

17. The story of Darshan Singh, a French convert

Darshan Singh Rudel

When asked how I came in contact with the Sikh faith, and how I became a Sikh myself, I simply reply, it is *Vahiguru da bhana*, or *Vahiguru di kirpa nal*, in other words, thanks to God's will or God's grace.

There are no Sikhs in the south of France where I was brought up. Like most French people, I knew nothing of Sikhism or Sikhs even though many had died in France, during the First World War. I may say I was spiritually minded as a child, but with different ideas that were going to bring me into conflict with my practising Roman Catholic parents. I did not believe Catholics or Christians had a monopoly on truth. I believed Christians should have long hair and beards as Jesus did, and I refused to cut my hair and eat meat, believing 'Thou shalt not kill' should extend to animal life as well. I was 10 when I had these ideas, but I was compelled to eat meat and cut my hair until the age of 15. I was baptized, and remained a church server at the village Catholic church until I was 15 even though I had become more sympathetic to the Reformed Protestant Church. I saw it as closer to the Christian path for its simplicity and more direct approach to God. Members of the Protestant Church (Huguenots), were once persecuted in my region (Languedoc) very much in the same way as Sikhs during and after the time of Guru Gobind Singh. My heroes as a child were (and still are) Garibaldi and St Francis of Assisi, also a French anarchist, Proudhon, who believed religious principles, not politicians, should lead people.

I knew very little about India, except that Buddhism originated there, and that it was the land of Mahatma Gandhi. Ever since I was very young, I had a desire to go to India one day. I was not interested in school studies and in high school I couldn't relate to many youth of

my age. I remember having debates with my French teacher, an atheist, about God's presence. I enjoyed being on my own and close to nature while working on my father's farm. Tension with my parents increased to the point that I decided to leave home and school, wishing to learn (mostly agriculture) while travelling around the world. I continued to regard myself as a Christian until I left school at 16. Then I became altogether agnostic and I was often hostile toward organized religion. However, I am grateful to God as strong principles guided me, and despite all my shortcomings, kept me away from wrong, even though I mixed with all sorts of people. Those principles were somehow religious, though my ego didn't want to admit it.

Somehow, my interest in various world faiths never diminished, especially during my first overland visit to India which brought me into contact with many religious communities. Even then I was often critical of their conduct, which was not always religious. It is my encounter with Sikhism which had the greatest impact on me and, I can truly say, restored my faith in God and made me realize that only our ego keeps us away from that reality. I was not yet 19 when I first reached India during the Emergency Rule imposed by Indira Gandhi. Nine months in various parts of that vast land brought me into contact with Sikhs. I wondered if many were only keeping turbans and beards because of tradition rather than because of a vital faith. But I also met some spiritually minded Sikhs. Usually, practising Sikhs are most inspiring people. I felt deeply impressed by their personality and kindness and felt the need to learn about their faith. No one tried to convert me; Sikhs are not known to proselytize. Communication was slow at first as my knowledge of English was almost non-existent in those days and I spoke no Punjabi. I visited Amritsar shortly before leaving India, and was fortunate to spend a few days at the Guru Ramdas Guest House located near the Golden Temple. The discovery of the Golden Temple had a great impact on me. I felt deeply impressed by the beauty, serenity and universal spirit of that temple of God, since the foundations were laid by a Muslim saint, and the four gates welcome all. Also the *Guru ka langar* that provides food to all is a marvellous way of sharing with the less fortunate and a radical way to eradicate barriers between castes and creeds. Listening to *kirtan* (hymns) was also a unique experience, even without understanding the meaning of the *shabads*. *Kirtan* always had a very soothing effect on me.

I left India with a heavy heart, taking with me some literature of

Sikhism and promising myself to return as soon as possible. After working (mostly in agriculture) in Greece, Switzerland and France I did return in 1980. I had long hair then and I wore a turban continuously only after 1980. I revisited Amritsar. I also stopped to see the historical *gurdwara* in Gwalior (related to our sixth Guru) and tried to go to Hemkunt Sahib, where Guru Gobind Singh is said to have meditated during his previous life. I returned to the Punjab in 1983 when tension was high as Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale openly challenged the Indian government. I met him, and also met American and European Sikhs for the first time and tried to meet Harbhajan Singh Yogi, the Sikh who converted them. Harbhajan was regarded as controversial by many Sikhs for mixing tantric yoga with Sikhism. His visit to Amritsar was postponed and I had to leave without meeting him. I left India for New Zealand and Australia where I visited the Sikh community settled there and worked on farms in those countries before going to Japan and Taiwan. I returned to Europe after spending five years abroad in India and the Far East. I finally came to England in 1983 as I had been advised to do by Sardar Dr Trilochan Singh, a Sikh historian whom I met at Sis Ganj *gurdwara* in Delhi. He said England was the ideal place for a European Sikh since one can live among Sikhs, learn Punjabi and more about Sikhism while listening to *kirtan* as well as having the opportunity to do *seva* (work) at the local *gurdwara* (place of worship). I have been most fortunate since arriving in Southall at the end of 1987, to be able to stay with Sikhs, mostly with an elderly couple that I regard as my second parents. Their only son died ten years ago in a car accident. Some Sikh friends helped me with Punjabi, and I also attended evening classes so I could do Punjabi and English GCSEs while working in a bakery to support myself. Also I joined the British Red Cross as a voluntary member after doing first-aid and nursing courses, since it is an organization doing humanitarian work without discrimination, somehow in the spirit of Sikhism.

I am most grateful to *Vahiguru* for being able to receive *amrit* (initiation) at Anandpur Sahib, realizing one of my dearest wishes. For a long time I knew Sikhism was the right path for me and had started preparing myself to be initiated formally into the Sikh faith. Initiation is for Sikhs a kind of rebirth.

I was finally allowed to return to India and the Punjab in 1991.

The Punjab had been a restricted area for foreigners for several years. Before receiving *amrit*, I visited several historical *gurdwaras* spread out in various parts of India, beautiful places mostly related to our Gurus or significant events that took place during their lifetime. It was a kind of pilgrimage meant to gain knowledge and inspiration while helping in the *Guru ka langar* and listening to *kirtan*. I also had the unique experience of spending three weeks at Gurmat College near Patiala in the Punjab, where students practise and learn all aspects of the Sikh faith, but also do comparative studies of all religions.

In 1983 I had visited Anandpur Sahib (the city of peace or bliss) and fallen in love with that peaceful town located in picturesque surroundings, where important events took place. It is the place where Guru Gobind Singhji transformed common people into a casteless community capable of defeating the mighty Mogul and Afghan armies. The initiation ceremony takes place twice a week and on my second visit in 1991 I was able to take *amrit* on Wednesday 10 July, after meeting the head Granthi, a very nice man, who reminded me of my duties as a Sikh. I felt very exalted as I walked to the upper room of Keshgarh Sahib and sat with a group of about thirty Sikhs, all here to reaffirm their faith as Sikhs, some of them taking *amrit* for the second time after breaking the Sikh code of conduct. I recognized a young Sikh, met previously in Mandhi (Himachal Pradesh) where he spent two years doing *seva* at the historical *gurdwara* as a preparation for taking *amrit* (the nectar of immortality, or name given to liquid drunk in the initiation ceremony). We were first reminded of our duties as Sikhs: from that day we were to live according to God's will, recognize Guru Gobind Singhji and Mata Sahib Kaur as our spiritual parents, and seek guidance from *gurbani*. We were requested to always wear the five Ks (see Chapter 10, p. 168), do our daily *nitnem* (Sikh prayers) and keep God in our mind and heart through *nam simran*. We were also requested to abstain from taking any intoxicants, smoking, drinking and to avoid meat. The *amrit* was prepared by the Panj Piare. The five bands and the Ardas were recited before we all drank the *amrit* from the same vessel. It was a thrilling moment. I see it as the greatest moment of my life, in my commitment to my faith, my spiritual rebirth and most of all in the privilege of being initiated at the place where *amrit* was given for the first time to the *panj piare* by Guru Gobind Singhji, who then humbly received it from them on

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Vaisakhi, 1699. Before taking *amrit*, I was known as Amarjit Singh, a name originally given by Hindu friends when I visited Sevagram Ashram in 1980, a place where Mahatma Gandhi spent a few years of his life. But I requested the *panj piare* to give me a new name, for I saw that day as a new birth. Darshan Singh was chosen and agreed to by the *panj piare* and the congregation. The *hakam nama* read on that day was a verse from Bhagat Ravidasji and was most appropriate:

When I am, Thou are not: now that thou are (within me), I am not.

A certificate was issued to me from the *gurdwara* to allow me to change my name once back in France.

I realized while living in several countries where very little is known about Sikhism, that to be a Sikh can be quite challenging. But I discovered that it is even more difficult to be a European Sikh since it is so little accepted and understood. Also, over the last few years, Sikhs have been portrayed as a terrorist community, partly due to militants who used terrorism, but mostly due to unfair anti-Sikh media propaganda. Finding work was, at times, difficult in Taiwan (two years) where I learned martial arts and Chinese painting, and in Japan (one year) where I studied Japanese landscape gardening. One can work as a French teacher in those countries since qualifications are not required – to be a native speaker is enough. But with a beard and turban, I obviously didn't look like a stereotypical Frenchman. No school was willing to employ me at first, and some European colleagues said that the only way to get a job would be to shave and remove my turban, something I was not prepared to do.

However, I didn't give up faith and before my savings were exhausted, help came mysteriously from some Japanese and European friends who had once visited Amritsar and were sympathetic to the Sikh faith. They helped me find jobs: gardening for Europeans living in Japan and teaching French in private schools and to private students. I am most grateful to God for their assistance. Since I left school and became an international vagabond, I have been always able to find work to support myself. In India, in 1991, I encountered different types of problems, as on a couple of occasions police tried to obtain money from me while I was travelling by train at night. They assumed I was from the Punjab, but apologized when they realized I was a foreigner. In New Delhi the

CID armed policemen came to pick me up from the Bhai Vir Singh Foundation where I was a guest for a couple of nights. This incident took place shortly after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. They took me to their headquarters in a van, after searching my room, and kept me for a seven-hour interrogation in which three inspectors tried to establish whether I was a militant, a spy or a human rights activist. They were hostile towards the idea that a European could convert to the Sikh faith, but once more being a foreigner protected me from police brutalities, and I was allowed to go once they realized I was harmless. However, they kept my fingerprints and took my photograph. It was a humiliating experience to be treated as a criminal, but it gave me an insight as to what life can be like for Sikhs living in India.

After taking *amrit* at Anandpur Sahib in 1991, I naturally tried to get my new name recognized officially by the French authorities. In France, a change of name may be permitted only if one has a legitimate reason. Application must be made to the high court, through a solicitor. My father contacted a solicitor at my birthplace (near Montpellier in the south of France) and a request was made to the court. To my dismay, the court dismissed my case as not legitimate, as a change of names for religious reasons is not allowed. The idea was to replace Michel Jean Louis Rudel by Darshan Singh Rudel, wishing to keep my surname since it is not related to caste, would keep my parents happy and would facilitate identification. My solicitor advised me to appeal, but after wasting £650 I didn't want to take that risk as it seemed unlikely that the court would reverse its ruling. To receive a different ruling, French laws would have to change, since they allow one to obtain French, or French-sounding forenames, but are hostile when it is the other way around, as they claim it would marginalize a French citizen. In the name of secularism and integration, French laws are discriminating against people converting to another faith.

My name has been, however, officially recognized in the UK after I signed a statutory declaration. I have finally become a British citizen and renounced my French citizenship.

Relations with my parents have improved greatly over the years and I am most grateful to God for that. My father discovered some positive articles in French about Sikhism and, knowing me, realized that my conversion was a natural thing to happen. Some Roman Catholics and other Christians are somehow hostile towards

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someone who converts to another faith. When asked why I changed my religion, I usually reply that it is not my religion, but humanity's religion, and that the Sikh Gurus' message is the most universal (catholic) in spirit. Guru Gobind Singh said, 'Recognize the whole human race as one.' Anyone who, while practising his or her faith whatever the label, recognizes God as universal truth, who is humble and surrenders to God's will is a co-religionist. He or she may be better than I, and from such a person I should draw inspiration. Knowledge of and respect for other creeds are essential to promote understanding, spiritual progress and, most of all, peace between religious communities. Relations among French people are not always the best as many French are hostile towards someone practising a different religion. Also a person who is vegetarian and doesn't smoke or drink is often seen as unsociable and often treated as an outcast.

Whatever adversity I face or have faced as a Sikh is insignificant compared to what Sikhs have suffered to defend their faith throughout their history. It has had the effect of testing and reinforcing my faith.