

BHAIR VIR SINGH AS INSTITUTION BUILDER: A STUDY OF HIS CONTRIBUTION IN EARLY 20TH CENTURY SIKH REVIVALISM

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ABSTRACT

This paper intends to understand the life and works of Bhai Vir Singh (1872-1957) as builder of institutions and practices which have played foundational role in the life, institutions, culture and practice of Sikhs in twentieth and twenty first century. It would not be an exaggeration here, to note, that without Bhai Vir Singh's contribution, Sikhs of 20th century would have been suffering from severe limitations in terms of education, history, print culture, commerce and philanthropy. Bhai Vir Singh emerged as the most influential modern educator on the history and legacy of Sikh Gurus, Sikh sacred writings and Sikh historical traditions. There is no doubt that Sikhs have been given spiritual guidance by Sri Guru Granth Sahib, and the life and teachings of ten Sikh Gurus. It was only with the efforts and contribution of Bhai Vir Singh, that Sikhs got an access to a focused, standard, authentic, annotated corpus of Sikh literature.

KEYWORDS: *Revivalism, Annotated, Authentic, Institutions, Contribution, Liberating.*

INTRODUCTION

Bhai Vir Singh invested his unconditional efforts to bring the glorious tradition of Sikhs before the readers of 20th century in a modern and lucid language and that too in such creative manner that it served the dual purpose of literature and history at the same time. When Akalis were liberating the sites of Sikh Gurudwaras from Mahants, Bhai Vir Singh was playing the same role through his scholarship. He was spending hours on his writing table to remove unauthentic content from the vast corpus of traditional Sikh literature available in the form of hand written manuscripts. He was producing brief books, written in a very simple language and to be sold on very affordable prices for educational and intellectual upliftment of common Punjabi reader in Gurumukhi. Despite his meritorious achievements in English education, he did not accept employment or any other recognition from British. Whenever he addressed British officials in his writings in Khalsa Samachar, it was to pursue the public interest of Sikh education and Sikh sacred space. It is mistakenly termed as loyalty towards the British whereas the British termed him as a Neo Sikh to be kept under watch. Much before the rise of Mahatma Gandhi or swadeshi

movement, he was working for swadeshi banking as it is clear from the establishment of Punjab and Sind bank in 1908. While Mahatma Gandhi wrote against allopathic medicine in his Hind Swaraj, Bhai Vir Singh was also working towards promotion of alternative medicine and established of Homeopathic Hospital in Amritsar.

This paper intends to lay emphasis upon the fact that Bhai Vir Singh was not the author of books only; he was the builder of institutions. And these were the institutions which shaped the identity of Sikh community in 20th century.

Text Books

The very first encounter which we had with Bhai Vir Singh was as school students through Punjabi text books. To every student of Punjabi, Bhai Vir Singh is the author of immortal poems. But it must be remembered that like Tolstoy in Russian, he was working hard to create basic text books for the students of Punjabi in the last decades of 19th century. This was the time when Punjab was learning to live with the new western system of Education with English as the medium of instruction. The new system was indeed a complete departure with the past.

In the tradition of indigenous education, there were hundreds of schools in Punjab during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Some were run with the help of religious grant and majorities were run with the contribution of community. There were large number of Gurmukhi schools which imparted knowledge with the help of Gurmukhi text books on language, grammar, poetics, medicine, history and theology. Vedant was one of the popular subjects in schools run by Nirmala ascetics. Chanaka Bhakha, Sarkutavli, Hanuman Natak, Niti Shatak were a few standard text books for laying the foundations. Vocational manuals were also taught in apprentice schools but those were largely in Persian script. These were called Kasabnama, the books of profession. After the British took over Punjab in 1849, a department of education was established with Director of Public Instruction Office. Dr. G.W. Leitner, founder Principal of Government College, Lahore prepared a very elaborate report on all schools and centres of learning which were imparting indigenous education in Punjab. This report was published in the form of a book 'History of Indigenous Education in Punjab in 1882. It was reported that the level of literacy in Punjab under Maharaja Ranjit Singh was quite high, and a later day report in Dawn Newspaper also highlighted the similar picture.

In 1876, Oriental College Lahore started teaching Punjabi after the efforts of Sir Attar Singh Badhour who presented a strong case for Punjabi literary tradition. S.Aya Singh, editor of Khalsa Parkash also played significant role. Professor Gurmukh Singh was the first teacher appointed for this purpose. The new work required preparation of syllabus, primers, text books, reading material and dictionaries etc. We are not aware of the names of the first authors of text books for Gurmukhi course, but later on Bhai Vir Singh devoted much energy towards preparing such material. In 1892, he prepared a text book of Physical Geography for Punjabi children. In the same year, he published fourth primer of Gurmukhi, 'Gyan Deepika'. In 1896, he prepared the first Punjab-Farsi Lughat that is sort of Punjabi-Persian dictionary. According to Harnam Singh Shan, this was the only lughat where his name as author was inscribed on title cover.

Khalsa Tract society

During the early days, there was culture of oral discourses delivered by philosophers and men who had a spiritual bent of mind which was known as Satsang. It was a culture of direct communication with the selected audience. Some writers used to act as scribes for the discourse and it could be conserved in the form of manuscripts. Discourses delivered by Bhai Mani Singh have reached us in the form of *Sikhan Di Bhagatmala* and *Gian Ratnavali*. During Bhai Vir Singh's early times, the city of Amritsar was a regular site for religious discourses. Besides, there used to be debates around the questions of religion, ethics and philosophy. Bhai Vir Singh had grown up seeing and absorbing these discourses and debates. At the same time, he was aware of the role played by Christian tract societies, where small printed tracts were created and circulated for proselytizing.

Printing Press

Although Christian missionaries had introduced Printing press in Serampur, Bengal much earlier; Punjab was slow in following the growth of print culture. In Sikh religious literature, handwritten manuscripts remained a dominant practice. There were many Deras and Bungas, where writers of Gurmukhi devoted much time and energy to prepare copies of Sikh literature. Bhai Vir Singh was very much aware of the role of printing press in promoting the religion and culture of a community. He was aware of the declining status of Punjabi language after the arrival of British in Punjab. He was aware that writing in Punjabi alone was not going to solve the entire problem because the propagation of literature through selected hand written manuscripts was very slow and costly process. In 1891, he acted like a pioneer in Punjabi print culture and established a printing press with the help of his friend Wazir Singh. It was established in Amritsar and named as Wazir Hind Press. Initially it was using lithograph technique in printing. Slowly it emerged as the largest lithograph press of the city.

According to Anita Minocha, lithograph was more creative and more popular with earlier print culture in India.

Gurdwara Management Reforms

In 1920, Akali movement raised mass struggles in the form of Akali Morcha to liberate Sikh Gurdwaras from the control of mahants. Mahants were the descendents of those Udasisants who were given responsibility of daily rehatmaryada of Gurdwaras. With the passage of time, due to vast landed property attached with these Gurdwaras, these mahants became corrupt and began to replace Sikh rehatmaryada with non-Sikh practices at these sacred sites. With the passage of time, the prikarma of Sri Harimndir Sahib became the site of idol worship.

Bhai Vir Singh was not concerned about the religious -spiritual affairs of Sri Darbar Sahib only. He was keenly observing and writing on practical aspects of its management. He was first to write on the issue of what we call disaster management today. In those days, the sacred pool of Darbar sahib was without safety layer of nets that we have today. Bhai Vir Singh wrote in detail on how to provide safety for devotees while taking holy dip. From time to time, he also warned the management of Sri Darbar Sahib about the issue of safety for women devotees also.

Chief Khalsa Diwan

Bhai Vir Singh had observed the increasing differences between the Khalsa Diwan Lahore and Khalsa Diwan Amritsar. He was of the opinion that there should be a single guiding institution for the whole Sikh Community, which could guide the Sikh youth and masses from time to time. He wrote about this need of a united leadership under one institution, many times in Khalsa Samachar. His ideas certainly exercised a positive influence of Sikh leadership and thus Chief Khalsa Diwan was founded in 1901 after merging the Khalsa Diwan Amritsar and Khalsa Diwan Lahore.

It's interesting to note here, that Chief Khalsa Diwan and Khalsa Tract Society had certain common objectives, which are mentioned as below:

1. To encourage Punjabi Language, to translate various texts written in other languages into Punjabi and to publish relevant books on Sikh history.
2. To add notes to Sri Guru Granth Sahib and other texts of Sikh history and philosophy, in Punjabi.
3. To disseminate the teachings of the Sikh Gurus amongst the masses.
4. (as mentioned in the *Rules and Regulations of Chief Khalsa Diwan*, Amritsar, Registered 1904, under the Act of 1860, Article 21)

Similarly, in the February, 1930 Tract of Khalsa Tract Society, it mentions the following priorities for the society:

1. The society, must work for evading the existing blind faiths and false practices, strictly with regards to religious and moral contexts.
2. To publish tracts so that the Sikh masses may come to know about their History and legacy of their past.
3. To publish tracts on the life and teachings of Sikh Gurus and Gurbani.
4. To do all possible efforts for the propagation of tracts.

Thus we may find many common causes between the objectives for the establishment of Chief Khalsa Diwan and Khalsa Tract Society. This can also be acclaimed that the objectives and ideas of Chief Khalsa Diwan were achieved through the publishing of these ideas in the Tracts of Khalsa Tract Society. Thus the idea of the Sikh leadership was ensured by the writers of these tracts to reach the common masses. These writings had a deep impact on the life and thoughts of its readers as it was written in a simple but impressive language which was a unique blending of facts with fiction and creative skills of a writer to present the history and facts in an impressive way.

Banking

If you look at any signboard or bank slip of Punjab and Sind bank, you will be astonished to find the Sikh sacred salutation Ek Onkar Sri Vahiguru Ji Ki Fateh(Hail, Victory to Sri Waheguru) in Gurmukhi letters. At the same time, this slip carries information that this bank is a Government

of India Undertaking. This is the legacy of Bhai Vir Singh. This bank was established in 1908 by Trilochan Singh, Sundar Singh Majithia and Bhai Vir Singh.

Banking was a traditional commercial activity quite popular with Punjabi merchant castes. There are many references to banking activity in Guru Granth Sahib. Guru Amardas Ji blessed Bhai Gangu Shah to start banking business in Delhi. There were wealthy Sehajdhari Sikh bankers in Bengal, Sindh and Deccan Hyderabad.

After colonialism, the British introduced modern commercial banking. State banks were established in various princely states. After 1921 Non Cooperation Movement, the congress encouraged the growth of national institutions like schools, colleges and banking.

Punjab and Sind Bank was nationalized in 1973. It introduced and propagated Sikh culture in the world of Indian banking. This bank started the practice of publishing annual calendar covering major themes of Sikh culture and heritage. Mentioning about the history of Punjab and Sind Bank, the website of latter mentions the contribution of Bhai Vir Singh in the following words,

“It was in the year 1908, when a humble idea to uplift the poorest of poor of the land culminated in the birth of Punjab & Sind Bank with the far-sighted vision of luminaries like Bhai Vir Singh, Sir Sunder Singh Majithia and Sardar Tarlochan Singh. They enjoyed the highest respect with the people of Punjab.

The bank was founded on the principle of social commitment to help the weaker section of the society in their economic endeavours to raise their standard of life.”

Homeopathy

Homeopathy is the only medicine system of western origin that is considered to be a part of alternative medicine- AYUSH. It was introduced in Punjab by a German doctor Honingberger, who was a close friend of Dr. Hannemien, the founder of homeopathic medicine system.

Bhai Vir Singh belonged to the family of physicians. His maternal grandfather Giani Hazara Singh was a famous hakim also. These were the times when practice in traditional medicine and contribution to religious scholarship went together. Bhai Mohan Singh Vaid, another major scholar who worked for giving Punjabi language a modern direction, was also a practitioner of traditional medicine. He wrote extensively on health and medicine in simple Gurmukhi for bringing awareness amongst masses.

Bhai Vir Singh's father Dr. Charan Singh was a practitioner of allopathic medicine. In 1943, Bhai Vir Singh established a homeopathic hospital in Amritsar. It was due to Bhai Vir Singh's influence; Homeopathy became popular remedy among educated Sikh middle class associated with cities like Amritsar and Tarn Taran.

Hemkunt Sahib Connection

Varinder Valia has written extensively on highlighting Bhai Vir Singh's role in locating the site of Sri Hemkunt Sahib. Here is the long quote from Varinder Valia describing his role:

“Bhai Vir Singh was instrumental in locating the site of Gurdwara Hemkunt Sahib. In the late nineteenth century, Sikhs began to search for Hemkunt — a place high in the Himalayan mountains and mentioned in the autobiographical Bachitra Natak of Guru Gobind Singh. Pandit Tara Singh Narotam, a nineteenth century Nirmala scholar, was the first Sikh to trace the geographical location of Hemkunt. He wrote of Hemkunt as one among the 508 Sikh shrines he described in Sri Gur Tirath Sangrah (first published in 1884).

Later, Bhai Vir Singh was instrumental in developing Hemkunt after it had been, in a sense, re-discovered by another Sikh in search of the Guru’s tap asthan. Sohan Singh was a retired granthi from the Indian Army who was working in a gurdwara (Sikh temple) in Tehri Garhwal. In 1932, he read the description of Hemkunt in Bhai Vir Singh’s Sri Kalgidhar Chamatkar (1929). Bhai Vir Singh’s description was so compelling that on reading it Sant Sohan Singh resolved to search for the place where Guru Gobind Singh had meditated.

With the inspiration of Bhai Vir Singh, the first jatha (group of pilgrims) was formed and sponsored by Chief Khalsa Diwan, Amritsar, in 1952.

We can see from the points of reference described above that Bhai Vir Singh’s role was not confined to higher level of mysticism and refined literary pursuit only for which he is popularly known. He was acting as the inspiration and support behind a number of institutions which shaped modern day Sikh identity.

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