

TO MY FELLOW MINISTERS: A CASE FOR LEARNING PUNJABI

posted on the Siblings of Destiny forum February 19, 2014

Sat Naam. I have just been having a Facebook conversation about Punjabi with a sibling who posts on this forum. A story came to mind you might appreciate so here it is for everyone.

I once stayed in India for nearly 6 months. It was my privilege to visit the youngsters at Sukha Singh Santa Singh, which was their school at that time. Was also there for the World Sikh Conference where the Siri Singh Sahib came with many more in attendance, but this story is about none of that.

Once my stay at Nanak Nivas was up, I found myself graciously invited to stay at the ashram (*dayraa*) of a Sant Baba Darshan Singh, who lived just outside Amritsar, not far from where Miri Piri Academy is today. They treated me like a respected member of the family, gave me a private unit with hot water and a toilet, looked after me in every possible way. It was wonderful.

As time passed, I was informed that we - perhaps 70 of us - would be making a journey to another of Babaji's communities, this one at Ajitpur, near Nanakmata Sahib, not far from the border with Nepal. When the day came, we happily packed up and took a two day trip by train and truck up into the foothills of the Himalayas where Babaji's community, his farming village was located.

Eventually it became clear to me that this was an annual occasion, a sort of rock festival of speakers on Sikh Dharma and soon there were a large number of distinguished gianis in attendance. Gianis Sant Singh Maskeen ji, the most famous Sikh preacher in all of India, arrived and seemed to have a special understanding with Babaji.

Interestingly, Gianiji had a sidekick with him. I think it must have been considered fashionable to have a pink-complexioned follower from the West, and that is what this Louis Singh was. Louis, dressed all in black from head to toe, would speak before Gianiji and the audience would sit at rapt attention appreciating him greatly for his efforts, then afterwards with a loud "*Bolay so nibaal! Sat Siree Akaal!*" would shower him with rupee notes. That was the routine.

I was curious about Louis Singh and besides, there was no one I could speak English with, so I sought him out and we talked a bit. He asked if I was "ex-3HO." I laughed to myself and said I was "3HO, why?"

Anyway, the festival went on for three days and on the second day it was made known to me that Babaji wanted me to get on the stage speak on the final day. Now I am normally up for just about any task that will serve Sadh Sangat, but I could see the dynamic that was unfolding and could not at first see my role in it.

Well, finally the day came and the time came and I went on stage. There were maybe a thousand Sangat on hand all curious about me and what I might present.

Before I go on about my presentation, let me first describe the talks Louis Singh would give. Basically, Brother Louis spoke on in a steady voice for about half an hour, very serious, well-spoken with the Sangat all enthralled by his words. At least, the Sangat was so gracious, that is how they presented themselves. You see, these were farmers. They lived and worked the land out in this rural place and spoke not a word of English. They could not understand a word Louis Singh spoke - and still they appreciated him enormously. But even with my humble ability to express myself in Punjabi, I determined that I would not stage a repeat of Louis Singh.

"Aad guray nameh, Jugaad guray nameh, Sat guray nameh, Siri gurdyay nameh..." With that, in the simplest

of Punjabi - grade two level, I imagine - I set out the story of how Guru Nanak had inspired Bhai Lehna to become the Second Guru, and Guru Angad had done the same with Baba Amar Das, and so on, until Guru Gobind Rai had created the Khalsa. I had a bit of fun with them then, because I had heard them calling me "*Angrayz*," meaning Englishman. I said to them "*Mai nahee Angrayz*." (I am not English.) Then I poked the existential dread in every Indian Sikh's heart "*Toosee nahee Hindoo*" and assured them they were not Hindus. Then, touched by the spirit of the moment, I finished my short talk, "*Asee Khalsa!*" We are Khalsa!

I have never, ever elicited - nor could I have imagined - such a response. Right away five "*Bolay so nibaals*" and then rupee notes like confetti pouring onto the stage in front of me. The smiles of recognition, the gratitude from the hundreds of salt-of-the-earth Sikh farmers will be forever engraved in my heart.

This, my siblings, is the experience you will never have so long as you continue to refuse to study, let alone learn even a sentence in Punjabi. As I told my brother earlier today, there is nothing - nothing in this world - that you as a privileged, pink-complexioned citizen of a domineering Western country can do that will so touch the heart of someone from another culture - especially if they live in or come from a place with a history of colonial oppression - as making an honest effort to speak a few words of their language.

It is very humbling and therefore nearly impossible for an American to do, but the Siri Singh Sahib (Yogi Bajan) and the Bhai Sahiba too called on all of us to take this path a long time ago.