

Two white sails, mast of red, black keel  
A jaunty blue stripe across the hull  
Belies the dejection of the stern  
For no breeze blows through this space  
To steal a smile or rush the fabric  
To pilfer foam from new waves

Someone taught me I could choose  
Any meaning I liked  
For every second of my time

I paddle softly with my hands  
This craft of buoyancy doesn't stir  
My destination must be — just here

Saltwater, saltwater, pretty in the light  
Menacing at night; I sit adrift  
In a boat that's not gone under.

\* Couplet translated from Urdu by David Matthews

Noor

Amandeep Sandhu

**Masiji** had reached Sirsa before me. I told her to proceed to the *kirtan* so she could get better seats but she chose to wait for me at the Bus Stand. I was irritated with the bus for taking more than six hours to reach Sirsa from Delhi, in spite of the bus conductor's promise. Yet, the bus couldn't help it. It had been above two years and the Rohtak section had not yet been four-laned. It won't be, until the next elections. When it is laned, it would last only until the next monsoon.

Actually, I was angry with myself for having listened to Masiji and agreeing to join her for the *kirtan*. It was a long weekend and I did want to go to Mandi Dabwali but that was to research my book, not to listen to *kirtan* in a Gurdwara. I have never listened to *kirtan* in any Gurdwara or temple except at home. One does not have to sit cross-legged for that. Still when I heard the name of the town – Sirsa – I was curious. In 2010 Sirsa was famous. It was in Sirsa that Baba Ram Rahim had his ashram and that is where he had challenged the Sikh faith a couple of years back and the town still burned like embers blazing from time to time. I wanted to know what the Sikhs were doing to counter the Baba's propaganda. A *kirtan* was a good start, I thought: I can consider it part of the research.

I reached around 20 minutes after Masiji and found her with others from Mandi Dabwali: nurse Sheetal, Prem the driver and his wife Kiran, and Bhai Gurbal Singh's daughter. Masiji told me she waited for me because she wanted me to meet Sant (saint) Pritam Singh. I thought of it as one of her whims. I know Masiji gets excited about matters of religion. I indulged her with a smile. I am already here for the *kirtan*; what difference does it make if I meet another Sant.

Of late she has been happy that I have started reading the Guru Granth Sahib and which she considers is me getting inclined towards religion. I must clarify to her that my inclination is not

towards religion. It is towards spirituality, it is towards seeking answers to questions which plague me. Ever since mother died, ever since I was left bereft.

I am trying to find the meaning of my life. I am trying to find what is it I should do with the years in front of me so that I can feel that the time is well utilized. How can I find peace? Masiji, on the other hand, is deeply spiritual. She found her God a long time back. She was already a doctor when her woes became unbearable: widowed without kids. Spirituality put her in the service of humanity. It gave her a purpose in life. I am not sure if it will give me my purpose but I do not want to dismiss it without knowing it. So, I am trying.

After a couple of winding streets we reached Gurdwara Dashmi Patshahi. These towns are so narrow. Tall buildings threw long shadows on the upturned roads. The Gurdwara sounded silent from outside but we could see a congregation gathering in its hall. A loudspeaker broke the still air; they were announcing that *kirtan* would start in a few minutes. I changed into a white *kurta pyjama*. Prem learnt that the Sant we wanted to meet was not at this Gurdwara but at Chila Sahib, another Gurdwara a short walk away. We started walking to it, Masiji leading us. "Sant Pritam Singh is 92 years old. He built all the Gurdwaras in this town. He built schools and hospitals." I remained quiet. "He is regarded very highly in this society. He has spent all his life uplifting the society. *Wabe Guru, Wabe Guru* (wondrous God)." Prem had also got me a saffron *parna*, small turban. I tied it on my head.

It was only 8.30 PM but the town seemed asleep. The roads were deserted. The lights were off; an odd dog ambled into our path. I wondered why we could not meet the Sant at the *kirtan*. Was it really worth walking through dark streets? I hoped Masiji understands that I am not really so kicked about meeting God men or holy men. But I did not say anything to her. I did not want to annoy her. I had already been late. We had come close after mother's death, but the relationship was fragile. Instead, I asked her if we should get the car so that the way back is a little easier. It did not help us that we were groping in the dark.

"One should always go on foot to meet holy men. Do you not remember the story of the queen and Baba Buddha ji?" she replied. It is said that a queen wanted to be blessed by Baba Buddha and she sent him horses and elephants laden with monies and fruits. He had said that if the queen wants his blessings she should come to him, he does not need her gifts. Then she walked down to him with *rotis* she had made with her own hands. He blessed her.

"Yes, that is about going to meet, but no one said anything about going back." I answered. I was worried about the pebbles and broken stones on the path. We were bare feet and they were pricking us.

"Shut up and do as told. All the time thinking about taking short cuts," Masiji admonished me.

We reached the big gates of the Gurdwara Chila Sahib. Even in the dark they looked imposing. But we must have been on the wrong side of the Gurdwara because when we entered we saw a big lawn with a few cots in it. We could not see either the main building of the Gurdwara or the *sarovar*, the holy tank of water next to mostly every Gurdwara. An entrance on the far side was barred.

There were a few men lying on the cots. With the ladies with me I felt a little embarrassed standing there, in almost their bedroom. It was an open air bedroom. It was only 8.45 PM, so different from our lives just six hours away where our social days mostly start at that hour. The *neem* trees were swaying in the wind, Eid had just passed and the small crescent moon shone down on us. That was almost the only light there. A man sat up on seeing us; thank God they were not fully asleep.

"Yes?" He asked.

"We want to meet Santji," said Masiji.

"You cannot meet him. From where have you come?"

"Mandi Dabwali, for the *kirtan*. But we have wished to meet Santji for long."

"Late now. And he is very old. He does not meet anyone any longer."

I intervened, “I have come all the way from Bangalore. Just to touch his feet.” I did not want Masiji to go back disappointed.

Another man had stood up by now. They looked like *sewadars*, people who maintain the Gurdwara. “It is late now. If you want to sleep come be with us. You and that man,” he said, pointing towards Prem. “Go eat at the *langar*, listen to the *kiratan*, and come back here. The ladies can sleep at the Gurdwara. Meet Santji in the morning.”

The hospitality, normal in Sikh culture, seemed like a dead-end. Suddenly a man drove in a jeep with a trolley attached to it. He got down and came close to us. Our eyes had now adjusted to the darkness. I saw the man’s beard was open, he looked sharp.

Masiji said, “Babaji, one of us is the daughter of the *sewadar* of Chor Maar Sahib Gurdwara. The Babaji from the Gurdwara asked us to meet a certain Joginder Singh who, he said, could arrange for us to meet Santji.”

“Joginder?”

“I am not certain of the name. I think it was Joginder.”

The man paused, conferred with the *sewadar* who was talking to us, and said, “I am not sure if you can meet Santji but come with me. If the Guru wishes you will see him.”

He turned towards the other men and said, “I’ll be back.”

“Okay Joginder. *Wabe Guru Ji Ka Khalsa, Wabe Guru Ji Ki Fateh.*”

It was then that we learnt his name. So Babaji at Chor Maar Sahib had the key. We bid our byes to the men and got into the jeep. The ladies in the back. Prem and I in front. We did not exchange a word with Joginder on the short five-minute drive.

We reached a blue gate. Joginder Singh got down to open it and took the jeep inside and asked us to wait in the courtyard. Before leaving he signalled us to a tap where we washed our hands and feet. The *kiratan* sound from Gurdwara Dashmi Patshahi was reaching us. It had started. In the light of the single yellow bulb I looked around and saw fruit trees, flower beds, and patchy grass on the ground. We faced a tall and wide wall of cementless bricks. It was a *kutchha* structure with two green doors, one where

we stood and another to which Joginder Singh ran. He said something in the door and came to our side to wait with us. I was wondering: one who had made buildings, schools, hospitals, Gurdwaras, all his life and lived in a *kutchha* structure must be a different sort of a person – the Sant. One can’t deny the opulence that religion can give to its followers and practitioners. Religion is, after all, a big business. Perhaps the biggest because there is almost zero investment and zero loss in it.

It must have been a short wait, maybe five minutes, but felt long. In that period twice the door opened partially, someone saw us, and it closed. Then it finally opened. We bent to touch the foot of the door and when I raised my eyes I was struck by the sight of a very large mosquito net. We were in a large hall; both the green doors opened into the hall but in front of us was a whole room made out of net – a room inside a hall. I could see the outline of two cots in it and still there was space for a number of people to stand inside. We walked around it to reach an opening, a door in the net room. When I stepped into it, I saw him.

He was almost invisible from outside; the small bulb in the hall was on top of the door from which we had walked in so we could not really look into the net when we entered the hall. Along one of the walls of the net lay Sant Pritam Singh under a white sheet. His hands on his chest, as if folded in a *Namaskar* or a *Sat Sri Akaal*. I moved closer intending to stand close to his feet. He looked diminished, as if he had no legs. I looked towards his face. His was the most peaceful face I had ever seen, the closest I had seen a face like his was of both my father and mother after they had passed away. Sant Pritam Singh’s face in the white turban, with his white beard and moustache, was illuminated. As if there was no need for a light in the room. He wore a white *parna* on his head. He was ill, much had failed in his body; but he did not look ill at all. He looked like he was looking forward to a new journey. I learnt later that he had refused medication.

The man who had built buildings all his life, in the service of religion and humanity now lay dying on a stretcher standing on a mud floor. While standing outside the hall I had anticipated

simplicity but this was much more than that. This was pure austerity; its beauty lay in the bareness of the scene. It was a stage for death to impose itself on a human being, of the most elemental force of our lives to wreck its way through all the barriers we create to prevent it. In this case the Sant had removed the barriers because he knew that the force of annihilation will reach him. He had offered himself to it with no attempt to stall it; he had placed his whole being to the force, it was his prayer without any vested interest. The austerity of the gesture, of the being, lifted the space to a higher realm - a realm of total acceptance.

He did not say a word. Maybe he could not. Maybe he was sleeping for he never opened his eyes. Maybe he was in semi-coma. But he exuded an illumination which was brighter than anything I had ever seen in a human being. As if it was a light that nature had created under his skin. Though he was not that fair complexioned I could see his veins. After we all stood around him he raised his hand as if blessing us but kept his eyes closed.

It was so utterly quiet. I forgot the *kiritan* on the other side of the wall. We shuffled a bit, moving to see him but we made no sound. We even handed over the packets of fruit we had brought to one of the *sewadars*. He opened them and distributed to each of us some bananas, *prasad* from the Sant.

It moved me to find stillness within me and we stood as statues around the Sant's bed. All this with no prompt; no orders to make us comply with a way of behaving in the Sant's chamber. There were no rules here, no regulations, no orders, all there was a body drawing us to be still, to reach into ourselves and find peace. For those few minutes we were there I sensed that we were in the presence of an uber-human phenomenon. The *noor*, light, was different, so was the quietude. I had never experienced such space before, where it seemed possible for one to drop all learnt knowledge and move into the realm of intuition. I, others, stood mesmerized.

Then the phantasm broke. One of the *sewadars* who had opened the door moved a little, apparently to allow the light of bulb to fall on Sant Pritam Singh's face. It was a subtle movement,

a little bit to the left but the Sant coughed. It was a crepitation - a reminder that the new journey had not yet begun but was imminent. The *sewadar* moved to the Sant and moved the white cloth cover over the Sant's neck. He gestured us to move.

I saw two other men standing behind. They were huge, with flowing beards and bulging eyes. In another age and time such men would have stood in the Sikh army, with naked swords or other weapons in their hands. They would have been roaring for the enemy's blood. They would have been charging at the enemy on battlefields. Here they did not look one bit aggressive. They stood with humility, ever present to serve the Sant, their master. I felt like I was in the middle of a primitive dwelling, a lost era, where men alone stood by men in the camps in battlefields at nights. This was indeed a battle, a much higher battle than what kings had fought. But here was the recognition that the enemy did not have a head to be cut. An acceptance that here the force that would invade would sneak in quietly, stop the crepitation, the breath, and become the body of the Sant. It would be a transformation where the Sant will become death and the stage for the alchemy was right here in front of them. They were going to be witness to a process of nature in front of which they could only bow in humility. We moved out silent, still in awe of the experience of seeing someone so ready to move but lying still, spreading his inner calm to the world outside. I marvelled at how someone had spent his time on earth to transform the world in such a fundamental way.

On our way back Masiji said to me, "You are such a liar. You came from Delhi and said when you came from Bangalore."

"Well Bangalore is where I have my home."

"But it was a lie."

"Maybe but one is always coming from the farthest place. I should have said America." I said and smiled.

She laughed. "What a fake you are! Lies will never get you entries!"