

The Punj Piare

The five 'beloved' ones who passed the test administered to them by the tenth Sikh Guru Gobind Singh, the day before the Baisakhi day of 1699, formed the nucleus of a new order, the Khalsa Panth; the reader is referred to my essay describing that eventful day. Here I wish to discuss some aspects of their story and the lessons that we can learn from their sacrifice. Let me list their names: Bhai Daya Ram, Bhai Dharam Das, Bhai Mokham Chand, Bhai Sahib Chand, and Bhai Himmat Rai. Below I discuss known facts about them.

First. One notes that these are all Hindu names. Although several Muslims were disciples of the Sikh gurus, not a single Muslim name is listed amongst the beloved ones. This explains why a strong bond exists between the Sikhs and the Hindu community.

Second. One notes that Bhai Daya Ram was 30 year old; Bhai Dharam Das was 33 years old; Bhai Mokham Chand was 36 years old; Bhai Sahib Chand was 37 years old and Bhai Himmat Rai was 38 years old. So, the Punj Piare were thirtysomethings, just in the prime of their lives; in those days one was lucky if one lived to be fifty. It is remarkable that they all chose to espouse a noble cause than worry about providing for their old age.

Third. Bhai Daya Ram was a Khatri. Bhai Dharam Das was a Jat. Bhai Mokham Chand was a Washerman. Bhai Sahib Chand was a Barber. Bhai Himmat Rai was a Water Carrier. It is noteworthy that Punj Piare all belonged to the Hindu lower castes. There was no Brahmin or a Rajput amongst them. In fact, Guru Gobind Singh had a lot of problems with the Brahmins. They occupied the top position in the Hindu caste system totem pole. As such they expected to be treated reverentially and preferentially. Guru Gobind Singh reminded them that they were no better than anyone else per teachings of the Sikh faith. This admonition did not sit well with them. The Guru suggested to them that they should prove their usefulness by taking the responsibility of educating the Sikhs. The Brahmins rejected this advice, vehemently protesting that it is unbecoming of a Brahmin to impart education to a lower caste Hindu. Similarly, the Rajputs considered themselves the warrior class as per the ideology of the Hindu caste system. They resented the fact that Guru Gobind Singh started imparting martial arts training to the Sikhs. The Rajputs had fiefdoms in areas surrounding the village of Anandpur where Guru Gobind Singh resided. They protested to the Guru that he was insulting them by raising the lower castes to their level, in strict violation of the caste restrictions. The Guru disregarded their protests. The Rajputs decided to use force but were defeated in several skirmishes initiated by them against the Sikhs. Also, Anandpur was becoming more prosperous under Guru Gobind Singh's able leadership. This made Rajputs feel very insecure and they decided to enlist the help of the Mughals to teach Guru Gobind Singh a lesson; that story is told in another essay.

Finally, it should be noted that Bhai Daya Ram came from Lahore in the state of Punjab; Bhai Dharam Das resided in Hastinapur in the state of Uttar Pradesh; Bhai Mokham Chand was the resident of Dwarka in the state of Gujarat; Bhai Sahib Chand belonged to Bidar in the state of Karnataka, South India; and Bhai Himmat Rai had a home in Puri in the state of Orissa. So, only one Piara came from Punjab, the other four came from other parts of India, east, west and south and presumably spoke the language of those states.

In short, the Punj Piare were reformed lower caste Hindus, who hailed from different parts of India, and spoke different languages. An important lesson of great significance is to be learned from this factoid. The recent efforts of some Sikh political leaders to frame community issues in terms of a limited Sikh homeland, speaking just one

language, is inconsistent with the global reach of Sikh faith. Another important supporting evidence comes from Shri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS) itself. The wisdom contained therein is gleaned from the work of sages who lived in different parts of India, spoke different languages, belonged to different castes, and pursued different life styles. This inference dictates a course of action on the part of the Sikh community with a sense of urgency.

We need to resolve to resume missionary efforts to spread the message of Sikh Gurus more widely to folks who speak different languages and pursue different life styles. This requires that SGGS be translated into different languages of the world so that different people can benefit from the wisdom contained therein at leisure, in their homes, in their own language. The community should also consider establishing endowed Chairs for Sikh Studies at prominent institutions of higher education in India as well as abroad so that an awareness of Sikh faith is spread to the academic communities worldwide. The availability of SGGS translated into the English language is a major step in the right direction. But a lot more needs to be done to achieve the stated goal. It requires a major community effort in several directions simultaneously; an appropriate monetary commitment needs to be made by the community and its institutions as well as from a cadre of professional volunteers to work tirelessly as missionaries over several generations to help implement this vision.

On the local scene, we may aim to establish a Khalsa school in the near future where students may receive a first-rate education in the traditional subjects as well as an expert instruction in Sikh values. We have made a beginning by teaching Punjabi in the Gurudwara every Sunday. More is required. We need to re-kindle the noble work of the Singh Sabha Movement in different parts of India. My father and one uncle were members of this movement in the Bombay area in the thirties. They established a Gurudwara in Dadar and later a Khalsa school. The enterprise has now grown into several schools for boys and girls in the Maharashtra. Later, my cousin became the Principal of the Guru Nanak High School for Girls. She served for several years and retired from that job in the seventies. I personally benefited by attending the Khalsa High School at Sialkot (now in Pakistan) before the partition of the country in 1947. Before I joined that school I knew little about the Sikh faith except for anecdotes from the lives of the Gurus related to me by my mother and an older sister. The school was located near the Babe-di-Ber Gurudwara, an institution of historic significance. I was told that Maharaja Ranjit Singh was visiting that Gurudwara when he was informed of the death of his famous general, Hari Singh Nalwa, in the battle of Jamrud near the Khyber Pass; Sikh armies permanently sealed the invasion route used by the conquerors of India for the past several centuries.

I was administered Amrit at Babe-di-Ber Gurudwara when I was in early teens. I met several Sikh leaders (Master Tara Singh, Giani Kartar Singh, etc) when they visited the Gurudwara. Baba Kharak Singh Ahluwalia, who played an active role in the Gurudwara Reform Movement in the twenties, lived in a Mohalla next to ours. These encounters played a crucial role in developing my awareness and appreciation of the Sikh history. I would like to see the next generation to be made aware of the limitless possibilities of their future as Sikhs. The tercentenary of the ascension of SGGS to Guruship is in October of 2008. We should take this opportunity to embark on an exciting journey of promoting Sikh faith by organizing an outreach program to other communities in Albuquerque and elsewhere to make them aware of our lofty ideals and track record. Then, we shall truly honor the memory of the Punj Piare who became the standard bearers of the new order.

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