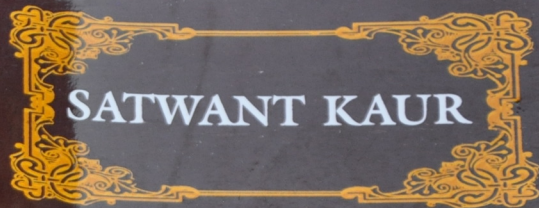


Bhai Vir Singh (1872-1957), popularly known as 'the father of modern Punjabi literature', appeared on the scene at a time when movements of religious awakening were swaying the young minds. Born a year before the birth of Singh Sabha, Bhai Vir Singh soon became its main inspiration and guiding spirit. Bhai Vir Singh devoted whole of his life for the rejuvenation of his community through voluminous writings, which covered a wide variety of prose and verse, novels and annotation of the Sikh sacred texts. He even started a Punjabi paper, the *Khalsa Samachar*, the only weekly which celebrated its centenary in 1999.

Basically a spiritual and elevated soul Bhai Vir Singh shunned worldly publicity. He hardly attended any functions or made a public speech. Honour came unsought with the Government of India conferring Padam Bhushan and the Sahitya Akademy giving him first award in Punjabi literature.

Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan, a premier literary and cultural organisation in the capital, was set up in 1958 to propagate Bhai Vir Singh's teachings through publication of his works. To ensure that Bhai Vir Singh's writings reach the larger audience the Sadan has launched ambitious plans for translation of his works in English, some European languages and various regional languages of India.



BHAI VIR SINGH

Translator

Bimal Kaur



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Foreword

The Sikh faith founded by Guru Nanak (1469-1539) has existed barely for five centuries, but this relatively short period has been packed with most colourful and inspiring history. Sikhism, as determined by the number of its adherents, is one of the two great religions of the world; the principles of monotheism, egalitarianism and protected minorities for freedom of faith represent major evolutionary steps in the development of religious philosophies. Arnold Toynbee, the great world historian, observed: "Man's religious history may be obscure, yet one thing can be forecast. The living higher religions are going to influence each other more than ever before in the days of increasing communication between all parts of the world and all branches of the human race. In this coming religious debate, the Sikh religion, and its scripture, the *Adh Granth*, will have something of special value to say to the rest of the world."

Notwithstanding such glowing appreciation of their role, information about the Sikh contribution to world culture has been very scantily propagated. Bhim Vir Singh, the modern guru of Sikh world of letters, took upon himself to provide valuable historical accounts of the Sikh way of life.

Among other great works of his is the heroic tale of "Satwant Kaur", a Sikh girl who was kidnapped by Muslim invaders during the eighteenth century. This awe-inspiring story has been translated into English as *Mir Sahib Kaur*. Bhim Vir Singh's *Satwant Kaur* has been preserved in putting this new English version of *Satwant Kaur* into the hands of discerning readers.

JASWANT SINGH MEH
Honorary General Secretary

New Delhi
April 13, 2003

Satwant Kaur

1

*Bal Chutkyo Bandhan Paray Kachhoo Na Hoat Upaayay,
Kahu Nanak Ab Oat Har Gaj Jiu Hobu Sahay.*
(S.G.G.S. * p. 1429)

(My power is shattered and I am fettered : and lo there is no escape. Saith Nanak : O Lord, Thou art my only refuge : Now save me, as Thou saved Gaj Thy devotee.)

O my Lord! Help me, help me! How did I get caught in this peril? What shall I do? What can I do? I am sinking—oh, oh, *Kalghiwale Pita* save me. Tell me what to do. How did I get here? Yes, it must be the result of my own actions. Take pity on me; oh, I'm going to faint.

After a while her consciousness returned.

O, Lord! Set me free from this horrible place. While I am sitting here in the dark, I can see my home is bright with lights. My father is reciting *katha* and my beloved mother, brother and sisters are all sitting, listening to him. Now they are standing up for *ardas*. My brother – so soft-hearted and so devoted to Guru ji, for whom he is always ready to lay down his life – this angelic brother of mine, his cheeks are wet with tears. They are singing now...if I try hard, I am sure

I can hear them :

Khet Ju Mandiyo Soorma Ab Joojhan Ko dao
(S.G.G.S. p. 1105)

(The God's) Hero has descended upon (the life's) battlefield; now is the time to strike.)

Ah! How sweet the words sound!

The voice fell silent. Abruptly it began again, "What! Did I fall asleep? No, I am surely losing my head. I don't know what I am babbling about.

Is there no one to help me? Who ever heard of young girls being treated so badly? And what was my fault? I tried to help and, in return, was taken away to be a slave. May God have pity on him who did this. *Dhan Guru!* My faith will see me through all difficulties...and suffering. So much time has passed since I was captured so treacherously. My hands were tied behind my back and like cattle we were herded together. All the way from Khanna (in Punjab) to Kabul! How did we survive this arduous journey? Yes, there were other girls like me. At least we could cling to each other and share our tears and memories. But now, now there is no one...all have been sold ... like animals.

My father used to say that the child of man is the most valuable of all God's creation; but here she is sold cheaper than a donkey! It must be the Lord's will...but, but how am I to face all this? I have had no food or drink for the last three days. My stomach is paining with hunger, urging me to move towards the plate in the corner and eat whatever is in it. But how can I eat when I don't know what creature's flesh lies there? I am the daughter of a Sikh - I am a Sikhni! How can I eat this? But Oh Lord, I am so hungry! No, I must be strong. Let life go if it will, but I must protect my dharma ...

And she hurled the plate away.



A young Sikh girl lay fainted from hunger, outside a strange house in a far-away land. The people of the household waited for her to finish her meal and come inside. When she did not appear for a long time, one of the servants went out. Noticing her lying on the floor, he thought she was pretending to be asleep and began to beat her. The shock brought the half-dead girl back to her senses. With a scream she got up on trembling legs and, shivering with fear and weakness, she managed to totter into the house. She was pushed into a corner where a pile of dirty dishes waited for her to clean. But she barely managed to get there before she fainted once again.

Just then a young boy, the son of the master, came running and began to play with the servants. When he saw Satwant Kaur lying in a corner and being beaten by the servant, he ran across and, catching her hand, said, "Don't beat her!" Then he bent down and helped her to get up. Holding her hand, he took her into his room. He brought a bunch of grapes from the fruit bowl and pushing them into her hands said, "Dear sister, eat these, and don't cry."

Then he went to his mother and told her about the servants beating the girl. The mother was moved and immediately ordered that Satwant Kaur should stay in her room, and take care of her and her son. She was no longer to be a part of the menial staff.

Satwant Kaur felt a little better after eating the grapes, but she was so worn-out emotionally and physically that she dropped off to sleep where she sat.

The next morning the child again brought some grapes and gave them to Satwant Kaur to eat. When the mistress realized that she would not eat the meat cooked in their home, she arranged for her fruit and gave her permission to cook her own food. She was

also allowed to visit a *sahajdhari* family, who lived in the neighbourhood.

Satwant Kaur thus became free from the servant's tyranny and her life became easier. But she did not know the local language and was constantly afraid of displeasing her mistress and the young child. She did not, however, let this depress her and began to learn the language and soon became fluent in it.

The mistress of the house, Fatima, was a very unhappy woman. She had no living relatives. Her husband was notorious for his debauched ways and did not treat Fatima well. As a result, she was looked down upon by friends and relatives. Even the servants did not show her the respect due to her as the mistress of the house. Fatima became very irritable and frustrated. The only one to arouse any soft emotion in her heart was her son, Ghani, with whom she spent her most happy and joyful hours.

She noticed how loving and patient was Satwant Kaur, and became very fond of her. During her bad moods, she relied on Satwant Kaur's calm and untiring support, and gradually a warm companionship developed between these two women of different cultures and faiths.



3

Fatima suffered her husband's ill-treatment quietly for a long time, but then came a day when she felt she had had enough. She went to the wife of the Amir of Kabul and told him the sorry tale of her husband's misdeeds. The Amir, on hearing this, immediately called Fatima's husband and reprimanded him sharply and ordered him to change his ways.

This infuriated the Khan who began to search for the source of his humiliation, and soon came to know that the complainant was none other than his wife. That evening he reached his *haveli*, in a drunken rage. Drawing his sword he entered his wife's bedroom. Luckily she was still awake; and seeing the devilish figure of her husband she screamed in fear.

Satwant Kaur rushed into the room. Quickly assessing the situation, she ran behind the Khan and kicked his leg. Losing his balance, he fell flat and the sword flew out of his hands. Satwant Kaur promptly jumped on him and pinned him to the ground. Seeing her courageous action, Fatima quickly recovered and between the two they managed to tie him up securely. By this time the Khan was in a stupor and began to snore loudly.

The women sensibly opened the bonds before the Khan awoke next morning. Due to his drunken state he did not remember anything about the previous night's events, and left. At night when he came home in his usual drunken state, the memory of his wife's treachery returned to fan his anger; but Fatima and Satwant were ready to ward off his attack.

The following night, the Khan did not return at all. His addiction to liquor had become so strong that even the fear of earning the Amir's displeasure was not enough to make him give it up.

As long as his own wealth lasted, he could satisfy his thirst without any comment or criticism; but once he had run through that, he began to dip into the treasury. His friends gradually turned away from him, and his enemies got the chance to inform the Amir. The Khan was arrested and put into the lock-up. His property and wealth were confiscated. But Fatima was allowed to keep the house and was given enough money to look after herself and her son.

An inquiry was ordered into the Khan's misdeeds and, with the evidence collected, death sentence was passed on him.

When Fatima heard this, she was horrified. She had never wished her husband any harm, even at the worst moments of her suffering. She belonged to the tough Pathan community, but was herself a soft-hearted person. Besides, company of Satwant Kaur had nurtured the loving and compassionate side of her nature.

Fatima was at her wits end. Who could she turn to for help? The only person who was close enough for her to confide in was the young slave girl, and she was in no position to help. But Fatima needed to unburden herself to someone, so she called Satwant Kaur and told her the whole story. Satwant listened patiently, trying to comfort her as best as she could. She knew that they were helpless before the might of the Amir, but she felt that some effort must be made to find a solution.

After thinking for sometime, Satwant said to Fatima, "You know the Begum well. Why don't you go and see her? May be she can put in a word to the Amir, and get him to spare Khan Saheb's life."

With fresh confidence, Fatima went to the Amir's palace the next morning and begged the Begum to save her husband's life. After receiving the Begum's word that she would do her utmost to help, Fatima returned. But there was no peace in her mind.

Satwant Kaur too spent the night racking her brain. In her heart she was doubtful of any mercy being shown to the Khan. But she owed loyalty to Fatima and felt it was her duty to help her. Towards morning, a plan began to form in her mind.

When Fatima awoke, Satwant helped her to get dressed. As she was leaving for the Begum's house, Satwant said to her, "In case you find that no help is

forthcoming, don't lose heart. Ask the Begum to get you permission for a last visit to meet your husband. I am sure Amir Sahib will not refuse that."

When Fatima returned, Satwant could see that it was as she had expected. Amir Sahib had refused to listen to his wife's pleadings and was adamant that the execution should be carried out. However, the Begum had assured Fatima that she would definitely get her permission to meet the Khan one last time.

Satwant Kaur went into her room and began to recite Gurbani, which was an important part of her morning routine.

In the afternoon Fatima called her and said, "Amir Sahib has granted my request. He has sent a message that I can meet my husband tomorrow, but I must go alone."

Satwant Kaur replied, "Bibi, this is a good news. I am sure whatever the Lord does will be for our good."

Fatima: What good can happen now? All the doors are closed to me.

Satwant Kaur: Bibi, don't lose hope. You have been good to me and given me kindness and love when I was suffering so much. I shall find a way to repay your debt even if it means risking my life. Now don't ask me anything, but do what I tell you. Order a palanquin with curtains to come in the morning so that you can reach the prison in full privacy.

And so, all arrangements were made.



Khan Sahib was in a dark cell. The intoxication of his drinking had long since vanished. His eyes were sunk deep into his skull and his clothes hung loosely on

him. His face wore a look of deep dejection and shame. But it was too late and, though he felt penitent, he knew there could be no reprieve for him.

He looked up as a palanquin was brought and placed near the cell door. He knew his wife was coming for a last meeting with him; but he was astonished when shortly a beautiful girl got out and with quick steps entered the cell. She glanced around to see that they were not being observed, and spoke quietly but firmly, "There is no time to explain anything. Quickly change into these ladies clothes and keeping your face covered, get into the palanquin. When you reach your house, take your family and find the quickest way to escape to Hindustan. You can discuss the details with your wife, but please, be quick now!" The Khan wanted to ask a number of questions, but the girl's insistence to hurry made him curb his curiosity and quietly he obeyed her.

In a short while the guards returned and, unaware of the exchange, picked up the palanquin and carried it away after locking the cell door.

The next morning all preparations for the execution were made in an open ground. A big crowd had collected and, when the time came, guards were sent to fetch the prisoner. To their astonishment they found a young girl sitting in a corner. Near her was lying a bundle of clothes. They called the jailor, who was also taken aback, and shaking with rage, shouted at the girl, "Who are you? Where is Khan Sahib?"

The girl, Satwant Kaur, looked at them with a calm demeanour and replied politely, "I am the one who came in the palanquin yesterday. Khan Sahib left instead of me. Now that I am here, you can execute me instead."

Jailor : This is outrageous! O woman, you have dared to outwit me? You should be cut into pieces and fed to the vultures.

Satwant Kaur : You are right. But I have repaid my debt and saved a life. Now you do your duty and take my life. I accept the punishment.

Jailor : What? You want me to be responsible for killing a woman? Never! I'll never do such a thing. But what shall I tell my master? A seasoned jailor like me—outwitted by a scrap of a girl! If I kill you I am branded a coward, if I release you I am not doing my duty, and if I go and tell all this to my master, I shall look such a fool.

Satwant Kaur : Don't worry. The order was for the palanquin to be brought in and taken out with all its curtains closed. How can you be blamed then? Tell the whole story as it happened. I am ready to face the consequences. I am not afraid to die. I am happy because I have saved a life. I received goodness from someone when I was helpless, and I have returned this in good measure.

The jailor was astonished to hear these words. He thought for some time, but when no other way seemed open to him, he went to the darbar and related the whole story to his ruler.

The Amir was intrigued, "Who is this young woman—so courageous and self-sacrificing? Bring her here immediately," he ordered.

The jailor left at once and soon presented the girl to the Amir, who asked her, "Who are you, and why have you risked your life in this manner?"

Satwant Kaur : I belong to Punjab and I am the daughter of a Sikh. Under your tyrannous rule, I was captured and, along with others, brought here and sold like cattle. I was taken to Khan Sahib's house—the same Khan whose execution you ordered today. I was not his servant, but served his wife Fatima from whom I received love and kindness. I am here to repay the debt I owe her, in the only way I can. Yes, I helped Khan Sahib to escape, but I am not a criminal.

Amir : You are a very brave woman. You have done something not many would have attempted. Unfortunately you are a Sikh and so must face the consequences. But justice also demands that bravery is to be rewarded. What reward should be given to you?

Satwant Kaur : I don't want anything. But I would like to ask one question.

Amir : What is that?

Satwant Kaur : Why are Sikhs treated so badly? Aren't they human beings?

Amir : Sikhs are human, but they are dacoits and they obstruct my invasions into Punjab. Also they are kafirs and so must be killed.

Satwant Kaur : Sikhs are not dacoits. Your generals are the dacoits. They loot your subjects in Punjab with the help of the local governors. They are busy laying your whole kingdom to waste. The Sikhs, who are always trying to protect the common man, are unjustly blamed and killed. There is no one to listen to them, as those who are in a position to dispense justice are themselves embroiled in wrong doing. The rulers in Delhi have power but, like old lions, they are incapable of any action. It is not correct for you to have this enmity towards the Sikhs. They only attack the rulers if they are tyrants. Punjab is our homeland, our birthplace and our country. You have no right to invade it, loot it and rule over it. To protect their homeland from foreign invasion, the Sikhs rightfully fight you. I am speaking the honest truth, and I am not afraid because I do not fear death. It is in your power to take my life, and I accept that. My only wish was to get a chance to convey my feelings, and I am glad I have had that chance. Now give the order to your executioner to wield his sword.

The people were awe-struck at the boldness of this young woman, and her fearless words spoken so defiantly in the open court.

The Amir sat, his mind full of conflicting emotions—anger, pity, and even love—at the daring of this slip of a girl. Turning to her, he asked, "You have shown immense confidence and intelligence. Tell me how did you get captured?"

Satwant Kaur : Amir Sahib, it's a sorry tale but, since you have asked, I shall tell you. One of your officers was galloping through our village when his horse stumbled and the man fell into a well near our house. With the help of some people my father managed to pull him out, and looked after him for more than a week. When he became well he set off for Ludhiana, which is a town not very far from our village. One day my father received a letter from this officer saying: "I am very grateful to you and your daughter for the care given to me. My wife wants to meet your daughter as she is lonely. Please send her." My father refused.

After a few days this officer came to our village with his wife and made camp there. His wife began to visit us and she and I became good friends. One day, when I went to meet her, they overpowered me and, taking me prisoner, left the very same day.



5

Satwant Kaur continued her narrative.

I learnt that the woman was not his wife, because she disappeared soon after. This villain then asked me to marry him, but before he could force me to do so, you gave orders to your soldiers to march immediately and he had to leave to join his regiment. In the resulting confusion, I was left behind. But when your guards saw me tied up, they pushed me along with the other men and women you had captured to work as your

slaves. I too was sold off along with others. But I didn't see that devil again till today.

Amir : Where did you see him?

Satwant Kaur : (Pointing to a Pathan officer standing nearby) There, there he is!

The Amir turned furiously on him and abused and cursed him, "May you be damned in hell! Is this how you repay a good deed? May Khuda's anger rain down on your head!"

Turning to the jailor, the Amir then pronounced, "Spare this girl's life, but shoot this man at once!"

Satwant Kaur : Amir Sahib stop a minute, please. By killing him, you cannot undo my sufferings. I have no more strength left. Please do me a kindness and take my life instead.

The pitiable condition of the young girl touched the Amir's heart. In a soft voice he said, "You have gained my sympathy, young woman. Ask me anything you want."

Satwant Kaur : Please spare the life of my Fatima's husband, Khan Sahib, and don't punish the jailor. If you want to be still more generous then please send me home to my family.

Amir : I accept the first two requests but I can't fulfil your last wish. I don't think I shall ever find a more self-sacrificing girl than you. I shall relieve you of all your pain and suffering and make you my queen. All the riches and comforts will be yours to enjoy.

The Amir signalled to his guards, who promptly escorted Satwant Kaur to the women's apartments of the palace. A beautiful set of rooms was placed at her disposal and a number of maids-in-waiting were appointed to serve her and take care of her every need.

Satwant Kaur was quite unsettled by this change in her circumstances. But very soon, the cloud of worry

lifted and her face began to glow with a quiet confidence. Casually, she walked into her room, and dressed herself in the rich silken robes and jewellery placed there. She walked around—inspecting all the rooms, ordering the maids to carry out jobs and finally sending them out on various errands.

As night fell, the Amir came to the palace. He was very happy to see Satwant in her new role. He sat down, smiling. One of the maids came in with beautiful flowers and the qazi walked in to perform the *nikah*—the marriage ceremony.

Just then thick smoke began to pour into the room. Everyone panicked and ran around to find the source of the smoke. Satwant too got up and rushed towards the door. When she opened it, flames leapt into the room, setting fire to it. Everyone began to scream and push, trying to find a way out. Taking advantage of the noise and confusion, Satwant Kaur escaped.

After some time when the fire was put out, the Amir asked about the girl; but no one could tell him of her whereabouts. Angrily, he ordered the servants and guards to search the whole palace and its grounds. The burnt section was also thoroughly examined, but not a sign was found. Finally, thinking that she might have run out in fright, the Amir sent out his soldiers, but they returned with only a half-burnt dupatta and a gold bangle, blackened by smoke.

Meanwhile, Satwant had reached a lonely part of the town. Sitting on a stone she began to review the recent happenings. She was taken aback at her own daring in setting fire to the palace. She had taken care to send away the maids so that no one would be injured, and had managed to escape with ease.

'Where did I get the confidence and the courage for all this?' She thought. 'By God's grace I have got out of one tricky situation, but what should I do now? How can I reach Punjab? Miles and miles of rough land,

with thieves and dacoits roaming across it...it's not possible to make this hazardous journey on my own. Then what am I to do? Shall I go to Fatima? Will she help, or will she hand me over to the Amir's soldiers? Oh, Lord! guide me, show me the way.'



6

Satwant Kaur sat for a long time in deep thought. Finally, the only ray of hope being Fatima, she made her way there, planning all the while to get in without anyone seeing her. She found the large doors of the house locked, and decided to wait until dark to try and get in. She covered herself completely with her shawl and wriggled into a niche in the wall, lying so still that it seemed as if a stone lay there.

A couple of hours passed and suddenly Satwant heard the sound of horses' hooves. She could see some riders in the distance coming this way, and carrying flaring torches in their hands. She was sure they were Amir's soldiers. Her hiding place was not secure. She looked around desperately and spotted a dark outhouse surrounded by a high wall. Above it a wooden beam extended outwards. Quickly, she tied her shawl and outer garments together and wrapped a large stone at one end. This she flung at the wooden plank so that the rough rope of garments encircled it and fell back into her hands. Using this for support, she scurried up the wall and hid in a dark corner. Now she was completely invisible but she could see the doors of Fatima's house.

In the next few minutes the soldiers arrived and knocked on the Khan's doors. Loudly they enquired if a Sikh girl had been seen there. The occupants denied any knowledge of this, but the captain insisted on

searching the *haveli* thoroughly. They left after satisfying themselves that she was not there.

Satwant Kaur stayed in hiding till dawn. As soon as daylight broke, she saw Khan Sahib leave with a number of guards carrying guns. A little later two servants left for the market.

Satwant Kaur knew the whole household well. She calculated that only the women folk were left inside. She climbed down from her perch and, wrapping a cloth around her head and face and bundling the rest of the clothes in her arms, she slipped inside. Taking care to avoid being seen by any of the maid servants, she reached Fatima's room.

The little boy was asleep but Fatima was awake. At the sight of this strange figure, she opened her mouth to scream, but Satwant quickly uncovered her face and signalled to her not to make any sound.

Fatima was reassured to see Satwant but puzzled because she had heard that the Amir had made Satwant his *begum*.

Fatima : What are you doing here?

Satwant Kaur : I have come to you to beg for refuge, my mistress.

Fatima : Why, has the Amir thrown you out?

Satwant Kaur : No. I managed to run away.

Fatima : But why? Why did you run away leaving the riches and comforts of the Amir's palace?

Satwant Kaur : I am a Sikhni. I cannot give up my faith just because I am threatened by a tyrant or tempted by riches.

Fatima : (totally astounded) You are truly extraordinary. I have not seen another Indian slave girl like you. You are more faithful to your religion than even the *mullas* and *qazis*, and your intelligence beats even that of *Lukman*. I can never repay what you have

done for me. I shall forever and ever be grateful to you. Tell me how I can help you.

Satwant Kaur : I have not done anything. It was your own good luck that saved your husband. As you know the soldiers are looking for me. Please hide me in your home in such a way that you, and only you, should know of my presence here.

Fatima : Don't worry, I know how I can keep you safely here.

(Getting up from her bed, Fatima went into the adjoining room. One wall was fully panelled with wood. She pressed a knob and part of the panelling moved aside, revealing a smaller room).

You can stay here, Satwant. You will be safe because no one comes here. In fact, no one knows the existence of this room. It was made many, many years ago by my ancestors. I will come with your meals and spend my free time with you. And at midnight, when everyone is asleep, I'll take you out into the courtyard. Don't hesitate to tell me if you want anything. I owe you my husband's life and my family's happiness. He loves me now and we have regained our lost respect and position in society. I can never do enough to repay you. I promise to take care of you and do everything in my power to see that you are safe and happy.

Satwant Kaur : My dear, dear mistress, I am deeply grateful to you for your kind and loving words. I thank the Lord who has brought me to a safe haven. I promise not to trouble you but shall quietly spend my time here. Some milk and grapes once a day will be enough for me. But be careful that no one gets an inkling of my presence here, neither your husband nor your son, otherwise you and your family will be in grave danger.

Fatima : Don't worry! The Lord is great and will protect us. Come, let me show you another door in the opposite wall. In case a time comes, when you need to escape, open it and go down the tunnel which leads

into the jungle on the city's outskirts. The mouth of the tunnel is blocked by a large stone, but when pushed from inside, it moves easily.



7

Satwant Kaur began to lead a life of confinement. Fatima took every opportunity to visit her and went out of her way to keep Satwant happy and comfortable. By a strange twist of fate the roles of mistress and maid were reversed.

Fatima was greatly puzzled to see how Satwant could remain in solitude for so many hours without feeling lonely, because she herself found it almost impossible to be by herself for even a short time. The next time she went to Satwant's room, she asked her, "Don't you get tired of being alone?"

Satwant Kaur : Bibi, I am never alone.

Fatima : (taken aback) But, I've never seen anyone else here.

Satwant Kaur : You are right, but the One who is with me cannot be seen with physical eyes.

Fatima : (scared and trembling) Do you mean a ghost?

Satwant Kaur : (smiling) No, my dear Bibi, not a ghost. My Guru lives with me.

Fatima : How is that possible?"

Satwant Kaur : Bibi, I recite Guru's Bani and my father used to tell me that where Gurbani is recited with concentration and love, the Guru is present there. Gurbani thus becomes the visible presence of the Guru.

Fatima : How can Gurbani become the Guru?

Satwant Kaur : I don't know how, but we believe that *Bani* is Guru, and I too have felt that when I am reciting *Gurbani*, my spirit becomes lighter; I feel happier and all doubts and pains fade away. I no longer feel alone and thus realise the Guru's living presence everywhere, and that is why in our daily prayer we say: *sabh thaain hoye sahaaye* (in *ardas*). (O Master, be Ye ever with us.) Our Guru is everywhere and ever ready to come to our help. I shall always be grateful to my father for taking pains to teach me *Gurbani* when I was still a young child. Without this gift I would have never been able to survive the dangers I have been through.

Fatima : When I was a child, a number of holy men used to come to our house because my father enjoyed meeting them. I used to hear them talk, but I couldn't understand what they said and never asked my father. Did you ask your father to tell you about the Guru and teach you *Gurbani*?

Satwant Kaur : Bibi, we believe that it is the sacred duty of Sikh parents to teach their children all about their religion. It is not enough to take care of only the physical well-being of the children, it is ordained to teach them to be good and honest Sikhs as well. Hence, whatever I know is because of my father's efforts.

Once, I remember, he was very pleased with me. I can still see the smile on his face. I had completed writing by hand, the full volume of *Panj Granthi*. It had taken me a year to do it. One of our neighbours was a widow; she was very keen to have it and I gave it to her gladly. My father said, 'Satwant, when I look at you I feel very happy, and give thanks to the Lord'. Later, I learnt that it is considered a very good deed to give a volume of *Gurbani* as a gift.

Fatima : Yes, I can now understand why you are never overwhelmed by the events and are able to revert to a cheerful mood again and again, and that it is your

faith which keeps you from feeling lonely. I, too, want to be able to share this joy with you. Is it possible that you can show me the way?

Satwant Kaur : Yes, there is no secret in it. But you must prepare yourself.

Fatima : I am ready.

Satwant Kaur : Then I suggest that you learn one line of *Gurbani* with its meaning every day. If you find that you enjoy doing this, then try and memorise it. Along with that, analyse yourself and whatever faults you find in yourself, try to get rid of them. In this way you will become more loving and caring, and not only feel happy yourself, but be able to spread joy to others as well.

Fatima responded very enthusiastically and began to learn the *Japji Sahib*. She had some difficulty in pronouncing the words correctly, but she persevered and, after some weeks, learnt the complete *Japji* and, with Satwant Kaur's help, also learnt the musical way to recite it.

As she became more fluent and regular, Fatima began to experience the same joy and feeling of well-being that Satwant Kaur had spoken about. She began to look upon Satwant Kaur as a holy being and her spiritual teacher.

Satwant Kaur was filled with *shukar* (gratitude) that, in spite of living in confinement far away from home, the Guru had granted her all comforts and the company of a good person, Fatima, who was now sharing *satsang* with her.

*Chhootat Nabi Kote Lakh Bahi,
Naam Japat Teh Paar Paraahi,
Anik Bighan Jeh Aye Sangharaiy,
Har Ka Naam Tatkaal Udharaiy.
Anik Joni Janamaay Marijaam
Naam Japat Paaway Bisraam,*

*Hau Maila Mull Kabhu Na Dhowaiy
Har Ka Naam Kote Paap Khowaiy
Aisa Naam Japhu Man Rang
Nanak Pateaiy Saah Kaay Sung.*

Dhan Guru, Dhan Naam, Dhan Gurubani!
(S.G.G.S. p. 264)

(One is saved not by millions of (friendly) arms,
But, if one dwells on the Lord's Name, one is saved.
Where myriads of crosses assemble to destroy us,
There the Lord's Name saves us in an instant.
If one is circling the round of births and deaths,
By dwelling on the Lord's Name one finds eternal rest.
We are impure; impurity leaves us not;
But the Lord's Name destroys millions of sins.
Meditate thou with Love on such a Name,
Which one finds in the society of the saints.)



8

Fatima's husband had earlier married a second time. The woman, whose name was Zainab, was extremely beautiful. Her character and background, however, were not. Khan Sahib had fallen for her looks, and she used all her wiles to encourage him in his life of dissipation. Her unending demands for jewellery and other luxuries had brought about his downfall.

Gurbani warns us :

*Soorat dekh na bhoal gawaara
Mitha mohara jooth pasaara.*
(S.G.G.S. p. 1077)

(Don't be misled by a person's looks as physical beauty does not always mean that the soul is equally beautiful; it can lead to one being caught in a web of lies and deceit).

The Khan had now realized the true worth of Fatima, who had remained loyal and faithful to him throughout. He stopped visiting Zainab and only sent her money every month for her needs.

Zainab felt extremely aggrieved and began to plan how she could take revenge on Khan Sahib and Fatima.

A cunning old woman, Sayd, had been in Zainab's employment for a long time, and was completely in the confidence of her mistress. She was sent to join the staff of Fatima's household, which she managed to do. In a short time, Sayd took over most of Fatima's personal work and, in this way, managed always to be near her.

Fatima told Satwant Kaur about engaging a new maid, but she did not pay much heed to this. It was only when she found Fatima singing the old woman's praises at all times that Satwant's sixth sense began to give warning signals. She felt there was something odd about a new maid becoming so close to her mistress in such a short time, and some of the things Fatima told her about Sayd somehow did not ring true.

One night, when Fatima and her husband were talking in their bedroom, Satwant Kaur quietly left her room to go out for some fresh air. In the dim light she saw Sayd lurking near the bedroom door listening to the conversation. Without making a sound Satwant Kaur slipped back and the next day she told Fatima that it was not safe to keep Sayd in the house, and that she should dismiss her. Fatima was not willing but, at Satwant's insistence, she talked about this to her husband. Khan Sahib, too, was very pleased with Sayd's work and scoffed at Fatima's pleas. When Fatima continued to urge him he asked the reason for wanting to send Sayd away. Fatima had no convincing reply to give, so after a little discussion the matter was dropped.

Sayd had listened to this conversation also and was dismayed that Fatima was becoming suspicious about her. She couldn't understand this as she was

always very careful in all she did and said. One thing puzzled Sayd. She noticed that during the day, Fatima disappeared for long periods. She could not be found anywhere in the house and none of the servants could give any information when Sayd asked them.

Her curiosity was aroused and Sayd began to trail her mistress even more closely, but without success. One night when everyone had gone to sleep, Sayd crept up to Fatima's door and waited. Towards midnight she heard her mistress get up and go to the other room. On silent feet she followed. It was pitch dark, and she could see nothing, but she heard the sound of a door opening and closing. And then there was silence.

Satwant Kaur spent her days patiently, but at no time did she accept this room as her home, where she could safely spend her whole life. Memories of her family—the peace and joy of *satsang*, the singing of kirtan which was done in secret to avoid the attention of the aggressive rulers—tugged at her heart all the time. She was constantly making plans to return to her homeland and praying to the *Akal Purakh* to make it happen soon. She had asked Fatima to get two sets of men's clothing made for her. She felt that if she travelled disguised as a man, she would be less conspicuous and thus safer.

Meanwhile, Sayd was sniffing around to find the secret of Fatima's strange behaviour. One day she hid herself under a bundle of clothes in the room with the secret door.

In the afternoon, when Fatima quietly entered and opened the secret door to meet Satwant Kaur, Sayd saw everything. In the next few days she watched carefully till she was sure she could open the door herself.

The next night she tested the key and was satisfied when the lock opened, but she waited till early morning before going in. It was still dark when she entered the

secret room. She could see the faint outline of a figure sitting cross-legged and hear the sound of soft breathing. But she could not make out whether the person was man or woman. She continued to peer, but when the figure moved suddenly, Sayd quickly retreated to the outer room closing the door behind her.

Satwant Kaur was extremely worried. When Fatima came later to meet her, she found Satwant Kaur ready to leave. "What happened?" Fatima asked.

"My staying here has become dangerous for both of us, so I am leaving," replied Satwant Kaur and she related the night's events to Fatima.

Fatima : Who could it have been?

Satwant Kaur : Bibi, even though I have not met or seen her, I am sure it was your new maid. All along I have felt that she was not a good woman, and would harm you in some way.

Fatima : Yes, I agree it must have been Sayd. When you told me earlier to get rid of her, I did try; but Khan Sahib is so impressed with her devotion that he did not agree and I did not want to go against his wishes.

Satwant Kaur : I do understand, but for the sake of peace in your home, you must get rid of her. Well, I must go now. I don't want Sayd to see me here again.

Fatima : No, please, don't talk of leaving. I can't bear the thought of it. Wait, I have an idea. There is another room like this one, a little further ahead. You can safely stay there.

After a little discussion, they decided that for the present, this was the best plan.

Sayd was now convinced that she had found the right weapon to destroy Khan Sahib's love and trust for Fatima. Finding him alone, Sayd went up to him and began to whisper, "My Lord, a strange man lives

in your home, and your wife visits him every night, but you know nothing about it."

Blood rushed to the Khan's head and putting his hand on the sword he shouted harshly for Fatima.

Hurriedly, Sayd went to fetch Fatima, but she could not find her anywhere. This was better than she had expected! She was sure Fatima was in the secret room with the strange man. Now was the time to take Khan Sahib there and catch her red-handed.

She rushed back to Khan Sahib and said, "Come with me, my Lord. Let me show you proof of what I said."

Boiling with rage, Khan Sahib followed Sayd, who opened the secret door. But her triumph was short-lived. The room was bare. She rushed around trying to find some sign of the occupants, but there was none.

Khan Sahib retraced his steps—his thoughts in turmoil. Anger at Sayd was mixed with feelings of shame and chagrin. He turned on Sayd and scolded her soundly. Then he went to look for Fatima. As soon as he entered the bedroom he saw Fatima sitting on the mat, praying.

In a fit of remorse, he moved forward and caught Fatima in a tight embrace. He then proceeded to tell her the whole sorry tale. Fatima reminded him softly, "My Lord, I had requested you earlier to dismiss this woman. She is evil and a trouble-maker."

Khan Sahib immediately went out and gave Sayd her marching orders. Thoroughly disgruntled, Sayd left. And her departure was a source of great relief for one and all.

That night, when the whole household was lost in sleep, Fatima got up and went as usual to meet Satwant Kaur. She was shocked to find the room empty. In a panic she began to search but there was no sign of Satwant Kaur. The thought that she would never see

her again was too much for Fatima to bear and she fainted.

For quite some time she lay on the floor. When finally she opened her eyes, she found that her head was in Satwant Kaur's lap, and she was sprinkling water on her face to revive her. With joy surging in her heart, Fatima sat up and held Satwant Kaur in a warm embrace.

Then she asked, "What happened? Where did you go?"

Satwant replied: "Bibi, I was very upset by the incident with Sayd. It made me realize that to continue to stay here would threaten your happiness and even your life. I am not worried about myself, but why should you suffer for giving me refuge?"

Fatima: But who will find out? Sayd was the only danger and she has gone. The other servants are deeply loyal to me.

Satwant Kaur: True, but Nature's ways are strange, and one's most carefully made plans can go awry. That is why I went to check out the tunnel which leads to the jungle. I walked through the trees for a short distance. The whole place was deserted, but then I heard voices. Two guards were talking, and when I crept nearer I realized that they were discussing me. It seems the Amir is not entirely convinced that I perished in the palace fire, so he has announced a reward for the person who finds me. I did not wait to hear more but quickly returned to find you lying here.

Fatima: You are a very brave woman.

Satwant Kaur: Life is not always a great teacher, and the experiences I have gone through have made me tough.

Fatima: I feel that now, more than ever, you must not go. For the present this is the safest place for you.

Satwant Kaur : I realize that, but one can't always think of one's safety. I desperately want to see my parents.

Fatima : You plan to return to Punjab? Don't you think that it's an impossible dream for a young girl with the whole army looking out for her?

Satwant Kaur : I know, but I cannot give up. Again and again my heart urges me to go and not to worry about the consequences. A Sikh girl learns to face danger with fortitude.

Fatima : My dear, your courage is remarkable! Whenever our soldiers used to come back after one of their raids into India, they used to tell us about the valiant community called Sikhs, who faced danger with a smile and fought the enemy with tenacity and determination. We used to laugh at them for making up such stories. But after meeting you I have realized that they only spoke the truth.

Satwant Kaur : Bibi, I don't know what to say. We have no kingdom, no forts, no land or wealth. The whole *Panth* lives with a single-minded belief in the Lord, and to uphold this faith it faces untold dangers and vicious attacks, and earns the praises from its worst enemies.

Fatima : True! I have seen this with my own eyes.

A rustling sound interrupted their conversation. Hurriedly saying goodbye to Satwant Kaur, Fatima left. Satwant Kaur was already dressed in male garments. Now she too quickly went through the passage and out into the woods.



9

A short distance away from the town of Kabul, two young men sat talking. They were wearing red turbans.

First man : What shall I do then?

Second : Dear brother, I don't know what to say?

First : Can't you borrow it?

Second : I have tried.

First : I will have to go without food then.

Second : Yes, I know and it worries me. Why don't you come here everyday?

First : I would if it wasn't so far! Can't you give it to me for just five more days? That's all I need to learn it by heart.

Second : I know, and I have pleaded with my father but he won't let it out of his sight.

First : Then hide it from him and smuggle it out.

Second : I wish I could. But it's kept in a steel box with a heavy lock on it.

A young lad who was standing nearby and listening to their conversation stepped forward and greeted them with folded hands.

Lad : I am sorry to interrupt, but I couldn't help overhearing. From your talk it seems that you want a volume of *Gurbani-Panj Granthi*. I can help by writing it for you if you can bring paper, pen and ink. I know *Japji Sahib* by heart, *Hazarey de Shabad*, *Rehras*, *Sohela*, *Sukhmani* and *Asa di Var*.

The young men's faces lit up with joy and hope. "You are a blessed soul come down from heaven to help us! We shall forever be under your debt if you can do us this favour," they said gratefully.

Lad : No, I am no angel from heaven, but a brother Sikh. It would be an honour if I can do this service.

The first young man was Tota Ram, who was eager to become a Sikh, and the second, Mangal Singh, was his friend and guide. He had taught Tota Ram *Gurbani* from his father's *Panj Granthi*, but as these volumes were scarce, his father had taken it back and locked it safely away.

Tota Ram, who was very disappointed, now cheered up and looked at the lad as godsend. They decided that he should take the lad home with them and arrange for his stay till the writing was completed.

Before they parted, Mangal Singh tore a piece from his turban and gave it to the lad to wrap it around his white turban. The law of the land demanded that all non-Muslims should wear red turbans so as to be easily recognizable.

Tota Ram and his companion reached his village. The lad was given a small room in a quiet corner of the house, and supplied with paper, pen and ink. In a beautiful, clear script, the lad began to write the *Gurbani*, and within a month the volume was complete.

Tota Ram was extremely happy. He could now resume his *nitnem* and recite the *path* regularly. In due course he partook amrit and became a Singh.

The young lad, whose name he said was Jaswant Singh and who was none other than Satwant Kaur disguised as a male, continued to stay there to produce more hand-written volumes of *Panj Granthi*. The demand was immense, and large amounts of money were offered. But Jaswant Singh continued to write in return for only food and some clothes. Soon his name became a household word in the whole of Kabul.

One day, an elderly businessman fell seriously ill. He asked his son to fetch someone who could recite *Sukhmani* to him. The son brought Jaswant Singh, who recited the *path* so beautifully that the old man was thrilled. His condition began to improve and within a short time he recovered. He grew very fond of Jaswant

Singh and asked him to stay with him so that he could hear *Sukhmani* every day.

A few days passed and the old man asked Jaswant Singh, "How can I repay you? You seem to have no desires, no ambitions, but I want to do something for you."

Jaswant Singh: I do have one wish, but as it cannot be fulfilled, I don't like to talk about it.

Old man: What is it? Tell me.

Jaswant Singh: I have in my heart a deep longing to go to Punjab.

Old man: Is that all? You know that caravans go to Punjab every few months. You can go with the next one. You will get enough time to visit Amritsar and have *darshan* of Harimandir Sahib, before its return.

Jaswant Singh: But I won't be coming back!

Old man: Oh! Then what will I do? I have come to depend so much on you.

Jaswant Singh: Why don't you come with me, Babaji? You too have been wanting to go to Amritsar.

The old man liked the idea and spoke to his family. At first they objected as he was too old, but finally agreed when Jaswant Singh promised to take good care of him.



When Fatima next went to meet Satwant Kaur, she was shocked to find the room empty. Taking an earthen lamp she went down the tunnel and pushing the rock aside, came out at the other end. She saw that the dirt on the ground had been recently disturbed, and knew that Satwant Kaur had really gone.

The pain of never again seeing her dear friend and guide, whom she had come to love and respect, was more than she could bear. With dragging feet, she returned to her room and sat down listlessly. She could not respond to her son's childish prattle, nor did she reply when her maids came for instructions. She tried very hard to control her grief, but her thoughts went again and again to Satwant Kaur, causing her tears to flow afresh.

Many days passed and Fatima tried to gain peace and strength by reciting *Japji Sahib*, which she had learnt from Satwant Kaur. But worry for her friend's safety and her own sense of loss continued to pierce her heart.

A few days later, Khan Sahib went off on tour. One night, as Fatima lay asleep, she felt someone shaking her arm. She opened her eyes to find Satwant Kaur sitting on the edge of the bed. For a moment she thought she was still asleep and dreaming.

Satwant Kaur spoke softly, "Wake up, Fatima Bibi, you are not dreaming. I am really here," and they clung to each other. "I was trying to find a way to return to my country, Satwant Kaur told Fatima, "when I overheard a plot being hatched against you. I managed to find the tunnel opening and came to warn you."

Fatima looked frightened but Satwant Kaur continued in a reassuring tone, "You have to be strong now! This is the work of your old enemy, Zainab, who has hired a band of robbers to attack your house tonight, loot all the valuables and kidnap you. Sometime back, she had sent another old crone to work as a servant in your home. This woman, Hasna, has been told to open the main gates after midnight to let the robbers in."

Fatima went pale with fear, but rallied at Satwant Kaur's words, "You are a Pathan and must act like one! There is no time to lose. First of all we must get

rid of Hasna. Take her to one of the strong rooms and lock her in. Then send one of your trusted servants to the Police camp to bring some men to guard the house. Don't forget to send some money for quicker results."

Fatima hurried to Hasna's room and shook her awake, "Hasna, why did you go to sleep so early? You forgot to bring the glass of milk for the little one and he is crying."

Hasna got up, apologising, and brought the milk from the kitchen. As she was crossing the courtyard, Fatima came up to her and took the glass from her.

"Give this to me and you run down to the safe room. Bring my jewellery box as I want to keep it in my room tonight," Fatima ordered.

Hasna ran down the steps and Fatima and Satwant Kaur quickly banged the heavy door shut and locked it. Hasna began to shout, but became quiet when she heard Fatima say, "You can sit there and enjoy the fruits of your treachery!"

Satwant Kaur now outlined the rest of the plan to Fatima. All the servants were aroused and called into the courtyard. Fatima told them, "I am feeling very frightened as Khan Sahib is not here, so I want you to put on all the lights and go about your chores as you do in the daytime."

The servants were very devoted to their mistress and willingly obeyed her every command. Soon the sounds of normal household activities filled the air.

Satwant Kaur then asked Fatima to show her the room where all the weapons were kept. She picked up the heavy guns and began to load them. When it was past midnight, the robbers became restless. Neither had the household gone to sleep nor had Hasna opened the gates. They had told Hasna that they would announce their arrival by hooting like an owl, but to their chorus of hoots also there was no response.

Fatima heard the strange sounds and became very nervous. She slipped into the tower room where Satwant Kaur sat keeping watch. This room had niches cut into the thick walls. Through these gaps, shots could be fired without exposing the person to the enemy.

Satwant Kaur signalled to Fatima to come up to the gap and look outside. Fatima looked and immediately stepped back when she saw five or six sinister figures lurking in the dark.

Satwant Kaur whispered, "I can take care of these thugs. If they dare to make a move I shall fire. The sounds are sure to scare your servants and create a panic, so it's better that you go and explain the whole thing to them. This way they will be prepared and remain alert"

Fatima looked at Satwant Kaur with amazement and respect. "Such an intelligent, fearless and resolute girl! She is fit to be a queen!" she thought. "I have everything, yet I feel so afraid and helpless, but she doesn't let anything crush her spirits." With these thoughts running in her mind, Fatima went to speak to the servants.

The robbers now became impatient with waiting and decided to take action. They rushed at the gates to break them down. At the sound of the loud thump, Satwant Kaur shouted a warning "Stop, or we will shoot and kill each one of you!"

But the robbers paid no heed and rammed into the gates once again. Immediately Satwant Kaur fired, hitting one of them in the leg. With a yell of pain, he fell off his horse. This stunned the others momentarily. They looked hard to see where the shot had come from, but could see nothing. Two of them picked up their guns and stood guard, while the others began to hammer at the gate again. Another shot rang out and hit one of them in the arm. Those keeping watch began to fire back.

Fatima softly entered the tower room where Satwant Kaur sat fully alert, her eyes shining with excitement.

"We need to attack from both sides," she told Fatima. "Tell your servants to go into the opposite room and start shooting arrows at the attackers."

Fatima quickly picked up some bows and a batch of arrows and went and instructed her servants accordingly.

In the next few moments, while Satwant Kaur loosed off one shot after another, arrows rained down upon the thugs from the other side. This completely unnerved the robbers and, quickly turning, they fled.



11

Satwant Kaur signalled to Fatima to come into the armoury. Together they put away everything, then Satwant Kaur went back to the secret room without anyone seeing her.

The corrupt police inspector, who had been in league with the robbers, had taken no action at night. Now he appeared with two constables and busily began to question the people of the household. Then he ordered his assistants to look around for any clues about the robbers.

In the afternoon, Khan Sahib returned. He had been extremely perturbed when the messenger reached him and related the night's events. He was relieved to see that the only damage was to the huge wooden gates, which could be easily repaired by an expert carpenter.

Seeing the policemen, he gave them stern orders to find the robbers at the earliest. Then he went inside

and spoke to his servants, praising them for being so loyal and protecting his household.

Khan Sahib was glad to see that Fatima appeared normal and seemed to have withstood the shock of the frightening experience well. But when he asked her for details, she spoke incoherently, stopping mid-sentence again and again. She did not want to make any reference to Satwant Kaur's name, but Khan Sahib thought that she did this because she was mentally disturbed.

In her room Satwant Kaur sat in deep thought. She was anxious and determined to reach her home with her faith intact. Unlike other girls, who had been kidnapped, she refused to accept the changed circumstances as her fate. She had fought her way through dangers and difficulties. She had also been able to resist the temptation of the comforts and luxuries she would have as the *begum* of the Amir of Kabul.

But now, she was finding it very difficult to break the bonds of friendship and affection that had grown between her and Fatima. These bonds had been further strengthened and enriched by their mutual interest in religion.

Fatima came into the secret room later that night to find Satwant Kaur ready to leave. She had only waited to say goodbye to Fatima, who now burst into tears. She clutched Satwant Kaur, begging and pleading with her to stay.

It was a heartbreaking scene, shaking Satwant Kaur's resolve. She tried her best to cheer Fatima up, but when all efforts failed she promised to stay for another eight days.

"But then I must leave," she said gently. "I must reach home where my parents are suffering the daily torture of not knowing where I am and in what condition. Had they seen me die, or received news of

my death, they would have accepted the grief stoically. It is not knowing whether I am alive with my innocence and faith untouched which must be causing them untold suffering. I must see them and reassure them."

Fatima : I know and I do understand, but I feel so helpless! The moment I think of you leaving, my heart sinks. I can't bear the thought of never seeing you again!

Satwant Kaur : Bibi, you are getting so much strength from the *Gurbani* you have memorized, and are now beginning to understand. It has made you more aware of the pain of others. You must believe in its goodness and feel the peace of it fill your heart. You will see that it will be your support in the days ahead.

It is important to remember that at the end, each and everyone of us will be alone. At that time no friends or relatives will be able to help. Why not start now to teach yourself to face that final moment? Make only yourself the source of your hopes and expectations and no one else.

Let me tell you a story. It's based on a real-life incident. Once a Singh lived in the middle of a forest with his wife and young son. He had cleared a large area and made a couple of huts. He and his family lived in one hut and the other was kept for people needing rest or refuge. The rest of the place had been cultivated and grains and vegetables grown to feed them.

One day, Singh Sahib noticed smoke billowing at some distance. He realized that a forest fire had broken out. He knew that soon the blaze would reach them, but before that the thick smoke would choke them to death. He thought for a while and, by God's Grace, hit upon a plan. Going beyond the vegetable plots, he set fire to the surrounding bushes, which were absolutely dry. They caught fire quickly and began to burn fiercely. This small fire moved away towards the jungle, leaving a large tract of charred ground all round the huts. Since

there was nothing left to burn, the forest fire took a path well away from them.

Once we realize that the day of ultimate loneliness is coming nearer and it can devastate us with such pain as to make it a living hell, we must act to face it with courage. Being alone, with faith only in one God, will make this same solitude enjoyable, for the Lord Himself will be with us, fulfilling all our needs with His presence.



12

Fatima : What you say is true. I understand it and believe it, but can't I do something more so that it becomes my very nature?

Satwant Kaur : Yes, this is possible. A person who learns to be detached from earthly pleasures and relationships can truly experience the joys of being alive. But detachment must be learnt. And the way has been shown to us. As we continue to recite *Gurbani*, our mind becomes purer. All desires and wishes lose their keen edge. Slowly, we begin to accept that the world around us is like a sandcastle. It can be swept away by the next wave. This, however, does not mean that we should withdraw from the world. We live in it, so we must enjoy all that it offers. We must be like a bee, which sips the nectar of a flower and flies off, and not be like the common housefly, which gets stuck inside the jar of honey.

Another thing we must do is to search for that true happiness which is eternal; which, when experienced, radiates the soul and removes all fears and doubts. For this, we do not have to go out, for it is right here in our hearts.

You must have heard of the musk deer. It carries the source of its rare fragrance inside it, and yet, not being aware of this, wanders from place to place in search of it. *Gurbani* says :

Bahar dhoodhan tey chhoot paray,

Gur ghar hi mahe dikhaya thaa.

(S.G.G.S. p. 1002)

(The Guru has saved us from needless wandering by revealing the source of eternal bliss inside us.)

Fatima : (Having listened with rapt attention and heaving a deep sigh) Dear sister, I love listening to you. I can feel my run-away mind slowing down and my thoughts becoming centred on what you say. I know that if I can only break the bonds of the outer world, which are constantly pulling me away from myself, I can achieve immense happiness and peace. But all this is too new, and my mind is still untrained. So help me, as you have done upto now. You have been extremely generous in giving so much time to set me on the right path. I can never repay you neither in this life nor in the next. Stay a little longer with me and help me to clear the doubts which continue to cloud my mind.

Satwant Kaur : I have not done you any favour. The Guru is the inspiration and he tells us that while travelling on the road of life we must do whatever good we can.

The Guru has also instructed us that we must first prepare the person if he wants to move on a spiritual path, otherwise it's like asking a blind person to evaluate the price of pearls.

To illustrate this point, I'll tell you a story. Once, there was a king who was a good man but completely illiterate. A learned pandit was his chief advisor. He wielded a great deal of power in the court. There came a time when he had to go away. He wanted to keep his position secure at the court, so he told the king, 'While I am away, you must be careful that no one tries to

make a fool of you. I'll teach you a Sanskrit sloka, which means The goddess sits on a stool eating corn. Whenever a man comes posing as a learned man, you can test him by asking him the meaning. If he tells this correctly you can trust him, but if he doesn't, you will know he is a fraud.

Thus it happened that many wise men came to meet the king, but went away humiliated because the king had been taught the wrong meaning of the sloka.

One day Pandit Kalidas happened to come there. He saw that the king was upsetting all the wise people of his kingdom through his ignorance. He decided to enlighten him.

When the king asked him the meaning of the sloka, Kalidas replied, "To give the exact meaning will take at least six months. You must spend a couple of hours with me every day, Your Majesty, otherwise it will not be possible."

The king agreed to do this, and in the six months, Kalidas managed to teach the king the basics of the Sanskrit language. At the end of this time, he requested the king to work out the meaning of the sloka himself. To his consternation, the king found that the meaning was exactly the same as given by the other wise men earlier.

In this way Kalidas trained the king to understand and appreciate the language so that he could interpret the meaning for himself.

It is written in *Guru Granth Sahib* :

*Kabir Ram rattan mukh kothri parakh aagay khole
Koi aye milaiyo gahaki leigo mehgay mole.*

(S.G.G.S. p. 1376)

(Kabir says when you have received the name of Ram, do not reveal it to one and all, but to the one who knows its worth, for only he will value it.)

*Jis jan kau prabh daras pyasaa,
Nanak takaiy bal bal jasaan.*

(S.G.G.S. p. 266)

(He, who seeks to see the sight of the Lord, Nanak is a sacrifice unto him.)

To illustrate what happens when one offers a gift to someone who is not ready for it, I will relate another story. A pair of birds had built their nest on the top of a tall tree. When the rains came, they sat snug and safe from the storm. Two fireflies hovered there, casting light all round. Just then a monkey appeared. He was shivering with cold and jumping from branch to branch trying to find shelter. One bird spoke, 'O brother monkey! You resemble a human being and have two hands and feet. You should have built a home for yourself in fair weather, then you would not be suffering now!' The monkey was furious at this advice coming from a mere bird and promptly destroyed the nest.

So, Bibi, the need is for us to learn to be good, to give up wrong-doing, and control evil passions. Reciting *Gurbani* cleans our minds and hearts, and fills them with love. It is of vital importance, and that is why I have helped you first of all to recite and memorize *Gurbani*.

There is one other thing you can do to get spiritual strength, but I must discuss this first with a saintly person, who is my guide and mentor. I shall be gone for one or two days only.

Fatima : Bibiji, my heart is full of fear. What if you don't come back?

Satwant Kaur : A Sikh does not tell lies. Whenever I leave for my motherland, I shall tell you before going, so please trust me. The *Santji* I referred to has come from Punjab, and all these days I have been talking and discussing all points with him. The words I have spoken to you are those which he has told me. On this

last point, I must clear my doubts before talking to you. So I will leave now, but I shall come back soon.

Saying her farewell to Fatima, Satwant Kaur changed back into the men's clothing and slipped out of the tunnel. True to her promise, she returned after two days, to a delighted welcome from Fatima.

Early next morning after completing the *Gurbani nitnem*, Satwant Kaur spoke to Fatima and said :

Our Guru established a spiritual path, that of *satsang* where people meet and interact for their spiritual upliftment. Yours and mine is such a relationship. The Guru has taught the Sikhs how to remember God all the time, by repeating His name (*naam japna*). The effect of this is like drinking the cool, sparkling water of a deep well. It refreshes and satisfies all who drink it, and it never runs dry :

*Khaweh kharchech ral mil bhai
Tote na awaiy vadho jayee.*

(S.G.G.S. p. 186)

(Expend as much as I may with all my company.
(but) it diminishes not and is ever on the increase.)

Satwant Kaur then went on to tell Fatima about *amrit* and its significance for the Sikhs, "This will be difficult for you, I know, so for the present concentrate on *naam japna*."

After a pause, she continued, "Our minds are always teaming with thoughts and ideas. If we think of good things, our minds too become good. So our aim should be to remember the Almighty at all times, for He is the Creator and Protector of all living creatures. Our Guru has taught us :

*Gura ik deh bijhaee
Sabhma jeeya ka ik Daata
So main visar na jayee.*

(S.G.G.S. p.2)

(This the Guru, my mentor taught: There is one protector and provider of all creation. Forget him not.)

If we find it difficult to concentrate on the Lord's name, in silence, then we can recite it aloud. In this way *Waheguru Naam* slowly seeps into our subconscious and becomes part of our psyche. Remembering becomes an effortless act, and at this stage the mind becomes restful and focused. It is not pulled in different directions by the temptations and attractions of this world. Slowly a sense of purity will permeate yourself and you will enjoy a lightness and beauty of spirit.

My prayers are with you. May *Waheguru* grant you the joy of His presence. I have a strong feeling that in this way, a day will come when you will be ready to take *amrit* and become a Singhni.

So my dear Bibi, cherish these words. A seed lying in the dirt is worthless, but when thrown into a fertile field and watered, it grows into a fruit-bearing tree. Similarly, Guru Nanak's gift is rejected by non-believers, but in the hearts of eager devotees, it takes root and grows, bringing fulfilment and joy.

Guru Nanak has not concealed anything from his Sikhs. Everything is freely available in his *satsang*. However, it is human nature to shut one's eyes in the face of a strong flash of light. The non-believers use this as an excuse to deny the Almighty's presence, and thereby expose their own ignorance.



For some time all was quiet. Then Satwant Kaur handed a sheet of paper to Fatima and said, "Read this carefully. It will be your guide and help in the days to come."

It was a copy of *Prashnotra* of Bhai Nandlal, the *rehatnama* in which was listed the daily code of conduct to be followed by the Sikhs :

All Sikhs must arise at dawn and recite *Waheguru's Naam* with love in their hearts. After a bath, they must recite the *Gurbani-Japji* and *Jaap Sahib*. In the evening they must listen to *Rehraas*, as well as to *kirtan* and *katha* which will bring them nearer to *Waheguru*. This routine must be maintained diligently, for in this way they will feel the bliss which only the love of God can provide.

The document continued :

A Sikh must have complete faith in the Guru's word (*shabad*), must visit the *gurdwara* regularly, must serve his guru with his heart and soul, and work towards a greater closeness with his brethren. Such a *gursikh* is welcome in the Lord's presence and achieves eternal bliss.

Fatima listened to Satwant Kaur with rapt attention. She had received three invaluable gifts to help and guide her :

> Recitation of *Gurbani* and *Mool Mantar*.

> Remembering the name of the Lord—*Waheguru—Naam Simran*.

> *Rehat* or basics of the Sikh way of life.

Armed with these, she set out on the straight path of Sikhism :

Gurmukh gaadi rah chalaya
(Var Bhai Gurdas 40.11)

(The devotee sets out on the straight path)

Beloved *Khalsas*, treat each other with love and sympathy. Do not harbour doubts and suspicions about your Sikh brothers.

Senapati, Guru Gobind Singh's poet, has written :

Khalsa Khaas kahawai soee
Jankay hirdaiy bharam na hoee
Bharam beikh tey rahaai niyara
So Khalsa Satguru hamara.

(from *Gur Sobha* by Senapati)

(He is called the *Khalsa*, whose mind is free from illusion. He who is above illusion, rituals and formalism, such *Khalsa* is true one.)

Another ill which has become prevalent these days is indifference towards *satsang*, which leads to arrogance. There is no respect for the truly religious person and true devotees are often equated with frauds. These grave errors are eroding the spirituality of the Sikh Panth.

People of little learning project themselves on par with the ten *Guru Sahibs* and manage to drive away the true believers. It is imperative to shun such hypocrites and pretenders. We must always wish and pray for the company of *gurmukh* and *sadh*-people who tread the Sikh path with sincerity and devotion :

Gurmukh Da Mael, Sadh Da Sang (ardas)

(O Lord! Grant us the company of the devotees and the society of the elevated ones.)

Fatima now got up. She had to be in her room before everyone awoke. She felt radiant with joy and thankfulness. Her eyes filled with tears and in a rush of emotion she fell at Satwant Kaur's feet, who quickly held her in her arms in a warm embrace. "Bibi, you are my friend, and must behave like one. I want you to be strong and firm in your faith, and bow only to the one Lord," Satwant Kaur said gently.

Fatima apologised for her impetuosity and after a few more words she left. Satwant Kaur now sat thinking. She too had become very fond of Fatima and was feeling the pang of parting from her. But she soon rallied and reminded herself of Kabir's words :

Kabir - *Kabir Sikh sakha bahutey keey
Kso keeyo na meet,
Chale tthey Hari milan kau
Beechay atkyo cheet*
(S.G.G.S. p. 1369)

(Kabir : I have gathered a large following, but befriended not God I want to meet my God but the way was barred by the mind.)

This attachment with Fatima must not become a liability for me,' Satwant Kaur told herself, 'It is all right to feel love for another because without mutual affection, trust and friendship cannot develop. Whatever has happened is God's will and the grace of Guru Nanak Dev. I have acted according to his wishes'. Satwant Kaur became immersed in the loving recitation of 'Dhan Guru Nanak, Dhan Guru Nanak'.



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Satwant Kaur stayed on for some time to watch Fatima's progress. She was glad to note that Fatima looked happier day by day. Her speech lost its harshness, and her manner towards her household changed dramatically. She was no longer arrogant and demanding in her orders to her servants. She also began to involve her young son by waking him early and teaching him simple prayers.

During her conversations with her husband, Fatima would gently point out how unjust were the raids made by him and his soldiers on Punjab, and being so harsh and cruel to innocent people. "Kings should be like fathers who protect their people. Wars should take place only when one nation is attacked by another," she said to him.

On another occasion Fatima suggested to her husband not to cut their son's hair as it was so soft and beautiful.

In This way two months passed. Satwant Kaur was now convinced that Fatima was firm in her faith and would continue on the path confidently. One day she told Fatima about her plan to leave. When Fatima resisted, Satwant Kaur said, "I will have to sneak away then, since you won't let me go happily."

The next day, Satwant Kaur awoke at 2 a.m. and got dressed. She had come to this house as a slave, but was now ready to leave after showing her mistress the right path to spiritual freedom. Fatima had insisted on giving her two hundred gold coins to help her on the journey, but Satwant Kaur left the bundle where it lay. Eating a handful of grapes, she made her way through the tunnel into wilderness beyond.

Satwant Kaur soon reached the clearing where the holy person was staying. In the dim light of an earthen lamp, Santji was sitting in meditation. Bowing to him, Satwant Kaur sat down quietly.

Towards dawn he opened his eyes. Seeing Satwant, he smiled and said, "Tell me, child, have you completed Guru's task?"

Satwant Kaur's eyes filled with tears, "Maharaj, I have tried to do as you advised me. On my own I would have made many mistakes. By Waheguru's grace and your guidance, Fatima has started on the spiritual path with a heart full of sincerity and devotion."

Santji was very pleased at these words and blessed Satwant Kaur, "You are a good soul! May Waheguru grant you greater nearness to Him! But remember always that pure love for the Almighty must ever be tinged with awe. This keeps a check on one's ego. The Guru has said: *Nanak bhaiy vinn jay mrai muhe kala iy utth jaiy*" (S.G.G.S. p. 149) (Says Nanak, the person

who dies without the loving fear of the Lord, dies in disgrace.)

Satwant Kaur thanked *Santji* for all his kindness and advice, then said, "*Maharajji*, I wish to return to my motherland and want your permission."

Santji: Your plan to accompany the old gentleman, Baba Ladha Singh, has got slightly delayed but don't worry. The next caravan will be leaving in fifteen days time.

Soon Baba Ladha Singh arrived and was pleased to see Satwant Kaur who was now in the disguise of Jawant Singh. *Santji* told Baba Ladha Singh to take good care of the young lad. He also told him that he would reach Amritsar by Diwali and asked the Baba to wait there for him.

Satwant Kaur was not happy to mislead her companions by this pretence, and felt that she did not deserve their kindness and respect. Silently she thanked them and the God for these blessings.

Dear friends! In the olden days when a Sikh received praise, it did not make him feel that he was superior to his brothers and sisters. Due to this, warm camaraderie and mutual love for *Sri Waheguru* united the panth. Today, the scene is very different. The moment praise is lavished on a person, he accepts it as his due and his behaviour towards others changes. He forgets that the foremost quality of a wise man is humility.

So, *Khalsaji*, feel that you belong to the Guru and be a friend to all. Let your soul be in the care of *Waheguru*, but let your heart believe in *Sagal charan ki eih mann ralla* (S.G.G.S p. 384) (I am the dust under the feet of others).

The Guru has clearly stated that he respects the Sikh who remembers the Lord and teaches others to do the same :

*Jan Nanak dhoorh mangaiy tis Gursikh ki
Jo aap japaiy, avraih Naam japavai.*

(S.G.G.S p. 306)

(Nanak craves for the dust of the devotee's feet who contemplates himself and makes others contemplate the Name of the Lord.)

The Caravan with which Satwant Kaur was hoping to reach her country finally took to the road. She and the old Baba along with a young servant were the only ones going to Punjab.

However, they had gone barely a few miles when the Amir's soldiers came thundering up and called a halt. They began to make a thorough search. Each and every box, bundle and bedroll was opened and gone through carefully.

The bewildered travellers were told that the Amir had lost a valuable diamond. In fact, the thief was one of the courtiers, and to direct suspicion away from himself, he had advised the Amir to stop the caravan, in case the thief was escaping with it to Hindustan.

The soldiers took full advantage of the situation to purloin valuables for themselves. They also began a personal search of the people, though this was not ordered by the Amir. The women were separated from the men and searched by women guards.

Satwant Kaur was in a dilemma. Had she been dressed as a woman all would have been well. But, she was dressed as a young man, and was now herded along with the other men.

As the search continued, Satwant Kaur's mind worked frantically to find a solution; all the time praying for divine help. Night fell and only half the job was done. So a camp was made and the caravan was surrounded by soldiers on all sides so that the search could be resumed the next morning.

In a village in far-off Punjab, daylight was fading and as darkness began to spread, the birds retreated into their nests, and the people to their homes where earthen lamps brightened the interiors.

Stars began to twinkle in the dark sky. Slowly the moon arose, casting a cool, silvery light all around. It was a scene to soothe the eyes and bring peace to the soul. But for one person, it was a time of stark suffering. A woman sat lost in her thoughts, tears flowing from her closed eyes. She wiped these occasionally as she desperately prayed for some semblance of peace and restoration of faith in God's will. But the love and longing for her daughter brought a fresh wave of emotion and she began to sob uncontrollably.

After a while, she wiped her eyes, looked up at the sky and began to talk to her missing daughter :

My darling daughter, sitting in some strange land, may be you too are looking at the moon. This is the only contact I have with you. Alas! this separation is breaking my heart. When will it be over? O my Lord, how my faith wavers! I am not able to accept Your will, nor have I been able to cut my emotional ties. May be if my child had died, I would have been able to swallow this bitter pill, and learnt acceptance with Your grace—Oh God! Why have I not received any news of my daughter? Child, you have left me so bereft—captured and taken to a land from which no one returns. Please someone, bring me news that my daughter died, pure and innocent as the day was born! I would rejoice, and compare the event to doing *ishnaan* (taking holy dip) at Sri Amritsar or going to Hazoor Sahib for *darshan*. But who is to tell me whether my daughter is suffering untold miseries on this earth, or is in the high heavens? Blood of my blood, heart of my heart—ah! How she was torn away from me! What untold pain!

And she began to chant a lament of her unbearable sorrow and need to see her lost daughter's face just

once to get some solace. At the end, she again burst out crying, and finally closed her eyes from sheer exhaustion.

In the next instant she saw a hillside, and a stream flowing nearby, the water making soft rippling sounds as it ran over the pebbles. On one side of the stream there were a number of trees covered with vines. Through the thick green leaves, bunches upon bunches of black grapes were visible. Under one of the trees she saw Satwant Kaur, sitting with bowed head. At times she sighed deeply, then tears rolled down her cheeks. She began humming to herself and her mother heard the heartbreaking words of a song about a girl separated from her parents, brothers and sisters who remembers the small daily incidents shared with them, and conveys her loneliness and deep longing to be back with them.

The mother moved forward and eagerly tried to take her daughter in a tight embrace, but there was nothing—no warm and loving daughter—only the empty courtyard, the same courtyard where her child grew up, running around and playing games! The scene vanished, and with it the beloved face. The mother heaved a sigh and said :

Ah, it was only a dream! But child, are you alive? Oh God, what am I to do? So many days have I waited without news; even *Santji* has not sent any message. Guruji, please guide me. Should I go to Kabul? Can I find her there? My instincts will surely lead me to her, and if I am unsuccessful, I shall die in the attempt. Oh Lord, either send back my child or send me death.

"What? Asking for death? What kind of thankless words are these?"—a deep, serious voice spoke from the doorway. Startled, Basant Kaur stood up and quickly moved forward to greet her husband. He came up to her and placed his hand on her shoulder, saying,

My dear, why this loss of faith? The Almighty creates and destroys, it is as He wills. Who are we to dictate to Him? Is our thinking wiser than His? You have always been very patient and strong, and were accepting this loss with full faith. What happened to make you lose control like this?

Basant Kaur : Forgive me, Sardarji. A woman is emotional and that makes her weak. We are like animals and as Guruji has said, *Chaunay soyna paayeeaiy chun chun khawaiy ghaas* (S.G.G.S. p. 143) (Even if gold is offered to animals, they will eat only grass.) Even if we are educated our basic self remains the same.

With your company, I had learnt a great deal. But since you were away, my patience and tolerance deserted me, my faith wavered, and left me feeling weak and helpless. Like ordinary women, I have cried and lamented for my daughter today. I have seen her crying. I have cursed my fate and myself and felt life to be too bitter and have wanted to die. I realize that in all this I have shown the gravest disrespect for our ever-loving Lord. I am not fit to be the wife of a true Sikh. Send me to Kabul please! Let me try and find my daughter. And if this does not happen, I'll break my head on the rocks and kill myself (and she began to cry bitterly).

He continued in a gentle voice :

Just think, dear, we have already lost our daughter, and now we are turning our back on our faith as well. You know that she was a gift from *Waheguru*, and now He has taken this gift back. The pain we are feeling is for the suffering she must be undergoing. But if we think for a moment, we don't know what condition she was in before she came into our family. If we could not know nor do anything about it then, the same situation exists now. We have tried everything possible to trace her and have failed. The constant worry is only for her physical and moral purity. If she is alive with her faith

intact, then it is a matter of joy, and if she has died with her faith and purity intact, then that too is a matter of joy.

I have full confidence that she will never show any weakness. She cherishes the pride of being a Sikh. You too must have this faith.

You must keep you thoughts positive and remain in *charhdikala*. If you begin to think that your daughter has lost her purity, these negative thoughts will surely reach her and create negativity in her thinking. Trust in the fact that your child is strong and facing the challenges staunchly. Then pray with complete faith to the Guru to come to her aid.

Jahan jahan Khalsa ji Sahib

Tahan tahan rachhya riayat. (ardas)

(Your protection reaches all places wherever the Khalsa resides).

With these actions you will help you daughter's spirit to remain hopeful and positive.

Don't limit your perceptions to the visible world only, because what we cannot see is much larger than what we can. The principles of the unseen world are more subtle, but extremely strong. Your wishes and thoughts have a definite identity in the invisible world. Like arrows they fly in the space, find their mark and make an impact to uplift or bring about a downfall, to create or to destroy, depending on our state of mind.

Because of your unhappiness today, you saw your daughter weeping in distress. Now when you think about her, picture her as being in *Charhdi Kala*! Send her the blessing—Child, may you never lose your optimistic spirit.

Every day we perform the *ardas* for those women and children who are lying in captivity in far-off lands, that they may hold on to their faith. And we firmly

believe that not even one of our children will fall from grace. Why do you let your spirits slide into disbelief?

Remind yourself of the numerous Sikhs who were captured along with Baba Banda Singh. Some were part of his troops, but quite a few were mere passers-by. Yet, not one of them compromised in the matter of his religion. We remind ourselves of such incidents not to become arrogant but to keep doubt, fear and disbelief away from us and strengthen our faith that if it is Guru's will then our wishes shall be fulfilled.

Basant Kaur : What you say is so true, but at moments I feel overwhelmed by a sudden wave of emotion. When I sit down to eat, the thought comes unbidden. Has my daughter eaten or is she sitting hungry? Before I sleep, I wonder if she is lying on the cold ground in some lonely place, and while churning butter I remember how she used to sing asking for stale roti and fresh butter.

My dear husband, I get a lot of strength and comfort from your wise words. It makes me contemplate how the Lord makes provision even for the new-born child. In the same way, He must have planned for my daughter. I know she is brave like a lioness and will face all troubles courageously. I also tell myself that some good will come out of this because we believe that whatever Waheguru does is for our good. May be something needed to be done in Kabul, which only Satwant could do and that is why she has been sent there. How can we know why things happen? For us it is enough that we keep faith. With these thoughts I feel strong.

This morning I began to realise that I was so unhappy because it was my daughter who was missing. So many raids have occurred and so many young girls carried away. I have felt a pang but never this heart break and misery!

I remembered these lines from Sri Guru Granth Sahib :

*Jab lag meiri meiri karaiy
Tab lag kaaj eik nahi sarai*
(S.G.G.S. p. 1160)

(As long as one is caught in the web of 'me' and 'mine', nothing worthwhile can be achieved).

Himmat Singh nodded and said :

It's true that pain is caused by our ego and possessiveness, but it is not easy to control these. Also, there is another aspect to remember. There is a very fine distinction between 'ego', which causes suffering and 'pride', which is the core or basis of a human being. If this is given up then there can be no happiness.

Some people take their weakness to mean that they have conquered their 'ego'. In fact, what they have done is to give up their right to make decisions and to take action accordingly.

The cause of your pain is self-respect or self-worth which refuses to accept and give in to the evil actions of another. We Indians had lost this spirit, and Sri Guru Gobind Singh revived it.

You wish your daughter to die with her self-respect intact. This arises from a higher love, which is supported by strength of character and true religious fervour. This is something to be proud of.

As to the conquering of the sense of 'me' and 'mine', one cannot get rid of it merely by talking. In spite of great efforts, it raises its head again and again.

The Guru has therefore shown us that the cure for it is through a deep and abiding love for Waheguru. As our love for Him increases, we shall feel closer to Him. A sense of belonging will fill our souls. I am His and He is mine—this relationship will become all-encompassing, drawing us away from the ephemeral attractions of this world.

And as we continue to remember *Waheguru*, a day will come when we shall feel His love being showered on us. This will wash away the fine veil of our ego, and enable our purified soul to become one with the all-loving Father. Strengthened by His touch, it will form an eternal bond with Him which can never break.

We are at the stage of effort, of trying to uplift ourselves to reach for oneness with the Lord. The way of the world is to believe: 'everything is mine, only the Lord is not'. But the Guru's path is of loving devotion which forges close bonds with *Waheguru*. When these bonds are weak, the love of others pulls us away to non-belief.

You must fight this. Don't listen to the complaints of worldly people. Also be careful not to be influenced by words of hollow wisdom.

The effort should be to start at the bottom rung and gradually move upwards. Begin by reminding yourself daily, as many times as possible: *Waheguru* is ever-present even though I can't see Him, so that slowly the awareness of His presence remains with you at all times.

Next, ask yourself, 'Where is He?'

And tell yourself: 'He is with me, and all around me'.

Then think, 'What is His relationship to us?'

To this you reply: 'He is our Father and He loves us'.

Once you are convinced of His love, then your devotion and love for him will become absolutely firm. You will feel that you are constantly surrounded by the radiance and joy of His presence. Your spirits will always be uplifted.

In this way, a person who has conquered his ego creates an aura of goodness. Whatever he does benefits others. His mind stays at a higher level; he respects

and relies on himself, and becomes alive in the true sense of the word. But this happens only after the mind has been cleansed by reciting *Gurbani* and by the love of 'naam simran'."

Basant Kaur : It is so true that when a vine clings to a strong tree, it can rise to the same height as the tree. In the same way a person of weak faith can rise to great spiritual heights by the *satsang* of his companion. You have done so much to help me shed my weakness, but I still need your help. I am extremely foolish. I have not been able to achieve the state of mind where I can feel the presence of *Waheguru* all the time. But I know that your kindness and optimism will make me strong.

Himmat Singh : I myself have not achieved that state of complete faith, but we are blessed with the gift of *satsang*. So we must not worry. *Guruji* will himself lead us to the goal.



15

To achieve a state of mind where we remember *Waheguru* all the time, we have been given the gift of *naam japna*. In this way we are able to be in touch with Him, feel His presence in our hearts, and then there is no feeling of separation.

Basant Kaur : But what if someone keeps repeating His name like a parrot?

Himmat Singh : (Smiling) My dear, it's a living, breathing person who is doing *naam japna*, not a lifeless machine. When a person does something sincerely, it has a definite effect on his or her thinking. When we do *naam japna* with a clear aim that it should become *simran*, which in turn should become love for

Waheguru, our intentions will bear fruit. However, if someone recites *naam* for a show, then that is another matter!

Basant Kaur: Oh! why do I get so confused? Why doesn't love for *Waheguru* fill my heart?

Himmat Singh: There could be a good reason for this. There is a strong belief among people that *Waheguru* is an autocratic and strict judge, who must be feared. How can then one have a loving relationship with Him?

But the Guru has given us an entirely different picture of *Waheguru* as:

- *Nirbhau* (without fear)
- *Nirvair* (without enemy)
- *Bakhshind* (forgiving)
- *Pita* (father)
- *Bhrata* (brother)
- *Sakha* (companion)
- *Mitr* (friend)

All these denote loving and caring qualities.

Thus when we see Him as *Aapay Preet Prem Parmesur* (S.G.G.S. p. 1330), (God puts His love in man and blesses him with His grace.) it becomes easy to love Him. We lose our diffidence, our sense of awkwardness when approaching Him, and begin to feel the closeness, which was being denied to us by our own fear and doubts.

Basant Kaur: Why do we feel shy or awkward with *Waheguru*? I am not clear on this.

Himmat Singh: In our heart of hearts we are only too aware of our weakness and wrong-doings. As long as we believe that *Waheguru* will judge us and find us wanting, we hesitate to pray to Him, because we feel that He will not love us.

I'll explain this in another way. Once the cub of a lioness became sick, and no remedy worked. Someone told her to pray to the Almighty, but she was hesitant. 'How can I pray for His mercy when I have killed countless of His creatures?' she thought. Similar thinking makes us feel ashamed to face our Lord. We have to realize that He is an all-pervading power, whose inherent nature is goodness and love. We are troubled and unhappy because of our own actions, but when we go near Him, we feel the comfort of His love. Then it becomes easy to pray to Him, to recite *naam*, to sing His praises and be grateful for all His blessings. (*Himmat Singh* paused, smiled and asked) How do you feel now?

Basant Kaur: Wonderful! I have enjoyed every word you've spoken.

Himmat Singh: So, by accepting Him as the source of love we have taken the first step. Once we begin to feel love for Him, His presence remains in our hearts, night and day. It feels as if we have become connected to Him, and through this connection, His love and comfort is flowing into us.

This idea is beautifully depicted in the bani of Sri Guru Amardas, *Anand Sahib*, in which he says:

Ey mann meireiya tu sada raho har naaleiy
Har naal raho tu mann meireiy dookh sabh visaarnaa
Angikaar oh kareiy tera kaaraj sabh sawaarna
Sabhna galla samrath suami so kyon manoh visaareiy
Kahiyy Nanak mann mereiy sada raho har naaleiy

(S.G.G.S. p. 917)

(O my heart, always remain close to the Almighty. Remain close to the Lord, my heart, because in that way all suffering is forgotten. Once He owns you, He will take care of all your problems. He, the Creator, controls everything. Then why should one not

remember Him? Says Nanak, urging his heart to always remain close to the Lord.)

As a friend looks after and cares for a friend, so the Almighty cares for those who love Him. He does this by giving them the gifts of His love and joy.

Another benefit of closeness with the Lord is that slowly all other relationships lose their hold. One is no longer at the mercy of emotional involvement with others, which was creating a barrier between the Lord and oneself.

This does not mean that we cut ourselves off from all relationships, but accept them as *Waheguruji's hukam* (Lord's will) and carry on doing our duty. This state is of true *vairag* (detachment) and it removes the need to take *sanyas* and go into the jungles. The path of spirituality, which was dry and full of dangers in the past, has thus become a comfortable highway making our journey pleasant and full of joy.

Basant Kaur: You have made these abstract ideas so simple to understand:

> *Waheguru* is all love.

> Each being is a part of Him, and thus carries the spark of divine love in his heart.

> But we have turned this love towards the materialistic world. Thus, we have become completely engrossed in worldly possessions.

> This is leading us away from the beloved Creator.

Now, if some change can be wrought in our nature, so that we can free ourselves from the hold of this world and turn towards the Lord, then we can achieve the right destination.

Only when we begin to believe that this world is His Creation and all that is happening is according to His will, which we must accept cheerfully, then, and only then, can we really be close to Him. This is the

meaning of *Hukam* *Rajae Chalna*. (S.G.G.S. p.1) (His will in born in us, ingrained, thou follow.) Am I correct?

Himmat Singh: Absolutely! My dear, some people are born with a consciousness of *Waheguru's* presence and are thus automatically attracted to a life of *satsang*. Some see the Creator in the myriad beauties of Nature. Then there are others who go through some personal trauma and turn towards this path. Sikhs, who recite *Gurbani* and try to understand it, lead their lives in His presence.

The type of company one keeps plays a big role. With a bad companion, one sinks into a life of evil, and with a God-loving friend, one is drawn to the spiritual life.

Everyone is aware that this world and its attractions are not lasting. Those we love are taken away from us by death. The possessions we collect and cherish are destroyed or stolen. At such moments we suffer the pangs of loss, and then comes the desire for peace and lasting happiness—a blessed cure for all ills. This, we find in *satsang*.

We pray for:

Gurmukh da mail

Sadh da sang (ardas)

(O' God! Grant us the company of the true devotee and the society of the elevated one.)

For it is in their company that we learn to focus our love on *Waheguru*

Gura ik deih bujhayee

Sabhna jiya ka ik dataa

So main visar naa jayee

(S.G.G.S. p.2)

(This the Guru, my teacher taught, there is One protector and provider of all creation; forget Him not.)

After a while *Basant Kaur* said, "I am feeling at peace now and I want this feeling to continue. It would help if we could have *satsang* at home for some days."

Himmat Singh : Yes, this is a good idea. We can have *akhand path* of Sri Guru Granth Sahib. I'll go and make the arrangements.

Messages were sent to all relatives and friends and the next day *path* began after praying for the well-being and safe return of those who were being held captive in distant Kabul. One after the other, five *akhand paths* were completed and during those days Bhai Himmat Singh's home became a paradise of spiritual joy.



16

In far-off Kabul, on the barren outskirts of the city, the caravan lay under the silent, twinkling stars. All round were the Amir's soldiers standing guard. Those who had already gone through the inspection were fast asleep, but the others waited, restless and anxious, till exhaustion claimed them into deep slumber.

Only one person, Jaswant Singh, sat with eyes fixed heavenwards, his thoughts focused on the Creator. His mind was filled with the fear of the morning, when it would be revealed that he was a young woman dressed in male garments. She would be recognised as the same girl who had escaped from the Amir's palace. The result would be capture, torture and death. Satwant had believed that being disguised as a man would give her protection, make her journey safer, but it had put her in greater peril.

As time passed a calmness descended on her mind. Every time a fresh wave of fear and worry threatened, she seemed to hear a voice saying :

*Angikaar ohh karey teyra
Karaj sabh swaranaa.*

(S.G.G.S. p. 917)

(He will accept you and He will protect you for He is the One who can put everything right.)

Eih mann meyreyā tu sadaa raho Har naley.
(S.G.G.S. p. 917)

(Oh, my heart! Stay always with the Lord.)

Time passed and still Satwant Kaur could see no ray of hope. She clung to her faith and reassured herself that the Guru would show the way; she must keep her spirits up. Finally, she got up and decided to find a way to get out of the camp, but guards were posted everywhere. Quietly she slipped back and sat down again.

One Pathan chief passed close by. He was talking softly to himself, "Everyone is asleep. All are either Kabuli or Pathans. Who would know where 'Butala' is ?

Oh, what should I do? Tomorrow, we leave and who knows what will happen then!"

As he paced slowly, he heard the sound of a soft voice. In the dark, he could see someone sitting and reciting something in a strange language. As he listened carefully, he realised that the person was Guru Nanak's Sikh, and was reciting *Gurbani*.

The Pathan chief was intrigued and excited, and moved forward quickly. He approached the young man and shook him by the shoulder, saying, "Who are you, young man?"

Jaswant : A traveller.

Chief : Where are you going?

Jaswant : To Hindustan."

Chief : Have you been there before or is this your first trip?

Jaswant : I have been up to Sirhind.

Chief : Have you seen Butala?

Jaswant : Not Butala, it's Vatala.

Chief: Yes, yes. What sort of place is it?

Jaswant: It has Muslim madrasas (schools) and libraries.

Chief: Yes, right. You know about Punjab also?

Jaswant: A little.

Chief: How is that?

Jaswant: My family was from Punjab?

Chief: Did Nadar Shah capture you and bring you here?

Jaswant: No, sir. But we belong to that part.

Chief: Do you know anybody in Punjab?

Jaswant: Not many.

Chief: Have you heard the name Aas kur?

Jaswant: (thinking deeply) Yes, sir, I had heard that a woman, Aas Kaur, along with her little boy had been captured by Nadar Shah and along with other Hindu slaves, had been brought here.

Chief: What happened to her?"

Jaswant: Near Attock, Sikhs had attacked and managed to free some Hindu prisoners, but she was not among them. It was believed that there was a *pahadi* maid, Nukro, with her, but no trace was found of the three.

The chief frowned and biting his lip asked, "Young man, how do you know all this?"

Jaswant: Just heard it in passing.

Chief: Why are you still awake?

Jaswant: I am remembering my Lord.

Chief: Why?

Jaswant: It is Guru Nanak's teaching to remember the Lord with one's heart even as we toil with our hands. He taught us that those who do not believe in the Lord, eat corrupted food.

Chief: You appear to be a very noble person. (Thinks his forehead is peaceful and loveable. His words are sweet and thoughts clear and concise) and speaks aloud.) Tell me, does Aas Kaur have a husband and do you know his name?

Jaswant: His name is Shatrujeet Singh. He has a daughter, who is very pretty and God-loving. It is said that she resembles her mother.

Chief: You've not seen her?

Jaswant: Only heard about her.

Chief: If you were in Hindustan, would you be able to find out her whereabouts?

Jaswant: I am not sure, but if it is for a good cause, I can try.

Chief: Hal You are a wise one.

Jaswant: I have heard that when she sings songs of love and sorrow in the memory of her brother and mother, the hardest stones melt.

Chief: Do you have any weapon with you?

Jaswant: Yes a small dagger.

Chief: Give to me.

Jaswant: How do I protect myself?

Chief: You know the consequence of disobeying me?

Jaswant: Yes, but at least tell me why you want it?

Chief: I have to imprison you.

Jaswant: For what crime?

Chief: No crime. I need you and when the job is done, I shall release you.

Jaswant: But why imprison me? You have just to order me and if there is no wrong-doing involved, I shall willingly obey.

Chief : I am not sure, but I've been waiting for a long time for someone like you. Maybe you can solve my dilemma.

Jaswant : To achieve your own ends, why do you arrest an innocent?

Chief : My wish.

Jaswant : Justice, justice...."

Chief : If there was justice, why would I have needed you? Enough of talking. Get up and come with me or it will be the worst for you.



17

Jaswant : I want you to listen to me carefully. From your reference to places and names, I feel that you are in search of someone. But this is a closely kept secret. If these names were ever revealed, you would get into serious trouble. I am in your power and will undergo any treatment you mete out to me. But if I reveal these names, your secret will be out and you too will suffer. Your action thus, will solve nothing.

But if you treat me with sympathy and try to understand my pain, I will keep your secret and do all in my power to help you. I can sense from your tense manner and speech that you carry a heavy burden in your heart.

Why do you want to add to it?

The chief became lost in deep thought: 'He is right. In my eagerness I have revealed more than I should have. If I am rough with him, he can destroy me, but as a friend he can be of immense help. With a wry grin he said to Jaswant, "Young man, you are very sharp! All right, tell me your problems and how I can help you."

Jaswant : I will tell you everything, but first promise me that you will be my friend.

Chief : Yes, but only if you will help me.

Jaswant : Can you tell me something about your problem?

Chief : No, not now. But if you decide to help me, then I will too.

Jaswant : I feel that your fear of trusting me is wrong.

Chief : Maybe.

Jaswant : Then you promise?

Chief : Do you know Nukro?

Jaswant : No.

Chief : I'll just come back (and he left).

Jaswant sensed that the chief was overcome with emotion and he had gone away to hide his tears. After a short while he returned. The moon had risen and in its glow Jaswant could see that the chief had washed his face. He appeared to struggle with some deep inner grief.

Jaswant had realised that this young officer was the only one who could save him from exposure. It was almost daylight and the soldiers would begin their task soon. He offered up a fervent prayer, 'Waheguruji, by your grace let this man feel sympathy and help me. Or save me in any manner you feel fit.'

Chief : Young man, look at these and tell me what they are.

Jaswant : This one is a kada and this is a small kirpan.

Chief : Do Sikh children play with these?

Jaswant : No. Children and adults, all keep these with them. The ones you have, obviously belong to a child. They must have been made for a very loving mother because the metal quality is excellent.

Chief: And what is this?

Jaswant: This is the morning prayer of the Sikhs.

Chief: Is it Jap Nisaan?

Jaswant: Yes and it is beautifully written.

Quickly Jaswant turned the pages, and found written on the last page—Written by Shatrujeet Singh for his devoted wife Aas Kaur.

Jaswant: You are a Muslim. What use are these to you?

Chief: (Taking them back) They are of use. Now tell me, what have you decided?

Jaswant: Promise me first.

Chief: You are not the one with the stolen diamond are you? Is that why you want my help?

Jaswant: No.

Chief: All right, I promise in the presence of my Allah that I shall be a true and loyal friend to you. Now, you too must make a vow.

Jaswant: I vow as a Sikh to be your true friend and guard your secrets.

Chief: I have heard that Sikhs are truthful, but still I want you to confirm that you are swearing by your God.

Jaswant: When a Sikh takes an oath 'as a Sikh' it automatically means that his God is a witness because Sikhs always live in the presence of their Allah.

Chief: Very well. Tell me now, what do you want from me?

Jaswant: That I should not have to undergo the physical search.

Chief: Why?

Jaswant: I hate any strangers touching my body.

Chief: Right, but where is the harm?

Jaswant: Under normal circumstances, no, but I have taken a vow. You don't need to worry that I am the diamond thief. If you don't believe me I am ready to give my garments for your soldiers to check.

The chief was puzzled and said, "I still can't see the problem, but if this is all that you want me to do then I can only offer one suggestion. Come with me and change into the clothes of my groom and get busy looking after my horse. As a part of my staff you will not arouse suspicion." Then nodding to Jaswant, he moved away.

Jaswant (who, as we know, was none other than Satwant Kaur disguised as a male) quickly woke up the old Baba and whispered, "I have to go for a couple of days, but I shall definitely meet you the day after. Meanwhile, please don't worry and don't try to look for me," and with a reassuring smile, he followed the chief.

On reaching the chief's tent, Jaswant quickly changed into the clothes of the *syce* (groom) and folding his own into a neat pile he kept them aside. The chief was already convinced of Jaswant's innocence, but the casual way he changed his clothes made his belief more certain.

Satwant Kaur's life had taken many twists and turns. From being the beloved daughter of doting parents, she was kidnapped and sold in the marketplace. Suffering the pain of imprisonment she went on to create an atmosphere of friendship and *satsang*. She lay sleeping on a bed of hay beside the horse, whose caretaker she had become.

The chief, whose name was Agha Khan, completed the round of the camp, and dropped on to his bed, tired out physically and emotionally. His mind was in turmoil. Though he felt relieved at finding someone to help him, he could not be sure how much further to trust him.

With the dawn, the rest of the travellers were searched thoroughly and when nothing was found, Agha Khan asked for the Amir's permission to leave. They received this towards the evening as the thief had been arrested in the palace itself.

Due to the lateness of the hour it was decided that the caravan would depart early next morning.



18

That night there was an air of celebration in the camp. Everyone went cheerfully about the tasks of cooking, eating and settling down to sleep. The travellers were eager for the dawn when finally the signal for departure would be given by the beating of the *nagara*.

At a little distance from the camp, Agha Khan sat in a troubled mood. In front of him sat Jaswant Singh.

Agha Khan : So, Jaswant Singh tell me what was the secret which you were trying to hide?

Jaswant Singh : To be frank, Khan Sahib, though we have vowed to be true friends, it does not include revealing all one's secrets. You will have to win my trust by showing your complete trust in me, if you want to know my secret. I reiterate that I will keep my faith with you and help you in every way I can. As to whether Sikhs keep their word or not, you can ask the Sikhs here, or the Pathans who have been to Punjab and have had dealings with Sikhs.

Agha Khan : I know this for a fact, otherwise I would not have approached you. If you were not a Sikh, my lips would have remained sealed.

Jaswant Singh : Then tell me how I can help you.

Agha Khan : (Hesitating for a while, then whispering, 'May Allah guide me') I have been given

the job of protecting this caravan and seeing it safely only up to Peshawar. What is troubling me is that I have a maidservant who nurtured me during childhood. She is in prison, though she is innocent of any wrongdoing. I love her dearly and I want to save her. We are leaving tomorrow and till now I've not been able to think of a way of rescuing her. I am being sent on this trip so that she can be executed in my absence, and no sign of her remains by the time I return.

Jaswant Singh : Which person has so much power that he can go against your wishes and order her execution?

Agha Khan : It's a long story, but the gist is that my maid knows some secret about my father, and he is worried that she will reveal it to me. Also my stepmother is against her, and has had strong words with me about this. My father loves me dearly and cannot bear to be parted from me. He is sending me on this mission just to separate me from my *nanny* and to get rid of her during my absence. Ironically, I already know the secrets my father wants so desperately to keep hidden from me.

Jaswant Singh : What caused the ill-feelings between you and your stepmother?

Agha Khan : Must be my nature, which is very different from the rest of the family. I have in me aggression and killing, but have to maintain a false front. Also my *nanny* had warned me against getting too close to my stepmother whose show of love for me was quite false.

Jaswant Singh : That was asking for trouble! Anyhow, let's see.

Agha Khan : (impatiently) Yes, yes, what can we do now?

Jaswant Singh : Is it possible for you to help her to escape?

Agha Khan : That is the least of the problems! The difficulty is to get her safely away. I don't have any confidants who can keep her in hiding, and I can't send her alone on the long journey to Punjab. Khyber Pass is a most desolate and dangerous area. The tribes living in the mountains are like blood-thirsty animals, who don't hesitate to butcher the lone traveller.

Jaswant Singh : Then you will have to bring her here, which you can do with the necessary security. Leave the rest to me.

Agha Khan : What will you do?

Jaswant Singh : Dressed in the male garb as a Sikh, she can act as our servant, who is looking after our luggage. I will take care of my companions and see that no one gets even a hint of this.

Agha Khan : If anyone gets news of this, I shall be torn to pieces!

Jaswant Singh : How will any of this leak out? And if it does, you can tear me from limb to limb. But why do you underestimate your own authority and position? Who can be bold enough to question you? You must show confidence in yourself. It is good to think and plan, but it must be followed by strength in action.

Agha Khan : My loving father can be extremely harsh and hard-hearted. He has been to Hindustan eight or nine times. He has looted and plundered and killed innumerable innocent people. All this has turned him into a tyrant.

Jaswant Singh : That is understandable, but you can show courage in your beliefs! When a person gets engulfed by problems, Sikhism teaches him that while on one side he must have faith in the Lord, on the other he must have confidence in his motives. He must never become disconsolate and apathetic.

Agha Khan : Yes, I see. So if I bring her, you will see this through? You guarantee this?

Jaswant Singh : *Waheguru* will help us achieve this. The only guarantee is the true promise made by a Sikh.

At these words, Agha Khan jumped on to his horse, cracked the whip and rode off like the wind.



19

It was past midnight when Satwant Kaur heard the sound of hoof beats. In a short while, Agha Khan appeared, accompanied by a tall, slim woman. She seemed to be in her late forties. Unlike the Pathan women, her face was long and thin. Her eyes carried a hint of sadness in their depths, but they also showed the wisdom and gravity which come from facing tough and challenging situations.

Jaswant Singh : You've achieved this very quickly.

Agha Khan : Yes, with some help from Allah. She had managed to get out of the house yesterday and has remained hidden during the day. Now, under cover of darkness she had been making her way to this camp when I met her. She had an inkling of what fate awaited her after my departure, so she decided to act. Her absence must have been discovered by now, and I am sure my father must be sending guards here, since this is the only caravan ready for departure and he knows this is her one chance of getting out of the country. So, Jaswant Singh, it is now time for urgent action!

Jaswant Singh nodded and, leaving Agha Khan to escort the woman to his tent, he quietly went to where his luggage was kept. He took out his second set of clothes and brought them for the woman to change into. Then he took her back with him and waking up the old Babaji, he explained, "Agha Khan has ordered that we take this man along as our servant, but it must

be kept a secret. I have promised Agha Khan, and you must help me." The old man agreed.

With the breaking of dawn, Agha Khan's ferocious father came galloping up along with his guards. He put on a great show of affection for his son and told him that he had wanted to meet him once again before he left with the caravan. While they sat talking, the guards quietly infiltrated the camp and carefully checked everyone.

The people were becoming impatient to leave. So Agha Khan took his father's permission and gave the signal for the caravan to move.

The guards stood lining the road and as the people passed by, they sharply scrutinised each one of them. Jaswant Singh and the maid too walked by, talking and laughing in a relaxed manner. The guards were unable to gauge that these were women in disguise.

Agha Khan's father now embraced his son one final time and turned back, but he left a few of his spies to go with the caravan, in case the maid-servant managed to join it at some later stage.

With a heart full of trepidation and also of thankfulness and joy, Satwant at last set off for her homeland.

As the caravan meandered over the difficult rocky terrain, Jaswant Singh got a chance to know Agha Khan's maid, whom they now called Saeenji. Agha Khan quickly spotted the four spies his father had sent, and instructed his most trusted guards to keep watch on them and keep them well supplied with liquor. Only then he visited his *amma* to see to her well-being.

One day after the evening meal was over, Jaswant Singh and Saeenji sat talking.

Saeen: In this country, the people are not all Pathans. Scores of Hindus have been captured and brought here. Now they cannot be differentiated from the locals.

Jaswant: But how is it that they quietly accept this merging with the Pathan population?

Saeen: They are helpless. The threat of the raised sword is enough to keep them meekly compliant. Also, they have no hope of receiving any support from their homeland, and so they accept the inevitable. In this way they are assured sufficient food and escape from the fear of instant death.

Jaswant: That is true, but if they accept death, they can avoid a life of slavery. What is life worth without faith in one's religion?

Saeen: Yes, I agree. I have seen that Sikhs are seldom taken prisoners. Even when they are outnumbered, they prefer to die fighting. So far I have not seen any Sikh, man or woman, who has agreed to give up his religion. Even though Sikhs are often of Hindu origin, a dramatic transformation takes place the moment they receive *amrit*. You appear surprised at my words. Have you not heard about the young Sikh girl, who was recently captured by the Amir? The moment she entered his palace, she set her room on fire and perished rather than give up her faith. Surely you must have heard.

Jaswant: Yes, I have. In Punjab the people take great pride that not even a child of theirs has been captured and enslaved by the Pathans. Either he has been killed or he managed to escape from his captors and reach back home.

Saeen: It's so true. Love of their religion burns bright and strong in their hearts. A Sikh infant can be brought up in a Muslim house, and for a number of years he can follow their path, but the moment he learns that he is from a Sikh family, it takes him no time to rush back to his original home and parents.

Jaswant: (Looking quizzically at Saeen) How is it that even though you are a Pathan you are so full of praise for the Sikhs?

Saeen : I am merely stating the truth. The qualities of the Sikhs are such that even their worst enemies end up praising them. It is a well-known fact that Nadir Shah had attacked Punjab, shed rivers of blood and captured innumerable Hindu women. At Attock, Sikhs had carried out raids under cover of darkness and saved 2100 of these unfortunate women. Only one Sikh woman was captured and sent to Kabul along with some Hindu women a few days earlier. But the brave lioness that she was, she gave up her life but not her religion.

Jaswant : Did you see her?

Saeen : See her? I was with her.

At these words Saeen's face became very pale with grief and tears began to flow from her closed eyes.

Jaswant : Please, don't cry. I did not mean to upset you, I won't ask anything more.

And Jaswant continued to reassure Saeen, till she could control her grief.



20

In the hilly region when the wheat crop begins to sprout, there comes heavy snowfall. Till the spring season these fragile plants remain lost under a thick blanket of snow. As soon as the sun begins to shine and the snow melts, the plants rear their heads, welcoming the light and warmth. With the removal of the oppressive cold, they begin to grow and flourish, so that within days they become tall and proudly carry the cobs of grain on their sturdy stalks.

For Satwant too, the events of the recent past had been as blighting as deep snow. She, who had been a cheerful and carefree child, became very serious and

thoughtful. She learnt to weigh each situation carefully before coming to a decision, or taking any action. She believed in *charrhdi kala*, but circumstances had taught her to keep the concept deep in her heart and not show on her face. It was this belief which had given her courage and fortitude.

Those who practice *naam simran* react to life's adversities by becoming more introverted and by conserving their spiritual strength. At this stage their actions are marked by thoughtfulness, patience and tolerance, and there is a lessening of overt and carefree happiness.

Satwant began to come into her own. Her smiling countenance spread cheer among her co-travellers. Saeenji was specially charmed by her innocent nature and began to love her deeply, but had still not realised that Jaswant was, in fact, a girl.

The caravan now reached the outskirts of Jalalabad, a town built on the right bank of river Lunda. The weary travellers were delighted to see the picturesque scene as they set up camp.

Towards the evening Jaswant and Saeen went and sat on the banks of the river. Jaswant recited the *rehraas*, and Saeen listened with love and devotion, automatically standing up for *ardas* and bowing down after its completion.

Walking back to the camp, Jaswant smiled mischievously and said, "My dear friend, you have become a *kafir* (non-believer) today."

Saeen : How?

Jaswant : You not only listened to the *namaz* (prayers) of a *kafir* but also participated in it and at the end even bowed to his *Khuda*.

Saeen : (laughing) Oh, you thought that? I did not pray to either a *kafir* or a *momin* god, but prayed with my dear Jaswant and bowed to his love and devotion.

I have always looked for a living being on whom to shower my love. This has always been my *pūja* and my *ibadat* (modes of Hindu and Muslim worship).

When I was a child my father was my god, after marriage my husband was the worshipped and I the worshipper. When he passed away, within a year of our marriage, Agha Khan's mother became my deity, the centre of my existence. Then after her death, I gave my complete devotion to Agha Khan, and now through him I have come to meet and adore you. I do not know any *namaz* or *rozās* (fasting). To me the love of a beloved person is the only worship.

These words were uttered with such sincerity and warmth that Jaswant's eyes filled with tears.

Jaswant : (with a gentle laugh) This is a beautiful thought no doubt, but I feel that *Khuda's* name must be taken with more respect and deference. Only love can help us to reach our destination, and at every stage He Himself is present. Those wise ones who travel on this path say it is becoming to remain silent when thinking of Him. He epitomises love and is present everywhere, yet remains detached.

You have a priceless gift of love in your heart. But where earlier this has been centred on your father, husband, mistress and Agha Khan, a day will come when its focus will be the Lord."

Saeen : It is difficult for me to change anything just now, because there has been too much of a gap. Maybe a day will come, when the present situation has been resolved, that I will meet a saintly person who will remove all my negative qualities. I have been serving someone since a very long time, someone who is truly benevolent and forgiving.

Jaswant : My dear Saeenji, I can't wait any longer. I am going to be rude enough to ask how long are you going to keep me in the dark and talk in riddles?

When you love me so much, why don't you tell me the whole story, instead of always changing the subject? If I had not known anything about the matter, I would have kept quiet. But I have heard some bits and pieces which I keep juggling in my mind to get a complete picture. I am not asking out of idle curiosity but because I want to know and come closer to you.



21

At Jaswant's earnest words Saeen gave a long sigh and said, "My dear, why would I hold back anything from you? But touching on painful subjects can only revive the suffering."

Jaswant : I know, but we have met under unhappy circumstances and that has, in a way, brought us closer. I too have had my share of troubles.

Saeen : I had a feeling that you were from Punjab and had been brought as a captive here.

Jaswant : Yes, that is right. I have managed to get my freedom after a lot of hardships. By God's grace and the kindness of your Agha Khan, I am hoping to reach my homeland. As he is a Pathan, I have not spoken very freely with him. But Saeenji, it's not easy to keep secrets for long from those we love.

Saeen : Barring some unforeseen calamity, I can assure you that my son will keep his word to the end.

Jaswant : I don't expect anything less from him or from you my sweet Saeenji. I feel there is not much difference in the blood coursing in your veins and mine."

Saeen : Yes, I am neither a Pathan nor a Muslim. This appearance of mine has been created by love, or (laughing) maybe as a result of my actions in my previous life.

Jaswant : (holding Saecn's hand in a warm clasp) I can't wait to hear your whole story. Please, tell me.

Saecn : I am the daughter of Punjab, the land of seven rivers. Though I belong to the Rajput clan, I was born in the hills of Punjab. My father was a big landowner. His name was Shaktu, and our hometown was Nadaun. I was married at an early age, but within a short time my husband and my father both died.

We were living in Lahore at the time. In our neighbourhood there lived a very cultured and dignified family. The lady of the house was a warm and caring woman. She took me under her wing after this tragedy, and gave me so much love that I became like one of the family.

So, dear *Jaswantji*, my blood is as pure as the waters of the Punjab rivers, and as such you are like my own brother (and she took *Jaswant* in a tight embrace. Tears ran down her cheeks, her breathing slowed and she seemed to go into a trance).

Jaswant : (after a while) *Saecn*, beloved *Saecn*, it's the Lord's gift that in this foreign, barren land, I have met a sister whose love has banished my feeling of aloneness. If you can tell me the rest of the story then my happiness will be complete. I am sure that *Agha Khan* too belongs to Punjab. The blood in his veins is full of vigour and strength, and not the harshness of this land. Tell me sister dear, that I am guessing correctly.

Saecn : Dear brother, it's a tragic tale, but listen and I will try to answer all your questions. To continue from where I had left off earlier, my mistress was the epitome of love and goodness, spreading cheer all round with her smiling face, singing *Guru's shabad* in her beautiful sweet voice. Her husband was a strong man, truthful and religious by nature, ever ready to help. They made a truly unique couple.

They had one daughter and then the Lord blessed them with a beautiful son. I have never known such happiness, not even in my father's house.

(After a pause) We used to get a lot of visitors, and the mistress was always happy to receive them. So, I spent more and more time looking after the little boy. I feel like crying when I remember those days of joy, service and *satsang* spent in that house.

Misfortune had descended on the country with *Aurangzeb's* fanatical rule. He had sown the seeds of communal hatred, fear and suspicion. These began to bear fruit now. The person who ascended the throne after *Aurangzeb* was *Muhammad Shah*, an inept ruler, too busy satisfying his lust for pleasure to give any thought to the country and the people.

At this time *Nadir Shah* began to invade with his savage hordes, completely devastating the land between *Peshawar* and *Lahore*. Rivers of blood flowed everywhere. Vast treasures of gold, silver and precious gems were plundered. Thousands of people were captured and taken back as slaves.

Bands of *Sikhs* used to make frequent forays into the enemy camps, snatching back whatever wealth they could lay their hands on, and rescuing thousands of young girls and women.

When *Nadir Shah* reached *Delhi* he asked about the *Sikhs* and when he heard details about their valour and discipline, he commented to *Khan Bahadur*, 'Handle them with care. It's quite clear that because of their qualities they will rule the country one day'.

But who was there to heed his words and he himself dealt with them with utmost savagery.

During this time we had to go to *Patiala* at the invitation of the *Maharaja*. Near *Ludhiana* we encountered *Agha Khan's* *Pathan* father, *Hasn Khan*, who was on his way to *Delhi* with a company of his

soldiers. In no time, all of us were made prisoners—my master, mistress, the children and myself. That night when the Sikhs attacked, they managed to release my master and the little girl only. During our journey Sikhs carried out raids numerous times on Hasn Khan's party, but to our misfortune, we remained in his clutches till we reached Kabul, bedraggled and tied together like animals.

The sons and daughters of Bharat were sold for a mere five rupees each. Hasn Khan was attracted by the beauty of my mistress and her son, so we were taken to his palace. Here, he tried his best to make her take the Islamic vows so that he could marry her, but she refused to give in. Finally, Hasn Khan took out his sword and brandishing it in her face threatened her, but she knew no fear. In a fit of rage, he lunged at her with the sharp blade and the next moment my most beloved mistress and friend lay dying on the ground.

Her son sat crying beside her and I was in such a state of shock that all I wanted to do was to kill myself. Suddenly, I heard her voice weak and feeble, but clear enough for me to understand. She made me promise to take care of her son, no matter what it cost me. Then she continued, 'When he is able to understand then tell him about his origin and all that has happened. Tell him that I want him to go back to his country, become a Singh and spend his life in the service of his nation and his '*panth*'. I leave this duty to you and, knowing that you will not let me down I can now die in peace.'

That black night I spent crying bitterly and consoling the child. In the morning I picked up the boy and went to Hasn Khan, and said, 'His mother is dead. What do you want to do with him?'

He asked in return, 'will he accept Islam?'

Folding my hands, I said, 'He is a mere child. What does he know of such matters? But this I must tell you

that he belongs to a very rich and cultured Sikh family, and as such should be nurtured and not thrown away.

At that moment an odd thing happened. Hasn Khan turned to look at the boy, who smiled at him and lifted up his arms. The tough Pathan automatically bent down and picked up the child, murmuring, 'I was childless. Allah has sent me this gift. From today he is my son.'

He called his *begum* and put the child in her lap. But the boy would not stay in her arms. He kept crying and holding his hands out to me. Very politely, I said, 'Khan Sahib, I have looked after this boy since the day he was born, and he will not stay without me. If you kill me too, he will not be able to stand the shock and may die.' Hasn Khan glared at me and harshly asked, 'Are you also a Sikhni?'

I replied, 'No, I belong to the hill regions.'

He said, 'Oh! Not very resolute then. Will you accept Islam?'

I thought to myself my religion is love, and I must carry out the wishes of my benefactress. What have I to do with Hinduism or Islam? My duty is to love and care for this child. Any means adopted for that would become my faith.

So I said, 'I am ready to do whatever you say'.

This pleased them immensely, but I requested them to see to the respectful disposal of my beloved mistress's body. After a long argument they gave me permission to cast it into the nearby river.

I took a sheet and carried her to the banks of the river. Reciting *Waheguru, Waheguru*, I got her ready for her final journey, wrapped her in the sheet, tied a stone to weigh it down and, with a breaking heart, said farewell to her. I had lost three beloved people and now had to take care of the fourth, all the time wondering what fate had in store for us.

I became a Pathani in a Pathan household, and won the trust of one and all, as if I was a part of the family. All the time I continued to look after my young charge.

So, my dear, Jaswant Singh, this Agha Khan is closer to you than you think. He not only belongs to your country but to your religious faith also.



22

Satwant had listened with bated breath, often with tears rolling down her cheeks or sobbing quietly. When Saeen ended her story, she clung to her, saying, "You are wonderful! You have not let my hopes down and confirmed that Agha Khan is not only a Punjabi, but a Sikh. Please tell me the rest."

Saeen : There is not much more to tell. We spent about seventeen years imprisoned in that life. I wanted to fulfil my promise to my mistress and tell Agha Khan about his origins, but I wanted to wait till he was mature enough to handle the situation. And you can see how well he has grown.

His adoptive mother, Hasn Khan's wife, was a very good woman. She lavished a great deal of love and care on him, and treated me very well too. Sadly, she died and after some time Hasn Khan married again, a young and beautiful woman. She had been hostile towards my child in the beginning, but recently her manner towards him changed, and she began to show him a lot of affection. My son is too innocent and trusting, but I could make out that this woman meant to harm him. She had a son from a previous marriage, who used to live with her parents. But now she had brought him home. Her plan was to get rid of Agha Khan so

that Hasn Khan would turn his love towards her son, thus making him his heir.

Once I had understood her plans, I warned Agha Khan to be careful. But youth is generally careless, and so, I began to be extra watchful on his behalf. One day, I took him aside to warn him again, and in my haste I said, 'My child, you must give up your carefree manner, and be more cautious. You can't trust these Pathans.'

He turned on me in surprise and said, 'What do you mean by these Pathans? Aren't you and I also Pathans?'

I gave a sheepish laugh and avoided answering. Then I got up and became busy with some chores.

The next day, Agha Khan came to me and said, 'Mother, you are the most beloved person to me. Last night I kept thinking about our talk and got the feeling that you were hiding something from me. I can't bear that there are secrets between us. This thought disturbed me so much that I couldn't sleep.'

I realised that the time had come to tell Agha Khan his mother's last words. I picked up his sword and keeping it in front of him said, 'Child, I am going to tell you something very important. I only ask that if you don't believe or don't like what I have to say, then you pick up this sword and kill me. But don't say anything against it.'

Taking this promise from him, I related all the incidents that had happened since his birth. As I talked, the effect on him was amazing. I had thought that a young man brought up in an alien land, as a member of a noble family with immense wealth and status, would react with disbelief and anger at my words. But it was exactly the opposite.

As I told him about his origins, his mother's suffering and death, his face turned red with anger.

His eyes turned blood-shot and, chewing his lip, he picked up his sword. I asked him, 'Where are you going?'

'To take revenge on my mother's killer,' he said.

I pulled him by his hand, and holding him in a close embrace, I said, 'Your mother was an angel. She forgave her slayer before she died. What is of great importance is for you to carry out her wishes.'

He calmed down a little at my words and two scalding tears rolled slowly down his cheeks. Then he asked, 'Tell me what were my mother's wishes?'

I replied, 'I won't tell you that just yet. First you tell me what you are planning to do.'

He said, 'That is simple. I shall kill Hasn Khan and go to Punjab to find my old father and assure him that his lion-hearted son has returned after avenging his mother's death.'

I replied, 'Maybe he won't accept you. In our country people don't eat and drink with Muslims.'

He said, 'Won't my father keep me to cut grass and look after his horses? And what about my sister - won't she allow me to sit in her doorway as a watchman? You have cheated me by keeping me in the dark and allowing me to grow up in the house of my mother's killer. I have eaten his food all these years. My life is cursed!'

At his bitter words, I burst out crying. He too was very agitated, moving restlessly all the time. Finally, he shook my shoulder and said, 'Mother, tell me what were my mother's instructions for me. I can't rest till I know. My blood is urging me to action.'

So I told him, 'There are no orders for you. They were for me to take care of you and to tell you the whole story when you grew up. She was sure that the moment you learnt who you were, you would no longer stay here, but rush to rejoin your people. This was her belief and she told me to convey this to you.'

He said, 'Yes, I will go to my country, but I will take the head of Hasn Khan on my spear and offer it to my father, and ask for his blessings for avenging my mother's death.' Very gently I told him, 'This will not please your mother, because she forgave Hasn Khan.'

'Wasn't she a brave woman?' he asked.

I said to him, 'My child, you are not familiar with Sikhs yet. They are not wild people fighting randomly. They are spirited and brave people. They pray daily for *sarbat da bhala* (welfare of all). They are *fakirs* who try and remove the burden of misery and suffering of this world. They don't take revenge; they are without enmity. But they fight against all evil, tyranny and wrongdoing.'

In this way when I told him some more about Sikhs, his anger faded and tears of grief began to flow from his eyes.

I took out the *kara* and *kirpan* which I had hidden in my box and gave them to him. I also handed over the *gutka* which his father had written by hand and given to his mother. I told him that these were his mother's parting gifts to him. He took each item and touched it to his forehead with reverence. Then he said, 'In obedience to my mother's and your wishes, I shall not kill Hasn Khan. But I will not now stay in his house.'

I warned him not to be hasty. 'Let some time pass and plan carefully. The road to Punjab is difficult and dangerous. We need to be cautious and circumspect now, and not take any rash step.'

He gave in to my suggestion quietly and as we continued to talk, his agitation too passed.

Things continued the same way in the household. But Agha Khan's behaviour towards his father and step-mother changed. They could make out that he was sad and preoccupied. Hasn Khan became suspicious that I might have revealed the secret to Agha Khan. He started spying on us whenever we sat talking. He could

not hear very much, but his worry increased and finally he made the plan to send Agha Khan out of the country and, in his absence, to put an end to my life.

Jaswant : Why did he want to kill you in this stealthy fashion?

Saeen : Because he knew that if he did this in Agha Khan's presence, his son would pick up the sword against him in order to protect me. Agha Khan was happy to be going to Punjab with the caravan, but he was uneasy about leaving me behind. He was at his wits' end how to get me safely out, when by *Waheguru's* grace, he met you and now here we are.

They sat talking late into the night. Finally, Saeen went to sleep but Satwant still sat, thinking, "Oh Lord! What is wrong with our country? We have strength, but are unable to use it. The result is that my countrymen are captured and kept in such harsh circumstances, yet our misfortune is that we don't awake to fight back these tyrants." Slowly all the past events and the tragic details of Aas Kaur and her son passed before Satwant's eyes. How long she sat thinking, she did not know. After a while her eyes closed and she too slept.



23

Prince Timur had reached Kabul. When Abdali learnt that Marathas had come to Punjab, he became livid with rage and began to plan new attacks.

Timur had left spies behind to bring in details of conditions in Punjab from time to time. When the caravan reached Jalalabad, Agha Khan met some of these spies, who were on their way to Kabul with the latest reports. From them he learnt that the Marathas had reached Attock and were manning the border. But

throughout the country it was the Sikh units which were in control.

Agha Khan felt thrilled that he was reaching his country in time to be of service. He would fight shoulder to shoulder with his compatriots to ward off Abdali's invasion.

Hasn Khan's spies too returned to Kabul as they were satisfied that the old nursemaid was not with the caravan. Now Saeen and Agha Khan could relax and meet openly. One day Saeen said to Agha Khan:

I have told everything about you to Jaswant. He too was brought here as a captive from Punjab, but I have not had the time to learn all the details yet. He was very grateful for your help, but now that he knows you are a Sikh and Shatrugit Singh's son, he is overjoyed. He told me that your sister is alive and sings beautiful songs full of love and longing for her missing brother. Even though there has been no news about you for so many years, they have not given up and the Sikh *jathas* pray for the safety of you and your mother.

Agha Khan : Amma, it amazes me that the community into which I was born has so much love and concern for its members. After seventeen long years they still pray for the safe return of a young woman and her son and friend, and keep sending undercover people to search for them! And all the time without losing hope!

Alas! if only I had not been captured and taken away. I would have grown up in my own home, eating Sikh food! I would have been the support of my aged father, and with drawn sword in hand I would have been serving my *panth* on the battlefield.

The first few years of my youth have been misspent in accepting enemies as friends and treating friends as enemies. Well, what is past is past. With God's grace I shall try and make up for lost time.

Saeen : May Waheguru grant you a safe return home. The community you belong to is so closely knit that daily each Sikh prays for his brothers and sisters with these words :

*Jahan jahan Khalsa ji Sahib
Tahan tahan racchiya riyae* (Ardas)

(O God, wherever are the members of the holy Khalsa, extend Thy protection and mercy to them)

Along with prayers each Sikh remains ever-alert to come to the help of anyone in distress. But the prayers have a deeper meaning as through them they ask for divine help and guidance for their brethren who are caught in difficult and painful situations. They accept it as the Lord's will if a Sikh dies fighting; his faith intact and his heart full of love for his Lord. But they consider it a calamity if a Sikh gives up his faith and acts in a cowardly manner.

I love listening to Jaswant when he relates incidents about Punjab. You must also find some time to listen to him. You will find the experience most enjoyable."

Just then Jaswant came and sat down near them.

Agha Khan: Welcome, my very dear and close friend!

Jaswant : I am so grateful and happy that we share the same roots. In His infinite mercy, Waheguru looks after His own.

Agha Khan : For seventeen years I have lived in an alien culture, not knowing the greatness of my own. But the moment I learnt my true identity, my blood boiled. If Amma had not stopped me, I would have cut off the head of my mother's killer and offered it at my real father's feet, and won his commendation. Tell me Jaswant Singhji, won't my father blame me for not avenging my mother's death?

Jaswant : No, Shatrujeet Singhji will never do that. Sikhs do not enjoy spilling blood needlessly. When they see the weak and innocent being tortured and killed,

only then they pick up their swords. They are basically *fakirs*, but with courage and determination in their hearts. They go to war to protect the people from the cruelty of the tyrants. It is this love for humanity that makes them fight. They have no desire to enrich themselves with the spoils of war.

They want to see their country free from the yoke of foreign rule and this is what gives them grit, determination and true resolve. It is selfless love which makes the Sikhs first try to change the thinking of the people in power. When they are met with stubbornness and wilful destruction, they put up a strong resistance. When all else fails, they resort to weapons. But this too is done not with hatred but with love in their hearts. That is why their battles do not end in needless massacres. Since the time of Banda Bahadur, Sikhs have been ruthlessly attacked and mercilessly butchered a number of times. Yet, they are not afraid, but are always ready to fight.

The massacres of Sikhs by Mir Mannu were the most horrifying. At that time, a couplet most often recited by the Sikhs was :

*Mannu saadi daatri, assin Mannu de soye
Jiun jiun soye waddhiye doon sawaaye hoye* (a popular slogan)

(Mannu is our scythe, and we, the grass. The more he cuts us down, the more our numbers increase.)

Your mother was truly a noble soul. She forgave her killer, and in so doing she went to meet her Lord with a clean heart full of love. She was brave to the end, giving up her life but not her faith, and left you a legacy of love and dedication to your panth.

Agha Khan : I am finding it very difficult to understand these high ideals. For me the need to take revenge is of foremost importance.

Jaswant : And that is because of the upbringing you have had for seventeen years."

Agha Khan : Yes, I have learnt two lessons extremely well—loyalty and revenge.

Jaswant : (laughing) Loyalty is good and these people have it because of their love for their community. Indians on the other hand, are too self-centred. This causes them to lead narrow lives and suffer the consequences. Sikhs exhibit exceptional loyalty because their love is based on high ideals; they feel no enmity towards anyone. They seldom show any meanness of thought or action.

Agha Khan : Seventeen years have gone by and yet my community has not given up on me. What kind of love is this? But tell me will they now accept me?

Jaswant : Whole heartedly.

Agha Khan : Will they interact with me?

Jaswant : Why not? The joy they will feel on seeing you will have to be seen to be believed. When they hear that the moment you learnt about your true identity, you did not take a moment to give up the wealth and comfort of your royal life to revert to the panth, cries of *Dhan Kalghiyawale* will echo all around. To the panth this will be a confirmation that the blood of Sikhs is pure and does not come under any worldly influence.



At every opportunity, Agha Khan sought out Jaswant Singh to hear more about the valour, bravery, selflessness and humility of the Sikhs. The more he heard, the more eager he became to join his brothers.

At one of the caravan's halts, Agha Khan noticed some people sitting under a tree. Walking up to them he saw that they were Sikhs. One of them sat alone with a hang-dog look, while the rest discussed

something among themselves. They were not Punjabi Sikhs, but belonged to that region.

Agha Khan asked them what was the problem? One of them said, "This man has gone against our religious codes and abused another Sikh. He has also plotted with a Pathan to beat up this Sikh brother."

Agha Khan : It's a quarrel between these two men. Why don't you let them sort it out between themselves?

Jathedar : Khan Sahib, we are Sikhs. Our beliefs and ways are quite unique. We are all brothers and if there is any misunderstanding among us, we go to the *gurdwara* and clear it up. We are forbidden to fight among ourselves. In fact, anyone found doing so is liable to punishment and is declared a *tankhayia*. No Sikh is allowed to criticise another Sikh behind his back, and that too to a non-Sikh? Never! All disputes are to be settled amicably within the family or in the *gurdwara* where the *granthi* Singh acts as the arbiter."

Agha Khan : All this sounds very complicated. Are you all able to abide by this rule?"

Jathedar : Very much so. We are all members of one family. If we don't love each other, what sort of a family are we?

Our Guru has clearly stated :

A Sikh may not abuse another Sikh.

A Sikh may not criticise another Sikh.

A Sikh may not conspire with another Sikh or non-Sikh to cause harm to a fellow-Sikh.

If we do not follow these rules, then we cannot be brothers. And if brothers harbour enmity towards each other, they will fight and kill each other. We must maintain unity among ourselves, with love and trust so as to be able to face our enemies.

We are all human and it is but natural for differences to arise. We are advised to overlook the other

person's wrongdoing, or try and reform him and not to expose him to public ridicule. This brother has committed a serious wrong and so our whole group had to sit on judgement.

Agha Khan : What have you decided?

Jathedar : He has confessed. The punishment awarded to him is to offer Rs. 1.25 in *Guru's golak* and to recite *Jappi Sahib* five times. Then he must organise a meal at his house for Sikhs and personally invite the person he has wronged. They must all sit together and eat.

Please, don't be offended, Khan Sahib, but this is the way of our community. We do not solve our problems by involving outsiders, however close or friendly they may be.

Agha Khan was greatly impressed by this and related the whole incident to Saeen and Jaswant when he returned to the camp.

Finally the caravan reached Peshawar. While the travellers made camp, Agha Khan stayed as an honoured guest with the Khan of Peshawar. A return cavalcade of travellers to Kabul was ready and Agha Khan was to accompany it back.

On the banks of a river, Agha Khan, Saeen and Jaswant Singh met to plan how they could reach Punjab quickly and safely. Agha Khan told them that he had already sent off the Kabul caravan with his assistant in charge. He had handed over the money and rations to him with the assurance that he would catch up with them in a few days.

When Jaswant Singh heard this, he said, "Khan Sahib, the lie you have used may be good sensed from a worldly point of view, but it is unacceptable as Sikhs base all their strategies on truth."

Agha Khan : My dear brother, when our enemy is full of wild, lies and treachery, shouldn't we use the same means to outwit him?

Jaswant Singh : During my exile the saintly person who helped me in Kabul told me, 'A Sikh does not tread the path of falsehood. His very existence is based on remembering his Creator and he who lives in the presence of his Lord cannot act falsely. A liar can never be of service to his community.'

Lies become prevalent when self-centred people get together to fulfil their selfish motives. They use all kinds of deceitful tricks to defeat a common enemy, but in so doing this becomes deeply rooted in their nature, leading to mutual distrust and suspicion. *Gurbanis* says: *Har Naamaaiy ke hovoh jodi*, (S.G.G.S. p. 1185) which means to come together in the Lord's name. Real unity is among *gurmukhs* who believe in the Lord's name and hence there is no place for suspicion and enmity.



25

At the break of dawn the next day, a group of people left Peshawar. These were Agha Khan, Saeen, Jaswant Singh and Baba Ladha Singh with his trusted servant. They were all dressed as Pothohari Muslims, as that would draw the least attention from their enemies. All were on horseback, while a couple of mules brought up the rear with their baggage.

The route led them through some of the most picturesque countryside. This land had seen many ups and downs. It was ruled by powerful Aryan kings in the past and was known as Gandhar. Later, Akbar renamed it as Peshawar after King Porus. Chinese travellers, who came here a century and a half ago also referred to it as 'Parshupura'. Hindu religion was dominant and one of the great scholars Panini was born here. Later, the people turned to Buddhism, and this area became the centre of its learning and culture.

Various monuments and edifices of Buddhist architecture were built.

Gandhar became famous for its fruits, flowers, forests and springs of fresh water. The land is still arable but all the natural beauty has long gone. Mehmood Ghaznavi laid the whole area to waste. The artistically designed *budh vihars* and stupas were turned to rubble.

In time all traces of Hindu and Buddhist culture vanished. This became the entry point for the foreign invaders to India, who looted and pillaged, leaving behind ruins and destruction. The party from Peshawar followed this route, their horses carefully picking their way among the stones and rocks. They little realised how many centuries of history lay underfoot.

As they neared the banks of the Indus, they spotted a group of Sikhs at a distance, and heard the sound of singing. Jaswant Singh suggested that they stop there and get some rest, while he sent one of the attendants to find out what was happening. Soon the boy returned and reported, "It's a group of Sikh men and women. They have prepared *karah parshad* and are singing *kirtan*."

Jaswant Singh wanted Agha Khan to experience a Sikh *samagam*. So they both dressed in Sikh garments and joined the group. Accepting them as Singhs and *sehajdhari* Sikhs, the group respectfully welcomed them.

After completing the *kirtan*, the leader recited the *ardas*, which was for the soul of a young girl who had died at this very spot.

During a raid by the Mughals, a group of Hindu men and women had been captured. Among them was a Sikh girl. During the journey she constantly urged the others to resist the invaders and not meekly follow them like a herd of cattle. They were being taken to a life of slavery, which was worse than death. To die fighting for one's freedom was far better. Her words

often led to skirmishes between the soldiers and their victims and many were wounded and killed.

When the Mughals learnt that the one instigating the rebellion was a Sikh girl, they began to treat her more harshly, finally tying up her hands and feet. On the banks of Indus where they made camp, they decided to convert her to Islam. The *qazi* got ready but the fearless girl refused. Ultimately, they lost patience and threw her into the river. And thus, this brave soul was liberated from all sufferings and went free and happy to meet her Lord.

The news soon spread to all the Sikhs who lived in the region. They could not find her body, but they made *parshad* and said a prayer for her soul. Since then, this was repeated every year. Later they were able to trace her to a Sikh family of Gharhthal. Her father had become a Singh after taking *amrit*. He was killed fighting in a battle.

Some Pathans of the area had told them that they had heard her say to her companions, "If you can do nothing else then jump into the river. On the way there will be plenty of opportunity as we will cross seven rivers—Sutlej, Beas, Ravi, Jhanab, Jehlum, Indus and Lunda!"

Agha Khan listened to all this, his throat tight with emotion. His thoughts went back to his mother and her imprisonment, and automatically his hand tightened on his sword. Waves of emotion washed over him, ultimately bringing tears to his eyes. 'O Lord!' he thought, 'Creator of such a courageous people! And yet what warm feelings they have for each other! They had never seen this girl, knew nothing about her except that she died to keep her faith intact, and yet they meet every year, sing *kirtan* and pray for her. What an example of love and devotion, more than that of any family! I am grateful that this sacred blood flows in my veins too, and it has brought me close to my own people, and to Sikhi.'

Agha Khan accepted the *karah parshad* with thankfulness. His first attendance at a Sikh *samagam* proved spiritually uplifting for him. The warmth of their acceptance of him gave him immense joy, especially when they heard from Jaswant Singh a brief account of their difficult journey from Kabul.



26

In the olden days, there used to be another tower, called *Toshaykhanay da Bunga* in the open land between the main gate of *Sri Darbar Sahib* and the *Akal Bunga*. The central, enclosed space thus became very useful for holding secret meetings like that for the *gurmata*s in strict privacy. The entrances to this place were carefully guarded. A secret code word, decided by the *jathedar* of the *Akal Bunga*, was conveyed to those who were invited to attend.

The *Akal Bunga* was established by the sixth Guru, *Sri Guru Hargobind*, and along with this was laid the foundation of the *Akali* ethos.

An *Akali* was one who had complete faith in the *Akal Purakh*, and whose mainstay in life was *gurbani* and *naam simran*. He had no worldly attachments—not to people, nor to things.

To the *Akali*, the panth was of supreme importance and he worked for maintaining the Sikh *maryada* and character as well as to serve the poor and the needy.

The *Akali* was a fearless warrior and, when needed, was ready to sacrifice his life. He was pure of character—in fact, an epitome of all the qualities which *Guru Sahiban* wanted their Sikhs to have. He was detached from the world, yet not a *sanayasi* because he lived in society to serve it.

The *Akali* wore blue-coloured garments, a tradition which began at the time of the first *Amrit Parchar*.

Iyun upajay singh bhujangeeay neclambar dhara.

(This is how the blue robe tradition of warrior sikhs come onto being)

Different *jathas* of *Guru Gobind Singh's* army wore different uniforms and sported particular colours. Blue colour, worn by *Sahibzada Fateh Singh's* soldiers, subsequently became the traditional symbol of both *Akali* and *Nihang Singh*s.

It was also the duty of the *Akalis* and *Nihang Singh*s to call the *gurmata* meetings in times of danger to the *Panth*. *Gurmata* was the supreme force for unifying the *Panth*. The *Akalis* of the *Akal Bunga* would send messages to all *jathedars*, responsible leaders, *granthi* *Singhs* and respected Sikh scholars to come on a particular day. When all had gathered, the entry-points were sealed. In the open space, a *diwan* was arranged and after the *kirtan* and *ardas*, the *hukam* was read out and *prashad* distributed.

A solemn oath was sworn by each and every person present there that he had come to discuss only matters of the *panth* and would take decisions for the welfare of the *panth*; no personal problems or prejudices would colour his decision.

After this, the *jathedar* would say *ardas* and the matter in hand would be taken up. As the problem was finally resolved, the *jathedar* would announce the decision, and the congregation would disperse. Then it was the *Akalis'* job to convey the decision to the whole *panth* and see that everyone adhered to it. Because of the deep respect and reverence the *Akalis* commanded, everyone bowed to their wishes. It was unheard of that anyone went against the *gurmata*.

The tradition of the *gurmata* began in *Chamkaur*, and during those perilous days *Guru Gobind Singh*

himself taught the Singhs the complete procedure of holding the *gurmata*.

After Sri Guru Gobind Singh the first *gurmata* of the panth was held with Baba Santokh Singh as the *jathedar* at Hazoor Sahib. And the last one was held during the Battle of Nushehra under the aegis of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and Baba Phoola Singh Akali.

After the Sikhs lost their kingdom, the *panth* seemed to go into a state of shock. Self-centredness and lowly acts, from which *Satguruji* had uplifted the Sikhs, again became prominent.

Under the leadership of the *Singh Sabha*, the *panth* seemed to awaken to its lost glory. But the western influence brought about some changes and the original meaning of *gurmata* changed to mean merely a 'resolution' with its narrow and restricted connotations.

A resolution can be termed as a *matta* or a majority view, but not a *gurmata*—which stood for *panthic* unity, purity, a higher aim, and was based on *naam* and sacrifice. This was a sacred tradition in which selfishness, partisanship, envy and working for one's own progress by fair means or foul had no place.

Gurmata stood for uplifted and pure minds, which had been washed of all selfish motives. Thus cleansed of 'me and mine', this tradition worked solely for the benefit of the whole *panth*.



The small group of travellers from Kabul reached Amritsar. They were now dressed as the *Khalsa*. Emotions and thoughts churned in their hearts as they approached *Sri Darbar Sahib*. Standing in speechless wonder, they looked with awe at the splendour of the Golden Temple.

Satwant Kaur—the young and innocent girl, abducted from the warm security of a loving family and sent into hostile territory to face untold hardships and terrors—did not ever imagine that a day would come when she would be back in her homeland? Yet here she was, her heart filled with gratitude and love for *Waheguru* who had protected her and given her the courage to face her persecutors bravely and who, in His infinite mercy, had brought her safely back to her beloved country. Her eyes filled with tears and, with folded hands, she bowed low till her forehead touched the sacred ground and she became lost in a world of spiritual bliss.

The old man, Baba Ladha Singh, had wished for a long time to have *darshan* of *Sri Darbar Sahib* before departing from this world. But the great distance and the arduous journey had made him think that his wish would remain unfulfilled. Now he lay in deep obeisance with a heart too full for words.

For Saen too, it was a homecoming. She was a Sikh and a devout follower of the teachings of the *Guru Sahiban*. The twists and turns of life had taken her to a foreign land and its alien faith. To carry out her duty to her beloved mistress and protect the young child left in her care, she had adopted the ways of the land. Now she stood in wonder at *Waheguru's* ways that had brought her and her young charge safely here. She too prostrated with a grateful heart.

Agha Khan stood in awed silence as his soul drank in the beauty and serenity of the temple. He felt a deep stirring of emotion which had been aroused by Saen telling him about his origins and the brave and upright *Khalsa*, of which, he too was a member. He looked at the temple and the cool water of the *sarovar* surrounding it, and he wanted

to lose himself in its embrace. His hands came up in the only way of prayer he knew and then, he too was bowing and offering his soul in total surrender.

All four lay *vismaad* mast, lost in a spiritual joy so deep as to be bordering on the unconscious, a joy which can be experienced but not expressed, when all thoughts halt, the outer world recedes and there is only the soul and *Waheguru's* presence.

A long time passed, then they got up and sat down on the edge of the *sarovar*. Just then a *Singh Sahib* approached and was joyfully recognised by Satwant as the *Santji* who had guided and comforted her in Kabul. He had stayed back to help some Sikhs who were still imprisoned there. He had managed to reach Punjab much ahead of them as he had received a message that his presence was urgently required for a *gurmata*.

It was remarkable how the untrained soldiers had established a strong and secret network of communication so that, even without the benefit of trains, mail and wireless services they could send messages to far-flung places like Afghanistan.

Santji now took Satwant aside and heard all about their long journey. He was deeply moved when he learnt that Agha Khan was none other than the missing son of Shatruijit Singh. His eyes filled with tears as his heart echoed with *Dhan Guru Nanak! Kalghianwale Patshah tu Dhan!*

Santji was an ascetic, but well-read and a master of many languages. Whenever the *panth* was in difficulties, he would leave his peaceful world and, at great personal risk, rush to help. Often he would leave his long hair open and thus, he came to be known as *Baorianwale Babaji*. The Sikhs were not the only ones to revere him. Because of his frequent trips to the northern states of Baluchistan, Ghazni, Kandhar,

Jalalabad, Khyber, etc., the Muslims of the area worshipped him as their *pir*. He had been on the lookout for Shatruijit Singh's missing family all these years and firmly believed that, somewhere, at least one of them was still alive. And now here was Satwant Kaur presenting his long-lost son to the *panth*.

Taking all four of them with him, *Santji* headed for the *Gurmata diwan*. There were strong rumours of an invasion by Ahmed Shah and the Marathas had spread all over Punjab and were carrying out activities inimical to the Sikhs. So, it was important for the leaders of the *Khalsa* to meet and plan a strategy to protect themselves against these powers.

Santji told them the secret password for the day so they could enter without any hitch. The *ardas* for the completion of the *diwan* was about to begin when *Santji* stood up and loudly saying *Sat Sri Akal*, he congratulated the *panth* that the son of Shatruijit Singh was finally in their midst. The news electrified the congregation and cries of '*Bole So Nihal, Sat Sri Akal*' echoed and re-echoed.

Then, at *Santji's* urging, Satwant stood up and related the whole story of her kidnapping, her days in Kabul and finally her meeting with Agha Khan and the journey back home. As they listened, these strong, brave, tough men were moved by the same emotion—what magic had the *Guru Sahiban* wrought in the minds and hearts of ordinary mortals that even their young daughters and sisters faced impossible odds with such fervour and fortitude!

The whole area echoed with passionate cries of *Dhan Sikhi, Dhan Sikhi! Dhan Kalghianwala Pita*. It was he who had given the gift of eternal life to the *Khalsa*. It was he who had sacrificed his four sons for an ideal and then proclaimed, "What does it matter if four sons have attained martyrdom, I have *lacs* of sons in the *Khalsa*! This ideal son will live for all time to come!"

Yes, and it was this flame of *Sikhi* that burned bright, steady and eternal in the heart of every Sikh.

Agha Khan now stood up and greeted the gathering with folded hands. He had managed to pick up some words of Punjabi and so, slowly but clearly, he said, "Waheguruji Ka Khalsa, Waheguruji Ki Fateh. I offer my head at the feet of the *Guru Khalsa*."

