religion is viable in the modern world, and whether the Sikh people have now, in view, some definite political goal, and lastly, whether such a goal is capable of being achieved.

Many people seem to have already forgotten that Shiromani Akali Dal, which is the central executive committee of the permanent political party, called the *Khalsa Panth*, in its Annual All India Session held at Ludhiana in November, 1966, unanimously passed the following resolution which, *inter alia*, says that:

"The Sikhs resolve and proclaim their determination to resist all attempts being made to devalue and liquidate the Sikh people in free India. And demand that the

rulers of India should take the following steps forthwith to assure and enable the Sikhs to live as respectable and equal citizens of the Union of India, namely: *First*, the Sikh areas deliberately and intentionally cut off and not included in the new Punjab, namely, the areas of Gurdaspur District including Dalhousie, of Ambala District including Chandigarh, Pinjore, Kalka and Ambala Sadar, of Hoshiarpur District, the entire Tehsil of Una, and the *Desh* area of Nalagarh Tehsil, and the Sirsa Sub-Division of Hissar District and areas of Shahabad, Tohana and Guhla and Ruttia Block of Karnal District, and the Ganganagar area of Rajasthan, must be immediately included in the new Punjab so as to bring all contiguous Sikh areas into an administrative unit, to be called the 'Sikh Homeland', within the Union of India, and *Second*, this new Punjab should be granted an autonomous constitutional status with same powers and privileges as were granted to Jammu and Kashmir, in 1950, in the Constitution Act of India, and The Constitution Act of India should further concede that in this Sikh Homeland Sikh interests are of special importance."

This is the political goal which the Shiromani Akali Dal placed before the Sikh people in the changed circumstances of India, but almost simultaneously a split occurred in its

organization and eventually the dissident group organized under Sam Patah Singh succeeded in taking control of the Sikh *gurdwaras* in Punjab and also capturing such Sikh representation as they could, in the Indian Parliament as well as in the Punjab Legislative Assembly. This new group then completely abandoned all claims to any political aspirations for the Sikh people as such and strove for retaining the control of *gurdwaras* and for forming a government in the new truncated Punjab in which the representatives of this group may have an effective voice.

To achieve and retain this position, this group not only elbowed out the genuine Shiromani Akali Dal which had remained loyal to the true historical impulses of the Sikh people but these men also abandoned and repudiated openly every pretension of any concern for either making Sikhism or Sikh people viable in the modern world. They do not believe that politics are a vocation for those who would achieve and advance public good, because they are convinced that politics are a game for squeezing the maximum amount of personal gain for those who enter its arena.

It is at this stage that the Sikh people find themselves at the present moment.

In the fateful year of 1947, the Sikhs had a good opportunity of acquiring for themselves a sovereign or an autonomous status in the Indian sub-continent such as could enable them to walk into the mainstream of the World history, but such was the incompetence of the leadership that they had thrown up and sustained during those days that all the friends and well-wishers of the Sikhs were unanimous in concluding that the Sikh leadership had lost the battle on the negotiation table which they had been conceded by the contingency of history.

Ian Stephens, who was a good-hearted Englishman, editing, during this fateful period, the powerful English daily of Calcutta and Delhi, *the Statesman*, wrote in his book, *Pakistan*, (1963) that:

"So far as the Sikhs understood what was happening in 1947, which was not much, was not taken advantage of by the Sikh leadership, which was in the hands of non-Jat *Khatri*s. The *Khatri* Sikhs are seldom politically wise though much given to intrigue..."

Trying to explain the reasons for this unfortunate situation the author observed that:

"In modern times (the Sikhs') political leadership has mostly been poor, partly because their numbers are small, but also because their talents are of a markedly practical go-getting sort. As a result of this second factor their ablest men, the cream of the community, are continually skimmed off into lucrative activities outside politics.... Politics amongst Sikhs, has, in recent years, got not much more than the leavings."

Others, more stern but less concerned spoke out the same truth but in a different language.

H. V. Hodson, the Constitutional Adviser to Lord Linlithgow, the Viceroy of India during the years immediately preceding 1947, in his well-documented book, *The Great Divide*, (1969) observes that,

On the approach of the Transfer of Power, the Sikhs who mattered were not those in ordinary politics but men with influence in and through the *gurdwaras*. They had neither the training nor the experience to cope with the problems of partition. Ill-versed in national politics, divided in their

attitude, the Sikhs reverted to a historical posture of only defence and defiance."

He wrote further:

"Time and again the powers that were in the Central Government of India complained of political incompetence of the Sikhs."

Hodson coolly dismisses the entire tragedy relating to the political fate of the Sikhs in the mid-twentieth century by saying, that,

"The Cabinet Mission persisted in regarding the Sikhs, perhaps, because of their wagging beards and political naivete, as pathetic misguided dotards who were behaving like silly children."

Why does such a terrible fate overtake the otherwise active, dynamic, sober and practical-minded Sikh people again and again? In the fifth decade of nineteenth century this chronic political incompetence of the leadership thrown up and sustained by the Sikhs lost them their empire and sovereignty within seven or eight years of the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, and again in 1947 it lost them an opportunity which the History may take another hundred years to offer to the Sikhs.

Ian Stephens gives out an explanation but this would not satisfy those who know the political affairs of Sikhs from inside and somewhat more intimately. There is something inherently fatal in the make-up of political consciousness of the Sikhs which does not let them submit to an inferior political status of camp-followers and secondary citizens but which also renders them incapable of throwing up and sustaining an honest, dedicated and competent political leadership.

### Sikh Democracy

The Sikh society was founded on principles of democracy by Guru Gobind Singh and their overall political impulses have been of a democratic nature.

Sir George Campbell, the author of *The Memories of My Indian Career*, (London, 1840) has rightly observed that:

"The Sikh (socio-political) system is very much like that out of which German system sprang. They formed *Misls* or military confederacies. Each *Misl* elected its own supreme chief and sub-chiefs. . . . The combined *Misls* formed the *Khanda* or the Sikh Commonwealth."

Now, it is the kind of structure that can compare favourably with the impulses that led to Anglo-Saxon and American political institutions and yet in the case of the Sikhs it, twice in history, has led to chaos and collapse instead of development and fruition.

### Cancerous Malady

This is because of a basic malady that afflicts the historical Sikh people, that is, the ethnic groups and tribes that embraced Sikhism in the north of India.

This basic malady is two-fold. In the first place, for reasons of a complex historical and racial character, the Sikhs interpret the democratic process not as the Greeks or Germans interpreted it and not as the Anglo-Saxon communities interpret it. The latter mean by the democratic process a process wherein the pros and cons of a subject and situation are freely discussed and thoroughly probed into and then, after honestly and carefully taking into consideration the arguments advanced,

and the facts ascertained, the majority concur in agreeing that such and such decision or course of action is in the best interests of the collectivity of their people.

Amongst the Sikhs the practice is not to try to arrive at the best decision but to try to achieve a consensus on the spot. It is customary to hear this type of argument in assemblies and forums of the Sikhs: "It is obvious that what Mr. A says is the right thing and it is the best course to follow in the circumstances. But we have to work together and particularly we must ensure that 'so and so' and 'so and so' are not astringed. These 'so and so's' are adamant that what they have said also must be accepted. Otherwise, they feel that they are regarded as 'nobodies' in the community. Let us, therefore, accept a part of what Mr. A has said and some portions of what 'so and so's' have said so that everybody feels that his opinion has prevailed. And let this be our unanimous decision: '*bole so nibhal, tar so akal*.'"

Under this procedure, as can be readily understood, it is the silliest and the worst decision, that usually comes to prevail because this perverted democratic temper of the Sikhs puts a premium on the fool, the vulgar, the traitor, and the intriguer. If merits and dispassionate consideration is not the final test of a correct decision and it has to be the consensus wherein everyone, particularly every undesirable rogue, has not only equality of opportunity, but equality of effectiveness, then it is obvious that this type of democratic process shall inevitably lead to chaos and disaster for the Sikhs, again and again.

This is what has happened to the Sikhs more than once during the last one century and more.

### Low-grade Sikh Leadership

Secondly, there is the factor to which an allusion has been made by Ian Stephens, namely, the capturing of Sikh leadership by a class of people who make up their lack of wisdom in politics by unmitigated proclivities for personal intrigue. This has brought about irretrievable degeneration in the Sikh norms in every sphere of their group activities: religious, social and political.

### The Sikh Press

The Sikh Press, such as it is, is in the hands of those who are leavings of the Sikh society in every sense of the term. They are such persons who did not and could not make good in any other sphere of life. Of course, it is not true of the entire Press, but it is true of the Sikh Press in general, and it is these people, and those who work as their tools who have wrought havoc in the Sikh affairs during the last three or four decades and have brought the community to the brink of total collapse and degeneration. These spivs have neither background nor integrity and yet they are the opinion-makers and leader-makers in the Sikh community.

This point can be clearly stated only through concrete illustrations and one or two are, therefore, given below:

(1) The political goal of the Sikh Homeland, within the Union of India, to ensure religious viability of the Sikhs in the modern world, and political guarantee of their significance in the current history, was openly repudiated by the non-genuine Shiromani Akali Dal in the seventh decade of this century and the dimly-lit torch of true Sikh politics was carried forth only by one or two adamant individuals backed by the Sikh youth and

such honest sections of the Sikh people who had been elbowed out of the religious and political organization, the Shiromani Akali Dal. These adamant individuals, only one or two in number, happened to belong to the Jat group of the Sikhs which the town-living non-Jat Sikhs who have migrated to India since 1947, from trans-Jhalam areas, look down upon with ill-concealed contempt. During the last year or so a well-conceived campaign was set up in the Sikh Press by these non-Jats under the inspiration and leadership of the political-minded daughter of the late Master Tara Singh, who has now usurped control of the Daily *Jathedar* which was established out of public funds for sponsoring Sikh causes.

This campaign has followed two lines. One, that so and so the protagonist of the Sikh Homeland political objective of the Sikh people is secretly conspiring with the enemies of the Sikh community. This was asserted again and again and distorted incidents were marshalled in support. Simultaneously, an oral campaign was launched, in the towns of Punjab and in Delhi, with the following argument which illustrates the type of intrigue to which Ian Stephens has referred. The argument has been that, 'although so and so, the protagonist of the Sikh Homeland, is an educated person and understands the theory and art of politics well, and it is also true that he has the interests of the Sikhs at heart and has suffered for his convictions, but the real issue involved is that by lending him recognition and support we are letting the leadership of the community pass into the hands of the Jats. This would be most improper. Let us, therefore, withdraw all support from him and in future refuse to lend any open support to his views and activities, and let us also malign him to elbow him out of public affairs of the Sikhs.'

It would not be easy for outsiders to understand this phenomenon but it is so that amongst the Sikhs this type of argument and this type of intrigue prevails and is, as a rule, successful.

(2) There is a Sikh Weekly run from Delhi by a young man, whose educational qualifications do not go beyond pre-University stage. He is, on paper, an extreme protagonist of a State in the north of India in which the decision-making powers rest in the hands of the Sikhs, though the practical role he has played in relation to Sikh politics on recent critical occasions, may qualify him for being tied to stake before a firing squad of some Sikh revolutionary regime. He specializes in foul language and skill in mobsterism and is publicly proud of these attainments. Recently, with the object of elbowing out a sensitive Jat protagonist of the Sikh Homeland, this young newspaper thug started tarnishing his image in the following manner: He argued editorially and otherwise in his paper that 'this Jat was most unreliable and treacherous to the cause of Sikhs because, on a particular No-confidence motion in the Punjab Assembly in June, 1970, he failed to vote for the Opposition, while the Chief Minister of Punjab is Parkash Singh Badal, an Akali, who is opposed to the demand for Sikh Homeland.' This, he argued, was a conclusive proof of the fact that this Jat intellectual was not only traitor to the cause of the Sikh community but was shown as a most insincere and unreliable character. It is not that this blatantly dishonest argument with undertones of blackmailing has been advanced in the Sikh Press. Such a thing can happen amongst any people and anywhere in the East or West, but in no community of sane and mature people will such an argument be allowed to prevail or go unchallenged because the principle of this argument is as follows: 'If somebody wants to uphold the true political goal of the Sikhs, namely, the

demand for Sikh Homeland, then, he must, whether in or out of the Parliament or a Legislative Assembly, always and invariably oppose every proposal or motion which directly or indirectly might be in the interests of those who are not in favour of Sikh Homeland'. Now, this is the argument of a lunatic or somebody worse than a lunatic, yet amongst the Sikhs it will almost certainly go unchallenged and might even gather a large number of adherents. Those who see through the vicious character of such tactics are mostly disinclined to join issue with the intriguers and irresponsible thugs, and in any case they remain ineffective.

(3) There is a Weekly Sikh paper, published from Bombay in which, apparently under the instigation of its non-Jat editor, a free-lance political worker who has nicknamed himself as, "Nathurak" or 'the Unscrupulous', wrote out a two-column tirade recently, arguing that, 'the so and so Jat protagonist of the Sikh Homeland demand had dishonestly betrayed the Sikhs and the evidence of this betrayal is that in February, 1971, on such and such a date, Sam Pateh Singh opposed the Homeland demand and yet this Jat failed to make a counter-statement in the Press.'

This thesis requires a lengthy dissertation to establish it clearly, but such is the malady that afflicts the political consciousness and understanding of the Sikhs that although they are a historical people, having a distinct religion and culture, and having all the characteristics of a political nation except the political autonomy which they have lost and have not been able to regain, they are almost on the verge of political extinction, according to many observers.

#### The Remedy

Those, amongst the Sikhs, who would

understand the true nature of the tragedy and who would also appreciate that in order to be viable in the modern world the Sikhs must fulfil two conditions, *firstly*, they must interpret their world religion in an idiom which is understandable to the modern educated man and *secondly*, they must define, proclaim and try to achieve a political autonomy which can guarantee the preservation and development of their political personality, must put their heads together to cure the community of the two ills that have eaten into the vitals of the Sikh people for the past many years. These two ills have been stated above as (i) the supremacy of the unscrupulous, the incompetent, and the thug, in Sikh public affairs, and (ii) absence of declaration and even open disavowal of their true political goal by their spokesmen.

Either, the Sikhs must cure themselves of these two ills or they must accept the fates that have now almost overtaken them, namely, their passing out of the mainstream of History and their extinction as a living and vital force in the affairs of the world community.

If the Sikhs would not make all-out efforts to rid themselves of the cancerous maladies that afflict them, even the Gurn-on-High will not care to extend His helping hand to save them from certain disaster.

#### Call to Sikh Young Men

Young men of the Khalsa Brotherhood! These then are the tasks that claim your immediate attention firstly to meet the challenge that the incompetent, unscrupulous persons in Sikh public life have thrown before the Khalsa. This challenge must be met on all levels, wherever these anti-Sikh forces raise their ugly heads, in private conversation and public discussion, in Press or on platform, in direct speech or through insinuation. All intriguers

armed at holding the genuine Sikh voice to blackmail and subjecting it to devaluation and distortion must be countered with promptitude and vigour of which youth alone is capable. As Guru Gobind Singh advised, where you find that these thugs, are not inclined to listen to the language of reason and persuasion, you must not hesitate to speak in the language that they more readily understand. Such is the exhortation which the Rider of the Blue Horse has made to the Khalsa.

Secondly, the burden has now fallen on the shoulders of the Sikh youth to replenish the flame of true political aspirations of the Sikhs in India and to carry forth the torch of demand for Sikh Homeland as defined in the resolution of the Shiromani Akali Dal at Ludhiana in November 1966. Where the older generation has faltered and collapsed the younger generation must rise up and carry forward.

Lastly, the intellectuals amongst you must strive and strain to remove and clear up vast clouds of misunderstanding that distort the attitude of non-Sikh Indian fellow-citizens towards the political yearnings of the Sikhs. This removal of misunderstanding must not be achieved through false denials and untruthful

disavowals in the fashion of some of our present day leaders, through unconvincing and deceitful utterances disclaiming any desire for achieving Sikh political objectives, by calling yourselves, 'Punjabis' instead of 'Sikhs' and by dishonestly eschewing public mention of Sikh political concepts of 'Panth' and 'rāj karagā Khālsā'.

*A firmer and truer understanding must be achieved between the Sikhs and their fellow citizens in India by patiently convincing the latter that the former aim at nothing more than salvaging their own politico-historical identity within the constitutional framework of an integrated India and a united nation and that sole desire of the Sikhs is to nourish and develop their own distinct spiritual personality so as to serve India and to become a significant limb of the worldcommunity. Placitancy and secession, divisiveness and discord is repugnant to the teachings of Gurus and is alien to Sikh genius.*

These are the formidable, yet enchanting tasks that beckon today the Sikh youth towards an organized life of dedication and service.

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