

## These Havan Kunds

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The final phase of the struggle for Punjabi Suba was a ten-day fast by Sant Fateh Singh and his threat of self-immolation by burning himself alive if the Government of India still refused to concede the demand. During these days of fasting Sant Fateh Singh lived in a room adjoining a terrace above the Akal-Takht. On the terrace, some kind of pyres, popularly designated *kunds*, were built. Mercifully, Sant Fateh Singh did not have to burn himself.

The ten days of agitation and Government of India's acceptance of the Punjabi Suba demand, which followed, were made to invest the *Kunds* with some kind of a mystic association and were sought to be retained in place as memorials by the present management of the Shiromani Gurdawara Parbandhak Committee. This move provoked intense opposition among many sections of the Sikhs. What transpired thereafter may be read in Sardar Kapur Singh's ensuing article. The *Kunds* have stayed in place.

Yet the controversy aroused by them has far from died down. Those opposing the retention of the *Kunds* feel that the facts surrounding the *Kunds* expose the whole Sikh people to ridicule and, what is worse, they constitute a perversion and a negation of the Sikh spiritual doctrine and values. Their point of view finds an extremely competent exposition in Sardar Kapur Singh's ensuing article.

While deciding upon the publication of this article, *The Sikh Review*, the only Sikh English monthly magazine and an infant journal at that, was not unmindful of the risks it was taking. Yet in the lives of religions, there come moments when the whole basis of the values promulgated by them seems to be in jeopardy. Take this basis away and there is nothing of the particular religion left. It is in the context of these postulates that *The Sikh Review* has considered the question of the *Kunds*. It feels that the pristine purity of the Sikh spiritual tradition must be maintained, whatever the price *The Sikh Review* or, for that matter, any other Sikh individual or institution has to pay for it. And it is, for this reason, necessary that it may once and for all be settled whether the retention of the *Kunds* as memorials offends against or is in keeping with the Sikh religious doctrine.



To help maintain a constructive and purposeful discussion, *The Sikh Review* will welcome articles or letters expounding other points of view. It will, of course, publish only such articles and letters as embody a completely impersonal, dispassionate academic and well-reasoned exposition of the subject and scrupulously avoid recrimination. The object of *The Sikh Review* is to establish *not who is right but what is right*.

Truth and, even above that, truthful living are the highest Sikh values. No belief, however cherished, no symbol, however dear, no institution, however prestigious should command our loyalty when it is found to conflict with truth or truthful living, as expounded, in matters spiritual, by the Sikh doctrine, the validity of which has been tested through centuries of travail and suffering. **Editors**

**W**ITHIN the history rich and numinous precincts of the Golden Temple at Amritsar, a number of brick and cement ugly structures, resembling baking ovens, have been raised for the last many years. On them are inscribed the name and praises of the present leader and controller of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, Sant Fateh Singh. This inscription is prominently visible to all who enter the holy and hallowed precincts of the Golden Temple, and these anti-aesthetic structures have been raised in such a manner as to make them vie in status and dignity with the Akal Takht, The Throne of the Immortal God.

2. These structures are loosely called, *havan kund*s or *agnī kund*s, nobody knowing how to designate them properly in the context of their origin and significance. It is claimed by the creators of these monstrosities and the present controllers of the S.G.P.C. that these structures have been set up as a memorial to those who claim to have passed through the Valley of Death to achieve a unilingual Punjabi State and that for this reason these memorials can justly be erected and maintained within the divine precincts of the Golden Temple and in rude rivalry to the holy Akal Takht.

Simultaneously, it is asserted that a unilingual Punjabi State never was a demand of the Sikh Panth, the mystic Collectivity of the Sikh People, and that the present Punjabi-speaking State has nothing whatever to do with Sikhism or the Sikh people as such, and that it is entirely a State carved out on the wholly secular basis of a language, meant to satisfy the aspirations of all those, Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike, residing in the new Punjab.

How can a purely administrative and political and secular demarcation of a State be memorialized in the numinous precincts of the Hari-mandir and in audacious rivalry to the holy Akal Takht is a matter which does not seem to worry the present controllers of the S.G.P.C.

3. Sometime ago, when Sikh feelings rose in crescendo against the hypocrisy and sham that these structures perpetuate, the President of the S.G.P.C. stage-managed, what he called, a World Sikh Convention. An objective enquiry into the religious and social backgrounds of the "delegates" of this Convention, the countries of their origin and from where they were actually picked up by the President of the S.G.P.C., who has, since, formally claimed for himself the status and prerogatives



of a sovereign, infallible Pope, thus rendering any such future World Sikh Convention unnecessary, if not altogether superfluous, will furnish most interesting material to those interested in study of typologies of modern decadent political communities. This Convention passed a unanimous resolution favouring retention and maintenance of these structures in perpetuity, while one of the delegates, the then current Chief Minister of the Punjab, a retired Judge of a High Court, offered to have these structures encased in marble and covered with gold plates at State expense. This, the present controllers of the Sikh *gurdwārās*, say, is their sanction for perpetuating these structures.

4. Two questions arise before inquisitive minds in connection with these structures:

- (1) what are the roots, in the context of Sikh history and doctrine and the Indian cultural traditions, out of which these structures have grown?
- (2) what is the validity of the sanction, being accorded to them through the *tamāshā* of a Sikh World Convention?

5. Let us take the second question first. It is certain, that there is no precedent whatsoever for a World Sikh Convention of this kind in the Sikh historical tradition. There is the doctrine of the *Sarbatt Khālsā*, the Collectivity of the Sikh People, and there is the doctrine of the *gurmatā*. The latter of these doctrines, originates from two distinct cultural traditions, the one, Aryan and the other, Semetic. The Aryan doctrine is embodied in the concept of the *pancās* which goes back to the *Vedā*. On this is based the Aryan concept of democracy. Its essence is that contingent matters of common interest and secular nature, must be decided by the 'representative will' of the people.

It is to be emphasized that this doctrine of the *pancās*, as adumbrated in the *Vedā*, is operative not in the domain of things spiritual nor of postulates and principles of things secular, but applies only to matters of day to day implementation of these principles. The point is that no *pañchāyat* can pronounce on matters of religious doctrine or postulates of politics or social organization, that it may only apply the accepted practices and postulates to a given situation.

Then there is the Islamic doctrine of '*ijmā*', i.e. universal consensus. This '*ijmā*' is a source of Muslim jurisprudence along with certain other sources. The principle of '*ijmā*' is that in matters not covered by the other sources of Muslim jurisprudence, such as *Korān* or *hadīth*, *ulemā*, the pious intellectuals of the community, who are competent to judge the matter in a given age, may pronounce upon them through consensus. It is the essence of '*ijmā*' that only those acknowledged as competent to judge in these matters are to make the pronouncement, and it is also the essence of '*ijmā*' that such a pronouncement cannot be made in an ad-hoc assembly, and certainly not by demagogy followed by votes; it must be made naturally, freely and in response to an urge of the Muslim people and not as a result of a formally convened process.

The Sikh *gurmatā* is an amalgam of these two traditions and doctrines, that of *pancās* and that of '*ijmā*'. A Sikh *gurmatā* cannot pronounce on matters of fundamentals, or on doctrines or on postulates. It is to operate as a representative of the entire Sikh People, and not to function as an ad-hoc hand picked assembly of special invitees convened by a party or faction or a self-styled Pope. Its decisions are not to be made by counting of votes and they must represent the general



consensus of those intellectual and pious Sikhs who are competent to judge the matters under reference. This is the true nature of a *gurmatā* of which a farcical and crude display was made by the magnates of the S.G.P.C., recently, in the form of a Sikh World Convention, to pronounce upon the validity of erection and maintenance of these structures within the precincts of the Heart of Sikhdom, the Golden Temple.

6. Fortunately and unfortunately, both, the proceedings of this World Sikh Convention have been preserved in the official publications of the S.G.P.C. Any person who has some respect for logical reasoning and who has some acquaintance with the Sikh doctrines and traditions can see for himself how trivial and cussed have been the reasons advanced in favour of the erection and maintenance of this insult to the Sikh dignity, called, the *havan kuṇḍ*s. Unfortunately, the posterity will have authentic material to feel ashamed at the low level of intelligence and the low moral sensitivity to which many Sikhs have sunk during the second half of the twentieth century. There is not a single serious or plausible argument advanced on the subject matter before this, so called, World Gathering of representative Sikhs, and the entire proceedings consist of pervert demagoguery and foolish irrelevancies.

So much for this All World Sikh Convention.

7. Now, coming to the first point, it is seen that there are at least five distinct and heterogeneous elements of Hindu cultural tradition and Sikh historical practices that lie at the back of the melodrama which certain Sikh leaders have played recently, of going on a fast unto death and then easing out of it on some pretext or other. It is to commemorate the last of such acts that the structures under discussion have been raised.

8. Why are they called *havan kuṇḍ*s or *agnī kuṇḍ*s and why has not a definitive name been given to them? The answer is that those who have raised them up have neither any educational background, nor the intellectual equipment to name correctly their confused antics, which they sub-consciously and vaguely wish to relate to some great tradition of the hoary past.

9. The five strains which have gone into this overstrained, silly and sentimental drama are the following:

(i) Students of the *Mahābhārta* will recall that on the eleventh day of the battle, Kaurvas formulated a strategy of capturing Yudhishtra alive, and Drona, the Commander of the Day, undertook to do so. The chief of the Pandvas, Arjuna, frustrated all attempts of the enemy to capture Yudhishtra alive, and thus, on the twelfth day of the battle, Karna told Duryodhana that Yudhishtra could not be captured alive as long as Arjuna was by his side. It was at this stage that the chief of Trigartas, the modern Himachal Pradesh and Jammu people, along with some of his chosen followers constituted themselves into a suicide squad. In the ancient Indian tradition, going farther back than *Mahābhārta*, people who joined such a suicide squad through certain well-established ceremonies, were called, *samsaptaks*, i.e. those under a solemn vow. The *Mahābhārta* tells us that these *dogrās*, for so they were, put on garments of matted grass and sat around the sacrificial fire, i.e. an *agnī kuṇḍ*. This is the ancestry of the *agnī kuṇḍ*s of the Akalis presently in control of the *gurdwārās*. These *dogrās* then calling upon the Fire-god as a witness vowed that they would either kill Arjuna or die in the attempt, adding, "If we flee in fear or otherwise remain alive but unsuccessful may the penalties of the seven deadly sins visit us." Thereafter, these



*samsaptaks*, performed their own obsequies or funeral rites. Then these *samsaptaks* got up and slowly walked towards the South, which is the direction of the *Yamaloka*, i.e. the Abode of Death. Having done this, these *samaspataks* ran towards the battle-field, crying, "Arjune, Arjune", "O, Arjuna, O, Arjuna." It is recorded in the *Mahābhārtā* that when Krishna drove the chariot of Arjuna towards these *samsaptaks*, the latter remarked: "There, Krishna, see the *Trigartas* standing, cheerful under the high intoxication of their solemn oath, knowing that they go to certain death. Indeed, they are full of high exaltation of the *swarga* at hand." Not a single *samsaptak* flinched or fled from the battle field and not a single one of them returned alive to claim public acclaim and votes in his capacity as a *zindāh shahīd*, living martyr.

This is the first element in the melodrama, which the Akalis presently in control of the *gurdwārās*, have taken up as their own, but only after suitably modifying it to suit their personal convenience, retaining the word *agnī-kund* and the element of a 'vow' only.

(ii) Then there is the ancient and hoary Indian tradition of the Hindu priests, the *brāhmins*, that of spiritual blackmail by threatening to commit suicide unless a specific demand is met by the other party. Throughout the Indian history, and up to the middle ages, a large number of instances are on record, where a *brāhmin* made some demand of another, and threatened to die by burning himself alive or by starvation or some other means, unless this demand was met. In the event of the demand not being met, the *brāhmin* would invariably commit suicide as threatened and then the person responsible for causing the *brāhmin* to do so would be guilty of the most deadly sin, the *brahmahatīyā*. No Hindu dare

commit the *brahmahatīyā* and thus the *brāhmin* would, almost always, succeed in his demands.

As late as the concluding decades of the 18th century, a *brāhmin* from a village near Kasur, threatened to burn himself alive on a wooden pyre, unless the Sikhs assembled at the Akal Takht, invested Kasur to rescue the *brāhmin's* daughter abducted by the Pathan prince there. As the students of Sikh history know, the Khalsa yielded before this threat, and against heavy odds attacked Kasur and sacrificed over two thousand Sikhs to satisfy the *brāhmin's* bidding, but the *brāhmin* had his way and the Khalsa avoided *brahmahatīyā* and in the bargain, upheld its royal titles and pretensions of being the Protector of the poor, *garīb nivāj*, the Friend of the underdog, *nimā-niān-dā-mān*, and the Upholder of Righteousness, *dharam-rakhayik*.

Out of this ancient Hindu cultural practice, Gandhi concocted his special brand of fast-unto-death, and realising the basically selfish character of it, yoked it to *satyāgraha*, postulating truth and altruism as a necessary prerequisite of the practice. Whatever its form, however, it rests on the assumption that the social relations and their ethical foundation constitute a common ground between the parties, and, in any case, undertones of coercion and blackmail can never be eliminated from such practices. Out of this tradition comes the second element of the drama certain Akali leaders have played in the recent past.

(iii) The third strain has been picked out by these Akali leaders from out of the recent practice of certain devout Buddhists to burn themselves alive, at various places in South East Asia, to pin-point certain fundamental political controversies or issues. In these acts of self-immolation, there is never a prior proclamation of their intention to immolate



and it is only after the gruesome deed is over that the public become aware that thereby the person sacrificing himself has pin-pointed a certain political controversy or issue asserting through a cheerfully accepted death that the other party stands in immediate need of rethinking over his position on the issue. The operative ideas behind this type of self-immolation are two: one, that the self-immolating person, through his death, declares that he refuses to co-exist with that which is basically evil, namely, the stand taken up by the other party. The other, that he, by laying down his life, makes a moral exhortation to the other party to reconsider his erroneous stand. It is this third strain, and the high publicity that it necessarily causes which the present Akali leaders have incorporated in their antics of making loud noises about their determination to immolate themselves unless this or that condition is fulfilled.

(iv) The fourth strain in this affair comes out of the Sikh history itself. There is a firm tradition in the Sikh history of individuals and groups of Sikhs making a resolve to die fighting against a tyrant who interferes in their religion or way of life. Baba Deep Singh, Shaheed, and Baba Gurbux Singh, Shaheed, are the instances in point. The essence of this Sikh tradition is that it is meant to assert the fundamental Sikh right to tyrannicide at the cost of their own lives. In this Sikh tradition, there is no vow taken except a simple and impersonal declaration of the aim, accompanied by a humble prayer to the God Almighty, "to help His humble servant preserve his Sikh integrity with the last sacred hair of his head in tact and till his last breath"—*sikhī tod nibhāīye Kesān saṅg svās*. There is no turning back, in this Sikh tradition; on any pretext whatsoever, and there is no desire for self-publicity or public acclaim. It is an irrevocable covenant between the Sikh and his Lord, the *Akālpurkh*. Both, the

principle and the methodology of this purely Sikh practice and tradition derive from the guide line and testament given by Guru Gobind Singh himself and it is not a derivative of or based on any previous Hindu or semetic doctrine or tradition. The Sikh fundamental right to tyrannicide is explicit in the divinely sanctioned target of the Khalsa: "to destroy root and branch, injustice and tyranny along with those who practise them from the face of the earth" (*dust sabhan kau mūl ukkhāran*). The methodology for this targetal accomplishment is laid down in the Guru's injunction, "to die fighting on the battle field, when the final issue is joined against the forces of evil", (*jab āvi kī avadhī nidān banai ran main ati hī tab jūjh marau*.)

Out of this Sikh tradition, the present Akali mimics have extracted their practice of performing, *ardās* with solemn vows, within the Golden Temple and before the Akal Takht, which vows are never intended to be kept from the very beginning and which vows are invariably made with some unbecoming mental reservation.

(v) To these four strains extracted out of ancient Hindu cultural traditions and the history of the Sikhs, these neo-Akalis have grafted a fifth strain, to provide a base to the other four. This fifth strain comes out of basic atheism, agnosticism and nihilism of these Sikhs who know little of and care less for Sikhism or what it stands for. Their basic creed is that this earth, and the senses through which they perceive it, is the only ultimate reality. It is their unshakable conviction that there is no intrinsic difference between truth and falsehood except that gullible people accept the first and reject the second. They are firmly persuaded that as long as they can get away with it, everything is permissible. It is out of this total perversion of the Sikh



creed that the utter lack of shame is born of those who have been indulging in these melodramatic antics, consisting of sacramental *ardās*, a religious vow, leading to building of *agnī kuñḍ*s and then seeking to perpetuate them as integral parts of the Golden Temple and the holy Akal Takht.

10. Being basically village rustics, without educational background or intellectual equipment, and being godless materialists, they lack the capacity to describe their antics and deeds in proper phraseology. They have heard the word, *havan kuñḍ*, in which their neighbours, the *Aryā Samā-jists*, throw good *ghī* and other sweet-smelling substances, and they are persuaded that *havan kuñḍ* is something good and respectable. That is why they have called

these structures as, *havan kuñḍ*s in addition to *agnī kuñḍ*s.

11. During the last three decades or so, the Sikh leadership has fallen into hands of such people that it is difficult to say whether, in their words and deeds, it is buffoonery which predominates or baseness.

12. The Sikh masses have become altogether unconcerned to matters of quality or standards in public affairs. The present condition of the Sikhs is not that of a people who have gone to sleep, which would be a tragedy anyhow, but which tragedy could be redeemed by sincere and earnest leaders. The tragedy of the Sikhs, at the moment, is that they are a people who have gone completely pervert and cussed.

Now, only a miracle can save them.

