

How The Mini Parliament Of The Sikhs Has Been Hijacked By Vested Interests. This Special Report takes a macro look at the entire gamut of functioning of the SGPC and brings out what is wrong. It argues for a thorough engagement at all levels to save the institution from those manning it



MANGLING THE RELIGION

Sach Kanwal Singh

You want to recall the glorious period of contemporary Sikh history, try the origins of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC). A child of the Gurdwara Reform Movement and an example of what positive resistance and a return to the roots struggle can achieve, the setting up of the SGPC is a lesson on how a minority can save its identity, freedom and institutions with a simple tactic: just plain honest sense of purpose and leadership.

You want to study how not to run an institution, how institutionalizing administration of the affairs of a minority can lead to worse ways of control and muzzling of ideas, and how institutions that go haywire can wreck even the most glorious of legacies, study the way the SGPC is being run for the last few years. Pay particular attention to who gets to call the shots and why, and how the men and women tasked with managing its affairs are selected/elected, and you would have a study in contrast.

One of the most respected and widely accepted body of the Sikhs, basically a premier Sikh gurdwara management panel but whose role

over the years has far outgrown its stated objectives, represents today a pathetic picture of what a good institution could have been.

To just start pointing out the aberrations, so far even the name Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee needs to be clarified. Legal records of the SGPC itself are run in the name of a central board.

Elections to the SGPC General House, comprising some 185 members, are conducted with the help of a government panel called Gurdwara Election Commission, and so far only the Akali Dal has fought these elections on its party symbol. For many years now, the party led by Parkash Singh Badal and now his son Sukhbir Singh Badal, thanks to the clout it enjoys in terms of political reach, money, muscle power and the killer instinct, has been winning most seats.

Such is the cult of personality in the Akali Dal, and the same has permeated to such an extent into the SGPC culture, that all major decisions are almost a family matter for the Badals.

Elections to the top office posts of the SGPC are organized every year, and members of the general house elect the SGPC president and other office bearers. By now, the Sikhs know well that basically



the Badals select a man, send a slip of paper in an envelope that is opened right on the spot and a usual cry of Bole So Nihal follows. This becomes the choice of the Panth.

It is immediately followed by the chosen one thanking the Badal family members, the SGPC members, the sangat and the Akal Purakh, very often in that order.

It was no different this time. It wasn't expected to be. But the fact that a Sikh organization in times of crisis for the community, and with a budget of Rs 400 crores and hundreds of gurdwaras, educational institutions, social forums, hospitals and inestimable real estate resources, men and money power, simply sits on it all and exploits the resources for the benefit of the Akali Dal and its top brass, has been perturbing the Sikhs for a long time now.

The challenges facing the community are many, and tough. Apart from the daily quibbles over Maryada, there have been partisan and bitter debates on on the subject of Dasam Granth, All India Sikh Gurdwara Act, status of Takht Sahibans, appointments of top clergy, issues of resource distribution between Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh, an increasingly widespread tendency at apostasy, the culture of

derawad, the issues of place of priestly class in Sikh society, the role of missionary colleges and seminaries, and sundry other matters.

Stepping back from such issues, there are larger issues of the Sikh community's interface with the neo-liberal economy's realities that affects the religion and its administration in interesting ways.

The issue of virtually every village in Punjab having separate gurdwaras, the prevalence of caste as a construct within the Sikh society, the increasing distance between the Sikhs and the Dalits, the poor handling of the trouble caused by Sirsa dera's fraudster sadh and the affect it has been having on Sikh-Dalit relationship, are all issues that one would have thought would come in for serious discussion within the SGPC.

Instead, we are treated every year to the sorry spectacle of the SGPC leaders assuring us that the affairs of the religious body are being run "exactly as per the wishes of the Akali Dal leadership." This year, Avtar Singh Makkar, propped up as the leader of the urban Sikhs, a non-Jat, and a spineless man to boot, educated us that the SGPC affairs have always been decided by the Akali Dal leadership and even asked the reporters, "Why do you have any doubt about it?" No one had any doubts, but Makkar will go down in history as the man who spoke the shameless truth with a straight face without flinching.

That is a better achievement than any Tohra.

The Diaspora Sikhs will do well to just compare the functioning of the SGPC to the way they have been trying to run their community affairs. The new team at Surrey is working on how to involve youth and children in community activities. It is seeing education as a way out. The Fremont Sahib gurdwara team is working on how to pull out

the gurdwara administration from huge debts and integrate the sangat into the day to day functioning of the community life in gurdwaras. The El Sobrante gurdwara is paying attention to the growing role of the community and thus trying to add infrastructure to the gurdwara while trying to take along the local residents.

As all of this happens, the SGPC takes a cautious decision that suits the Badals: stay away from the Guruta Gaddi celebrations since the Badals' write may not run all over. So it just makes a token presence, then walks away. When the Sikhs the world over were fully immersed in religiosity and a great chance was there to ensure that the issue of education could be brought to the heart of all community debate, the SGPC simply decides to squander it all away.

The continuous effort to keep Bibi Jagir Kaur near the power center of the Akali Dal and the SGPC is also questionable considering the charges she is facing in courts of law, and her perceived role in the murky affair of the death of her own daughter. Even Cherie Blair had to blush, but not the Akali leadership.

Mismanagement and malfeasance in the SGPC has been spoken of ad nauseum by now. Sometime back, there was renewed talk in some circles about underlining the need for structural and organizational changes but the machinations of the Badals have taken the force out of the sails of such a revolution.

Now we have a situation where the Akali Dal president Sukhbir Singh Badal announces from any available stage that his party is fielding four candidates for the Delhi Assembly elections and two of them will be fighting on BJP symbols. "Earlier, all were fighting on BJP tickets but this time two will fight on the Akali Dal's own symbol," he said.

Next time, you don't even have to make an allegation that the Akali Dal is in league with the RSS. Just quote Sukhbir Singh Badal. The novices are candid, though due to stunted intellectual growth.

Surely, if there is nothing wrong with the Akali Dal candidates fighting on BJP symbol, there can't be much wrong with BJP candidates fighting on Akali Dal symbol. What now is the hassle for any BJP member to fight elections to the SGPC under an Akali Dal symbol?

And where goes the authority of

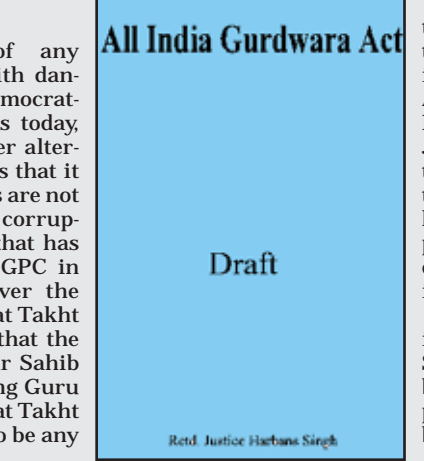
Do we need an All India Gurdwara Act?

Jagmohan Singh

Institutionalization of any religion is fraught with dangers, but within the democratic set up that prevails today, we are yet to evolve another alternative. Sometimes one feels that it is better that the two Takhts are not infected with the virus of corruption and mismanagement that has become the hallmark of SGPC in all its functioning. However the Tercentenary celebrations at Takht Hazur Sahib have showed that the functioning of Takht Hazur Sahib is no better: The forthcoming Guru Gobind Singh celebrations at Takht Patna Sahib are not likely to be any better.

Two of the main Takhts of the Sikh nation are outside the purview of the management of the SGPC in its present form - Takht Hazur Sahib and Takht Patna Sahib. Though through the electoral collage and Management committees of these two Takhts, the SGPC has some say in the management of these Gurdwaras, the SGPC does not intervene much, even in the positive way, for it realizes its limitations.

This however has led to a situation where the Code of Conduct, with all its pitfalls and weaknesses, has yet to be implemented in Nanded and Patna.



It is ironical that the SGPC grudgingly and stealthily denies democratic participation rights to Haryana-based SGPC members, but seeks inclusion of non-resident Sikhs as members.

Panthic thinkers fed up with the working of the SGPC are skeptical about any possible changes in case the All India Gurdwara Act is formulated and implemented. First of all, today there is no Justice Harbans Singh to pursue the formulation and implementation of the Act. Second, there is hardly any enthusiasm in the present SGPC leadership for democratization of its functioning.

It is ironical that the SGPC in its last session at the Teja Singh Samundri Hall was not only slow but grudging to give democratic participation rights to the members of the SGPC elected from the state of Haryana, which form part of the original jurisdiction of the Sikh Gurdwara Act, 1925, but on the other hand have passed a resolution for inclusion of non-resident Sikhs as members of the SGPC? While the later proposal is welcome, how can we condone the denial of rights to Haryana members?

The experience of Sikhs in Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Mumbai, London, California, Dubai - almost any-

where in the world, with respect to management of Gurdwaras requires newer ideas and thoughts. The international Sikh community may start using the internet for exchange of views and opinion, SGPC notwithstanding.

Akal Takht amid all this debate when we all know who calls the shots? No one family, no matter how powerful, can appropriate to itself the entire decision making for the community. It is time the community talks back, reacts back, and takes its affairs into its own hands. Otherwise "Koorr Phire Pardhan Ve Lalo".

One of the most definitive ways in which the lack of democracy and accountability gets underlined is the way the budget making exercise of the SGPC takes place. The Rs 400 crore budget is transcribed

in four thick volumes, made almost unreadable thanks to the talent of the drafting team. Then it is presented before the general house and in less than a minute, someone belts out the war cry of "Bole So Nihal." As "Sat Sri Akal" echoes around the Teja Singh Samundri Hall, the budget is declared passed.

How would have the mahant system been worse than this?

When was the last time you heard a discussion in the SGPC about how to cleanse the system, how to formulate norms about

how to be a member, how to end politicization of the religious affairs body? Or how to make budgeting procedures more transparent by opening ways of reviewing and auditing of the budget?

The Sikh Nation must get its act together to pull the SGPC from the morass it has slipped into. Every gurdwara, every forum of the Sikhs should be debating the issue in its weekly gatherings. We need seminars, workshops, debates on how to save the SGPC. It is not about the Badals or the Makkar, it is about us.

With Rs 400 crore budget, and wide acceptability as a representative organisation of the Sikh community, the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee was custom-made to not just represent but advance the religion, and take it through the labyrinths of a discourse with modernity. Instead, the SGPC today is a hand-maiden of just one family, a bunch of power-hungry people and is manned either by the irreligious or the unscrupulous. Complete lack of democracy and good governance practices have now reduced it to real madhouse. No wonder, those who man it take pride in calling it a Mini Parliament. In reality, it is as badly run as the Indian Parliament.

