

Land of many wounds

Panjab: Journey through Fault Lines

By Amandeep Sandhu

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Amandeep Sandhu, a “mechanized” or “mona” Sikh (as Sikhs without long hair and turbans are commonly referred to), was not born in Panjab, nor did he grow up there. He was born in Rourkela, Odisha and did his Master’s in English Literature from Hyderabad University. So, he has been an “outsider” to Panjab affairs. Hence, to fill what he calls this “hole” in his heart, he ventured on a three-year sojourn, from 2015-2018, crisscrossing Panjab, trying to understand the state in which two-thirds of his co-religionists reside. According to the 2011 Indian Census, Panjab’s population was 24 million, of which Sikhs comprised 14 million, in other words about 60 per cent of the state’s population. According to Sandhu, there are another ten million Sikhs living outside Panjab, most of them abroad.

For those not too familiar with Sikhism, there are essentially two types of Sikhs: Keshdhari Sikhs (those who sport turbans and unshorn hair) and Sehajdhari Sikhs (who, like Sandhu and me, do not). You cannot tell a Sehajdhari Sikh from any other Indian, except that most of them wear a *kara* (steel bracelet). Actually, there is no historical evidence that the earlier Sikh gurus sported turbans, or had beards, though they are portrayed as such in paintings. It is only the last guru, Guru Gobind Singh, who laid down the five “Ks” for his followers, for identification: *kes* (unshorn hair), *kanga* (comb, to keep the hair in place), *kara*, *kirpan* (sword, for fighting), and *kachcha* (underwear, for cleanliness). Somehow, over the years, these identity marks have become established, with the British reinforcing them when they stipulated that Sikhs in the British Army should have turbans and beards.

However, over a period of time, the forces of modernity have taken over, with fewer and fewer Sikhs remaining “orthodox”. Even the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), the highest spiritual authority for Sikhism, admits that only a little over five million Sikhs in Punjab are Keshdharis, which means that the orthodox Sikhs are in a minority in their own state. What’s more, the overwhelming majority of Sikhs outside Panjab are Sehajdharis, though there are no reliable statistics to this effect. More on this later, since Sikh identity occupies a key part of Sandhu’s book.

Sandhu reveals another interesting statistic. He says that there are around 120 million people who speak Panjabi,

making it the tenth most-spoken language in the world. A large majority of these Panjabi-speakers are in Pakistan, though the government in that country is trying its utmost to promote Urdu and downplay Panjabi. Nevertheless, a “Panjabiat” ethos certainly exists which could one day bring Panjabis together, not by physically erasing boundaries, but more as a cultural union.

The Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 was Panjab’s greatest tragedy, dividing the state on religious lines, accompanied by horrific bloodletting and the biggest transmigration of people in recent

Mohinder Singh Randhawa, a true renaissance man. Kairon helmed the Green Revolution and founded the transformative Panjab Agricultural University (PAU), while Randhawa was the moving spirit behind the building of the new state capital, Chandigarh, which Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru hoped would be a good replacement for Lahore. Sadly, it failed in that respect and eventually became the joint capital of both Panjab and Haryana. And, as it was classified as a Union Territory, it had offices and residences for three kinds of civil servants — from the Panjab, Haryana

The section of the book that I found the most fascinating and revealing was how, despite the emphasis on equality laid by all the ten Gurus, particularly the first one, Guru Nanak, caste still persists among the Sikhs. Indeed, Panjab has the highest proportion of Dalits, 31 per cent of its population, of any state in India. One would have thought that over a period of 500 years, since the time the Sikh faith was founded, the caste system, particularly the discrimination against the “Untouchables”, would have disappeared. Not so. There are gurudwaras that deny permission to Dalits and in some villages they have wells of their own. Sandhu rightly blames the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, the highest spiritual authority for Sikhism, for this truly lamentable state of affairs. It’s failure has also been responsible for the phenomenal rise of deras in Panjab, which attract Dalit Sikhs

times. Some ten million people were displaced on both sides of the border. Nevertheless, the Indian part of Panjab rose phoenix-like, testifying to the resilience of the Panjabi. Many had come from what became Pakistan with virtually nothing, compelled to reside in over-crowded refugee camps. But putting the bitter past behind them, through dint of sheer hard work and enterprise, they prospered. Some were settled in the Terai region, south of Nepal, where they cleared jungles and turned them into fertile farmland.

Panjab was fortunate in having a visionary chief minister in Pratap Singh Kairon and in civil servants like

and UT cadre. The result was that the city has more government officials per capita than any other capital in India, and probably the world.

Sadly, after Kairon and the likes of Randhawa, Panjab only had a succession of narrow-minded and short-sighted leaders, who could not build on the base of prosperity that had been established earlier. Instead, a ruinous “Panjabi Suba” agitation, led by Master Tara Singh and the Akali party he belonged to, followed. Though it was meant to be about language, it divided Hindus and Sikhs. Fearful of Sikh domination, many Hindus declared, falsely, that their mother tongue was Hindi in the

Census. Sandhu sums it up well:

Panjabi, a 900-year-old language, with its own script, literature and cultural cosmology was deemed grammatically similar to Hindi and not an independent language by itself. By seeking to curb legitimate Panjabi demands, the Centre made it a flashpoint and ended up making language a bone of discord between the Hindus and Sikhs and precipitated a crisis between the two communities which were historically and culturally aligned with each other... By associating Panjabi with Sikhs, which was a partial truth, the Centre made Panjab a language battlefield and sowed the seeds of what would devastate the state in the years to come.

The result was that Panjab, divided cruelly at Partition, was further “truncated”, with the formation of Haryana and its hilly areas going to Himachal Pradesh. “If the Centre had acceded to the grant of a larger Panjab, the Akalis not played the religion card, and the Congress had focused on people instead of power, Panjab would have had a different history,” claims Sandhu. “Yet, history is what it is. It bequeaths wounds and illnesses.”

One of those “wounds” was the rise of Sikh militancy which eventually focused on Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, one of the most malevolent characters ever to be inflicted on the Sikhs and on the unfortunate state. Incredibly, in its hunger for power, the Congress Party propped him up, using him to divide and weaken the Akalis. The puppet cut his strings and turned into a Frankenstein monster. The ill-conceived Operation Blue Star by the Indian Army followed, one of the greatest tragedies to befall independent India. This is Sandhu’s view of that army operation:

The battle of the Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple) ... was thus an engagement between the nation-state and the fighters of a religion whose very ethos lay in standing up for justice and honour the way they interpreted it. It was a clash between the hubris of Indira Gandhi, based on the arrogance of the Indian army, versus the stubbornness of Bhindranwale supported by the willingness of some dedicated young men ready to die for their religion, trained by a soldier (General Shabeg Singh) whose own faith in the nation had been split wide open, because its system had been hijacked by its leader Indira Gandhi.

I feel that this interpretation is unfair to Indira Gandhi and needlessly glorifies Bhindranwale and the young men who foolishly martyred themselves. Indira Gandhi was misled by a poor Intelligence set-up which had little idea of how well the militants had fortified themselves, and Army commanders who told her that the operation “would be over in a few hours” with little loss of life. It took four days and a toll of hundreds of civilians, militants and soldiers, though no reliable figure has yet been given of the casualties. And it needs to be borne in mind that it was Bhindranwale and the “dedicated young men” who were responsible for stopping buses, separating Sikhs from Hindus, and then gunning down the Hindus.

Be that as it may, Sandhu has described the unfolding tragedy of Punjab exceedingly well. In the wake of Operation Blue Star came the almost inevitable assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and the anti-Sikh pogrom. Militancy was only wiped out by the killing and “disappearances” of thousands, many of them innocent civilians, at the hands of a brutal Panjab police force. Those “wounds” still fester and are among the “fault lines” of the title of the book. Worse was to follow, as drugs began to flow into the state from across the border, turning a frighteningly large percentage of Panjab’s youth into hopeless addicts. Sandhu met the families of several of them and their stories are truly heart-rending.

However, the section of the book that I found the most fascinating and revealing was how, despite the emphasis laid by all the ten Gurus, particularly the first one, Guru Nanak, on equality, caste still persists among the Sikhs. Indeed, Panjab has the highest proportion of Dalits, 31 per cent of its population, of any state in India. One would have thought that over a period of 500 years, since the time the Sikh faith was founded, the caste system, particularly the discrimination against “Untouchables”,

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would have disappeared. Not so. There are gurudwaras that deny permission to Dalits and in some villages they have wells of their own. I once appeared on a Barkha Dutt TV show on Sikh identity, at which I pointed out these unhappy facts to the Sikhs in the audience. They shouted in protest. When they were also asked whether they knew that Kanshi Ram, who laid the basis of the political party of Dalits, the Bahujan Samaj Party, that Mayawati later led, was actually a Sikh, they were dumbfounded and ready to lynch me. The police had to be summoned to protect me and escort me home!

Sandhu rightly blames the SGPC for this truly lamentable state of affairs. The SGPC’s failure has also been responsible for the phenomenal rise of deras (establishments of religious sects led by a spiritual leader) in Panjab, which attract Dalit Sikhs. Some of these incredibly wealthy outfits are led by self-styled “godmen” whose almost comical, but destructive antics, defy the imagination. The Dera Sacha Sauda is one of them, and its leader, Ram Rahim Singh, mercifully, is now in jail on a long prison sentence. The SGPC is also guilty of dividing the Sikh community into not just Keshdhari and Sejajdhari

Sikhs, but added categories such as Amritdhari (those that have been baptised) and even Patit (apostate).

Is there a way out of the abyss that Panjab finds itself in? Sandhu ends on a hopeful note:

...Panjab would need a push to bring in a structure where Panjabis not only in Panjab, but also those living in other parts of India, across the border with Pakistan, and in the diverse diaspora, could participate in re-building Panjab. At the same time, to lift itself from the depression that gnaws at it and erodes it, Panjab needs to rise against patriarchy, feudalism and ritualistic symbolism... In the past, in spite of grievous wounds, Panjab has always risen and proved its critics wrong. I believe that some day this Panjab too will rise to its challenge – in its own eclectic way.

That is a forlorn hope, unfortunately. However, Amandeep Sandhu has written a book that is deeply-felt, passionate and straight from the heart, one that is essential reading for anybody who wants to understand a community and a state that once led the way in the country, and which, he believes, could do so again. ■

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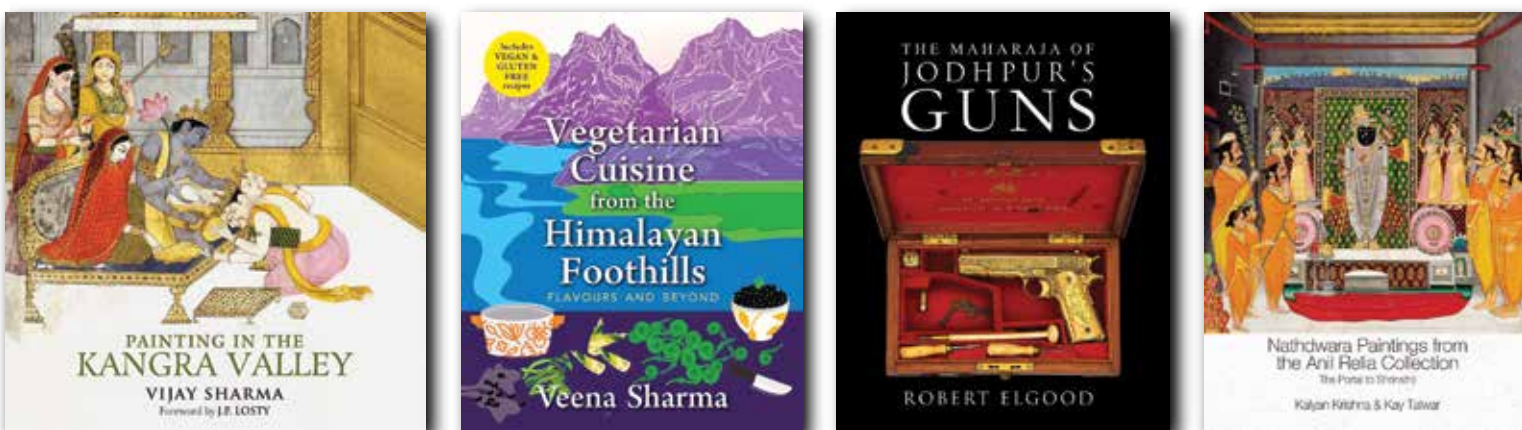


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