

Preachers, politics, primordial passions (The Hindu Editorial 18-5-07)

In times less driven by primordial religious passions, Saturday's kitsch-laden re-enactment of Guru Gobind Singh's baptism of the first Khalsa Sikhs might have provoked nothing but wry humour. Eccentricity is, after all, a well-established part of India's religious landscape. But the fallout from Saccha Sauda founder Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh's performance — seen by the clerical establishment as heretical — has left dozens injured in still-unfolding clashes across Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, and New Delhi. Indeed the religious fury has cut across national frontiers, with diasporic Sikh neoconservative websites joining the fray in the hope of revitalising their fundamentalist constituency. Many commentators have drawn parallels with the 1978 clashes between the Khalsa and the heterodox Nirankari sect, which laid the foundations for the decade of Khalistan terror. Like the Nirankaris, Mr. Gurmeet Singh's sect supports the Congress. It was instrumental in the party's surprising, if ultimately pyrrhic, victories in the Shiromani Akali Dal's (SAD) south Punjab heartland during the recent Assembly elections. However, the fault line this time is not religious. The real battle is over that ugly issue most politicians in Punjab like to pretend does not exist — caste.

While the Indian media tend to be suffused with images of Punjab's prosperity, it is often forgotten that the State is also the site of the kinds of caste apartheid that gave birth to the politics of the Bahujan Samaj Party's founder, Kanshi Ram. Almost one in three residents of Punjab belongs to the Scheduled Castes — the highest percentage in India — and atrocities against them have been mounting. Ever since the seizure of a shrine at Talhan by upper-caste villagers provoked large-scale rioting, there has been a string of violent attacks on both Sikh and Hindu Dalits. In response, Dalits have increasingly turned from established faiths to new spiritual leaders who articulate their anger. In 2001, the spiritual leader Piara Singh Bhaniarawala set off a small-scale version of the ongoing violence when he released the Bhavsagar Granth, a 2,704 page religious text. Suffused with *sakhis*, or miracle stories, extolling the spiritual powers of Mr. Bhaniarawala, the Bhavsagar Granth was intended to supplant the Guru Granth Sahib in Dalit Sikh homes. Punjab's government unsuccessfully prosecuted Mr. Bhaniarawala but did nothing to address his constituency's grievances. Neither did the clerics who railed against the preacher. Soon establishment clerics will meet to discuss their response to the challenge thrown at them by Mr. Gurmeet Singh. The kinds of reflexive responses that can be expected are evident in the Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee's shocking recent decision to expel clean-shaven Sikh students, and those sporting short hair, from the schools it runs. It takes little to see that such chauvinism strengthens the case of competing fundamentalists. Where clerics go, SAD tends to follow. But if Punjab is to avert a wider caste conflagration, the State government must steer clear of questions of theology - and instead direct its efforts at addressing the causes of Dalit anger.

Talibanisation of Sikhism (The Hindu 30-5-07)

Madanjeet Singh

The Sikh fundooos have distorted out of all recognition the militant order of Khalsa that Guru Gobind Singh instituted in 1699. It is incomprehensible how anyone can project nine years of Khalsa as the raison d'être of Sikhism and give it precedence over 239 years of the history of Sikh Gurus.

THE UGLY spectacle of sword-wielding mobs clashing with the followers of Saccha Sauda — seen by the clerical establishment as heretical — is a mockery of Sikhism on the auspicious occasion of Guru Gobind launching the first Khalsa, on March 30, 1699, at Anandpur Sahib. The real bone of contention this time is not just over religion, but caste, which the Sikh politicians, like other political parties, are lavishly using to strengthen their fundamentalist constituencies. The false pretensions of secularism on which the Shiromani Akali Dal won the February 2007 Punjab Assembly election are exposed by its jumping on the Hindutva bandwagon of the Bharatiya Janata Party. This is a poisonous nexus designed to destroy the secular and multicultural character of Indian civilisation. The instigations have cut across national frontiers, with the Babbar Khalsa vultures waiting to pounce as they watch, sitting on the branches of Taliban trees across the border in Pakistan. The situation recalls the 1978 clashes between the Khalsa and the heterodox Nirankari sect, which unleashed the decade of Khalistan terror.

Recent events are an appalling desecration of the secular and pluralist grassroots culture of Indian civilisation that Guru Nanak promoted. He gave precedence to "duties and devotion" in the conduct of daily life and became a devotee of a god who he refused to delimit by sectarian description. Sikh tradition has it that at the age of 30, Guru Nanak declined to say anything more than repeating: "There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim." Nanak believed that faith was a matter of personal belief and he urged Muslims to be true Muslims and Hindus to be true Hindus. His followers included many Hindus and Muslims, simply called Sikhs, meaning disciples (*shishya*). Guru Nanak preached against caste discrimination and racial prejudice at a time when slavery was customarily practised worldwide. Thousands of people, irrespective of their religion, caste, creed, or sex flocked to pay homage to Guru Nanak when he passed away on September 22, 1539. His tangible shining legacy is the Golden Temple at Amritsar, the foundation stone of which was laid in December 1588 by Hazrat Mian Mir — an eminent Muslim Sufi saint of Lahore. The sanctum of the shrine is named Harmandir, after Hari (God).

As misfortune would have it, the Sikh and Hindu 'fundooos' (a nickname given by the novelist Githa Hariharan) have jumped on the BJP's Hindutva bandwagon to destroy the multicultural and pluralistic magnificence of Indian civilisation. The Sikh fundooos have sidelined Guru Nanak's egalitarian, secular culture and smashed to bits the "Three Pillars of Sikhism" that he erected: meditation, earning an honest living, and sharing with others. The institution of langar — the common community kitchen, which Guru Nanak established to break the discrimination of the caste system — has been undermined as separate gurudwaras have mushroomed in Punjab for lower-caste Sikhs, while higher status elitists frequent exclusive langars where they are not obliged to sit and eat as equals with Dalit Sikhs. Many Sikhs have started flaunting their higher status by adding caste suffixes after their name Singh, a practice strictly prohibited by the Sikh Gurus.

Notwithstanding the media images of Punjab's prosperity, the region has become the ghetto of caste apartheid. As a recent editorial in *The Hindu* points out: "Almost one in three residences of Punjab belongs to the Scheduled Castes — the highest percentage in India — and atrocities against them have been mounting. Ever since the seizure of a shrine at Talhan by upper-caste villagers provoked large-scale rioting, there has been a string of violent attacks on both Sikh and Hindu Dalits. In response, Dalits have increasingly turned from established faiths to new spiritual leaders who articulate their anger. In 2001, Piara Singh Bhaniarawala set off a small-scale version of the ongoing violence when he released the Bhavsagar Granth, a 2,704 page religious text" extolling the spiritual in the Guru Granth Sahib in Dalit Sikh homes.

The Sikh fundooos have distorted out of all recognition the militant order of Khalsa that Guru Gobind Singh instituted in 1699, barely nine years before his death in 1708. The order was formed during a state of emergency to confront the Mughal army in guerrilla warfare. The ever-ready equipment of the Five Ks was essential for the militants as they moved from place to place under cover of forest. He also broke the feudal stranglehold of the Moghul administration by directly distributing plots of crown land among the Khalsa followers, who comprised both Hindus and Muslims. It was thanks to his Muslim disciples that Guru Gobind Singh was able to escape from the siege of the fort at

Anandpur by Mughal and Rajput armies. The rabble-rousing caste fundooos must also know that three of the five Panj Pyaras baptised by Guru Gobind Singh belonged to the lowest of castes.

In fact, following the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, the importance of the purely militant character of the Khalsa organisation diminished. This is evident from Guru Gobind Singh's policy of reconciliation as he joined with Aurangzeb's successor, Bahadur Shah I, to reduce the conflict. An outstanding statesman, poet, and scholar of Persian and Sanskrit, the tenth Guru of the Sikhs never initiated an anti-Muslim crusade. Instead, Guru Gobind Singh followed in the footsteps of his predecessors who had supported Prince Khusro against his father Jahangir in the latter's battle for the throne, and later Dara Shikoh against Aurangzeb. Historical records show that during his journey to Nanded in Maharashtra for discussions with Bahadur Shah, Guru Gobind Singh emphasised Guru Nanak's original ethical tenets over Khalsa militancy. With his enormous popularity, he might well have nominated the eleventh Guru of the Sikhs from among his loyal disciples. Instead, Guru Gobind Singh asked them to accept the Granth Sahib as their guide, which contains compositions by the Gurus as well as traditions and teachings of saints, including Kabir, Namdev, Ravidas, and Sheikh Farid.

The Taliban-inspired decision taken by the Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee to expel clean-shaven Sikh students and those sporting short hair from the schools it runs is astounding, considering that none of the nine Gurus with Hindu names before Guru Gobind Singh was obliged to carry the Five Ks: Kesh (uncut hair), Kanga (comb), Kaccha (short trousers), Kara (steel bangle), and Kirpan (sword). Guru Gobind Singh himself adopted the Five Ks only during the last nine years of his life when he changed his name, Gobind Rai, to Gobind Singh. It is incomprehensible how anyone can project nine years of Khalsa as the *raison d'être* of Sikhism and give it precedence over 239 years of the history of Sikh Gurus. It is as preposterous as giving religion precedence over secular culture and faith over reason.

(This is based on the Prologue to Madanjeet Singh's forthcoming book, Cultures and Vultures. The author, a former Indian diplomat, the founder of the South Asia Foundation, and a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador, is a Sikh. As a director of the Cultural Sector of UNESCO in the early 1980s, he was in charge of the History of Humanity, a seven-volume compendium conceived by Julian Huxley in 1946.)

The sword and the olive branch (The Hindu Editorial 31-5-07)

Peace stood at the gates of the Akal Takht on Tuesday, olive branch in hand. By rejecting an apology issued by the Sacha Sauda sect for any offence it might have caused, the five high priests of the Sikh faith severed the branch with their swords and slammed the door in the peace-maker's face. They have thus laid the foundations for a confrontation that could tear Punjab apart. According to the Akal Takht, which claims authority over the spiritual and temporal affairs of Sikhs, the Sacha Sauda apology was written "without feelings" and therefore "not acceptable in the eyes of the Guru." Therefore the high priests have decided to continue with their "agitation to uproot the Sacha Sauda sect" — an anti-constitutional project. Members of the sect, a majority of whom are Dalit, will continue to face religious and social sanctions that the clerics hope will persuade them "to return to the fold of Sikhism." While the priests have called on their followers to protest peacefully, violence is a real possibility.

Like their fundamentalist Hindu and Muslim counterparts, the five high priests represent a vision of religion that seeks to sharpen the boundaries between faiths. Much of the course of modern Sikh religious politics has revolved round efforts to impose clerical authority over popular identity. Neo-conservative clerics waged an energetic and ultimately successful battle to disenfranchise Sehajdhari Sikhs — those who do not observe one or all of the orthodox faith's outward manifestations — from elections to the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee. Thus large numbers of Sikh Dalits found themselves without a voice in the affairs of their religion. The Akal Takht abandoned the Bikrami calendar, which ensured that Sikh festival dates were identical to those of north Indian Hindus. Neo-conservative clerics have repeatedly used coercive tactics to intimidate emerging sects like that of Piara Singh Bhanjara and Ashutosh Maharaj, which have drawn Dalit support because they appear to challenge the theocratic fundamentalism of the clerics. In all this, one crucial point needs to be noted: the success of the neo-conservatives owes much to the state's support and connivance. While the Akal Takht has historically argued against governmental interference in religion, it has proved adroit in its use of the state apparatus to crush dissenters and apostates. Chief Minister Prakash Singh Badal has let it be known that he intends to be guided by the views of the Akal Takht. He needs to be firmly reminded instead that he is bound by the provisions of the Constitution, specifically Article 19 guaranteeing freedom of speech and Article 25 guaranteeing freedom of conscience and worship.