

PRESERVING THE LEGACY OF GURU GOBIND SINGH: WHERE WE STAND AFTER 350 YEARS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

INAUGURAL ADDRESS

Prof Harjeet Singh Bhabra,
PhD, MBA, B. Tech. (Hons.)
Dollard-Des-Ormeaux, Quebec, Canada
Email: harjeet.bhabra@concordia.ca

The Sikh community all over the world is celebrating the 350th birth anniversary of Guru Gobind Singh this year, the tenth and last living Guru. The main objective of today's seminar is to reflect upon what we have achieved as a community over the past three and half centuries, the odds that we had to confront over this time, the challenges that stare us in the face today, and the approaches and strategies we need to adopt to prepare for the increasing pressures we no doubt are going to experience in the times ahead.

Each century brought its own unique hurdles for Sikhs. However, before I talk about the specific challenges that we have successfully surmounted, let us take stock of what we have achieved as a community during this time.

Sikhism today has emerged as one of the six major organized religions in the world.

The universality of Sikh philosophical thought is widely recognized and accepted globally. Many pillars of modern institutions (e.g. United Nations), such as gender equality, universal brotherhood, etc. can be traced back to the founding principles of Sikhism.

From a small marginal group in society five hundred years ago, Sikhs today are spread globally, known for their entrepreneurship and hard work. They have been major contributors towards economic development of societies they adopted to live in.

Their valor and bravery is legendary. They have contributed far more in relation to their small numbers to the cause of national and individual freedom and nation building.

However, this growth has not been without its challenges. Over the past nearly four centuries, what has remained constant is that there has never been a period when Sikhs were free to grow unfettered. Perhaps the only period of relative calm was the 16th century, which allowed for much of the Sikh

philosophical thought to develop and mature without significant obstacles. The major challenges can be traced back to the beginning of the 17th century.

Political oppression and political subjugation was the first major problem of the young religion. Forcible conversions and the relentless onslaught by the rulers left Sikhs in a difficult situation. The 17th century was a period of tremendous sacrifice starting with the martyrdom of two of our Gurus and many of their faithful followers.

The 18th and 19th centuries saw Sikh numbers dwindle significantly, as they sought refuge in the wilderness. At one point, it is said that Sikhs numbered as few as 50,000. The young religion had almost disappeared from the face of the Earth. Except for a brief period of four decades from 1799-1839, when Sikhs proudly had a kingdom of their own, most of the remainder of these two centuries were more or less lost. These four decades again saw significant growth in numbers, economic prosperity and cultural development.

Throughout the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, Sikhism had to work to preserve their unique philosophy and guard against the risk of being amalgamated into the mainstream religion of the Indian subcontinent. This threat has not disappeared and has been emerging repeatedly in different forms. While it is not forcibly imposed today, the tacit pressure is always present.

Driven by their entrepreneurial spirit, the 20th century saw Sikhs spread globally. Many of the host societies where they settled were totally unprepared to receive the unique Sikh identity. This is true even today in many developed countries. Secular nations such as France have imposed restrictions on the display of Sikh identifiable symbols in several spheres. Sikhs are confronted with new challenges on a daily basis in many nations as they strive to preserve their identity and prosper in their new surroundings.

What are the challenges we face today and what are the major

issues that we will have to deal with in the coming times?

For starters, it is the challenge of preserving our unique identity as given to us by Guru Gobind Singh. The challenge comes from three sources (and may be more if we dig deep). First, it is the onslaught of modernization and rapid technological advancement. At last count, Sikhs are less than 0.4% of the world population. The pressure to integrate and look-alike is relentless. The second pressure is not for Sikhism alone but religion in general. The new generation that has grown with science and technology is not prepared to accept religion as a faith at face value. As rational individuals, they question each and every religious demand that is made on them. Needless to say, as Sikhs we have a bigger challenge in convincing this generation on the need and value to preserve our unique identity. It cannot be imposed. It does not work. We will have to come up with rational arguments and find an acceptable way forward. If we come down too hard, we risk the very survival of our identity within the span of a few decades. Third, integration with other faith groups in the form of formal social unions will no doubt take its toll down the road. This process is inevitable and will have a lasting impact.

In addition to modernization, we also face pressure from within our own community. There is a small minority, who are traditionalists and refuse to accept change with time. They persevere to preserve the *status quo*. Take the example of adopting the *Nanakshahi* calendar. Or the burning issue of chairs and tables in the *langar* halls in Gurdwaras in the West. Or the more recent efforts to ban interracial marriages in Gurdwaras in UK. There are many such issues and they will only grow as we spread and integrate further.

The third big challenge facing us today is the strain within the community, which is being exploited by outsiders and we are totally oblivious to it. Rather than provide leadership at this crucial time, many of our community leaders are working against the Sikh community.

The fourth challenge deals with how Sikhism is practiced in the Gurdwaras and outside of it. Many of the practices resemble *Brahmanical* approaches and these are allowed because individuals desire them as such. However, each such practice we allow today becomes an accepted norm over time and chips away at the fundamental principles of Sikhism. Outside the Gurdwaras, we have seen the growth of different sects that have amassed a huge following. These are the same innocent individuals whom Guru Nanak and all the Gurus subsequently saved in the centuries gone by. They are now again falling into the same trap.

The work of the *Sant-Sipahi* created by Guru Gobind Singh is not over, and perhaps never will be. We need to remain vigilant of our surroundings and the threats we face constantly, both overt and covert. Today we are more organized, better educated and informed, and blessed with more resources compared to in the centuries past. I am optimistic that we will confront ably and effectively any new challenge that emerges in the future. We owe it to our Guru to preserve his vision.