



# The Sikh Way

A PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

I.J. Singh

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I.J. Singh is the author of a collection of essays titled *Sikhs and Sikhism: A View with a Bias*, published by South Asia Books, Columbia, Missouri, and Manohar Books, New Delhi. A second edition was published by The Centennial Foundation, Guelph, Ontario, Canada.

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## PREFACE

I have often wondered why people write. Why do I? Certainly not to teach or preach to others. To profess to preach would require a level of hubris that I hope I do not have. Possibly, there are as many motives as there are authors. Some write for money, others for fame. (I think it was Samuel Johnson who said that he who does not write for money is a damned fool.) Some have a message they think others need, as if from the burning bush; others carry a weight and they must unburden themselves. For some, it is like having a child, with its intermixing of pain with pleasure and satisfaction.

I think that writing about things that are precious to one, that define one, is like holding a mirror to the self. It may be an adjunct to human vanity, but a good mirror can also reflect with brutal honesty. Writing becomes then the most economical and precise means of self-examination — as true and accurate as one's talents and inclinations allow. This remains my intent.

*How good is the mirror and what does it reflect?*

Six years ago I published a collection of essays titled *Sikhs and Sikhism: A View with a Bias*. The response, particularly of young Sikhs of the diaspora, was overwhelming. It was the most exhilarating experience of my life.

But I write about Sikhism as I view it. The essays in this book are meanderings — a pilgrimage — through the rich tapestry of Sikh religion. Therefore, the issues that I engage run the gamut from those that stem from history and tradition to those that seem to have emerged

more recently as we interact with different people and their religions across the world. I usually provide little or no direct citations in support of my positions, but that is intentional. I hope that my opinions can be buttressed and supported by scriptural, historical or traditional sources. At times it will appear that when I encounter Sikh practices that I find difficult to accept or explain, I look for reasons in the Hindu cultural and religious milieu that surrounds us. This is not to lay blame on Hinduism. It is merely a reflection of how the larger sea of Hinduism influences Sikhism because both share the same space and culture.

The essays that follow are, in fact, variations on a theme. The question naturally arises, what theme? The theme remains the same in all of my writing: being and becoming a Sikh. Of interest to me, then, are issues of what we believe, how we arrive at what we believe and how we live. How we see ourselves and how others view us. How our beliefs shape us. How the music of Sikhism plays in our lives. There are complex melodies and *ragaas* (or ragas, in English) to a beautifully rich tradition in which I find particular delight and pleasure.

Since these essays stand as independent pieces and not as sequential chapters in a book, some repetition is inevitable. Also, on rereading them I find that my writing is neither exclusively descriptive nor entirely prescriptive. If my essays appear somewhat incomplete, they are. A sense of completion would mean that there is nothing more to say. I would like the reader to stay engaged and have the last word. If these brief forays into Sikhism can capture the reader's attention and provoke a discussion, even disagreement, my purpose would be amply served. It is in discussion and debate that we sharpen our focus, define our goals and hone our skills.

While I am responsible, indeed, accountable for the ideas and how they unfold in this book, this does not mean that all these ideas and concepts are entirely or even partially mine originally. The debt to others, some of whom I have never met, remains unrecognized but is not lessened because of the paucity and brevity of my expression. In

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my wanderings through Sikh history and religion, I stand on the shoulders of giants. This very general and evasive acquiescence to historians and scholars of the past and present as also to friends and foes alike will have to suffice.

I.J. Singh  
New York  
January 29, 2001



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No one lives his life entirely free of all debts to others, and there are many that I shoulder in the writing of these essays. My first and foremost thanks are to the many friends at The Centennial Foundation who made this book possible. I am particularly grateful to T. Sher Singh and Sat Gosal; without their persuasion and kindness this project may never have seen the light of day. Good lawyers both, they are also excellent judges of human nature. Somehow they knew that I delight in procrastination; they wisely denied me that pleasure and luxury by the very little time they gave me to finish these essays. Ishnan Kaur saw to the endless drudgery and detail of the production and printing with patience and understanding. She was a true midwife in the birth of this book.

Some of the essays have appeared briefly in modified versions elsewhere. The one on bioethical issues is slated to be published sometime this summer in a shortened, different version in *Ecumenism*, a journal published in Montreal. A twice-as-long version of the essay on the Sikh diaspora was presented at the conference titled "Sikhism: The Religion for the Third Millennium," which took place at Punjabi University in Patiala, India, March 27 to 29, 2000, and will appear in full in the transactions of the conference. The material that went into the essay on Sikh institutions has appeared as parts of several commentaries in the *Sikh Review* (Calcutta); it has been collated and edited for this collection.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge many friends whom I have used as a sounding board for some of these ideas at dinners and

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over the telephone. I may have pestered them, but they were generous with their time, critique and kudos. With Sher and Sat, often they were the extra ears and eyes that I needed. I particularly note Jerry Barrier, Ravinder Singh, Harpreet Singh, Roopinder Singh, Gagandeep Kaur, Hakam Singh and my wife Neena.

I.J. Singh  
New York  
February 1, 2001

## INTRODUCTION

Dr. I.J.Singh is a self-proclaimed operator of a “body shop.” To the rest of us, he is a professor of anatomy who just happens to be a humble, sincere and erudite commentator on Sikhism. He delights in dissecting and exposing the bare essentials of a person. Metaphorically, he enjoys reducing Sikhism — its traditions, religion and heritage — to its essence. Sikhism is a practical religion of discussion, debate, faith and humility. The method the Gurus, or Ten Masters, used to reveal the new religion and in particular the formation of the *Khalsa* by Guru Gobind Singh, the Tenth Master, underscore the centrality in Sikhism of dialogue among followers whose minds have been emancipated from preexisting strictures. There is no need for an intermediary (such as a priest) for the dialogue to occur. *The Sikh Way: A Pilgrim's Progress* is thus an attempt to explicate the frame of reference a Sikh must adopt to nurture the dialogue.

Dr. Singh writes as a practitioner of Sikhism. He instructs the reader that he is not a historian but rather a commentator on contemporary issues facing the Sikh diaspora. The marshaling of facts is left to professional historians who, he remind us, must genuinely divulge their biases, which are inherent in the so-called Western historical method. In assessing different traditions and cultural norms, historians must be sensitive to the profound significance of the *Guru Granth* for all Sikhs, and to the part that faith plays in Sikhism. Faith and reason are interdependent. In writing *The Sikh Way: A Pilgrim's Progress*, Dr. Singh “paints with broad brush strokes.” His objective is to comment on a wide array of issues, such as the Sikh perspective on bioethics, abortion and the delineation between Sikhism and other religions, by adopting a broader view of the Sikh tradition. This perspective flows from a paring of the myths from the first principles

that must be extracted from the teachings of the Ten Masters. Sikhism, we are reminded, is first and foremost a religion of ideas, albeit with a grounding in humility. Indeed, the word “Sikh” is derived from the Sanskrit word “*sisya*,” which means “student” or “disciple.” The logic of this argument is simply and elegantly displayed by Dr. Singh in each of his chapters, particularly in those that explore the boundaries between Sikhism and Hinduism.

Referring to the style of the Gurus, Dr. Singh continues the dialogue. The traditional parables take a new form. By way of example, the story of Baisakhi 1699 is more about its relevance today in the corporate world. The leader must remember that governance is truly effective if the consent of the governed is first obtained. The concern, then, is not with what happened in the tent but with what practical moral tools the Tenth Guru left his Sikhs. The Five Beloved, or *Panj Pyare*, were a model for a dispute-resolution mechanism. How effectively is that model used today? The *Khalsa* was created to fill a spiritual, not a military, need. The Sikhs had an army; recruits from neighbors were always available. The Gurus never fought for the sake of acquiring land or power. The role of the *Khalsa* was to reinforce the inherent dignity of all persons. Well before the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in the West, in creating the *Khalsa* Guru Gobind Singh enunciated a creed for recognizing the inalienable rights of all persons. This creed evolved from the teachings of Guru Nanak. Its application was exemplified by the nine Gurus who succeeded him. The substance of *The Sikh Way: A Pilgrim's Progress* is an illustration of how the message was put into practice. The old moral dilemmas merely have a new form. The framework for addressing these dilemmas has been well established by the Gurus.

Dr. Singh goes to great pains to underscore that Sikhism is a unique religion. One would assume that there is no need for such argument. After all, Sikhism is the fifth largest religion in the world. All established institutions of higher learning recognize Sikhism as a unique religion. Dr. Singh, however, cautions that in the last few years there has been a disturbing outpouring of literature, stemming from

vested interests in fundamentalist India, that aims to blur the distinctions between Sikhism and Hinduism. Good fences make good neighbors. The Gurus exhorted a Hindu to be a good Hindu and a Sikh to be a good Sikh. To now contend that Sikhs are merely good Hindus not only denigrates both Hinduism and Sikhism but grossly distorts the facts. Those facts are ably set forth by the author.

Finally, Dr. Singh both castigates and congratulates the Sikh diaspora for its efforts to preserve the Sikh tradition. He chides those who focus on personalities and blindly accept the authority of others in administering *gurdwaras*. These people should instead reflect on the ideas of the Gurus and attempt to ensure full equality in the management of *gurdwaras*, for example. It is lamentable that these institutions do not provide a forum for discussion of issues of morality and faith prevalent in the general community, such as the transgressions of Bill Clinton. Dr. Singh gives kudos to those Sikhs who are engaged in emancipated discussion in cyberspace. The significance of the *sangat*, however, must not be diminished. Faith is cultivated in the presence of informed minds, and the ability to persuade must not be overlooked. Dr. Singh reminds us by reference to the lives of the Gurus that we must be equipped with a good dose of humor, compassion and self-control. To disagree agreeably is a great virtue.

The Centennial Foundation, too, believes in the imperative of a dialogue on Sikhism. It is our mandate to produce and disseminate high-caliber educational resources to promote knowledge and appreciation of Sikh history, philosophy and tradition. As part of the celebrations of the tercentenary of the founding of the *Khalsa*, we published a revised edition of Dr. Singh's *Sikhs and Sikhism: A View with a Bias*. The response to this book was stupendous.

On this, the bicentenary of the formation of the *Sarkar Khalsa* (Sikh Empire) by Maharaja Ranjit Singh, we are pleased to publish *The Sikh Way: A Pilgrim's Progress*. The ethos of multiculturalism and respect for the rule of law during his rule (1801 to 1839) serves only to underscore the importance of knowing one's history. Having an

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intense sense of one's own worth — one's own traditions — is a precondition for recognizing the worth of others. Only then do we truly discern the “us” in “them” and the “them” in “us.”

Happy Baisakhi!

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# 1

## ON SIKHISM, HISTORY AND HISTORIANS

Sikhs are fond of history, but I don't know if they have learned much from it. Their reverence for history is clearly seen in the fact that about two-thirds of their daily prayer is a recounting of their history.

Sikhs are also inordinately proud of their past. They never tire of telling themselves and others of their glorious tradition — of the bravery of the Gurus and the early Sikhs, and of their wisdom, mercy, generosity, compassion and kindness. There are many people who point to a remarkable past. The Arab world was the cradle of science and civilization once. The Chinese invented gunpowder, were great traders and speak of an awesome past. The French and the British at one time ruled better than a third of the known world. Jews sing of their glory of 2000 years ago. The Hindus of India too have a past that scholars can spend lifetimes researching, and many do. All had their day in the sun.

I don't know if that is the best lesson history has to teach us. The past has more inherent worth than being something to crow and sing about. Just remembering how great we were yesterday does not automatically translate into how great we are today. If all we can do is to praise our past, so can others praise theirs; children and insecure adults routinely exalt their fathers. What is so satisfying in that?