

APRil 14, 1979

Wahe Guru ji ka Khalsa
Wahe Guru ji ki Fateh

Sadh Sangat ji,

I have been asked on this joyful occassion to speak briefly for the benefit of our English-speaking guests on the meaning and significance of the Sikh marriage ceremony. As I myself am still a student of Sikh religion and culture, my own knowledge is far from complete. However, if you will forgive my limitations, I will happily share my knowledge with you.

By coming together today in this impressive gurdwara (or Sikh temple) to gather in front of the Sikh Holy Book, the Siri Guru Granth Sahib, we join together to form the sadh sangat, the "assembly of Saints" -- witnesses to this Sikh ceremony of marriage, the Anand Karaj.

In its essential form, this marriage ceremony has been practiced for some 400 years among the Sikhs since the time of the 3rd Sikh guru, Guru Amar Das. The four ^{verses of} marriage hymn, the Lavan, were added at the time of Guru Ram Das, the 4th guru, who composed them on the occassion of his daughter's marriage. In India, this form of marriage was legalized with the passage of the Anand Marriage Act of 1909. Subsequently it has been accepted as a legal form of marriage in Canada as well.

For want of time, I shall skip over an account of the processes of betrothal and family gatherings which have preceeded this happy event itself. Instead, I will attempt to explain the wedding ceremony which we have witnessed this morning.

First of all, it is important to recognize that the Sikh Holy Book, the Guru Granth Sahib, is not simply a collection of the sacred Sikh writings but is considered the living Sikh Guru (or teacher).

Thus the respect accorded it (for example, when we bow before it or when the granthi ^{FLYS WHISK OVER THE SHRI GURU GRANTH SAHIB} uses his whisk to keep the flies away) is not a form of worship of the Granth Sahib itself (for in the Sikh religion it is God alone who is worshipped); rather, it is a show of respect for the Supreme religious teacher. Since, in fact, the marriage ceremony need not take place in a gurdwara and since any good Sikh can properly officiate, it is the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib rather than the particular building or the particular religious official which is central to the ceremony. It is from the Guru Granth Sahib that the couple receives its advise, and it is by bowing before the Guru Granth Sahib that the couple makes their public commitment to this marriage.

Having made that necessary aside, let me return to the ceremony itself:

Following the singing of the Asa di Var, the Guru's morning hymn, and other hymns appropriate to the occasion, the groom takes his seat before the Granth Sahib. The bride next comes and takes her place to the groom's left. The officiant, having ascertained that both parties are Sikhs and that the couple have unequivocally agreed to be married, asks the couple and their parents to stand while the rest of the congregation remains seated. He then invokes God's blessing on the proposed marriage and asks God's grace for the union of the couple. Since Sikh marriages unite families as well as individuals, the consent of the parents as well as that of the bride and groom is publically sought. The consent having been duly given, all are seated. A short hymn follows which offers these words of general advice:

Before undertaking anything, seek the grace of God. By the grace of the True Guru, who in the company of saints expounds the truth, success is attained. It is with the True Guru that we taste the ambrosia. O Thou destroyer of fear and ^{em}bodiment of mercy, bestow Thy grace on Thy servant. Nanak says, by praising God, we apprehend the infinite.

This hymn having been recited, the officiant addresses the congregation, and particularly the couple, explaining the significance of Sikh marriage. In Sikhism, marriage is conceived of as not simply a social or civil contract, but as the fusion of two souls into one. Unlike Western marriages where love between the partners is considered the necessary prerequisite for marriage, Sikh marriages present love as the ideal towards which the married couple grows. In their marriage, the partners are urged to strive towards a perfect and happy union on all planes of life. And the point is stressed that the perfect marriage is analogous to the ultimate goal of Sikh piety: The union of God and Man.

Here follow a succession of hymns which offer advice to the couple:

The bride should know no other man except her husband, so the Guru ordains. She alone is of a good family, she alone shines with light who is adorned with the love of her husband. There is only one way to the heart of the beloved, to be humble and true to do his bidding. Only thus is true union attained. They are not man and wife who have physical contact only. Only they are truly wedded who have one spirit in two bodies.

Ask the happy one by what ways they have won the beloved. They will answer, by sweetness of speech and the beauty of contentment. A loaf of dry bread and a bed of bare earth is full of happiness in the company of the beloved. Let humility be the word, contentment the offering, the tongue the mint of sweet speech. Adopt these habits dear sister, then you have him in your power.

Another person's property, another man's wife, talking ill of another, these are poisons. The touch of another man's wife is like a poisonous snake.

After this lecture on marriage and the singing of the hymns, the officiant asks the bride and groom to signify their assent to the marriage by bowing before the Guru Granth Sahib. When they are

once again seated, (the bride's father comes forward to place a garland of flowers on the Guru Granth Sahib. He then garlands his daughter and the groom and places one end of a muslin scarf in the groom's hand, passing it over the groom's shoulder and placing it in the bride's hand. Thus joined, the bride and groom take their vows, and the following hymn is sung:

Praise and blame, I forsake both. I seize the edge of your garment. All else I let pass. All relationships I have found false. I cling to Thee, O my Lord.

The officiant now opens the Guru Granth Sahib to the Lavan of Guru Ram Das. The first verse is read by the officiant and then is sung by the musicians as the couple circumambulate the Granth Sahib in a clockwise direction with the groom leading. ^{and the bride escorted by her male relatives} When the couple return to the front of the Granth Sahib, they bow and take their respective seats. The process is repeated for the remaining three verses of the Lavan. During the last verse, the congregation often throws flowers and petals on the pair as a sign of happiness and by way of congratulation.

The four verses of the Lavan hymn have a dual message: they describe the progression of marital love between husband and wife, and at the same time, the love and longing of the human soul for God.

The first verse is an affirmation that the married life of a householder rather than the single life of an ascetic or hermit is the proper one for a Sikh. In addition, it emphasizes that liberation can be achieved through knowledge of God as set out in the Guru's teachings. The first verse translates as follows:

By the first circling the Guru has shown the duties of the householder life. Sing the bani (instead of the Vedas) and hold fast to the faith which they reveal so that God may free you from evil inclinations. Hold fast to righteousness and contemplate the name of God. Fix the smirti in your

mind, they too contain God's word. Devote yourself to the true Guru and all evil will depart. Those minds are blessed indeed which are filled with the sweetness of his name. To him bliss comes without effort. God's servant, Nanak, proclaims that in the first circling the marriage rite had begun.

In the second verse, God -- the dispeller of fear, the soul of the universe, the all-pervading -- is recognized as capable of reaching and transforming the devotee. The second verse translates as follows:

In the second circling you are to recognize that God has caused you to meet the true Guru. By holding Him in reverent awe and singing his praises, self-centeredness is washed away. I stand in his presence, face to face, with reverence. The Lord God is soul of the universe, there is nothing he does not pervade. He is both within us and outside us, the only one. Songs of rejoicing are heard in the company of saints. The slave, Nanak, proclaims that in the second round the divine music is heard.

The third verse describes the soul's detachment from worldly influences, but puts it in the context of the fellowship to be found in the sangat. The third verse translates as follows:

In the third circling longing for the Lord and for detachment from the world wells up. By our good fortune, in the company of the saints, we encounter the Lord. He is found in all his parity through praising him and singing his hymns. Good fortune has brought us into the saint's fellowship in which the story of the ineffable Lord is told. The Lord's love fills our minds and absorbs us, as we have been blessed with a good destiny which is recorded on our foreheads. In the third circling, the slave Nanak says, God's love is awakened in the heart.

The final verse of the Lavan is Guru Ram Das's expression of the ideally analogous relationship between the married couple and between God and his devotee, a state in which two distinct souls have merged as one. The fourth verse translates as follows:

In the fourth round the mind attains divine knowledge, and union with God becomes complete. Through the Guru's grace this blissful state is attained. The sweetness of the beloved pervades our souls and bodies. The Lord is dear to me and I am pleasing to him. Day and night my mind is fixed on him. By exalting the Lord I have attained him, my heart's desire. The beloved has completed the union. The bride's mind has blossomed with the Lord's name. The Lord is united with his holy bride. Says the slave Nanak, in the fourth circling I have become one with the eternal Lord.

The ceremony concludes with the customary singing of the first five and the last stanza of the Anand followed by the Sikh prayer, the Ardas, in which the entire congregation joins. The Guru's council is taken by opening the Guru Granth Sahib at random for the reading of a verse. The congregation then partakes of the sacred food, the Karah Prashad, and the ceremony is concluded.

I thank you for your patience in listening to this brief account of the marriage ceremony. I hope that what I have presented has allowed you to better appreciate and share in today's most sacred and joyous occasion.

Wahe Guru ji ka Khalsa
Wahe Guru ji ki Fateh

The Khalsa owes allegiance to God
Sovereignty belongs to God alone