

NAGAR KIRTEN AND SIKHI

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Nagar Kirten (literally: neighbourhood *kirten*) has over the past few decades become standard fare for *Gurpurabs*. As more and more *gurdwaras* rush to jump on the bandwagon of taking the *Guru Granth Sahib* (and accompanying *kirtaneas*) on a display ride on the streets of their townships, and as more and more *sangats* compete to make their processions larger, longer, grander, and more entertaining, it may be worth weighing this concept from the point of view of *Gurmat* and *Gurbanee*. What are we trying to achieve? What, if any are the tangible benefits of the investment of time, money and energy into this moving exhibition of our Guru, the broadcasting of *kirten* onto the streets of the city's commercial districts, and the display of our accompanying *sangat* at popular/tourist designated places? Is this "parchar" in form only and devoid of substance? And most important, what, if any is the spiritual basis of this "kirten on wheels" practice? Have Sikh leaders in general and *gurdwara parbhandaks* in particular become so debased in *Gurmat* that it does not matter anymore so long as they latch on to the latest trend, satisfy the entertainment needs of their *sangats*, and contribute to their local council's hunger to create events for their tourists?

This article attempts to discuss the above questions and related issues.

THE TREND. There is no doubt that *Nagar Kirtens* are in fashion. They take place all over Europe, North America and Asia. What started off as annual *Vesakhi* affairs have spilled over into just about any *Gurpurab*. But that is not the only metamorphosis. While the front portion of the procession may have some resemblance of it being a Sikhi related function (*panj pyares*, *Guru Granth Sahib* and *kirtenias*), the real action is elsewhere – in the gaudy floats, the blaring music, the bhangra dances, the *gatka* performances and everything related that makes the whole affair into a thoroughbred social event. *Kirten* and *gurbani* are no longer the attraction of these events. Whether a *Nagar Kirten* of a particular community is *gurmat* related or has become a full blown social *mela* depends very much on whether the event is in its infant stage (meaning the local *sangat* just got latched on) or has matured over the years (meaning the organizers have steadily increased its entertainment content). It further depends on how much

competition exists from neighboring gurdwaras. In other words, how far down the slippery slope of the above metamorphoses a particular *Nagar Kirten* situation is located depends very much on how many years the *Nagar Kirten* has been organized. The fact remains that the journey from a *gurbani* and *kirten* related event to a full blown *Mauj Mela* is not only certain and definite, it is getting shorter and faster.

EXPLAINING THE TREND. Three explanations can be advanced to explain this trend towards *Nagar Kirtens*. The first is global and has its roots in the Inter-faith movement and the catastrophic 9/11 incident. The movement and the event do not have anything in common. Yet the underlying philosophy of the Inter-faith – the need for faiths to understand *other* faiths – has been hijacked by the core message of 9/11 which is that there is a need to educate *others* about our faith – even if forcefully. The Inter-faith movement has long held the view that no dialogue can take place without cross-faith understanding. A good deal of resources of those involved in this movement has thus been devoted towards acquiring a genuine and deeper understanding of all faiths. Inter-faith activities typically involve seminars, talks, symposiums, prayers, discussions, written papers and dialogue. This is of course something that ought to be lauded.

The events of 9/11 - because they were deemed (wrongly) to be perpetrated by the followers of one faith against another, seemingly justify the need for forced cross-faith education. The blame game and negative imaging of Islam and Muslims that came in the aftermath created a demand in the Muslim world of the need to “educate” others about the true nature of Islam. The underlying notion of this demand was that the non Islamic world was by and large ignorant about Islam, held on to stereotypes and was anti-Islam. All these hence needed correcting and this correcting was to be done vociferously and volubly if necessary.

Because *Kesadhari* turbaned Sikhs – mistaken for Osama / Taliban types - became victims of the aftermath of 9/11, a similar demand came to reside in the Sikh psyche: we have to educate non-Sikhs about our faith, our beliefs etc. Sikhs were being murdered, singled out for airport checks, ordered off airplanes and trains and discriminated in their workplaces. Such lack of understanding about Sikhs needed correcting. Our leaders and gurdwara *parbhandaks* took up this clarion call without blinking an eyelid. That we have to take Sikhi to everyone out there became the mantra of Sikh leaders.

A large number of Sikhs, *parbhandaks*, organizers and supporters of the *Nagar Kirten* "movement" base their justification for the need of this event on this principle. "We need to go out there, to show others, to educate others about what we are, who we are, what we do etc. We need to get rid of stereotypes and ignorance about Sikhs. How will the others know about our solemn practices, our great Guru Granth Sahib, our fantastic *Kirten* and our superb culture if we kept it confined to within our Gurdwaras? We are thus doing the Sikhs and the *panth* a great service."

There are core difference between the objectives of the Interfaith advocates and the demands of the post 9/11 period. The first is that the Interfaith movement stresses voluntarily *acquiring* an understanding of other faiths, but the post 9/11 demand wants to *force* its understanding on others. The former can only be done with genuine desire, while the latter is done with a sort of vengeance: we will bring it to you whether you like it or not. It does not matter if the non-Sikhs want to know about us or not - just take our thing to them became the underlying philosophy of the *Nagar Kirten*-ites. The Interfaith movement invites others to come together to understand each other, while the post 9/11 demand wants to compel others to be witness to its own beliefs and practices (here comes our float, our procession is within our right to assemble, move aside lest you get crushed!). The second difference is that the Interfaith movement allows for gradual, steady and genuine learning. Their events take place over a 365 day period. It is thus incremental – one learns more and more as one goes along. The post 9/11 demand wants to take its culture and beliefs to others in a one big bang way – once /twice a year loud and long *dhmaka* type procession (God have mercy if anyone stood in the way). The third difference is that the Interfaith objective is humble and thus genuine (come, lets share your beliefs and mine). The post 9/11 demand is an arrogant one, and thus dubious (can you see how good/great my beliefs are!).

The questions one thus has for these *Nagar Kirten* die-hards are as follows: Can anyone (sikh and non sikh included) be "educated" about the Guru Granth Sahib, *Kirten*, *panj pyare*, Sikh religion or culture etc through a procession? Can stereotypes and ignorance be removed through processions? Is it not the case that the method chosen (processions) was wrong, even if the questions, issues and concerns were right? What about the wrong messages that get sent out – both to Sikhs and non Sikhs about wastages and a seemingly unending desire amongst Sikhs to undertake a one-way street type of forced "education" approach? What sort of *panthic* service is achieved by putting great amounts of time, energy, money and attention into such dubious and unproductive ritual –

which is an unimaginative copy of the Hindu processions of their *devi-devtas*? In fact, the single most prevalent message that comes across to non-Sikhs about the *Nagar Kirten* may simply be that this is the Sikh version of the Hindu deity procession. I am reminded of someone who described the *Nagar Kirten* he had witnessed: *Eh Sikhian dee devi nikel rahee hai !*

But a more important question is this. Have our *parbhandaks* educated them selves and their *sangats* so thoroughly through *parchar* within their gurdwaras about our *gurpurabs*, *gurbanee*, *gurmat* and *kirten* that they must now educate the others out in the city streets? The truth is that our *sangats* and Sikh youngsters especially are in dire need of the most basic of *gurbanee/gurmat* knowledge and on the verge of declaring their faith is outdated and irrelevant to their lives. One major reason for this is that our gurdwaras and their *parbhandaks* have failed us wretchedly. The major reason for this miserable failure is that the *parchar* **within** our gurdwaras has been reduced to piteously boring repetition of unbelievable tales called “sakhis.”

The second explanation for this trend of *Nagar Kirtens* in grand ways rests on the notion that form is easier than substance. It is easier to be seen doing something, rather than doing what is really required which happens to be difficult. Teaching our youngsters and *sangats* how to read the 1430 pages of the GGS, to understand its core messages and to bring its spiritual meaning into our daily lives is a tough exercise. Putting the GGS on a two ton truck lit by 1430 bulbs and driving it through the streets is easy. Decorate it with 16 flags – each representing one Bhagat of the GGS. Inspiring our *sangats*, our youths and even non Sikhs to learn *kirten*, to appreciate the intricate *rag* and *taal* system of *gurbani* classical music and to mesmerize their souls through the stirrings of the spiritually elevating mix of *shabad* and *raag* is very difficult. Hiring a group of *ragees*, loading them onto a 2 ton truck complete with a powerful sound system and parading them around town is the easy part. No one even has to listen to them. Organizing Punjabi and *gurmukhi* classes, *gurmat* sessions, running kindergartens and libraries in gurdwaras, etc – the substance of gurdawara *sewa* and leadership is difficult and *parbhandaks* always have a ready laundry list of reasons - ranging from not enough of qualified trainers and poor response from the *sangat* – as to why this cannot be done and will not ever be done. But organizing the *Nagar Kirten* requires no ability that is worth discussing. Everyone is qualified to run it (because no qualifications are required) and there is overwhelming response from the *sangat* (who does not want to have fun?). The result is an exercise in deception. We deceive ourselves into believing that effective *parchar* is being done through our *Nagar Kirten* sham. We deceive

ourselves that our *parchar* amongst Sikhs is so complete that we have taken it to “others.” We deceive ourselves that we are doing the *panth* a service. Indeed it may be nothing more than a mockery. We deceive ourselves that we are celebrating a *gurpurab* when in reality we are celebrating our own inadequacies. We deceive ourselves that the Guru’s blessings are with us in this elaborate *mela*, when the only blessing we have is the pat we give ourselves on our own backs for a great *Nagar Kirten*. What can possibly qualify for a bigger fraud?

The third explanation lies in band waggoning. The Punjabi version is *bhed chaal* (literally sheep follower-ship, or sheep being led by sheep) No gurdwara wants to miss being on the wagon. No *parbhandak* wants to be left out. No one wants to be left behind. No one wants to be told that last year’s *Nagar Kirten* was better, or that the one organized by the other gurdwara down the street was bigger, or that the one organized by the just voted out *parbhandak* committee was more entertaining. Small and remote gurdwaras participate in *Nagar Kirtens* of bigger neighboring gurdwaras by sending floats or teams with a view of sheepishly organizing their own when the next *gurpurab* comes along. There is such a thing as *Nagar Kirten* internships.

THE BENEFITS. There is no denying that *Nagar Kirtens* bring people (not necessarily *sangats*) together, create joyous occasions, and raise awareness of the existence of Sikhs within a local community. It gives those participating a good feeling especially when non-Sikhs capture the procession on film or camera. The participants get a sense of pride. It is not everyday that policemen stop traffic to give priority to us. The organizers feel good when newspapers and televisions report the procession. It is nice to see our names in print, hear our voices on television and our activities reported.

But the reality is that none of these benefits are long term or permanent in nature. They bring little or no collective good. The benefits are miniscule compared to the investments of time, energy and money – all of which are limited for a community as small as ours. More importantly, none of these benefits tie-in to the objectives of *kirten*, the Guru Granth Sahib and *Gurbanee*. If Sikhs in a local community need to depend on *Nagar Kirten* to raise awareness of their existence, then something is not right about these Sikhs. Such awareness would be more meaningful if achieved by regular and benevolent contribution to the community. Open a free medical clinic in the local gurdwara and get noticed in a meaningful and permanent sort of way. And newspapers and television report just about anything out of the ordinary. Amongst the first things a

journalism student is taught is that while a dog biting a man is not news, it is indeed newsworthy if a man bites a dog. Are *Nagar Kirtens* in the news for the good they bring or for their notoriety to cause traffic chaos? If publicity is desired, then *parbhandaks* should strive to get into the news by contributing to worthy causes, by reaching the heights of *sewa* as taught by Guru Amardas ji or by getting their gurdwaras involved in local community activities in some extraordinary manner. That would be a real service to the *panth*. Run a community kitchen and feed the homeless, adopt an orphanage, sponsor a old folks home patient, visit the local nursing home regularly – the list is long. The gurdwara will get into the news and there will be no reason to be embarrassed about it.

THE COST. The large amounts of money, time and energy spent on *Nagar Kirtens* cannot be justified given the rather intangible benefits as described above. Being a small community with extremely limited resources, there is a need to be extremely selective in the choice of our activities. *Nagar Kirten* is not a smart choice by any measure.

NAGAR KIRTEN IS BECOMING BIG BUSINESS. There are three reasons why *Nagar Kirten* is set to become a permanent (albeit a generally useless) feature of the Sikh way of life. Two of these – our penchant for form over substance and *bhed chaal* mentality - have been described above. The third reason has to do with the “commercialization” of this event. Stalls selling Bollywood movies, CDs and posters of actors and actresses are fast becoming a part of the *Nagar Kirten*. Business people go where the crowds are. Very soon *Nagar Kirtens* will be fully sponsored by these business groups. They will provide all that is necessary – even talk to local officials on behalf of gurdwara *parbhandaks* to decide on routes and times for the procession. The *parbhandaks* will be pleased because it will be less work for them. In return these business people will ask for advertising and publicity rights – effectively turning the *Nagar Kirten* into a large and moving advertising screen for these business people. The GGS and *Kirtenias* will then be relegated to some remote corner of the procession.

WHAT ABOUT THE HONOUR OF THE GURU? This is a question that is uppermost in the minds of Sikhs who are concerned about the right and wrong of *Nagar Kirten*. Is there honor in parading the Guru in the streets? What is the *Maryada* of **taking** the Guru out on to places where the sanctity is always in doubt? What about disrespect, disregard or plain contempt amongst viewers who chose to light up a cigarette, take a sip from a beer can, spit or blow his/her nose or simply turn his/her back as the Guru passes by? What about the natural

elements. During one recent *Nagar Kirten* it rained and the canopies above the Guru Granth Sahib in one truck and over the *Ragees* in the other got filled with water. The one over the *Ragees* burst, showering the occupants and destroying their instruments while the one over the Guru nearly burst, inspiring this article. Who will be held responsible, if not the entire Sikh community for such gross contempt even if caused by oversight?

What exactly is served by taking the Guru on this unmanageable journey to nowhere? What is the objective? What is the benefit? What do we want to achieve? Has anyone come to know that there are 1430 pages or 48 *raags* in the GGS as a result of witnessing a *Nagar Kirten*. Or that the language of the GGS is such and such, or that so many Gurus and so many *Bhagats* have written it. Or that *xyz* is **one** of the messages of the 5,867 *shabads* therein. Or even that there is a book underneath all that paraphernalia – because all the crowds get to see is the *rumalas* and other paraphernalia? That too if they can take their eyes off the *gatka* display and look at the *rumala* and *palkee*.

If a *Nagar Kirten* must be held at all costs – can the Guru be left to reign with pride and dignity intact in the gurdwara? Can the Guru be left out of this raucous *mela*, this ego feeding event, and this commercialized and adulterated affair called *Nagar Kirten*. Can we keep the Guru out of our self aggrandizing and self gratifying episode that is on fast track to get even more disrespectful? Or are we as participating *sangats* **all** prepared to share the blame, carry the burden and pay the price for the disrespect and disregard of our Guru?

WHAT ABOUT THE MARYADA OF KIRTEN? What does *gurmaryada* say about the sanctity of *kirten*? What about the inviolability, the purity and the sacredness of the environment in which *kirten* is to be recited and listened to? Are the messages of *Gurbani* (being sung as *kirten*) suitable for loudspeaker blaring on the streets where people are generally expected to shout, scream, yell and shriek while attempting to listen to this *kirten*? How exactly does one enjoy the benefits of *kirten* except in an environment of silence, serenity, tranquility and quietude that we aspire to have in our gurdwaras or homes whenever *kirten* is sung?

Gurbani says: *Raaj Leela Teray Naam Banaee, Jog Baneya Tera Keertan Gayee* (GGGS Page 385) Meaning Your *Kirten* creates a beautiful situation and that unites me with You. Is the *Nagar Kirten* atmosphere of disarray conducive for such unity? Gurbani further says *Kalyug Meh Keertan Pardhaana, Gurmukh Japeey Laye Dhiyana* (GGGS Page 1075) Meaning: In present times, *Keertan* is the primary

method of spirituality, *Gurmukhs* therefore sing with it in complete focus. How would one focus in the frenzy of a *Nagar Kirten*? Elsewhere Gurbani says: *Jagana Jagan Nika, Har Kirten Meh Jagna* (GGS Page 1018) Being awake/aware/conscious is generally good, but the best is to be awake during Kirten. There is another verse regarding the manner of doing Kirten on page 1157 of GGS : *Achinto He Mun Keertan Meetha, Achinto He Prabh Ghat Ghat Deetha*. Meaning Kirten is sweet when the mind is free of anxiety. It is in such anxious-free state that one sees God in everyone. These sprinkling of verses talk about the atmosphere, the state of mind and the environment that must exist for *Kirten* to be considered *Kirten*.

Or have we equated *kirten* to folk songs or just about any other pop music that can be blared anywhere, to anyone in any sort of condition. People can eat corn, talk on the cell phone, shout across the street, and smoke a pipe or even pot while listening to folk songs from a passing float in a procession. But are we prepared to let this happen to Guru Nanak's spiritual gems?

ARE WE JUST COPY CATS ? The Hindu gods and goddesses are depicted in statue form. A statue can only be at one place at any one time. So the *darshan* of the deity is normally done by people coming directly face to face with the statue. One way of maximizing this *darshan* is to occasionally take the statue to the people (who are believers). So the deity is loaded on a beautifully decorated chariot and taken to the people. These believers wait eagerly outside their houses for the chariot to come, pay obeisance one after another and make offerings. Within such a context there is great benefit in taking the statue to the people.

The Guru Granth Sahib is the embodiment of the *shabad* Guru. This Guru can be in multiple places at any given time. He is where the *shabad* resides – which is in the hearts and minds of believers. There is no concept of physical *darshan* of the Guru Granth Sahib – the book structure, the paper or the *rumala* and *palki*. These are mainly containers for the *shabad* to reside – just like a thumb drive that contains a digitized copy. So this taking of the Guru for a round of *darshan* for the people is out of context in Sikhi. But to whom is the Guru being taken to for *darshan*? Save for some thinking Sikhs who will not take part in the charade, almost all the Sikhs in the community are already in the procession. The *Nagar Kirten* does not go on a route which is residential but commercial and tourist connected. Are we expecting these non Sikhs to do a *darshan* of the *shabad*? How many are expected to know there is a book underneath those glittering *rumalas*, let alone understand what a *shabad* is all about.

In this sense then, *Nagar Kirten* is a third rate copy of a ritual that belongs to people of another faith. This copying is dull and unimaginative to the core. We substituted everything of theirs with our physical things – the GGS replaces the deity, our *ragees* replace their high priests who ride the chariot with the statue and our *sangats* with their hard core believers who walk the entire path of the chariot. We could not even come up with an original name for this plagiarism! If theirs is a chariot, ours is plainly a charade.

Jab Yeg Gahe Bipran Kee Reet, Mein Na Karun En Kee Parteet. When my Sikhs get imbibed in Brahmanical ways and rituals, I would withhold my trust and faith in them – Guru Gobind Singh.

ABOUT BEING A NUISANCE. As *Nagar Kirtens* get bigger, longer, more crowded, more commercialized and more frequent they will increasingly become a nuisance for the local communities. Traffic comes to a standstill, people's schedules get disrupted, homes and businesses get blocked and inevitably the local communities will ask their leaders to speak up against it. The Indian Express of March 8 2008 has this report in its Chandigarh edition: *Nagar Kirten leaves behind a trail of traffic chaos*. What else can a parade of 750 vehicles, 32 horses and 11 camels achieve if not utter chaos.¹ After all a colorful crowd looks nice to look at once a year, can be tolerated twice a year, but becomes a nuisance beyond that. Plus our parades being copies, the local communities have to put up with the original *Nagar Kirtens* of the other faith – thus adding to the number of parades and lowering the tolerance. At a recent *Nagar Kirten*, (in Malaysia) while negotiating a rather narrow street, the truck carrying the *ragee jatha* got stuck in the branches of trees lining the neighborhood. There being no other way, a few *naujawans* got together to give the offending trees a trimming that the foliage

¹ Some sentences of this report are reproduced as follows: *Most of the city's busiest routes were choked as the Nagar Kirtan procession progressed on Sunday. Apart from hundreds of devotees, the procession included more than 750 vehicles, 32 horses and 11 camels. The procession is likely to cause traffic chaos on Monday morning in southern parts of Chandigarh and Mohali. Chandigarh and Mohali Police have requested commuters to avoid certain routes. Despite it being a Sunday, there were impossible traffic jams on the roads. There was utter chaos on the roads, particularly in Sector 36 and 37. And with the intersection between Sector 34-35 closed, the procession caused major traffic disruptions in this area. Mohali Police said the road from YPS roundabout to Amb Sahib Gurdwara will remain closed for general traffic from 10 am to 12.30 pm. "We have tied up with the organisers of the rally and instructed them not to disrupt traffic. We have asked them to let emergency vehicles and school buses overtake the procession," said a senior police officer. The Indian Express, Chandigarh dateline March 2, 2008.*

would remember for a lifetime. This action left more than a few neighbors offended. They wanted to know who gave these *naujwans* the right to cut trees planted within the compounds of the people. These people have vowed not to let the parade pass this way again. If it does, they will be waiting. It will be a trimming of a different kind, they pledge. So much for taking the Guru for the “*darshan*” of such people! But why expect non-Sikhs to respect our Guru when we ourselves have chosen to disrespect the Guru by taking Him on a parade to such “ungrateful” people?

IS THERE ANY SUBSTANCE IN THIS SORT OF “PARCHAR” If one does a *google* search on *Nagar Kirten*, one comes up with one web report after another extolling the tremendous success, the huge support, the great impact, and sensational triumphs of each and every parade. One gets the impression that a *Nagar Kirten* gets boring fairly quickly and *parbhandaks* have to add new attractions – in the form of camels, horses, motor cycle outriders, elephants, peacocks etc – every year. Any and every such addition is an achievement! Some *parbhandaks* are already considering inviting stars and other personalities to grace their parades – all in the name of getting their fans into their charade. Some web reports even (mis)quote *Gurbani* verses in their reports either to deceive the *sangat* or to cover up nature’s wrath. One has Guru Amardas ji’s verse “*Jhakhar Jhangee Meeh Varsey, Bhee Gur Dekhan Jae. Samund Sagar Hove Bahu Khara, Gursikh Langh Guru Peh Jayee* (Meaning, come rain, storm, or hailstones, I will go see my Guru. Even though the ocean is vast and salty, a gursikh will cross it to go to his Guru). What connection this verse has with *Nagar Kirten* is beyond me. Unless the web master wishes to suggest that the third Nanak attended *Nagar Kirtens*. As matter of fact, he did attend those of the chariot deity type regularly, but that was before he came to meet with Guru Angad. The other explanation is that it rained cats and dogs on the *Nagar Kirten* day and the above verse is quoted to provide solace to those who turned up to have fun in the rain anyway.

Cast aside the rubble of the tremendous success, impact and triumph that we have heaped in self praise and the question relating to the substantive benefit stands in its place like a sore thumb. Blow away the smoke screen of how many thousand attended, and how many witnessed it, the question of tangible benefits stands like a solitary tree in the vast desert – calling for the attention of those who are concerned.

SO WHAT IS THIS NAGAR KIRTEN REALLY ABOUT? Overall it is about missing the point all together. What exactly is the objective of doing and listening to *Kirten* in *gurmat* ? Is that objective served by doing serene and

peaceful *kirten* in raucous and rowdy entertainment seeking crowds? *Nagar Kirten* is also about finding short cuts and taking the easy ways out of *parchar*. Real and substantive *parchar* required innovative solutions, hard work, dedication, and selfless commitment both from the *parbahandaks* and the *sangat*. *Nagar Kirtens* are easy to organize, and all *sangats* got to do is simply attend, walk along and enjoy the ride. This is so much easier than having to sit in a gurdwara for two hours listening to *kirten*, *katha* and recitation of *paath*. *Nagar Kirten* is also about doing business. There is a ready clientele for people who want to sell all sorts of stuff. *Nagar Kirten* is about having a real big *mela*. It is further a reflection of our laziness in the spiritual and leadership realms. It is also about form over substance. *Nagar Kirten* is further about letting the world see some of our ugliness. We don't care if the traffic is chaotic. We could not care if an ambulance or fire engine does not get to its destination because of our chaos. *Nagar Kirten* shows a haughty and arrogant side of Sikhs – when it is our time and place, we are Kings in an inconsiderate sort of way (read the Indian Express report above to get a feel of such puffed up conceit of ours). As Kings for that one day, we park anywhere, throw rubbish everywhere, act loud, walk on anybody's lawn and disregard all rules. Finally *Nagar Kirten* is about making merry at the expense of the honor & dignity of the Guru, *Kirten* and the *Nagar*.

WHAT IS IT NOT ABOUT? *Nagar Kirten* is certainly not about *Kirten*. *Kirten* is to be done, listened and enjoyed within the serenity, dignity and solace of a *diwan*, a *gurdwara*, home or any other place with such qualities. *Nagar Kirten* can only be classified as *Kirten* if the definition of *Kirten* is adulterated to fit the “farmer's market” or *sabjee-mandee* like atmosphere commonly found in the procession. If *Kirten* can indeed be done in the midst of jostling crowds mostly engaged in loud conversation, blaring horns of motorists upset over the traffic jams created, sirens of police cars sent to control the crowds and traffic, and the elements of nature (rain, smog, etc) – then *Nagar Kirten* in this skewed sort of way can be counted as *Kirten*. But this is not the *Kirten* of the GGS and would not be the sort of *Kirten* any Sikh would want.

Nagar Kirten is not about the *Nagar* either. *Nagar* translates as village, *pind* or community. By definition a *nagar* has to be residential, centered on homes or areas around the homes of believers, who for some reason or other cannot come to the deity, so the deity has to be brought to them. They wait eagerly for the arrival of the deity and make way for it voluntarily. They don't complain about traffic chaos and other disturbances. They don't have to wait for others to trim their trees to make way for their chariot. This is because they are believers.

Our *Nagar Kirten* takes to the streets passing commercial areas, places frequented by tourists or other parade grounds. The local authorities, police, government etc support the *Nagar Kirten* (even if reluctantly) because of its tourism potential, because it adds color and life to the city/county/town or simply because to turn down the request would invite allegations of discrimination against Sikhs. Similarly the people who turn up to see the parade are looking at it from an entertainment point of view. Sure enough our *Nagar Kirten* folk never fail to entertain. *Panj pyare* with swords unsheathed, colorful brightly lit *palkis*, *ragees* singing ballads, *gatka* performers, *sangats* dressed in traditional garb and in some cases *bhangra* dancers are, from the point of view of non-sikhs providing fairly good entertainment. They have nothing to complain about because it is free. But the number who sees it as a nuisance is on the rise.

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT IT. Sikhs and gurdwara *parbhandaks* have a propensity for *bhed chaal* particularly when it comes to ritualistic and un-*gurmat* practices. No question about it. Getting our gurdwaras, leaders and *sangats* as a whole to stop this *baykaar* and *bipran kee reet* rooted practice will prove to be a daunting task. No question about that too.

Those looking for guidance from the Akaal Takhat or other historical gurdwaras in India will be equally disappointed. The *parbhandaks* of these places do not have a genetic make up that is different from our local *parbhandaks*. One of the largest *Nagar Kirtens* in the world is undertaken at Nanakana Sahib during *Nirankari Gurpurab* under the auspices of SGPC. There are no Sikhs in this area save for a handful of SGPC *sewadars* who stay within the Nankana premises to keep the *Gurudham* open. Tens of thousands of Sikhs come from Europe, America and Asia to take the Guru and groups of *Ragees* on parade to the neighboring Muslim communities. The Pakistani villagers make good money selling food, drinks, accommodation and other stuff to this money laden Sikhs. Some of them spin tales of Guru Nanak having given their ancestors all sorts of artifacts during the *Nagar Kirten* beginning 1469 and charge the gullible modern day *Nagar Kirtens* money to do a *darshan* of these artifacts. These artifacts are as fake as the *Nagar Kirten* tales of Guru Nanak, and decades of *Nagar Kirten* has not created a single Sikh out there in the *Nagars* of Nanakana, but the Sikhs never fail to pat themselves for a *Nagar Kirten* well done.

Nevertheless, realization if it does happen, and change if it eventually comes, will emanate from individual and thinking Sikhs to whom the honor and dignity of the Guru, the sanctity and purity of *Kirten*, the regard and sacredness of our spiritual ways and the substance of *Sikhi parchar* are of paramount

importance. It will come from blessed Sikhs who will stand up and boldly say no to the senseless parading of our holy Guru in the streets of downtown, to the equally futile performance of our divine *kirten* to entertainment seeking crowds, and to irrational expenditure of time money and energy to undertake an event which has no basis in *gurmat* and *gurmaryada*. Every thinking Sikh understands that we need to invest in our youth and future generations and that such investment must be in the form of substantive, real and meaningful *parchar*. *Gurpurabs* are opportunities for the imparting of such education (which must take place 365 days), not pretexts to waste money on futile parades and ego feeding processions. Our gurdwaras and *parbhandaks* have failed miserably and continue to fail us desolately in this regard. If we cannot stop this down slide, at the very least, we must not be part of it. End.

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