

## **Sikh History and Culture on the Net: Storytelling As An Innovative Medium**

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**Abstract :** This paper tries to explore the role of the age-old tradition of storytelling ( albeit in a new format available on the net ) in shaping the personality of the children and inculcating Sikh values among them and at the same time also acting as a medium to reinforce one's identity. An attempt has been made to understand the notion of 'identity' and its interpretation through the use of Sakhis and in the process, glorifying the Sikh religion, history and culture but unconsciously, exposing the fears, crisis of the community as well. In the case of the Sikhs, 'modernity' has emerged as the most dangerous form of the 'Other' and the present crisis also seems to be related to the very definition of the term 'Sikh'. Who can be considered a true Sikh or, rather, a Sikh? The paper centres around the relationship between 'the Word and the World'( if I may use the title of Veena Das's book) or the understanding of social life through the prism of religion.

**Key-words:** Janamsakhis, Sikhs, Gurus, modernity

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

A need to tell and hear stories is essential to the species Homo sapiens-second in necessity apparently after nourishment and before love and shelter. Millions survive without love or home, almost none in silence; the opposite of silence leads quickly to narrative, and the sound of story is the dominant sound of our lives, from the small accounts of our day's events to the vast incommunicable constructs of psychopaths.'

(Reynolds Price, *A Palpable God*, 1978, New York : Atheneum, p.3)

Storytelling, the way to narrate events, has always been an important aspect of every culture, which is not only a medium of entertainment but also an instrument of transmission of cultural as well as religious values. Though storytelling is always associated with oral tradition, the evolution of technology has changed its nature to a great extent and no wonder, with the advent of computers and internet, it has emerged as a powerful pedagogical tool to instill certain moral and educational values, especially in children.

The existence of innumerable websites, catering to different, infact, each and every need and query of the individuals is a known fact. But this shrinking of the global world is also accompanied by another phenomenon-the fear of losing one's distinctive identity and the infiltration of culture with alien values. An attempt by almost all religious groupings, to preserve as well as to transmit their religious values, through the use of the computers was an obvious choice. And Sikhism was no exception.

The notion of 'identity' does not limit itself to 'I' and 'Me' or the distinction between 'self' and 'society' but has social, historical and cultural perspectives as well. It is true more so in the case of 'Sikhism' where the history and religion are just juxta-imposed into each other. Sudhir Kakar while analyzing the psychological aspects of childhood in India defines 'identity' as "...to convey the process of synthesis between inner life and outer social reality as well as the feeling of personal continuity and consistency within oneself. It refers to the sense of having a stake in oneself, and at the same time in some kind of confirming community'(Sudhir Kakar; *The Inner World*; p.2)

'Identity' has emerged to be the major issue of concern for numerically small communities and especially those settled outside India. They seem to be extremely sensitive to their separate identity, especially their culture, making them more traditional than those living in their country of origin.

Sikhnet Stories For Children

‘To catch them young’ seems to be the norm and what better way than to convey history, memory and the religious, social values in an interesting format of storytelling, using not only words, but images, pictures and sounds as well. The practice of Oral stories has passed through the journey from memory to a written, recorded, televised and now *netbonding form of cultural transmission*.

#### From Oral Tradition to Netbonding

Kahn Singh Nabha in Mahan Kosh, the oldest dictionary of Sikh religion and history, describes ‘Sakhi’ or the story as an historical event having a witness; or a learning experience (p.179). In Sanskrit the word sakhi means saksya, that is, evidence or testimony but in Punjabi the sakhi refers to story or anecdote. Similarly the Janamsakhis are described by him as ‘Jeevanbritant’, or the life histories of the first Guru, Guru Nanak (p.504). W.H. McLeod defines Janamsakhi ‘as the traditional narratives of the life of Guru Nanak’ and ‘as the evidence of the divine mission of the Guru’. Guru Nanak had taught a message of liberation and had himself lived a life which gave visible expression to that message’ (McLeod, W.H., ‘Janam Sakhi’ in The Encyclopedia of Sikhism, Harbans Singh (ed.); p.337) Even the word ‘Sikh’ refers to a disciple, a follower, a learner.

The Sikh Janamsakhi Tradition was predominantly oral and the recorded collections can be traced back to the latter part of the sixteenth century. The evolution of multiple narratives of these janamsakhis in the oral form continued till the introduction of printing press during the late nineteenth century.

This paper centers around Sikh stories for children, downloaded from the website [www.sikhnet.com](http://www.sikhnet.com). The stories, sixty three in total, are targeted at children, ranging from the age of 1-17 and above. Every story has a picture and also a provision for audio, perhaps playing the true role of a storyteller, completing the journey from oral to written or, taking a reverse course of written to oral, or occurring simultaneously.

There are a number of sections stories are divided into. For example, there are stories by topic, stories by tags, stories by age-groups, stories by sections. One may find an intense intermingling of stories. For instance, if you go by tags and click on the word ‘Brahmin’, you can refer to the story listed in the section on stories by topic also. In order to avoid confusion, to begin with, I have strictly followed the stories by topic which, in fact, covers all the topics ‘under tags’, ‘age-group’ and so on.

The ‘stories by topic’ is divided into five sub-sections comprising various themes and narratives. The sections are:-

- (a) The Sikh Gurus
- (b) Folk Stories
- (c) Spiritual
- (d) Parables
- (e) Modern Day

It is hard to find any set pattern since one theme may impinge upon the other.

#### **The Sikh Gurus**

The Guru, according to Guru Nanak, is “the ladder, the boat, the raft, the ship, the place of pilgrimage, the holy river” (Sri Rag, quoted in The Religion of the Sikhs, by Gopal Singh, 1971, p.59). In Sikhism the Guru and God or His Divine Word ‘Shabad’ are one and the same since the Almighty is nirankar, i.e. formless. The only way to realize Him is through surrender of one’s ego and remembrance of His name-- nam-simran. The best way to comprehend the teachings of the Gurus is the narration of their life-histories, their janam-sakhis.

There are total forty-one stories (till the last week of December 2010 though the number is increasing day by day) depicting the life-histories of Sikh-Gurus. (\*See the Appendix for the complete list of the stories)

The section on the ‘Sikh Gurus’, not surprisingly, has the maximum number of stories. Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion, seems to be the focus of most of the stories. Out of forty-five stories, almost half centre around Guru Nanak’s childhood, his youth, his Udasis etc. After Guru Nanak, the maximum attention is paid to the sixth and the tenth Guru. This focus is in fact very significant from the point of view of the historical evolution of the Sikh religion. Guru Hargobind, the sixth Guru, was only eleven at the time of his anointment as the guru who chose to wear two swords representing the spiritual and temporal powers. Also known as ‘Sacha Padshah’, Guru Hargobind truly represents the transitional or the martial phase of Sikh religion. It was during his times that the Sikhs were trained in martial arts, hunting and horsemanship. The tenth Guru truly represents the merger of the guru and the follower (‘ape guru ape chela’), the creator of the ‘Khalsa Panth’, his aim was to, “evolve a community which would not only fight against all shams and taboos of caste, and status, but being worshippers of the One Supreme Being which would look upon all humanity as one. Nay, they would be the spearhead of a worldwide movement for synthesis and dedicated service. Such a democratic, dynamic force he brought into being in 1699, on the day of Baisakhi (mid-April) at Anandpur, out of the common run of the people (Gopal Singh, p.24).

In Sikhism, though the life-histories of the Gurus are known as sakhis or Janamsakhis, not even once the word sakhi is used. It has been replaced by a more modern and popular word 'story' which in Hindi means kahani and does not necessarily refer to the lives and accounts of the Gurus.

The story, 'Guru Nanak and the Boulder', told by Gurumehar Kaur, is itself a reflection of the conflict between materialism and spiritualism and keeping with the concern for the environmental issues, the emphasis is less on the miraculous powers of the Guru and more on the sharing of the natural resources. The story runs as follows : --

"Once Guru Nanak, Bala and Mardana were traveling and Mardana was feeling very thirsty. It was very hot out and they had been walking for such a long time. They just arrived at a place where a greedy man lived. He had a well and everyone in the area needed the water to wash themselves, the grow food, to drink. He would charge them money for using the well.

Guru Nanak sent Mardana to get some water from the well. When Mardana got to the top of the hill he asked the man, "Can I have some water? My friends and I are very thirsty." The man said, "You have to pay. If you don't pay you can't have any water." Mardana said, "We don't have any money sir, we just need water." The man said, "If you don't have money, than you can't have any."

So Mardana came down and told the Guru what the man had said. Guru ji said, "Go again and tell him you are asking in the Name of God." So Mardana did and again the man refused. Mardana again came back and told Guru ji what happened. Guru ji said, "We must give a person three chances to do what is right. Go again and ask him in the Name of God to share some water with us." So Mardana asked him, "Please sir, share some water. I ask you again in the Name of God. I'm sure if you share God will bless you." The man said, "I don't care! If you don't have money, go away. Stop bothering me."

Three chances had been up. They were thirsty and hot. Guru ji said, "Do not worry. God always takes care of us." He got a small stick and dug it in the ground. It was amazing! A spring of pure, clear, refreshing water came up. Everyone was really happy. They all drank what they needed to and other people also came to have some of this spring water. The man on top of the hill, saw this. He looked in his own well, it was drying up. The water was going from his well to the spring down there where all the people are. He became furious. Near by there was a huge rock, a boulder. He mustered all his might, and with great effort he managed to tip it over. He wanted to crush Guru Nanak. The boulder rolled down the hill gaining speed as it went. Everyone got out of the way... everyone except Guru Nanak. The huge boulder was going to run right over him and destroy him. Mardana cried, "Guru ji, please get out of the way, the boulder is coming right for you! Come, please!" But Guru Nanak just meditated where he was. He calmly reached his one hand out to stop the huge boulder. Mardana didn't want to see his beloved master killed, "Guru ji, I beg you, get out of the way!" Then the huge rock met with Guru Nanak's hand. It stopped right in its place. Guru Nanak's hand left an imprint in the hard stone as if it was made out of soft clay. The man saw how Guru ji had stopped the boulder as if it was nothing. He realized that what he had done and ran down to ask forgiveness. He bowed to the Guru and begged to be taught how to live in a more spiritual way. Everyone was amazed of the power of God. The people had fresh water they didn't have to pay for. The boulder had stopped in its tracks and the man had changed his ways. From then on he was a generous, sharing and kind man. Whatever God made is for all of us. It's always best to share what we have and take care of each other. "

'Sharing' has always been the focal point of Sikhism and in the present world of global environmental concerns sharing of natural resources seems to be the major concern and this story fulfills this role.

Another recent addition, 'Guru Nanak and the Cannibal' tries to teach children to be well-dressed and clean as well as to be a 'civil person'. The cannibal, the black magic, the giant are nothing but the inner weaknesses of human beings which could be over-come by the remembrance of God which is the real magic.

"Guru Nanak, Bala and Mardana traveled to many, many places all over India. They encountered lots of different people and situations and always Guru ji blessed every spot where he touched his feet. He healed all those he saw. He gave the medicine of Truth to everyone he spoke to. One time Mardana got hungry and went to get some food in the woods near by. What he didn't know is that a cannibal, someone who eats humans, saw Mardana. The cannibal, named Kauda, tied a rope around Mardana and took him back to his dwellings. He boiled some oil in a huge pot which he was going to cook Mardana in. Even while Kauda started to chop other foods to cook with him, Mardana just kept praying in his mind, "Satinam, Satinam, Satinam...."

Guru Nanak felt what was going on. He said, "Bala, let us go find Mardana, he needs our help now." So they came to the place where Kauda was about to cook Mardana. At first Kauda the cannibal wanted to eat the two new men who came his way. His mind had been twisted almost his whole life. His body never felt real peace. Even though he was a king among the wicked, his soul suffered from the dark path of his life. When Kauda saw the Guru, he felt different somehow. Guru Nanak didn't have to say anything, his eyes spoke more than words can. Kauda knew he had no secrets from this new traveler with the bright eyes. He felt the Guru looking so deep in to him that he knew not only his whole life, but his soul too. He felt the Guru's

understanding. He felt that Guru ji didn't want to punish him for all the awful things he had done in his life. The Guru saw who he was and understood him, had compassion for him. It's hard to imagine someone having compassion for a man who kills and eats other people. The Guru had no fear of him but just radiated love. Kauda fell on his knees and began to cry. Without even saying a word Guru Nanak had made this fearsome man helpless. Without raising a fist Guru Nanak made this filthy murderer defenseless. The Guru said, "By your actions you decide your destiny. Why do you do the actions which will make your burn?" The Guru kindly said, "You have become blind and do not know what you do."

Kauda fell at the Guru's feet crying. Guru ji said, "God is Forgiveness and Compassion. If you truly want to change your ways, change them. Everyone was created by the Creator. Everyone will eventually go back to the Creator. You are a child of God. Always remember God and chant the Naam. Earn an honest living and share with others. You must do this and show all others to do the same." Kauda took everything the Guru said to heart. He went from being filthy and dirty to being well dressed and clean. Instead of stealing from people and killing them, he worked hard and shared with others. The rest of his life he dedicated to living the teachings of the Guru. He became a righteous man and always remembered the Guru in his heart. God loves everyone."

Most of the stories on the Sikh Gurus are in fact the storehouses or the messengers of the tenets of the "Sikh way of life", for instance teaching the kids the notions of "naam japana, kirt karni, vand chakana" and asking them, at the same time to live life fully as the emphasis in Sikhism is on the 'householder's way of salvation' while renunciation or running away from the world is disowned. The interesting part is the use of the alien terms (terms never used in traditional janamsakhis) like 'cake' ('Bhoomi Daku's Promise to the Guru), 'baseball' (Baba Atal Rai), 'doctor' (Nanak and the doctor), 'soup' (Five-Fingered Family) and 'villians' ('Rishi Dusht Daman). The stories are targeted at the kids leaving outside India or the children of the NRIs which explains the use of these terms.

### **Folk Stories**

Folktales are one of the forms of storytelling and are not always considered true or sacred unlike myths and legends which are often regarded as the accounts of one's religion or history. While the main characters in myths are gods or superhuman beings, the legends usually have humans as the centre of their focus. Myths are also claimed to be the established models of behaviour since the role-models shown in the myths are sacred. Myths are also regarded as the distorted accounts of real historical events and the re-telling of myths is not without significance since it takes one to the 'other' world of the sacred while detaching the person from this world, even though momentarily.

There were only nine stories in this section till October 2009 but the number rose to seventeen in December 2010. As would be evident from the titles and the contents of the stories, most of them are folktales taken from different religions—Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism. Harijot Singh, the brainchild behind the project, argues, 'As Khalsa we respect all paths and know many ways can lead to God when sincerely followed. We also protect the honor of all things sacred. In this spirit of khalsa universality we are featuring an ancient story that doesn't particularly belong to Sikh history but belongs to all of humanity.' Here, the reference is to the Buddhist story, 'Ungli Maal and Buddha' which according to Harijot Singh, is a story of universal virtues like courage, fearlessness, meditation, wisdom and innocence.

In addition to 'Ungali Maal and Buddha', the stories range from general folkways like 'A Truly Great Man' (on non-possession), 'The Serving Giant' (on meditation), 'Five Fingered Family' (on unity) to the medieval period of Sikh history ('The Throne of Lahore'; 'Akali Phula Singh'; 'Hari Mandir Sahib' and 'Massa Ranghar'; 'Baba Deep Singh') and so on. The focus of this interesting mixture of stories is

- (1) to provide a glimpse of Sikh history with an emphasis on sacrifice and martyrdom and
- (2) to inculcate good moral, ethical and civic values

Three stories, 'Adi Momo', 'The Throne of Lahore' and 'Rishi Dusht Daman' would be analyzed because of certain specific reasons. Firstly, the first two stories are rather a comment on 'modern civic-value system' and secondly just presenting a contrast, the third story covers not only this time period but travels through many yugas.

The first story, 'Adi Momo' by Shiva Singh emphasizes on the effect or the magic of kindness, compassion on human beings.

"Once upon a time in a small village there lived a father and a son. The father was a spiritual man who loved to write poems and sing all the time. He was a deep thinker and he often wondered why people did the things they did. He understood a lot about how people work and what is really important in life. The rest of the villagers didn't like him because they all worked very hard and they thought he was just lazy. The villagers thought, "This man and his son don't contribute anything to the village, they just live off our hard work. They don't deserve our generosity. We should teach them a lesson." So the villagers got together and kicked the

father and his son out of the village. So they went to the jungle just outside the village and left their home that they knew so well.

One day the villagers began talking among themselves and they got very excited. Even in the jungle, the father and son could hear the noise in the village as the people got more and more afraid. They said, "Oh no, Adi Momo is coming, Adi Momo is coming!" The son asked the father, "Adi Momo? What's an Adi Momo?" The father patiently explained, "My son, Adi Momo is a man. Everyone thinks that Adi Momo is very mean and violent. Sometimes he comes around and acts really angry, he breaks things and scares people."

The son asked, "But why?! Why would this man act like that??" "Well," explained the father, "When Adi Momo was a child, his parents were not nice to him. They would tell him mean things like "You are not a good boy!" and "You can never do anything good." They told him, You are ugly. We do not want to see your face." Adi Momo was very sad. He believed what his parents told him. He believed he was ugly and mean. As he grew up, he became a very cruel person. Now whenever he comes around, he steals from the villagers and kicks puppies and acts really mean to everyone."

Adi Momo was coming closer and closer to the village. He looked more like a beast than a man. His skin was thick and dark, he had scraggly, dirty hair in his face. He snarled and grunted as he walked. When Adi Momo came right to where the father and son were they both got a little scared.

Then all of the sudden the father started singing. He started singing Adi Momo's name to a musical tune, "Adi Momo, Adi Momo, Adi Momo, Momo, Momo, Momo...." No one had ever talked to Adi Momo with kindness before. Adi Momo had never heard his name said in anything but a mean and scared way. He stopped walking. He started to listen to the song. "Adi Momo, Adi Momo, Adi Momo...." Slowly he started moving with the music. The son began to sing too, "Adi Momo, Adi Momo..." Adi Momo's hands relaxed from the tight fists he was holding. Then Adi Momo did something no one had ever seen him do before..... he smiled!

From that day on, Adi Momo slowly started to change. People started being nice to him and he started being nice to them. He started helping people with their chores, helping them with their cleaning, helping to carry heavy things and doing farm work for them. This all happened a long time ago, and now, in that village, kids still say his name. They don't say it out of fear they way they used to, but they sing his name with smiles. "Adi Momo, Adi Momo..." Can you think of someone you do not like? Can you say their name with love and kindness? Everyone needs love and kindness. Don't you?

Adi-Momo', written by Shiva Singh is a reflection on the process of socialization wherein the mean and violent behaviour of a person is simply attributed to his parents and the value system inculcated by them. As argues the writer, 'As a child his parents weren't nice to him. They would tell him mean things like he isn't a good boy and he'll never do anything good. He came to believe what his parents had told him and he became a very cruel person. Now whenever he comes around he steals from the villagers and kicks puppies and acts rather mean to everyone'. Though the moral of the story is 'who would not want to be treated with kindness?', the emphasis on 'good-parenthood' or socialization just can't be ignored. Here, it would be fruitful to make a comparison between the Indian and Western tradition of childhood. Though the western society was marked by an ideological conflict between the rejecting and accepting attitudes towards the child, moving from external suppression (to consider the child as an unwanted burden) towards internal suppression (to train and discipline the child) and finally to give the child a greater freedom as noted by Sudhir Kakar (Sudhir Kakar, 2008, pp.209-210). On the contrary the child in the Indian tradition is a valuable entry into the family system. The child is considered pure and a true manifestation of the 'Divine'. 'Here, the proper form of interaction between adults and children is not conceived of in terms of socialization but *interplay*. Closer to that Indian tradition, interplay as a paradigm of growing up would emphasize the *adult-child unit*, concern itself with their *mutual* learning and mutual pleasure in each other. It would thus sharply differ from the socialization model that concentrates solely on the child and his movement towards adulthood' (Kakar, Ibid, p.210). We should not forget that the stories are written not only by NRI writers but are also targeted at NRI children. As far as the Indian societies are concerned the 'socialization model' is the natural choice in the evolution of the childhood process.

The second story, 'The Throne of Lahore', on the one hand praises the large-heartedness of Maharaja Ranjit Singh while at the same time glorifies Maharaja's decision to not to punish the robber Mann Singh which in fact proved to be a life-changing experience for him. 'He (the robber) became Sardar Mann Singh and joined the Khalsa army. Everything about him changed. Such was the kingdom of Ranjit Singh, *no one was ever punished by death* (emphasis mine) and people were given a chance to change.

After Guru Gobind Singh left this Earth, the Khalsa had to meet many challenges. They had to secretly live in the jungles but through their faith they survived. Many believed that there were no more Sikhs left alive. But the Khalsa kept growing in power. Soon enough, a man named Ranjit Singh began to be known as the King. He obtained a lot of land far and wide throughout the whole area. He became a Maharaja - a great king. Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a devoted Sikh of the Guru and also a rich King. He stayed in the capital city of Lahore. It was during this time that a robber named Maan Singh started to become very famous in the Lahore area. The robber Maan Singh and his 50 horsemen would raid villages, kill people, and steal many valuables.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh sent out an order to go and stop this robber. "If anyone catches him alive I will give him two villages!" he said. Very few wanted to face the brave and fearless robber and no one thought that he could stop him. In the city of Lahore, Maan Singh posted up a sign that said, "If anyone catches me alive, I will give him the throne of Lahore." This was a direct insult to Maharaja Ji

One day an unknown Singh rode through the jungle. He met with Maan Singh, the robber. After exchanging some words, they began to fight one-on-one. The fight lasted a very long time. They were equal fighters. Finally the robber became tired and the Singh took his opportunity and knocked Maan Singh's sword out of his hand. Tackling him to the ground the Singh said, "Now I have you alive, give me the throne of Lahore!" Now Maan Singh, even though he was a wicked thief, felt honor bound to his promise to give the Singh the throne of Lahore. So he said, "We'll have to capture it first. Let us go." When they arrived at the gates of Lahore the guards welcomed the Singh and opened the doors. Maan Singh was confused. When the Singh walked into the city he was met with applause from the people

Maan Singh started to realize that this wasn't a typical person who beat him in a fight. The Singh announced, "I am the king of Lahore, the throne is mine. Your promise is fulfilled." Maan Singh was wonder struck! The man who faced him in combat was actually Maharaja Ranjit Singh himself! The Maharaja was virtuous and kind, he didn't punish the robber for his past actions. The robber became inspired by the nobility and fearlessness of the Sikhs. He became Sardar Maan Singh and joined the Khalsa army. Everything about him changed. Such was the kingdom of Ranjit Singh, no one was ever punished by death and people were always given a chance to right any wrongs they had done and to change themselves to become better.

\*Folk- Stories

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|---------------------------------------|--|
| (1)The Horse Mind                     | (9)The Serving Giant                               |
| (2)A Real King                        | (10)Adi-Momo                                       |
| (3)The Earthquake                     | (11)Ungli Maal and Buddha                          |
| (4)Bhagat Dhanna ji                   | (12)Bhoomi Daku's Promise to the Guru              |
| (5)Bhai Tharu's Life of Fearless Love | (13)The Thief and Kali                             |
| (6)Bhai Sud                           | (14)Hari Mandir Sahib and Massa Ranghar            |
| (7)The Sweetness of the Naam          | (15)Baba Deep Singh                                |
| (8)A Truly Great Man                  | (16)Akali Phula Singh and (17)The Throne of Lahore |

The above two stories seem like the charter of a modern civil society. 'Kindness', 'socialization', 'not to kick the puppies', an appeal against death sentence and to give a chance to everyone to reform oneself are examples cited to present the traits of a good citizen.

The story 'Rishi Dushat Daman', which was eventually withdrawn after a number of protests, reads as follows:-

"A long time ago there was a great war between the gods and the demons or 'dusht' as they were called. The goddess Shakti represents pure, female power. Shakti was losing the war to the demons. She was being chased by two huge demon brothers. They chased her all around the four corners of the Universe, finally she came to the Himalayan mountains. The Himalayas are sacred mountains where many men of God dedicate their lives to meditation and devotion. When Shakti came to these mountains she found herself in a beautiful spot where she saw a golden light. Then she saw an old, old saint sitting in deep meditation, on a rock by the lake. The light was coming from him, he felt such bliss and was absorbed in the Divine like a drop of water in the ocean. She awoke him from his meditation and asked for his help. Just then the dusht, the demons arrived and said to her, "Shakti, we have found you. We have killed your armies, now you are alone and we are going to kill you, this is your end!" The saint objected saying "Leave her alone, she is pure, she is God's creative power, do not harm her". The demons didn't take this old man seriously. As they went after her, they threatened him too. So the old man stood up and shook the deer skin, which he was sitting on, in the air. From this skin came a beautiful looking man. It was Rishi Dusht Daman which means the Rishi who destroys the villains. Dusht Daman obeyed and started towards the enemies. The evil brothers taking out their swords in an instant rage went to kill all of them. Rishi Dusht Daman, as quickly as the wind, swang his sword and cut off both of their heads. The saint told Dusht Daman, 'I am very old and it's time for me to leave the earth. You should stay here like I have, meditate, be one with God so God can bless this earth.' Rishi Dusht Daman stayed there living in perfect union with God, killing demons whenever necessary. He was always very powerful, very joyful and forever fearless. His task on earth was finished and all he wanted was to join God in the spiritual realm. It was to this mighty soul that God, with a great voice, spoke to. God requested that he came once more as a human. "The earth is suffering, go destroy evil doers and spread the Dharma". So Rishi Dusht Daman went in to the womb of

Mata Gujri and was born as Gobind Rai. Never did he lose his union with God. This pure child became known as Guru Gobind Singh, the father of the Khalsa.”

What was wrong with the story or why did it hurt the sentiments of the Sikhs so much that it had to be withdrawn? One of the mails sent by Ravneet Singh on 6 December 2008 is cited here to give a glimpse of the scar this story had left on Sikhs' psyche and also how sensitive the Sikhs are about their separate identity as well as History. Ravneet Singh argues, 'Plz stop preaching this false story!! I hv a request to sikhnet ppl!! For guru's sake please stop spreading this false story of "dusht daman"...nd I hv d following reasons for that: 1. In this story, samaadh rishi refuses to fight with the demons, as he's a Brahmin...then this story says that samadh rishi is only GURU TEG BAHADUR in his previous birth... now see guru ji got d name "TEG BAHADUR" only after fighting a war at GURU HARGOBIND'S time,, his 1st name was "Tyaag mal"!! Now how did a Brahmin in his next birth performed a kshatriya??? 2. Dusht Daman, as this story says was created by d Brahman "samaadh rishi", has nothing to do with GURU GOBIND SINGH JI MAHARAJ.... As he himself says: "Khatri ko poot hoon, Brahman ko nahi,, kai tap aawat houn jo karon..."3. if U link it with bachitar naatak,, satguru has only talked about hemkunt parbat in it...no dusht daman,, no samadh rishi is der in bachitar naatak!! So plz,, try to understand the story is created by those Brahman organizations who only want to see Sikhs as a part of Hinduism."

The story written by Guruliv Singh, goes on smoothly till it reaches its last paragraph, that is, the re-birth of Rishi Dusht Daman as Guru Gobind Singh- the last Sikh Guru. This story which looks more like a part of Hindu mythology was attacked by a number of readers as an attempt to Hinduize or rather to Brahmanize Sikhism which immediately draws our attention to the Singh Sabha movement, the Sikh reformist movement in the Punjab in the late nineteenth century.

There is a blend of 'sacrifice' in stories like 'Hari Mandir Sahib and Massa Ranghar', 'Baba Deep Singh', 'Akali Phula Singh' and 'Bhai Taru's Life of Fearless Love'. The last story is presented as an example to highlight the underneath message.

In the village of Poola lived a young man named Taru. He worked hard on his farm with his family. He was devoted to Guru Gobind Singh and lived his life in service to others. He was well known for his service and everyone loved Taru Singh. He believed, "All people are children of God. Guru Gobind Singh ji has taught us to treat all people with equality and love. I don't care is someone is Hindu or Muslim, I just want to serve the God in everyone."

Not everyone in the land was as spiritual as Taru Singh. Those who ruled India were religious fanatics who killed anyone they wanted. Their mission was to convert everyone to their religion and control all others. The Khalsa doesn't stand for corruption so the Khalsa was especially hated by these people. They put out an order: "Anyone who helps the Khalsa will be punished and anyone who brings one of their heads will be rewarded." One person in Poola got jealous of how everyone loved Taru Singh so he thought, "Taru deserves to be tortured and suffer like the rest of the rebels hiding in the jungles." Taru Singh was captured, tortured and then brought to the governor.

Once the governor saw Bhai Taru Singh, who withstood his torture without complaining, he was enchanted. He said, "You have a spiritual light about you. Somehow my heart doesn't permit me to kill you." Then he tried to bribe Taru Singh, "You can be a great man. Join us. I will give you a mansion to live in, I will give you power and great wealth. All you have to do is cut your hair and join us." Bhai Taru Singh said, "I will give you more than my hair, I will offer you my head with my hair on it." Even though this was an insult the governor admired his courage, "My boy, you are too young to know about life. Join me and I will give you any woman you want. You will have your choice of beautiful women of royal blood to take as your wives. You will live in great luxury and comfort and be in charge of much land with many people. You will live like a king."

For Bhai Taru Singh betraying his brothers and sisters, who had been killed by these tyrants, giving up his faith was not possible. He said, "Even if I was made to be ruler of the whole world, if all people obeyed my command, if I had heavenly fairies as my servants, even then I would not give up my faith. My hair is a spiritual crown, it is worth more than mere riches. I'm not afraid, I'm ready to die. I pray to my Guru that I will die with all my hair intact."

The governor became infuriated. He violently called on the barber, "This man must die, kill him slowly... but cut his hair first!!" The barber tried to cut his hair but for some reason it wasn't cutting. "Get the shoe maker, he has sharper tools. Cut his hair and then kill him slowly!" The shoe maker came and even his sharpest tools couldn't cut Bhai Taru's hair. In a rage the governor cried, "Bring the carpenter!" The carpenter was called, "If his hair can not be cut, than I will cut his whole scalp off." So the carpenter cut his scalp off. But Bhai Taru's hair remained intact. Bhai Taru was tortured for about a month after this. The governor was suddenly struck with a great pain in his stomach. His pain kept increasing. He thought, "Maybe I'm suffering this pain because of torturing a pure man like Taru Singh." So he asked for forgiveness. Bhai Taru said, "As far as I am concerned the governor is forgiven. He will still have to face the consequences for his actions." The governor came to believe that if he had Bhai Taru's shoe and hit himself over the head with

it, he would get better. This turned out to be the only thing that relieve his condition. He hit his head with Bhai Taru's shoe until the day he died. Bhai Taru left his body on hearing this news. He was cheerfully welcomed to the spiritual realm where he was surrounded with incredible light and unimaginable love. It's not the life that we live, it's the courage we bring to it.

The other two sections on 'Parables' (5 stories—'World Play', 'It's All Within', 'The Clever Rabbit', 'The Wiseman and the Bowl of Milk' and 'Prahlaad and Harnaakash') and 'Spiritual' (3 stories—'Secret to All Happiness and Success :Jagjit's Mysterious Book' Part 1 and Part 2 and Attitude of Gratitude) are age-old stories, mostly from the Panchtantra Tales, the Gita, the Ramayana etc., all the Indian children are familiar with. The emphasis is definitely on good moral values and ethical conduct. Though dealing with the repetitive notion of 'contentment', this story, 'Attitude of Gratitude' is slightly different as it throws light on the spiritual merits of a woman.

Once there were two students. One day they were both told that they had received the great honor of seeing the Grand-Master. They were both very excited and humbled by this honor. The two students hiked to a remote mountain top to a very beautiful temple there. Both students were excited to see the Grand-Master.

The junior student volunteered himself to go first, and he entered in to the master's chamber. The Grand-Master looked very calm.... and silent.... His eyes showed kindness. He said, "Look in the Mystical Window and see the Truth." The junior student looked, and after a while he had a vision. He saw himself holding The Sacred Sword and also holding The Sacred Book. He told the master, "I looked just like the paintings of the saints of old! It was amazing!" The grandmaster said, "Yes indeed" Then the student said, "If I am like the saints of old.... then I must be a very great person!" The Grand-Master assured him, "Indeed, you are very special to God." The student decided that because he is so special he must go and teach others. The junior student left the chamber very excited, saying, "I knew it! I was always treated like a junior student, as if I don't know anything, but I AM A GREAT MAN! Everyone should listen to everything I say. I WILL GO AND TEACH THESE PEOPLE!!!" After he left to teach everyone, the Grand-Master sighed and said to himself, "Indeed you shall."

The senior student was now called to see the master and told to look in to the Mystical Window to see the truth. Calmly, she looked in the window. After a while she shared her vision, "Master, I saw myself holding The Sacred Sword in one hand and The Sacred Book in another hand." She explained how in the vision she looked like the saints of old. The Grand-Master said, "Indeed" "Master, if the truth is I am like the saints of old, than does that mean I am a great woman?" The grand-master assured her like he did the junior student, "Indeed you are, you are very special to God." Then the student asked, "If I am a great woman, if I am special to God, if I am like the saints of old... doesn't that mean it is my task to spread the truth?" The grand-master said, "Yes indeed it does."

Then the senior student did something the junior student didn't do... the senior student thought for a moment... and asked, "Master, may I ask, I've always seen the saints holding the sacred book and sword... what do these things really mean?" The grand-master was very pleased, "Aha! It means God has given us all very many gifts but it takes a lot of focus to remember what has been given to us. It takes focus... as sharp as a SWORD!" The student was amazed to hear the meaning of the Sword, "So it means we have to focus to remember all the gifts God has given us!!" The Grand-Master continued to teach her, "Indeed! Once you focus and remembers the gifts... it takes heart of a poet to fully appreciate them. The Sacred Book is like flowing poetry." Then the senior student started breathing deeply. She began to meditate... "I am using my sword-like focus to remember every blessing the universe has given us..... My heart is melting and I wish to sing the praises of the Infinite forever, and then sing them even more!" As she was meditating she realized she was using The Sacred Book and Sword, "Right now, I am using sword-focus and my heart is flowing like poetry!" The grand-master was extremely pleased. He burst with love when he said, "Indeed you ARE!" Later both the students came down the mountain. In town, the people really wanted to know if the Grand-Master had revealed the truth of the whole universe to them. The junior monk came jogging down the mountain, very excited with wide eyes yelling, "LISTEN TO ME, LISTEN TO ME!" The people asked, "Oh my goodness! Did the Grandmaster bless you?" "Did you look in the Mystical Window? What did you see?" The junior student shouted, "THE GRAND-MASTER PRAISED ME AS A GREAT MAN!" The people were astonished. The junior student continued to convince them, "The Mystical Window revealed that I AM THE GREAT SAINT OF THIS AGE! It is I who has The Sword and the Holy Word." He continued telling them his ideas. What he said sounded very much like truth and many people believed everything he said. In fact he became very famous and he had many followers.

The second student came down the mountain smiling and humming to herself, "Hmmmhmmhmmhmm". The few who didn't follow the first student noticed something. The senior student seemed very peaceful... very content. They asked, "Well, what did you see?" The senior student said, "I saw that God has given all of us many gifts." She smiled with kindness. The people wanted to hear more, so she taught

them, "There are two things. One is the challenge of remembering our gifts. The other is the heart to never forget them." Those who heard this felt calm and bright, and they smiled. The senior student continued on her way, the people still wanted to hear more from her, "Where are you going? What will you do?" She smiled with kindness, "Oh, I'll go somewhere and do something, that's not what matters. The real challenge is to remember God's blessings and then to never forget." The people smiled again.

Those who followed the first student started a new religion. Those who followed the second student, they just fell in love with life. They were full of gratitude and spent their lives happily serving everyone they met. The best way to see life is with an attitude of gratitude.

The narration is very significant and symbolic. The disciple, in the body of a woman, is shown to be wiser, full of humility—the last attribute considered essential for the realization of the Supreme Truth which comes through the voice of a woman only. And why not? When all the Gurus consider themselves to be the mahal or the wives of the Almighty. The story is in true spirit of the Guru Granth Sahib upholding the equal status of all human beings irrespective of gender or caste .

### Modern Day Stories

The focus of modern day stories is Modern History on the one hand and on the other it makes an attempt to throw light on some of the problems which are the result of modernity. There is a definite emphasis on the conflict between modernity and tradition. Here, the 'Other' is the modern value system as is evident from the story, 'You are Beautiful'.

Uncle Roop Singh tells us of a time when a boy came to him. The boy was thinking of cutting his hair because people were making in fun of him for being a boy with long hair. So uncle Roop told him a story:

Once there was a potter who took some clay and started squashing it. He kept squashing the clay for a long time and the whole time the clay kept yelling "Please stop it, stop it!" Maybe he was being mean to the clay! Then the potter took the clay and put it on a wheel. He started spinning the clay. The clay said "Please stop it, I'm getting dizzy, I beg you stop!" but the potter continued spinning and spinning the clay until it came in to the shape of a cup.

Now the potter very gently took the cup. He handled it with great care and put the cup in a kiln. The cup was having a hard time understanding how the potter was being so kind and caring this moment, and just a bit ago he was hurting him and also making him dizzy. Inside the kiln huge flames rose up from everywhere. The cup started screaming "Please stop it, let me out of here, I'm burning, I beg you stop it!!!" The potter just looked at him and smiled and said "No, no, not yet." After the flames went out, the potter very gently took the cup out of the kiln.

Now he lovingly put the cup on a table. Then he got out his paint set. He started stroking the cup with his brush. Now the cup started laughing "Hahahaha, stop it, that tickles! Stop it, hahahahaha, stop it!" But the potter just said "No, no, no, not yet," and continued painting for a while longer.

Now the potter brought the cup to the fires of the kiln again. Again the cup yelled "Stop it, please stop it, I'm burning again, I beg you, stop it!" and again the potter said "No, no, no, not yet." After a long while the flames stopped and the potter gently took the cup out of the kiln. He placed the cup on the table in front of a mirror. When the cup saw the mirror he said "Wow that's beautiful!!" The potter said "Yes it is beautiful, it's you. I made you beautiful." The potter explained to the cup that if he had listened to his cries of "Stop it, that hurts," when he was kneading the clay, the clay wouldn't be able to go on the spinning wheel. People would just see a hard clump of clay and throw it in the trash. If he had stopped when the clay said, "Stop it, I'm dizzy!", the soft clay wouldn't have ever been shaped in to a cup. People would see some unshaped clay and throw it in the trash. If he had listened when the cup said, "Stop, I'm burning!" from the fire in the kiln the first time, no one would ever be able to use the cup. He would've just been an unfinished cup with a bunch of cracks. People would just pick up the cracked cup and throw him in the trash. When the cup said, "Stop, it tickles," if the potter stopped painting him, he would have an unfinished design on him. People would see the cup with only some art on it and they would throw it away. If he had stopped from putting him in the kiln the second time, the paint wouldn't have stuck. When people would wash the cup, all the paint would come off, then they'd throw the cup with no paint in the trash. But now the cup went through everything and was finished. Now all anyone can say is "Wow, how beautiful!" We are also made beautifully like the cup. Our Creator has certainly made us just right. We are beautiful just the way we are. If we show ourselves as complete we are beautiful."

The story shows the growing concern among the Sikhs regarding the trend among the younger generation to look fashionable and to cut their hair short. The community is all the time struggling with modernity. Interestingly the Sikhs have come to terms with the use of the words, 'vaal kataa litei' (he has cut his hair). In the olden days these words appeared to be the most dreadful and the 'kesh kataal kara litei' was the expression used for the sorry state of affairs. Infact kesh kataal kara litei is a very strong statement tantamount to murder—murder of one's identity as well.

Another story, 'The Power of Prayer' proved to be a hornet's nest. The story evoked the maximum number of responses and was eventually withdrawn though can still be accessed from the archives. First the narration.

"This story took place not too far away, and not too long ago. Young Navdip Kaur's little brother was very sick. He was so sensitive to light that he stayed in the darkness and he was so sick that he couldn't even speak, he had an infection in his lungs. She took care of him even though it meant she couldn't study for her science exam which was coming up. She held him in her arms for almost three full days. She spent all her time looking after him, feeding him and taking care of all his needs. During these three days she was supposed to be studying for her exam, but she hadn't read a single word from her science book. She wasn't worried though. "I am doing the right thing," she thought. When her mom got home in the morning from working at her night job, Navdip gave her mom the care of her brother. Without even changing her clothes she ran out the door for school to take her exam, but when she got to her bicycle for the 40 minute ride, there was a puncture in the tire! No one could help her fix it this early in the morning. She ran over to her friend's house to see if she could get a ride with her, but her friend already left! So she asked her friend's mom if she could borrow her bicycle, but her mother couldn't find the key for it! Nothing seemed to be working out. She was walking through the streets and she knew if she didn't make it on time, she would lose a whole year of school, but still she was calm and hopeful. All of the sudden a sweet voice asked, "Daughter, where do you want to go?" What a strange thing! It was a rickshaw-puller who was talking to her! Where had he come from? His turban, beard and clothes were all white and his face seemed to glow with light. He had a presence about him. This cheerful man looked saintly. She only had \$10 and that wasn't nearly enough to get to school. "How much?" she asked. "Two dollars," he said. He had the most wonderful and comfortable rickshaw she had ever seen. It was painted all over with beautiful flowers and elephants. Soon they arrived at the auto stop where a car was leaving to the college. She tried to give the rickshaw man the \$10 and ran after the car, trying to flag it down. The rickshaw man would not take the money. She thought maybe he didn't have change and he really only wanted \$2. When she got to the car she asked the driver if he had change so she could give \$2 to the rickshaw man. The driver and everyone in the car looked at her like she was crazy. "What rickshaw? There is no rickshaw here, who are you talking about!?" When she looked back to see the rickshaw..... no one was there. "Did you see the rickshaw?" she asked the people in the car. They just kept looking at her confused. Astonished, she just got in the car and went to school to take her exam. Later at home she told her mom the whole story of the mysterious, saintly looking man who appeared. He gave her a ride and then disappeared. Her mom laughed and said "That old rickshaw driver was God himself, that's why no one else could see him. Navdip remembered the story of her brother's birth. She had never believed the story till now. He was born too early and the doctors said, "He probably won't live more than a day." He was turning blue all over and couldn't get enough oxygen. Her mom just bowed her head and began to pray with all her heart. After a half hour the mom looked over to her daughter and said, "I saw a beautiful man with a white turban, white robe and a white beard. He had sparkling eyes and light came out of him. He walked between the lines of all the babies. He stood before my son and pointed a finger at him. It meant that life is given to him by God's command, God's hukam. His name should be 'Hukam Singh.'" Suddenly a nurse shook her and said, "He's coming back to life, he's coming back to life!!!" The most senior doctor pointed to the heavens and said, "God is Great. Now Navdip had seen this man for herself. She no longer doubted that God comes down and helps even people like her. Know that God will always help you in every situation!"

Why did the Sikhs feel so agitated about this simple narration? What compelled the site to withdraw the story from the main section? Some of the comments by one PCJ, British Sikh, are truly reflective of the sentiments of the Sikhs regarding miracles and the Formless God. On 19 December 2008 pcj shows his disappointment by addressing the writer of the story, Guruka Singh with the following words. "I am a little disappointed that this turned into a children's story. The author doesn't know for sure that it was God, then why on this earth are we pushing this to be that this was God Himself? Are we not supposed to be truthful about God? Then why make up stories about Him?" One Thai Singh responds, 'dear PCJ this is just a great story by Guruka Singh for kids to learn truth about truth and God, I hope you grow up a little bit. Do not fume over kids material their are some better subjects to tackle, waheguroo bless you and give some brain to rationalize things. GURUKA Singh jee KEEP IT UP boy. these people have no understanding about the subject they are just beating the bush.' PCJ replies back, 'Thai Singh It's told as being a true story. Do you understand what a true story means? It means it is a fact. Why would you tell kids something that may not be true?' Another reader Puttgobindka gives the example of Bhai Ghanaya Singh, a devout follower of Guru Gogind Singh who used to see guru in all human beings.

In Sikhism the Almighty is Formless which explains the reaction over the presentation of the story. It also proves the effectiveness of the website as a vehicle of promotion of the Sikh religion and its philosophy. Another story which I have chosen from the section of Modern Day Stories is 'The Martyrs of Amritsar. Based on a true event of 1978 depicting the clash between the Sikhs and the Namdharis, it sheds light on the age old

question of,' Who can be considered a Sikh and whether there can be a Living Guru ( among the Sikhs) other than the Guru Granth Sahib?

"Only a few years ago in Amritsar there was a peculiar group of Sikhs. They call themselves the 'Nirankaaris'. They worshiped a man as the living Guru, he even sat above Siri Guru Granth Sahib ji. They did slanderous things about Guru Gobind Singh. Their leader was a rich and corrupt man named Burbachan Singh. Some honest beloved Sikhs of the Guru who lived in Amritsar became upset and decided to do something. One of these men was Bhai Fauja Singh. He was very close to Guru Gobind Singh, he was attached to Gurbani and shared great love and admiration for those he saw who shared the same pure spirit. He always spoke the truth and many of his friends got inspiration from him. Bhai Fauja Singh told them, "We are the Khalsa and we love Guru Gobind Singh. These people insult our Guru every day. It is our duty to preserve the honor of the Guru."

Baisakhi day came up, on this day all Sikhs remember how Guru Gobind Singh formed the great Khalsa. The Nirankaaris were planning on doing something outrageous; they were going to hold up their Guru in a palki and carry him around as a public statement that this false man was the living Guru. It is so beautiful when good men stand up against great insults, Bhai Fauja Singh and his companions committed to stopping the Nirankaaris from polluting the Khalsa. So these seventy men with only swords in their hands, marched to where the Nirankaaris were meeting. There were hundreds of Nirankaaris who began throwing bricks at these Khalsa. Now the Nirankaaris took out thier swords and began fighting the Khalsa. It was 70 against hundreds. After some time the Nirankaaris took out thier guns and began shooting at these Amritsar Sikhs. The fake Guru, Gurbachan had a relative who was a policeman. This man and other corrupt police began shooting at the Sikhs.

Bhai Fauja Singh was shot many times but he kept yelling "Bole So Nihal, Sat Siri Akal". He was shot 9 times before he finally fell to the ground. In the end many were injured and twelve Khalsa left thier bodies. After the police put the dead bodies on a cart to roll them away. They put Bhai Fauja on it too, but he was still alive. Two Sikhs saw this and came over to him to help him. They were arrested and put in jail. The bodies were taken away and put in a pile somewhere else. An old Sikh man found where these bodies were and found Fauja Singh still breathing. His broken body was chanting 'Wahiguru' with all he had left on this earth. The man went back to get Faujas wife and other people who could take him to a hospital. When they all arrived Fauji Singh had left his body. He had lived his last time on the earth with fearlessness and devotion. His pure soul went back home. Those Sikhs in Amritsar showed us that it's not life that's important, it's how we live it with courage.

The story with a clear message of sacrificing one's life and to honour the sanctity of the sacred Granth, evoked a mixed response. On the one hand it was not considered an appropriate story for the kids, on the other hand it was regarded as a great inspirational story and a request was made to mention, 'what bad things were said about Sikh Gurus'? Any changes in the Gurbani would never be tolerated.

### **Stories At A Glance**

The website with its special section for the children has been successful in the process of socialization of the kids through the use of history and religion to inculcate Sikh values by telling them stories about the Sikh Gurus, their sacrifices and the Sikh philosophy. The formation of the 'Self' is taking place and at the same time to safeguard one's Identity seems to be the main issue of concern. Though it is true for almost all the small communities but is true more so in the case of the Sikh community which is struggling with 'modernity'. The outer symbols are not just parts of the body but are demonstrative of their distinct identity( see the story 'You are Beautiful').

The section on Modern Day Stories is very significant and symbolic as well. It presents the crisis the community is facing wherein the 'Other' has emerged in the form of modernity while the danger of being absorbed into Hinduism is also looming large. But the most important question is, 'who can be considered a Sikh? 'and whom to debar from the fold of Sikhism? The responses from the readers shows the popularity and the acceptance of the medium as one reader Gurmeet Kaur shared her experience, 'My boy grew up with Khalsa stories narrated by Guruliv Singh. We used to hear them in car, at bed time over and over since he was five years old. A lone Sikh boy in his school and neighbourhood, these stories strengthened him to remain true to Guru and Gursikhi. These are such treasures and they have influenced him for his life. Thank you Sikhnet for making them available for all the sangat. Mothers and Fathers, please take advantage of them" So the *netbonding has been successful.*

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