

A Conversation with Geetanjali Singh Chanda

Dr. Geetanjali Singh Chanda is Senior Lecturer in the Women's, Gender & Sexuality Studies Program at Yale University. Her earlier work "Sikh Masculinity, Religion and Diaspora in Shauna Singh Baldwin's *The English Lesson and Other Stories* was published in the journal "Men and Masculinities" in February 2009. She is the author of *Indian Women in the House of Fiction*, published By Zubaan.

Seva is one of the principle tenets of Sikhism. It ranges from dusting the shoes of worshippers in the gurdwara to cleaning the premises to serving food and a whole host of other chores. The basic quality it seeks to instill in an individual is that of service with love and humility. Inni Kaur's book *Journey with the Gurus* is a unique example of seva - of piety and devotion - to the Sikh community.

The stories recount familiar tales about the life of Guru Nanak – the founder of Sikhism –from his childhood to the revelation when he disappeared for three days in the river Bein. These are stories derived from the Janam Sakhis and Inni has drawn from Bhai Vir Singh's *Balam Sakhis* and *Guru Nanak Chamatkar*. Most of us are familiar with these stories because they have often been orally recounted in homes by the older generation.

The task of telling these stories anew however, was daunting at at least two levels; One, how to translate the idiom of these oral narratives into a written form while yet retaining the ease and fluency of a "told story" and two, how to communicate 'out of context' stories that were so deeply rooted in a specific regional, linguistic and cultural milieu.

The target audience of this book is the diaspora Indian, and probably largely a Sikh audience. Although there is no reason why others would not find it interesting too. They stand on their own as easy to read and well written stories and, in fact, one of the chief merits of the text is that one does not need any previous knowledge of Guru Nanak or Sikhism. The target audience is children who have grown up in the west. Inni was addressing these stories to second or third generation Sikhs who continue to maintain religious or cultural links with Sikhism but are more familiar with the everyday context of an American worldview. Indian children, even non-Sikhs – pick up an ambient knowledge and familiarity with religions practiced in India, almost by osmosis because plurality of religions is part of the fabric of India. In an American context the author has to negotiate a tricky interface between two quite different linguistic and contextual idioms.

Inni says that her first readers were the children themselves for whom these stories have been told. They were children of friends, children whom she taught at the

gurdwara in Connecticut and children who attended Sikh camps that she was involved with. It was their questions about specific characters, dress, conversations and food that guided her forward. One of the main differences she notes is that Indian children are more willing to accept the 'miracle' aspect in the stories whereas children brought up in America are more questioning and seek the moral lessons in the stories.

The inclusion of the discussion points at the end of each story shows the pedagogic intent of the collection. Initially, Inni says there were no discussion points. These were added later at the behest of parents and teachers. Inni became convinced that these were essential to create the space for talking about Sikhi and various other issues raised in the stories. They became the vehicle for cross generational conversations. Parents and grandparents finally found a common ground where they could discuss the stories and the moral lessons contained therein. They provide a way for cultural and religious connections which is especially important where the dominant mainstream culture tends to submerge minority identities.

The question of identity becomes most urgent when one's identity is under threat. And although it may be erroneous to cling to notions of a monolithic, unchanging identity there is a need to know where one comes from especially when that past is quickly being erased by a pervasive and insistent call to become part of the American melting pot. The young especially want nothing more than to merge and not stand out. But, Inni says, even to reject this aspect of one's identity and past - one has to at least know it. If one does not know what Sikhism is, for instance, then how can one reject it? Inni's own experience growing up was one of gradually finding Sikhi for herself. As a young convent educated school girl she wanted to be anything but a Sikh. She was always spiritually inclined and so dabbled in finding out more about Hinduism, Buddhism and Sufism. Her interest in Sikhism was inspired by her grandfather. "The fragrance he carried in his life" seduced her to try and follow in his footsteps. And in a way this is how she presents Guru Nanak in the stories. He is not a god to be feared or respected; rather he is presented as a friend. His relationship with his sister Nanaki, the descriptions of the games they played, their walks where she points out different flowers and birds to him all conjure up a very ordinary childhood, one that will resonate with most children.

Inni's questioning about the purpose of life - birth, marriage, children and death - is that all there is to life - made here realize that something was missing. And like the Azan calling the faithful to prayer she heard the voice within instruct her "*Simran kar*". And her simran led her to creative writing, which began with poetry. She says poetry came easiest to her because she just heard it in the air and merely "reproduced" it. She hesitates to call it "original" or claim ownership of it as her work because it's just there and she does not have to 'work' to create it. We see her own poem "The Child" included in the collection as well as a poem by Bhai Vir Singh and a Shabad. Similarly with the stories she does not claim to be the 'author' because after all the stories are not her original creations - she is merely retelling what exists in the Janam Sakhis and in common lore.

What made her write this book? Inni says she was dissatisfied with the materials available to her to teach children so she decided to fill the gap and write it herself. Every detail of this handsomely produced book has her signature on it. She had a certain vision of the kind of book she wanted and then went about creating it. She says, "I have treated every page in the book as a jewel." She wanted a classic, a handsome volume on fine paper with illustrations that carried a certain gravitas. It would be a book that children would cherish, handle with care and proudly take to class for 'share and tell' sessions. She wanted the illustrations to be realistic but not real and so settled on a calendar style art with vibrant colours and rich in details of nature, birds, animals, foods and clothes – and the sixty illustrations were ably executed by the Chandigarh based artist Pradeep Singh.

Skilled storytelling and illustrations are what attract a child to a book. Inni draws the reader, both young and old, in with a clear, limpid and compelling style. Her easy, conversational approach and nonjudgmental or moralizing tone allows the imagination to roam and to journey with the guru.

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