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The Three Pillars of Sikhism: A Note on Origins*

Nirvikar Singh

University of California, Santa Cruz

This paper considers a trio of moral precepts for Sikhs that have come to be known as the “three pillars of Sikhism,” (*Naam japna, kirat karni, vand chhakna*) and traces their origins to a specific work of Bhai Vir Singh, originally published in 1907. The paper also discusses some subsequent literary use of the triple, and relates the “three pillars” to the trio “*Naam, daan, isnaan*,” which appear in the writings of Guru Nanak in Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

Keywords: Three pillars of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, Bhai Gurdas, Bhai Vir Singh, Puran Singh

Introduction

The idea of “Three pillars of Sikhism” has become commonplace, if not ubiquitous, in presentations about the Sikh tradition. For example, a Wikipedia article (Wikipedia, 2019) with that title lists Naam Japo, Kirat Karo and Vand Chakko as these pillars. Paraphrasing the article slightly, these, respectively, refer to reciting or meditating on the Divine Name,¹ earning honestly with hard work, and sharing and consuming together. This article asserts that these directives (they are presented in that form) were formalized by Guru Nanak. However, it is well known that this tripartite formulation does not appear anywhere in Sri Guru Granth Sahib, which is the Sikhs’ spiritual guide, and which contains all the authenticated canonical writings of Guru Nanak and his successors.

Variants of the above presentation can be found on numerous web sites devoted to Sikhism and Sikh teachings, and even in speeches by a British Prime Minister,² but the origin of the “three pillars” is not explicitly given anywhere obvious, based on

* I am grateful to Pritam Singh (Oxford University), for pushing to find the origins of the “three pillars,” and to Naindeep Singh Chann for helpful suggestions on an earlier draft. Remaining shortcomings are my sole responsibility.

¹ “Name” in this context is a complex concept: briefly, it can be thought of as referring to the “presence” of the Divine.

² In 2014, in a Vaisakhi speech at Downing Street, David Cameron (UKPOL, 2015) discussed at length “the 3 pillars of Sikhism,” described as Nam Japna, devotion to God; Kirat Karni, working hard; and Vand Chakna, commitment to community. He used a similar formulation the previous year (SikhNet, 2013). The spelling in the transliteration of the three pillars here follows the original speech as documented.

standard internet search efforts. The purpose of this note is to fill this gap, and to provide at least a partial account of the origins of the “three pillars.”

Many scholars and practicing Sikhs are aware that Guru Nanak’s actual triad of values is Naam, Daan, Isnaan, where Daan refers to charity, and Isnaan to purity.³ Harbans Lal offers an accessible account of these three principles (Lal, 2017). He notes that the same formulation is used by Bhai Gurdas⁴ (see also Gill, 2017, for definitive translations and analysis) and Bhai Nand Lal.⁵ Harbans Lal further argues that the “scriptural sanctity” of this latter trio needs to be preserved, and not “tainted” by non-canonical formulations such as the increasingly popular “three pillars.”

Lal also conjectures that the latter came to exist after the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947.⁶ This note shows that the conjecture is not accurate. Our tracing of origins of the “three pillars” also suggests that there may be less cause for anxiety than some may express, although one cannot argue against giving primacy to Gurbani (the words of the Guru) over alternatives. However, we will suggest that the origins of the “three pillars,” once clearly identified and more widely known, will give Sikhs a more complete picture of these groupings of ethical principles, and show a clear connection between the two triples.

Origin of the Three Pillars

It appears that the formulation that has become known as the “Three pillars of Sikhism” first appears in print in a novel by Bhai Vir Singh. Vir Singh (the “Bhai” is a term of respect, literally meaning “brother”) was an important literary and

³ In the page sequence of Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the first use by Guru Nanak is “Naam, daan, isnaan drirh har bhagat su jaagey,” or “holding fast to Naam, daan, isnaan, [they] are awake to devotion to the Divine.” There are a handful of other examples of usage of the triple, by Guru Nanak and also by Guru Arjan.

⁴ Bhai Gurdas was a relative and contemporary of Guru Arjan, and the scribe of the first compilation of what became Sri Guru Granth Sahib: see Gill (2017) for details. In the first pauri (literally, step, meaning component verse in this context) of his first Vaar (a longer verse composition or ballad), Bhai Gurdas writes, “bhaau bhagat Gurapurab kar Naam daan isnaan drirhaaiaa,” or “with loving devotion [they] celebrate the Gurus’ anniversaries and holding to Naam, daan, isnaan, inspiring others.”

⁵ Bhai Nand Lal was a poet and contemporary of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and final human Guru of the Sikhs, and like Bhai Gurdas, his verses may be sung in gurdwaras, in addition to verses from Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

⁶ Lal associates the “three pillars” with attempts to counter the influence of communism among Sikh youth. This may be true in the later period he discusses, but this note demonstrates that the origins of the more modern triple were not determined by such motivations.

religious figure in the late 19th century and first half of the 20th century. His historical novels, especially *Sundari* (originally published in 1898), were written as part of a project of reviving the faith of the Sikh community in the face of colonial power and missionary activities by Christians and Hindus. In particular, valuing the Khalsa identity formulated by Guru Gobind Singh was an important part of this project, and novels such as *Sundari*, depicting a combination of virtue and valor among Khalsa Sikhs, became immensely popular reading at the time.⁷

The novel in which the “three pillars” appears, however, is *Baba Naudh Singh*, which began to be serialized in a periodical in 1907, and was published in book form in 1921.⁸ The full title of the novel gives some indication of its theme: *Subhag ji da sudhaar, hathin Baba Naudh Singh*, which has been translated as *The reformation of Subhagji at the hands of Baba Naudh Singh*.⁹ “Reformation” in this context refers to transformation of character, wherein the young widow, Subhag, is transformed from being weak and credulous to someone of strength who provides support and comfort to others. While Bhai Vir Singh’s first three novels were historically based and full of action, though not devoid of ideas (as already noted), Baba Naudh Singh has been described as a novel of ideas (Surjit Singh Chawla, see previous footnote), with a thin plot. Chawla describes the novel as a response to aggressive proselytization by other religions at the time of its writing, and the title character embodies high moral qualities, including moral rejection of such attempts at religious conversion.

All of the above is by way of providing the context for Bhai Vir Singh’s introduction of what has become the “three pillars.” This occurs in Chapter 8 of Part 1 of the novel. In the story, Subhag has come to stay with Baba Naudh Singh and his wife, Nand Kaur. They are looking after her and she is gaining spiritual strength and peace of mind. The narrative then shifts to a dialogue between Nand Kaur and Naudh Singh. Nand Kaur remarks that while the holy texts direct people toward Naam, Daan, Isnaan, they also give examples of where practicing charity

⁷ An excellent account of the novel and its ethical message can be found in Nikky G.K. Singh (1993), Ch. 7.

⁸ A contemporary printing is Bhai Vir Singh (2010).

⁹ This is from the Introduction, by Surjit Singh Chawla, p. v, of the English translation of Baba Naudh Singh, Part 1, done by Gurbachan Singh Talib and revised by Surjit Singh Chawla, published in 1989. The second part is somewhat different in content, and moves early on in its narrative from the story of Subhag to a long account of episodes from the time of the Sikh Gurus. Its corresponding translation was published separately in 1991. What appears to be a facsimile of the 1921 publication of both parts in one single volume was published in 2010. All of these were publications of the Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan of New Delhi, India.

does not prevent suffering, and where bathing is useless. It is here that Naudh Singh responds, first to urge his wife not to entertain such doubts that take away happiness, but to remain imbued with Naam, and then to say (p. 21), “Asi taan thulhe te siddhe lok haan. Kirat karni, vand chhakna te naam japnaa, eh saadi varton hai.” In translation, “We are solid and straightforward people. Earnest effort, sharing with others, and minding the Naam, that is our way of being.”¹⁰ This appears to be the original occurrence of the “three pillars” formulation.¹¹¹²

However, it is important to realize that the trio as presented above is not the central thrust of this segment of the novel. Much of the rest of Chapter 8 continues with a discussion between Nand Kaur and Naudh Singh as to the true import of Naam, Daan, Isnaan. In a nutshell, the argument made is that Daan and Isnaan only have proper significance if guided by Naam. The original is more detailed and poetic than what is presented here. But the point to be made is that, barring Naam, the other components of the “three pillars” are not mentioned again in this chapter. Indeed, they are only brought up in passing, as a lead-in to the main discourse. One can speculate as to why they have become so popular (perhaps because of their association with the positive character traits of Naudh Singh and Nand Kaur), but they are not presented by Bhai Vir Singh as a substitute or alternative to Naam, Daan, Isnaan.

With respect to the fact that the “three pillars” are not in Gurbani, it is also useful to consider the heading of Chapter 8. Most of the chapters are headed by quotes from Sri Guru Granth Sahib, and the choice for this chapter is “Ghaal khaaye kichh[u] hathoh dei, Nanak raah pachhaaneh sei,” which translates to “Whoever works to earn and gives some to share, Nanak says they know the way.”¹³ The connection to “kirat karni, vand chhakna” is clear: it is a reasonable conjecture that

¹⁰ The translation provided by G.S. Talib is somewhat different in detail. See Baba Naudh Singh, Part 1 (1989), p. 32.

¹¹ The only explicit reference to this passage of which I am aware is in Dewan Singh (1973), p. 290, footnote 183. It was this reference that led me to this source. Dewan Singh credits Bhai Vir Singh only with popularizing the term “vand chhakna,” but I have not been able to find any earlier usages. He also references the *Shabdarth* of Teja Singh (Vol. 2, p. 596, footnote 6), where “vand chhakna” occurs, but the earliest publication date of that work is 1941, considerably later than the initial publication of *Baba Naudh Singh*.

¹² Interestingly, Nikky G.K. Singh (1993) uses the three pillars as a framework for discussing the moral and ethical guidance provided in the novel *Sundari*, although that work was written earlier than *Baba Naudh Singh*, and it does not appear to use “kirat karni” or “vand chhakna” anywhere.

¹³ The original lines are from Sri Guru Granth Sahib, p. 1245, Var Sarang.

Bhai Vir Singh chose this chapter heading to tie in Baba Naudh Singh's plain words to the poetry of Gurbani, both expressing the same combination of moral guidance.

Evolution of the Three Pillars

While it is difficult to trace the spread of a popular expression, there are at least two important literary references that may have contributed to its prominence. Whereas the original usage in *Baba Naudh Singh* occurs almost in passing, within a broader discussion of the significance and interpretation of Naam, Daan, Isnaan, both the cases to be presented here highlight Bhai Vir Singh's formulation, and expand on it. The author of both references is Professor Puran Singh, who was a contemporary of Bhai Vir Singh, and greatly influenced by him. Puran Singh was an academic, scientist, poet and mystic, who is well known for his writings in Punjabi and in English.¹⁴ Two English works of his are relevant here.

Spirit of the Sikh is a collection of essays by Puran Singh, written between 1927 and 1930 (shortly before he died, in 1931). The collection appears to have been first published in three parts (Part 1 in 1976, Part 2 Volume 1 in 1980, and Part 2 Volume 2 in 1981), by Punjabi University Patiala. The subtitle of the collection, *Meditations on Religion and the Spiritual Experience*, captures the broad theme of this particular work, although it might be appropriately applied to all of Puran Singh's literary output. The relevant passage is in essay number 6 of Part 1, titled "The Disciple-Spirit." The essay begins with work attributed to "Saint Shah Behlol of Iran," but then, as it discourses on being a "Disciple" (capitalized in the original), shifts to Sikh thought. Puran Singh writes,¹⁵

True Discipleship, as Bhai Vir Singh put it so pithily is:

1. *Kirat karni*
2. *Nam japna*
3. *Vand chhakna*

Puran Singh then provides an exposition of each concept: five lines on the first, a longer disquisition on *Nam japna*, and then an even longer (exceeding a page) discussion of *Vand chhakna*, with which the essay concludes. Puran Singh's ordering of the three ethical guides is different from the order in the original of Bhai

¹⁴ The Puran Singh discussed here is a completely different person than the later individual, known as Bhagat Puran Singh, who founded and ran the charitable organization Pingalwara. For an excellent overview of Puran Singh's life and work, see Shackle (2017).

¹⁵ The italicization follows the original.

Vir Singh, and one can conjecture that it has something to do with the flow of exposition that Puran Singh chose to develop. It is significant that the verb forms are exactly the same, rather than the directive forms now more commonly found, such as in the reference with which this paper began.

While this particular presentation of Puran Singh may only have become widely known from the 1970s (but long enough ago to spread widely, especially in the internet age), another treatment by him was published in 1928, and is important in a different way as well. In *The Spirit Born People*, Puran Singh (1928) also connects the two triples in a plausible manner, reflecting to some extent Bhai Vir Singh's original treatment. The presentation occurs in Chapter 13, which is titled, "The Brothers of the Tress-Knot of Guru Gobind Singh." Although he does not use the term "Khalsa," Puran Singh is clearly referring to that institution, and although he uses the word "Brothers," later in the chapter he states that they are "a *Sangha*¹⁶ in which woman take free and equal membership."

The chapter begins by extolling the virtues of this grouping, and stresses continuities of its values in Sikh tradition preceding Gur Gobind Singh. Then Puran Singh connects his discourse to Bhai Vir Singh's presentation in *Baba Naudh Singh*, albeit without explicitly referencing that work:

In the words of Bhai Vir Singh Ji, let me give the creed of this Brotherhood in five words, "*Nam, Dan, Snan, Kirt Karna and Wand Chhakna.*"

The spelling and verb forms are somewhat different here than in Puran Singh's other treatment, but more significantly, he weaves together the two triples, with the overlap yielding five related moral precepts. He provides relatively brief discussions of each of the five, and then connects them to Guru Gobind Singh:

Guru Gobind Singh is the Guru of the modern times. He is a Prophet who has reconstructed human society in this Brotherhood of *Nam, Dan, Snan, Kirt Karna and Wand Chhakna.*

Thus Puran Singh works Bhai Vir Singh's discourse in *Baba Naudh Singh* into a single combination of five precepts. Interestingly, he distinguishes between *Dan*, which he interprets as giving deeply and without limit, and *Wand Chhakna*, which is described as equal distribution of the fruits of labor. One can offer alternative interpretations, and there is nothing inviolate about this grouping, but it is important

¹⁶ The word denotes an association or community, especially in spiritual contexts. It is often used for Buddhist groupings, but has broader South Asian usages.

to mark it as a possible approach, and to note the acknowledged antecedents in a specific work of Bhai Vir Singh.

Conclusion

Of course there are many other spiritual, moral and ethical precepts in Sikh teachings, discussed or presented individually and in various combinations. This note has not sought to examine any of those other precepts, nor does it go into the deeper meanings and implications of even the two overlapping sets of three precepts considered here. Its limited goal has been to trace some origins of the three pillars, found in a specific work of Bhai Vir Singh, and offer some clues as to their popularity, through their highlighting in the work of Puran Singh. There is much scope for additional historical and sociological analysis with respect to how Sikhs and those who interpret, research or interact with the Sikh tradition approach the “three pillars.” More historical detail on the spread of this usage will be useful. Additional research can also include debates on the merits of a formulation that is somewhat extra-canonical, though this note has pointed out Bhai Vir Singh’s attempt to implicitly reconcile the words of Baba Naudh Singh in the narrative to a specific verse of Guru Nanak. Another issue is the origin of the term “pillars” (not used by Puran Singh) in this context, which is suggestive of the “five pillars of Islam.” The hope is that this note will provide a more accurate basis for any such debates or further research.

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