

## WORLD SIKH NEWS

The Framers of the Constitution knew that free speech is the friend of change and revolution. But they also knew that it is always the deadliest enemy of tyranny.  
—Hugo Black

## 25 Years: Let's Move Into Phase II

In her scintillating speech in Ottawa at the World Sikh Organisation's function, Dr. Cynthia Keppley Mahmood referred to a beautiful movie which she called "one of the great films of all time." The movie, *Le Scaphandre et le Papillon* or *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, is the true life biopic of a man paralyzed in an accident who can only move his one eyelid. He desires nothing but death but then with the help of a nurse, develops a sort of code with the eyelid's movement and succeeds after years in dictating an entire book, his own life story.

"(T)his is a story of liberation and of human dignity, because the protagonist realizes that despite all, he still has his voice and thereby his humanity. He can still "speak." So important is the power of speech in being human...." Dr Mehmood said.

Several Sikh MPs had this power of speech when they were repeatedly elected to Parliament in India, among them many representing the ruling Akali Dal. But not one of them thought it fit to refer to the 25th year of the Indian Army's attack on Sri Darbar Sahib and Sri Akal Takht Sahib and the massacre of thousands of Sikhs.

In Punjab, Parkash Singh Badal thought it fit not to be seen at at gurdwara or event even remotely connected to any observance of the 25th year of the tragedy. In fact, he is rarely seen at any gurdwara. In Parliament, his daughter-in-law and wife of the Akali Dal president Sukhbir Singh Badal, Harsimrat Kaur Badal did not refer to a single Sikh issue. The fact that she was speaking as the Sikh Nation was marking the 25 years of the Saka Akal Takht did not matter to her. She confined herself to the issue of female foeticide, a very serious issue which she earlier sold to the people of Punjab as Nanhi Chhanv, a project conceived and pushed by an image management agency to sell her as a serious politician.

It fell to someone like Sardar Tarlochan Singh, the Independent MP from Haryana in the Rajya Sabha who presented the Sikh voice not meekly but forcefully and shamed the government for giving gallantry awards to Army officers who participated in the attack.


One could nitpick and say that his boss, the late Giani Zail Singh, was someone who first claimed he had no knowledge about the attack and later decorated the officers. But it will be pertinent to remember that Tarlochan Singh was under no pressure to take up the issue, and when he did take it up, it was not for show.

His tenor, his tone and the pitch of his voice showed the pain in his heart, and he let words do the magic. "Sharam aani chahiye," he was addressing the Defence Minister. "Gallantry awards kis liye? Kya Pakistan capture kiya tha? China capture kiya tha? They killed the Sikhs, that is why you gave them gallantry awards."

It is not easy to speak truth to power. It is not easy to speak truth right inside the power centers. And it is not easy to speak the truth bluntly when you have no compulsion except the pain in your heart.

That Indian Parliament's recesses echoed with words of shame heaped on the establishment is all the more important since they came when there is a conspiracy of total silence. Was the 25th anniversary of Operation Bluestar an event to be taken so lightly the way the ruling Akali Dal and the SGPC have done? Should there not have been a built up towards the event and should there not have been a year long event schedule to mark the occasion?

And should we not be engaging with the reality of a changed world and understand and use the new tools, media and knowledge to propagate our point of view? Dr Mehmood has asked the Sikhs to move into a "more mature second phase, the hard work of actually making something happen".

We hail the loud voice of Tarlochan Singh; it has its place and significance. And we at the WSN also strongly endorse Dr Mehmood's call. 

## Ravi Dasis &amp; Today's Punjab

WSN Bureau

In a well worked out and analytical article, Surinder S Jodhka of Jawaharlal Nehru University has argued that the interpretation of the recent violence in Punjab as "yet another instance of caste conflict within Sikhism" (between dalit Sikhs and upper caste Sikhs) was incorrect and "could lead to a communal divide between dalits and mainstream Sikhism."

Jodhka, in his paper published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, a left leaning journal in India, has tried to provide a historical perspective and has made clear how, though the Ravidasias rever Guru Granth Sahib and their temples are also often called Gurdwaras, a large majority of them do not identify with the Sikh religion and are rather now an autonomous caste-religious community.

They have evolved their own symbols and practices of worship, which distinguish them from the Sikhs of Punjab. "They do not see their faith as being in an antagonistic relationship with contemporary Sikhism," Jodhka argues. He traces back the phenomenon to the rise of the Ad Dharm movement that took off with the arrival of Mangoo Ram, the son of an enterprising Chamar of village Mangowal of the Hoshiarpur district of Doaba subregion of Punjab, on the scene.

Jodhka explained how initially the Ad Dharm movement saw itself as a religious movement and its proponents advocated that the "untouchables" were a separate qaum, a distinct religious community similar to the Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, and should be treated as such by the rulers. They argued that Ad Dharm has always been the religion of the dalits and that the qaum had existed from time immemorial.

"In the very first conference of the organisation, they declared: We are not Hindus. We strongly request the government not to list us as such in the census. Our faith is not Hindu but Ad Dharm. We are not a part of Hinduism, and Hindus are not a part of us."

The emphasis on Ad Dharm being a separate religion, a qaum, was to undermine the identity of caste. As a separate qaum, Ad Dharmis were equal to other qaums recognised by the colonial state, the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. Mangoo Ram also expected to bring other untouchable communities into the fold of Ad Dharm and emerge as a viable community at the regional level. But the movement could not maintain its momentum for very long and began to dissipate soon after its grand success in 1931. To quote Jodhka: According to the popular understanding, the causes of the decline of Ad Dharm movement lay in its success. Its leaders joined mainstream politics. Mangoo Ram himself, along with some of his close comrades, became members of the Punjab Legislative Assembly. The caste issue was gradually taken over by the emerging pan-Indian movement of the dalits and it finally merged with it. The Ad Dharm Mandal began to see itself as a social and religious organisation and in 1946 decided to change its name to Ravi Das Mandal, "entrusting the political work to All India Scheduled Castes Federation in conformity with rest of India"

It was during the Ad Dharm movement that the Ravi Dasi identity had begun to take shape. Leaders of the movement also saw Ravi Dasi identity as their own resource. Long after dissolving the Ad Dharm Mandal and being in retirement for many years, Mangoo Ram summed up the achievement of the Ad Dharm movement in an interview with Mark Juergensmeyer in 1971 where his focus was more on having given the local dalits a new community and religious identity than their political empowerment: We helped give them a better life and made them into a qaum. We gave them gurus to believe in and something to hope for.

After having changed its name to Ravi Das Mandal in 1946, the movement activists shifted their focus to social and religious matters. They had realised long ago that in order to consolidate themselves as a separate qaum, they needed a religious system of their own, which was different from the

## BEGUMPURA

The regal realm with the sorrowless name:  
they call it Begumpura, a place with no pain,  
No taxes or cares, nor own property there,  
no wrongdoing, worry, terror or torture.  
Oh my brother, I have come to take  
it as my own,  
my distant home, where everything is right.  
That imperial kingdom is rich and secure,  
where none are third or second - all are one;  
Its food and drink are famous,  
and those who live there  
dwell in satisfaction and in wealth.  
They do this or that, they walk where  
they wish,  
they stroll through fabled places unchallenged.  
Oh, says Ravidas, a tanner now set free,  
those who walk beside me are my friends.

## About Bhagat Ravidas

Ravi Das was born sometime in 1450 AD in the north Indian town of Banaras in an "untouchable" caste, the Chamars and died in 1520. Like many of his contemporaries, he travelled extensively and had religious dialogues with saint poets in different parts of the north India. Over time he acquired the status of a saint. However, his claims to religious authority were frequently challenged by the local brahmins who complained against his "sacreligious behaviour" to the local rulers.

His followers believe that every time the king summoned Ravi Das, he managed to convince the political authorities about his genuine "spiritual powers" through various miraculous acts. He is believed to have also visited Punjab and met with Guru Nanak, founder of the Sikh faith, at least thrice. He also gave most of his writings to Guru Nanak, which eventually became part of the Sikh holy book, *Guru Granth*.

Though historians of Indian religions tend to club Ravi Das with the Bhakti movement, a pan Indian devotional cult, his ideas appear to be quite radical. He built his own utopia, a vision of an alternative society, articulated in his hymn "Begumpura", a city without sorrows, "where there will be no distress, no tax, no restriction from going and coming, no fear".

Hindus and Sikhs. However, in order to do that they chose a caste-based religious identity: Chamar = Ad Dharmi = Ravi Dasi.

Choice of Ravi Das appeared to be an obvious one for the Ad Dharmis as a religious symbol for the community. The fact that his writings were included in the Sikh holy book, *Adi Granth*, which had been compiled in Punjab and was written in the local language, made Ravi Das even more effective and acceptable.

Thus the Ad Dharm movement played a very important role in developing an autonomous political identity and consciousness among the Chamar dalits of Punjab and its renaming itself as a religious body, Ravi Das Mandal in 1946, was an important turning point in the history of dalit movements of Punjab. However, it is

important to mention here that the Ravi Dasi religious identity had already begun to take shape, independently of the Ad Dharm movement in the region.

In fact, some of the Ravi Dasi deras had, in fact, played an active role in the late 1920 when Mangoo Ram was campaigning for separate religious status for Ad Dharmis. Mangoo Ram often visited the Ravi Dasi deras during his campaign.

Interestingly, even when the community reconciled itself to the idea of being clubbed with Hindu SCs for census enumerations, the identity of being Ad Dharmis continued to be important for them. As many as 14.9% (5,32,129) of the 70,28,723 SCs of Punjab were listed as Ad Dharmis in the 2001 Census, substantially more than those who registered themselves as belonging to the Ad Dharmi qaum in 1931. In religious terms, as many as 59.9% of the Punjab SCs enumerated themselves as Sikhs and 39.6% Hindus. Only 0.5% declared their religion as Buddhism.

However, notwithstanding this official classification of all SCs into the mainstream religions of the region, everyday religious life of the Punjab dalits is marked by enormous diversity and plurality. Apart from the popular syncretic religious traditions that have been in existence for a long time in the region, the dalits of Punjab, and elsewhere in India, have also developed an urge for autonomous faith identities, particularly for getting out of Hinduism.

They view Hinduism as the source of their humiliating social position in the caste system. This urge became much stronger with the emergence of a nascent educated middle class among them during the later phase of British colonial rule. The Ad Dharm movement of 1920s (discussed above) was a clear example of this.

Historically, dalits have chosen two different paths to this move away from Hinduism. The first of these was conversion to other religions such as Christianity, Islam or Sikhism, which do not theologically support caste-based inequalities and divisions. The second path has been to look for indigenous egalitarian faith traditions that emerged in opposition to the system of caste hierarchy. The Ravi Dasi movement can be seen as an example of this path.