

## SHORT STORY

### NEOKHALSA

by Satish Kumar Shukla

It was the first substantial assignment, in fact his maiden, awarded to the newly appointed bureaucrat.

Just graduated into Govt. ranks, young, full of irrepressible enthusiasm, on the threshold of a cherished career, he took to it as ducks take to water grasping the opportunity with both hands and with all his soul, this Godsend, and sought to go about it as ants go about their assigned tasks.

A dream come true, he exclaimed to himself in self contentment's reverie, settling into his office chair. As if in divine disposition, the Chief Minister had handed him a pack of manuscripts received in his office, supposedly verse, a poet's rumination on the Khalsa Tercentennial in modern context, for which mundane politics' rush left him with little time however much he wished he could himself enjoy the first flushes of a creative mind, these specially graced lot by the benevolence of Almighty God.

Rarely but surely in life, bliss falls into one's lap. The unexpected rolls before you in palpable boon's waves, the yearned extends as the fulfillment's rainbow before your disbelieving eye and you would want to share your joy with whole world forgetting for once all ephemeral, all transitory nature of things. Our young bureaucrat's joy too knew no bounds.

Rightly so. The event was an extraordinary one. Khalsa was unique concept in the development of human raison- the advancement of *Homo sapiens*, made up of hitherto

undiscovered intellect's fancy-flight, fallen to the lot of no lesser than Guru Gobind, the 10<sup>th</sup> Sikh Guru. In a moment of thick self reflection he must have conceived a new man in the womb of his divine muse.

*Khalas!* The very term denotes purity, sublimeness of human striving for perfection as matter attains perfection in turning into, say, diamond, perfected constitution of coal's form and content.

Khalsa is the human variant of diamond! He rose from his desk in a sudden gush of effusion, as if enlightened, looking out through the large window at the Secretariat throng, a medley of peoples and officials running around on errands cheerlessly, seemingly unaware of such sublime concerns of society as Khalsa. And then there was the constant whirr of clerks and files and machines or even his own boss' whimsical calls, sundry petitions that he felt too disturbed to attend to this particular assignment. He decided to look for a better opportunity, maybe at his home library or just simply in the long walk along Sukhna Lake. That was his favorite pastime, gathering fresh thoughts among cooled airs in the proximity of nearby Himalaya, the traditional home to humanity's Vedic heuristics.

He was though much perturbed at his Chief's likely raving, his tenuous hold on the import of Khalsa as a quantum spring in the evolution of the spiritual man. On the one hand the Chief was spearheading the drive to make the tercentennial an international affair even sacrificing home talent to get foreign experts to do Designs and Architecture at Anandpur Sahib. On the other, he was citing a subject as drab as today's dirty politics as coming in his way for more personal engagement with program content. That was remarkable lapse, ill logic really, an enigma he could understand in no better way than figuring out that perhaps a certain heartlessness belongs to spending public money. It was actually so, judged from the way the plutocrats played their power games in Delhi in the name of people who lacked basic nutrition, still lost in their colonial debasements, half clad emaciated skeletons of citizens wasting their existence in utterly hopeless lives, troubled by thousand poverty, of mind, of material, destitute, shanty town and slum dwelling in a Republic that prides itself on its *Gantantar*, even so firing on every while the engines of this cannibal democracy.

At home, sipping evening tea in his bungalow garden, he was joined by his sister, a young bubbling spirit in her first year at university. Always keen to talk, to discuss, to question, more particularly to question custom and tradition, she seemed to him a conversation worth in his new found regard.

'Come, sit down. Tell me, what do you think of Khalsa?'

She giggled, "Why? The Sardarji, any Sardarji is a Khalsa, isn't he?'

'O come on! I mean it differently. What lies behind the façade, its significance really?'

'None whatsoever, if you asked me. It just represents another religion somewhat like *Momin* does Islam and *Panditji* Hindu.'

'But they never celebrate *Momin* Centennial or the Hindu Millennial, do they?'

'Let me see. You are sure talking of the upcoming Khalsa Anniversary. But you ought not oversee facts. The Sikh is a relatively young religion, Khalsa just about 300 years old. Who will care for all this in another thousand years? Going by the fast paced soft sciences ruled world, who knows its fate?'

'That's silly skeptics of yours again.'

'And you are forgetting the most important point. Like Hindus, Sikhs don't believe in renunciation. In fact, Sikhs are outstanding pragmatists, perhaps a bit misled thereby, but certainly overdoing their act. Go, see Punjab villages. We saw it ourselves during our recent outing into countryside. Farmer homes are not the same, court yards decored by bullocks and carts and the implement, and those simple materials built verandas. The diaspora has infected their limb and deranged their soul beyond redemption.'

“But that is progress, I suppose.”

‘Not exactly, if you applied some of your own fine thinking to the matter. You see, in a mild country that is Panjab where early winter morning brings on warm waters, where a bath at a Persian Wheel is a luxury gratis, they are taking to using geysers! Now they even use air-conditioners to beat the heat. Religion enjoins on them *Amritvela* fresh water bath! And most certainly simple living, one with nature. That is what the Gurus did, didn’t they?’

‘Dear little sister! You are again off to your tendentious tantrums. Religions do overlive material ingress upon human soul. Weeds do grow in the garden. We clear them. That is all.’

‘My professor thinks otherwise. He knows history. He says religion is hogwash, opium for the people. A good tool in elites’ hands to hoodwink masses into collective stupor, yes designed subjection in fact.’

‘That’s again too simplistic. Rulers rule with force, power you see. How would you explain English Raj? The Muslims even repressed Hindus, singling out Sikhs for their extraordinary favors, you remember?’

‘That is a better view. Perhaps Khalsa is a direct child of that repression.’

‘Not exactly! No doubt borne of the need to fight oppression, Khalsa is very much more. It is serious thought, didactic logic, a principle of life enunciated by a singular Guru. Do you know I have been entrusted with the responsibility to shape the cultural format of the Khalsa Tercentennial Celebration this April 13?’

'O yeah! Are you? Really? But I must proceed', she hurried pointing to her tennis gear as she started to walk away.

The discussion was getting too serious for a young mind's light wings. In a moment of juvenile huff she was gone, off to her evening game of tennis. He was left alone with his tea, his thought, his task.

He unfolded the manuscript.

Gosh! What was that? A full 100 pages of verse on Panjab, a Literary Adagio, announced the title. *Hope in hale heart, song on lily lips, lilt in sprightly step, rhythm in supple limb, ripple in subtle emotion...*so it went on to describe Panjab, the only land with five rivers- Persians' christening had been right- cuddled up, billing and cooing, swooning along side the grand Himalaya, always good for a love's legend legion! Such exciting eulogy!

He turned the page. Prologue had, imagine! Indus recite momentous history. A torrent began just as soon on next pages. Satluj, the big river that it is, making in one big sweep of verse highs and lows of Panjab lava flow before your mind's eye. The 'elocution' ended with a beseeching *Free me! Through the heart of one pristine Panjab let me flow. Oh! For my eternal tryst with the waiting Indus!*

The Beas was just unstoppable. It whipped up some riparian frenzy playing pranks with reader mind. Chenab vexed on love's labor lost upon its chagrined waters. Ravi was, too, eloquent, revealing human fancy for romance and equal fallibility while Jhelum literally meandered upon page in slow relaxed rumination on man, fate and time, the little literary odyssey ending in a fine supplication, again a river calling upon the misled Panjab protagonist to let him- the metaphoric Panjab river- flow on to its destiny unhindered, in peace, and at leisure, Om Shanti Shanti as the Rishi had envisaged it. It said.

The bureaucrat's hand quivered, his head turned. He was fed upon Chaucer, Spenser,

Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Romanticism, Tragedies and Comedies, things and times however attractive or real yet very much alien, removed from his immediate experience, foreign to his Indian sensibility. Kings and Queens, Hamlet and Macbeth, Arthur and Desdemona remained so much fantasy while this here was real, palpable that his eyes could see, his heart feel, his imagination touch. He was born to the soil of Panjab. Its winds, its earth, its waters dwelt in his wont, its lore belonged to him as much as his own smile, his own dream, his own dash. Heer conjured before him Tragedy far 'better' than Macbeth, Sohini one even better. And England just didn't have five rivers, not even one really to match the Panjab's openheartedness, to play the magnanimous mother to love and legend and lore on such grand scale.

He went on with his discovery. These poets are a strange lot. They reach places even the sun won't! They live in penury, by self honor yet rewarded. They are fiery and wouldn't bend. Not if Death Deity herself were to descend. And they dig up with their 'wordy' hoes from seemingly insipid soils exhibits of the quaintest and the most beautiful kind. Their fantasies and their treasures, silver and gold winged, ornate with dazzling rubies and gems of novel thought play with your mind strangest of wistfulness's games, luring and enthralling with cognition's exuberances as only Meghdutam do.

The manuscript now slid into Panjab's extended panorama, perhaps intended prelude to the Khalsa climax. In turns winter, spring, summer, rains, autumn were captured, painted on the canvas of verse in myriad color eigen to the land of rivers. Now you could feel the chill of deep winter, now the fragrance of spring blooms- Baisakhi moods, now the scorching heat and the biting dust of *Jeth-Harh* even as verse on rains brought on relief, gorgeous release's showers. Literally!

The ecstasy was an extended one, for soon took seasons' place the rustic Panjab lore. Giddha had you seething in romance, Bhangrha heaving you in unbounded mirth's swirl. Baisakhi, the song of farmers' joy, Lohrhi the ballad of character and moral. The crescendo was beating up into frenzy. It is like being on a mountain trail through tortuous trek amid hill and jungle and stream, done up, yet full of expectation when suddenly, over the next bend, past the obstructing hillock, you stop dead in your heels.

There before your tired eyes lies, opened up, the splendor of a bashful vale, and the surrounding monk-still mountains, silvery streams creeping on dales, water falls cascading from heights, and the inviting deep woods laden glades, little settlements dotting the scenes, wisps of smoke here and there announcing life, mingling with blue hills the rams, deer, cool winds and your own labiled emotions, nature's mighty poetry at work. Or the God's own Van Gough brushing at his painted fantasias!

Just as he turned the next page, lo! There stood the poet's delving on Khalsa, a high point of the mortal creation, Panjab's indelible addition to world's sublime inventory, it said. It eulogized Khalsa, *Weltgeist*, conscience of truth embodied in man, one who remains immersed in God's chant. One though who would strike

***CHU KAR AZ HMAH HEELTE GUZASHAT***

***HALAL ASTU BURDAN BASHMSHEER DAST***

Fantastic! He muttered to himself only to be overwhelmed by the next NEOKHALSA or the very last CHARHDI KALA that bespeaks of fortitude that plucks luck from the very jaws of despair, mocks death, always astride on the crests of struggles of life, a mind's stance no Shakespeare, no Dante, no Goethe, no Whitman knew as well as the great Guru Gobind imbibing it from the magic of Vedas permeated India.

He closed the manuscript. He rose. His brow, he felt, was warm, nearly feverish, some sweating. He had been through poetry's rapids. He had seen how, by God's Grace, luck had bestowed upon him a unique chance to show his mettle, to contribute, and in such sublime style, to reawakening the true spirit of Khalsa. He decided to seek the very next morning a meeting with the Chief with a view to making this manuscript the center piece of celebration on April 13, 1999, *tour de force*, a centrally arranged elocution to relieve the formal monotony of insincere speech making- listeners' torture, and to relive the spirit of April 13 1699- and as the most faithful tribute to the genius of Guru Gobind Singh who himself excelled in poetics in many languages.

The Chief had just returned from his many legged tour. He was bowed down by the

curse of internecine warring among Sikhs. Never had they learned to close ranks right through their short but powerful history. It had always been so exasperating, disappointing to see each time opportunity slip from their hands. However hard they tried, never could they attain even a semblance of the glory of the Sikhs reached under Maharaja Ranjit Singh. What is worse, they never cared to glance inwards, to open that third dimension's eye. The limelight, the politicking, the power and pelf it brought along, the *HAYUMA*- Sikhs' greatest undoing- were too strong magnets, even irresistible dopes, in fact so strong that they never had the courage or the will to sit and talk to self over wider questions of life, morality, sense and sensibility, of the direction their culture and religion were to take, the main occupation of their famous Gurus. They had even earned the ill reputation of having Panjab dismembered all over again!

For this Chief it was always business, now touring, now inaugurating, now making speeches the lesser bureaucrats marveled at writing, and in the heat of politicking then always minding his back, warding off the prowling stab. They were so much used to using big words, hyperbole really, that it all meant little to them upon occasional reflection, just the empty speech and needless verbiage.

There was no time to regard Khalsa, the concept, the promise, the theory and the practice. The Chief would look at his hands. He carried a Karha, upon head the Kesha and turban as down under the mandatory Kachha together with a little model comb Kirpan. Oh! He would reassure himself, he was indeed a true Sikh, a Khalsa. The surface shone, shimmered with show, his tepid interest again assured him.

For content, to represent, to bring out the import of Khalsa he had selected this young bureaucrat and charged him with the task of shaping the upcoming celebration at Anandpur Sahib, April 13, 1999. He was himself tired, too tired of endless Sikh bickering and the dangerous hues it was acquiring in the Holy Amritsar once again. Nearing 80, he lay exhausted on his office sofa after his latest whirlwind tour as our young bureaucrat walked in.

*Wahe Guru Ji Ka Khalsa Wahe Guru Ji Ki Fateh!* He bowed, hands folded in reverence.



The Chief looked up amused. He had little strength to match the martial greeting. His bureaucrats always fawned with a Sir, Sir.

So a wave of hand came easier in answer or just the nod, and an admonishing wink to stick to Sir and the shorter, more practical Good Morning. That was the first shock for the fiery young man.

As then he sought to convey his view from previous evening's rumination and his own feeling on the manuscript, the Chief again waved, blinking with his extinguishing eyes a take it easy look. He was complaining, He had to attend to various agendas, a meeting with foreign dignitaries, a seminar on Moral in Politics at noon, a dash to the Prime Minister in Delhi in the afternoon and yet again the rush to Amritsar intervening to tide over a simmering rebellion.

'Please! Will you take care of the business yourself?'

'But Sir, the manuscript ought to have your best attention.'

'Oh! These poets are crazy people. They have little else to do. Ever dreaming, ever building castles in air. Darned dreamers these!'

'I am afraid, Sir, this is belittling the community.'

'And you will teach me, young man?'

'Khalsa is so bound up with Guru Gobind Singh and he was himself a poet of substance.'

'Ah! don't you know elephants have two sets of teeth- *Khan de hor, dikhan de hor!* My job is to make political capital over and above the exercise of this commemoration. And

then meet the conspirators half way down. Which fool said politics and morals belong together?’

‘Sir, the manuscript is so weighty, I mean in literary way, that only the best attentions will do.’

‘Stop! Survival is weightier. Now please leave me alone. Talk to the Chief Secretary.’

‘Yes Sir.’

That is Government functioning. The young bureaucrat wondered at the gulf between word and deed, between honesty and hypocrisy and at his own predicament to have to serve such seniled deadwood masters, soulless figures drowned in mores of intrigue and duplicity, leading the rest of society. He considered too whether he should say a straight no than get pulled into this stupid soggy all lies politics quagmire.

He fretted, he fumed but saw no way out to win for his preoccupation with exalted fare a yes, a nod.

In due time he had a meeting with the Chief Secretary, a grayed bespectacled old man, stony expression burdened with steely authority, streaming out dictatorial awe. A man who might have even loved once, might too once have exulted at high literature, who now presented and indeed acted a picture of stuffed up mien, a stiff shirt, a man himself beaten by bureaucratic weather all his working life, in no mood to take from a beginner a discourse on novel ideas and fine poetry on Khalsa Tercentennial.

He asserted, in icy words, it was to be a mega event, international format, crores to be spent, a lot of clout to be harvested, crowds to manage, Bandobast on grand scale that Panjab had not seen before. Where was the point, he lambasted, and who had the time for the finesse of thought and the *alankars* of poetry, let alone intricacies and scientific

discussions on origin, evolution and future of Khalsa?

'Look, young man!' He continued, 'Government is like a big powerful current. You flow along, clear? No questions asked, right?'

'But Sir, there is, foremost, a direction inherent in flow. Up to the oceans.'

'That holds for rivers. There is no direction- do you see any anyway- in governance but one. That is power, holding on to power. Or more correctly privilege, personal privilege a ploy to proliferate unchecked, a license if you will. You have comfortable life. Bungalow, servants, cars. In this damned heat and dust air-conditioned luxury at home, in office, all at public expense. And the perks of unquestioned hold on society through clever use of influence and most important of all, by manipulating peoples' police. Of course in return for servility, parroting day in day out Yes Sir, Yes Sir. Umpteen times. That costs but conscience or an occasional prick on it. What direction are you talking of?'

The fledgling was beaten inside out. His enthusiasm lay in ruins. His spirit crushed, dashed all his hope and the youthful credo. He returned to his office, his sense of righteousness smothered in the mill of cold heartless bureaucracy, his dissent beginning to boil and burst patience's banks.

A fine big chamber was his office, cool, air-conditioned, five stories above sprawling Chandigarh panorama, commanding choice view of the Lake and Shivalik Himalaya, the Kasauli Top and Shimla Hills beyond, and quite metaphorically of life around him. A peon at the door, power on his own countenance but then castrated as he began to see in the light of burgeoning reality.

He was young, just 26, at the threshold of emerging life. In his veins ran good blood. His uncle had been hanged to death by the British. His father spent most of his years in Kala Pani, returning home a wreck. His great grandfathers, both, were in their time involved

in Congress Movement. And he himself had during his university education gathered the finest fruits of knowledge. He always had had reservations on IAS, a sinister legacy of Raj but chose to try it as a challenge to maneuver the system from inside, from position of strength as it were.

Little did he know in his youthful excitement that systems have their moribund art, so, ruthless eigen dynamic. They possess the power to subdue the starkest mavericks into slavish apparatchiks, meeker than sheep. They reduce fiery Nehrus to docile doves, cause stubborn Gandhis to bend to miserable fate. They have the power to divide nations, peoples, cut across their hearts with Radcliff razors, make brothers butcher brothers, sons rape sisters, fathers sell daughters, subcontinents turn to Partitioned Holocausts. They prize the most heinous barbarism as Statecraft, commit most hideous of atrocity and cruel injustice as their right yet escape, even come clean under the cover of darkness of their sheer might compounded by peoples' ignorance and elites' surrender to excess in pursuit of their own Jaichandisms.

Systems are great monsters embodied in dictators, as in the more subtle democracies as indeed in devils and despots feeding on innocent human aspiration yet celebrated as Republics and Revolutions, Capitalism and Communism, why even as deceptive élan on Justice, Equality, Liberty, Fraternity. Systems always have Jacobian Jaws, powerful and crushing at once. Systems can bombard nations, decimate folks yet still earn sanction, social sanction, citizens' awe, popular support wrapped in many a blind parochialism culminating in UNOs, Security Councils, rhetoric and respect, and too in right proportioned sprinklings of hack literature that passes for high art and of course again systems' epic élan. Colonialism put every predecessor in shade and modern neoimperialism, distinguished by so much multinationally incorporated subterfuge, is even out to flush out every last remnant of true nationalism among folks.

His attention turned to history. He was beginning to see systems are like huge citadels. You can only conquer these through direct assault or then by fine intrigue from inside their impregnable fortresses. Many options there aren't.

It did not take him long to reach the truth of his existence, to see the light. He concluded

he belonged elsewhere, not here in any case. Oh! He belonged in the ranks of Guru Gobind. He, that lion of rebellion against tyranny, was his light. Yes!

Taking the sheaf of manuscripts and the poet's address along, he left his office one day just as Buddha had left his home, out into the fascinating world of free enquiry, free action, free life.

The Emerson and the Thoreau seeds of years ago and those of Hermann Hesse readings, let alone Sikh Scriptures' oceanic wisdoms were beginning to bear fruit. He had to live out truth as by Gurus ordained, *Satyamaiv Jayate* and what is more, *Sub ton upper sach acharu*. In other words, where others were failing, he had to step forward and upkeep Charhdi Kala, act Khalsa, indeed neo Khalsa. His faith in the might of truth stood vindicated.

Those in the high Government houses, dwelling in ivory towers of their luxury at people's cost, moreover committing treachery upon Republic, blind to folks' pains, devoid of vision, were some State satraps or just as much slaves, usurpers, enemies of the people, good fodder for cannons of rebellion for restoration of the rule of right and the right law. *Bastille! Marschez! Abbatez le Tyran!*

The truth of Khalsa was dawning upon him as, armed with the new knowledge's Shamsheer, a sixth Piyara, he stepped out into the beckoning world of his new found freedom. A falcon on the sky of essay, endeavor, adventure and above all an adherent of honest truthful living's act.

So were oceans conquered. So were Americas discovered. So were evil empires beaten to dust. So was Colonialism laid to rest. So did always the sun of truth shine through darkness' every covering cloud.

A new sun of high purpose shone over his head and showed him the sunny trail leading into mind's those terrains where then, when labor's fruit ripens, neo knowledge is borne

exactly as it went as the Great Guru Gobind had perceived his Khalsa.

He touched himself. His heart was agog, his brow warm from reflections.

Aha! In deep thought embroiled, out into actions, he was realizing, he himself was the Neo-Khalsa!

There lay spread before him, stretching far, Guru Gobind Singh Marg!