



SADHU SUNDAR SINGH – HIS CONTRIBUTION TO INDIAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929) was a Christocentric Indian Christian Mystic, known for his efforts to Indianize Christianity and whose thoughts on Christ, Bible, Spirituality, Christianity etc, are very original. Born in Sikh religion, by the age of sixteen he read Bhagavadgita and memorised Granth, Koran and several Upanishads. He hated Christianity so much, that he tore up and burnt the bible at this teen age. But next year, in a powerful vision he saw Jesus and was converted to Christianity. At the age of Seventeen, he set out on his journey as a new Christian, penniless, except with a New Testament copy, wearing a saffron turban and the saffron robe of a sadhu, as an ascetic devoted to spiritual practice, to preach the Gospel and about Jesus. Due to the Sadhu's uncanny physical resemblance to the Incarnate Jesus, similarities to the life and ministry of Apostle Paul, he was considered as a Biblical figure coming alive. He travelled extensively in India and around 24 countries in his missionary work. His thoughts on Prayer, Visions, Bible, and Heaven on Earth etc were so strong and original, that it even surprised most of the western theologians. His entire theology is based on his personal and spiritual experiences (Anubhava) with Lord Jesus. His thoughts about the primacy of Prayer in a Christian's life are compared with that of other great European Christian mystics like St. Augustine, St Francis of Assisi, and St. Thomas a Kempis. Many of his theological thoughts are similar to that of Luther, even though he never met him nor read about him, but he also had some differences too. In his various severe sufferings that he faced in his efforts to preach the Gospel, even when he was persecuted, left to dead, imprisoned in Ilom, dumped in a dark well in Rasar, among skeletons and bones, he said Christ's presence has turned his prison or hell into a heaven of blessing. In him Christianity and Hinduism meet, and the Christian is like a flower which blossoms on an Indian stem. He says non-Christians, who did not get an opportunity or left an opportunity to accept Jesus, will get another opportunity afterlife to have their false and partial views of truth corrected. Even though he says all other religions are inadequate and only through Jesus one can get salvation, in his fulfilment approach, he says there is dim measure of "light of the truth" among the followers of different religions and provides for "continuity" in fulfilment and that they will eventually get full knowledge of true God, the "True Reality". Sundar Singh is thoroughly convinced, that Christianity can enter Indian hearts and souls if offered in Indian form. He had done more than any man in the first half of the twentieth century to establish that "Jesus belongs to India" and Christianity is not foreign.

KEYWORDS : Visions, Ecstasy, Heaven on Earth, Bhakti Spirituality, Fulfilment

1. INTRODUCTION:

Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929) was an Indian Christian mystic, known for his efforts to Indianize Christianity and whose thoughts on Christ, Prayer, Bible, Spirituality, Christianity etc, are very original. As a young Punjabi Sikh boy in teens, he was a restless soul, until he found the Christ in himself. By the age of seven he memorised the Bhagavat Gita. By sixteen he had finished reading the Granth (Religious scripture for Sikhs), the Koran and several Upanishads. As a student in a Presbyterian Christian Mission School, he vehemently rejected Christianity and it was there that he burnt his Bible in a protest against Christianity. Unexpectedly, he experienced a conversion the following year, when in his restless hunger for peace of soul (Saftti), one night he thought to commit suicide, when he had an extraordinary spiritual vision in which Jesus Christ has appeared to him. To his complete wonder and disbelief, he had a vision of Jesus, shining in his beauty and questioned him, "why are you prosecuting me" and also ordered him to obedience and Sadhu instantly got peace of mind.

"Go forth and bear witness of me" was the command he received from Jesus after his conversion. During 1906, he set out on his journey as a new Christian, wearing a saffron turban and the saffron robe of a sadhu, as an ascetic devoted to spiritual practice. He was a homeless wanderer in search of spiritual truth. He took the command given in Mat 10:9 literally and travelled penniless, except a New Testament in hand. He carried forward his devotion for religious life, which he learnt from his mother, to his Christian experience and life. He extensively travelled on the most dangerous, mountainous terrain of the Himalayas particularly Tibet called the "dark closed land" every year, on bare feet. Hence was known as the Apostle with bleeding feet. He never begged, he depended upon alms given by kind hearted people. Later he extensively travelled within North India, South India, and nearly 24 countries of the world covering both the East and the West, on his missionary work. There are several striking similarities and differences between the theological thought process of Sadhu and Luther, even though Sadhu never met Luther or heard of him.

2. Biblical Figure walking alive: Mrs Parker and his Biographer writes that where ever he went, we hear people saying, "How like he is to Christ" Jean Fluery a missionary says "The man is a living sermon. I have never met anyone who helps you to see Christ as he does". Many people were noted to have mentioned during his world tour that a Biblical Figure has come alive in him and is living before their eyes. In his fervent hatred to Christianity and Christ before he met Christ, in his wonderful conversion by way of a powerful vision of Christ, and his

extensive ministry without caring for his life for preaching about true God, in his extensive travels through land and sea to bear witness to the grace and power of Jesus, he is also compared to Paul, the Apostle to Gentiles. Sadhu has also gone through several severe sufferings like Paul had mentioned about himself in 2 Cor 11:23-28.

3. Spiritual Thoughts

a) Prayer: Sadhu Sundar Singh gives very high priority to Prayer for a true Christian Life, so much so that the Western Theologians were surprised at his insistence that Prayer has more effect on our Christian lives, than even reading the Bible. He says that Prayer is the "bread of life". He consistently insists on the necessity of Prayer in all his preaching. When his father was ultimately converted to Christianity and expressed interest to know Jesus, Sadhu tells him, if you want to know Christ, read Bible, but if you want to learn to know him personally, then you must pray. The great power he had all through his ecstasies, visions, and in the very strenuous, taxing and wearying life style that he adopted as a homeless wanderer, and in the survival through all those great sufferings that he had to face in his journey to preach the gospel, it has all come from his extensive prayers. While he was on the Himalayas, he was said to have prayed ceaselessly for several days, without any food. It is the source of all his piety and deep love to Christ. Sundar Singh repeatedly insists that prayer is the heart of the religion, and the absoluteness of Christian Life. Sadhu usually compares the necessity of prayer to breathing. Prayer means the inhaling of breath of the Holy Spirit. He says, that most of us are like, as though we are in sleep, who breathe without being conscious of it.

Sadhu emphatically says, Prayer is not asking for worldly gifts or blessings, but asking for the Giver of blessing Himself -- that He may live in our hearts. Only during Prayer, the deep mysteries of the Christian faith becomes clear. He believes that, what cannot be achieved through intellectual labour, and study of the scriptures, can be achieved through the believing prayer. The clarity, the depth and the centrality of prayer to a Christian life that Sadhu emphasises, give him a special place among the world theologians. His thoughts about Prayer are compared with that of other great European Christian mystics like St. Augustine, St Francis of Assisi, and St. Thomas a Kempis.

b) Visions: Sundar Singh' in his book "Visions of the Spiritual World" speaks of his visits to heaven, sees Jesus and his confrontation with angelic spirits. He says that in Kotgarh (1912) he first had a heavenly vision while praying¹. He says he cannot ask for it, but while praying or

in mediation sometimes he passes in to mental prayer, from which he glides into ecstasy.ⁱⁱⁱ Some times as often as eight to ten times in a month, he has these visions. He says these are communion of saints and are biblical as mentioned in Zechariah 3:7-8. For him faith and experience both are very essential for an effective Christian life. The basis of his theology is direct experience of Jesus Christ thus his theology begins from his experience of Christ rather than from any theistic considerations.^{iv} In Ecstasy, in his every vision Christ is the centre of the scene.

St, Paul did not share details of his heavenly experiences. But Sadhu says, that the veil, that normally covers the real world, had been lifted for a few moments with the help of Christ faithful servant to see things, as they really are. He further says, that the unutterable experience of that spiritual communion makes him look forward for the time when he can permanently enter into that bliss. There are usual detractors, who say that he should not have allowed Canon Streeter to publish these personal and heavenly experiences, during his life time.

c) Heaven on Earth: The personal experiences of Sadhu with Christ through his prayers and visions, the joy of the cross, the sufferings in this world he faces, and the peace in his soul that he enjoys in his Christian life, all this he considers is nothing other than the Heaven upon the Earth. This expression, which he uses everywhere both in his public and private speaking, is from the old Vedic writings rather than the New Testament. In Chandogya Upanishad chapter 7 this phrase occurs: "In very deed, this Atman is in the heart ... in truth, he who knows this enters daily into the heavenly world." On that dreadful night, when he was thrown out of his home on his conversion, he spent the chilling night and the biting cold in the open, without any protection or cover. He calls this his "first night in heaven." Also about his imprisonment in Ilom, or even when he was dumped in a horrible well full of corpses and bones in Rasar in Nepal, he wrote "Christ's Presence has turned my prison into a heaven of blessing." About the well in Rasar, he said "This hell is heaven " This supernatural experience of "heaven upon earth" is based on prayer, which itself brings man into immediate living communion with the Supreme the God.

d) Witness for Christ: Sadhu is strongly Christocentric. Again and again Sadhu said in his addresses that he desired to be nothing more than simple witness to the Power of the Love of Christ. "There is a great difference between knowing about Jesus and knowing Him. He expresses his strong love for Christ when says, "When a Hindu woman is willing to burn herself with her dead husband (as in Sati practice), why should I be ashamed when Jesus is alive?". He says Christ is my life, my saviour and everything to me in Heaven and Earth. When among his friends, as he speaks of Christ, his eyes are brightened with a love light and his face is transfigured. Seeing him, one knows why a Christian has been defined as one "who has fallen in love with Christ."^v Sadhu affirms that "People misunderstand Him when they don't know Him, but when they know Him they love Him." About Christ incarnation he says "Christ is not just a holy man who is dead and gone; He is the incarnation of God, the Saviour of the world. We must live in Him -- then we shall have a message for the world and we shall see Him again in glory. His relationship with Jesus Christ was more like a Bhakta of the Hindu tradition. He says "I do not believe in Jesus Christ because I have read about Him in the Bible – I saw Him and experienced Him and know Him in my daily experience. Not because I read the Gospels, but because of Him of whom I read in the Gospels, have I become what I am"^{vi}

e) Passion for the Cross: His passion for Cross was so high, that in a reply to a letter from his father, when his father threatened to disinherit his claim to his property, if he does not get married immediately, he writes saying, "You are my earthly father, but I have another Heavenly father, who needs to be obeyed and served above anyone else"^{vii}. It was the high standard, which Sundar so courageously represented, that enabled him to write with such a faith concerning the future triumph of the cross. "A great Indian Church is needed to form a great Indian Nation"^{viii}.

He says to follow Jesus and bear his Cross is so sweet and precious, that if I find no cross to bear in Heaven, I will ask God to send me as his missionary if need be to hell, so that there at least I get an opportunity to bear his Cross.^{viii}

4. Religious Thoughts :

a) Bible: Sadhu is so much convinced of the amazing power of the Bible, when he walked out of his for the first time, to start his

missionary journey, he took nothing other than the New Testament. For him, it is a mystically inspired creation through the Holy Spirit. He says that "those who wrote the Bible did not receive their inspiration by making notes, but only by living with the Word of life. He affirms that the Holy Spirit is true author of the Bible and that the authors wrote the holy books inspired by the Spirit. But on his personal and spiritual experiences he directly had with Jesus, he says, "it is not because I read the Gospel that I know Christ, but because he revealed himself to me." Also because of his spiritual experience, he did not idolise Bible, as did his other Sikhs would do for Granth. When he was asked by a German Missionary Secretary, if he would give preference to Personal experience over that of written scriptures, he replied simply saying, I sit at the feet of the same Lord, who inspired those scriptures. Like Luther he considers John's Gospel to be the most important book of the Bible.

b) Christianity : Sadhu Sundar Singh spoke vividly on various religious thoughts. On Christianity versus Heathenism , he says redemption is for all races and peoples of the earth. He is so strongly Christo centric like Luther, that the only darkness that shines upon this entire dark world is Jesus. He is so immersed in Christ, for him Church is lesser matter. He preferred private prayer instead of public worship in meetings. He does not like to adhere to any organised Church. He does not recognise any religious authority in his life, infact he even surrenders his license to Baptise. He says, God is only one, why so many denominations. He recommends unification of Catholics and Protestant Churches. He preached Gospel in wide varieties of denominations stretching from Anglicans, Presbyterians Nestorians, ,Syrian Catholics, , Methodists, Lutherans, Jacobites Baptists etc . He is supposed to have done several miracles and healing, but he never glorified it. He rejected many people to be his disciples and preferred to be a lone wanderer for Christ.

c) Bhakti Spirituality & Fulfilment Concept: Christianity from the beginning devised various ways, to relate its theology of decisive and universal significance of the Christ-event, to the religious faiths and experience of other faiths. The common umbrella that covers the various approaches developed in this regard, is called the Fulfilment concept. The fulfilment concept, with its roots in the New Testament (Acts 14:16-17) and the contributions of early Church leaders, continues to find prominence and creative theological expression in Roman Catholicism. However, Protestant Fulfilment Theology, reached its peak during its development in early 12th century and subsequently fell into decline. Sadhu Sundar Singh's approach to the recovery of this fulfilment concept is noteworthy. There is a distinctive expression of the irenic attitude towards Hinduism during the 20th Century in Sadhu Sundar Singh, who embodied the Hindu ideal of the seeker of God, while reflecting an authentic Christian Life style.^{viii}

Sundar Singh's most definitive statement regarding his fulfilment approach can be noticed in his quote: "Christianity is the fulfilment of Hinduism. Hinduism has been digging channels. Christ is the water to flow through these channels". We have noted that a framework of 'continuity' provided by Sundar Singh's pre-Christian bhakti mystical orientation had prepared him for the specific Christian revelation. These points of contact within the bhakti religious consciousness constitute the "channels".

The influence of Bhakti upon Sundar Singh's theological framework can be summarised as under. (1) His adoption of the Bhakti sources within his framework represents an electrical subconscious synthesis of elements specific to the Vaisnava and Sikh Bhakti traditions. (2) There is clear evidence that his conversion experience was conditioned by his pre-Christian bhakti consciousness, of "avatara" from the Vaisnava Bhakti conception, and the bright radiance that accompanied his vision of Christ (Light is also commonly associated with vision of the ultimate reality in Hinduism). (3) In specific terms, his view of God as loving, personal creator, acceptance of incarnation, nature as a channel of divine revelation, recognition of the divine authority of the written word i.e Bible (Sikhism gives a high degree of importance to its written scriptures i.e Granth Sahib), conception of Sin (Sikh concept of haumai, Hindu concept of Karma) and Salvation (bhakti mystic quest for union with divine) , and the acceptance that salvation comes as grace from God (Prapatti in the vaisnava bhakti tradition also denoted a form of grace). (5) His deep longing for communion with God is characteristic of both Vaisnava and Sikh forms of bhakti.

Sundar Singh acknowledges presence of a dim measure of "light of the truth" among the followers of different religions. If honest seekers of

all religions live true to the light they possess, God gives them more Light and they will eventually get full knowledge of God. Sundar Singh seems to emphasize continuity rather than difference in all religions. In one of his ecstatic visions, he received the following response to his anxiety about the fate of non-Christians.

Very few will be lost but many will be saved. If there were no hope for all non-Christians and Christians in sin in the world, then God would stop creating men. We must do our part here on earth to save sinners, but if they refuse we need not be without hope for them¹⁸

Sadhu Sundar Singh is convinced, that because of his infinite grace and mercy, non-Christians will have opportunity in the afterlife to have their false and partial views of truth corrected. Of course there is certain degree of uncertainty in Sundar Singh's teaching, where one side, he speaks of final judgement, the darkness of hell etc, but at the same time he talks of opportunity for salvation after death. Thus fulfilment concept was nonetheless an integral aspect of this theological framework. His fulfilment view was not theoretical construct as much as a practical approach emerging from his actual engagement with the sources of various religious traditions. Sadhu's fulfilment approach has the bhakti quest for salvation as its point of convergence.

5. Parables of Truth

Like Christ, Sundar Singh taught in parables. His simplicity of words, his vivid explanations were very popular with his listeners. Although there are many parables he spoke to explain about God's love, Prayer, Burden of Sin, Longing for God etc, I am mentioning only a few of them here.

Longing for God: One of Sundar Singh's parables about longing for God, reminiscent of Christ's teaching, is characteristic of him: He talks about a child looking for his mother (who is hiding) in a garden. Despite many beautiful trees and birds that were shown to the baby, it longs for his mother and keeps crying. Sundar Singh says, despite the many beautiful things in the world, we need to long for God in that manner.

Sin & Taste: (1) Sometimes during sickness the faculty of taste in the tongue is affected with, and during that time, however tasty the food given to the sick person may be, it has a bad taste. In just the same way sin interferes with the taste for spiritual things. (2) Many who are immersed in sin are unaware of its load, just as one who dives into the water may have tons of water upon him, but is wholly unaware of its weight until he is choked in death. But he who emerges from the water, sees God and gets relieved from that pressure of the sin.

Breath and Prayer: In another parable he talks of the fish who come up to the surface out of a lake and open their mouths. Although they can breathe quite well under water they have to come up to the surface every now and again to inhale deep draughts of fresh air, or they would die. It is the same with us. The world is like an ocean; we can live in it, carry on our work and all our varied occupations, but from time to time we need to receive fresh life through prayer.

Prayer and Meditation: He talks about the Heron standing motionless on the shore of a lake, not praising the beauty of God's creation, but waiting for a prey. Similarly, many human beings behave like that in prayer and meditation. They give no thought to His Power and Love, they pay no attention to His Spirit which can cleanse them from their sins, and they give themselves up entirely to the thought of how they can gain something from God that will please them, something that will help them to enjoy the transitory pleasures of this world.

Suffering: During an earthquake it sometimes happens that fresh springs break out in dry places which water and quicken the land so that plants can grow. In the same way the shattering experiences of suffering can cause the living water to well up in a human heart.

Incarnation of Jesus: A King who wished to send a message to his people, since his servants failed in it, the King, who loved his subjects, resolved to take the message to them himself in order to be convinced of their difficulties and went in a poor man's disguise. The poor and the distressed had confidence in him and told him all their anxieties. But there were some proud people who did not believe that such a poor man was really the King's messenger, so they were rude to him and chased him away. Later on the King came in his royal attire with his army and punished the proud, but those who had been good to him were

honoured and their wants relieved. Even so it is with the God who became man.

Love of God: He speaks of a burning tree and a Bird trying to protect its babies. No one could climb the tree, no one could help her. Now she could easily have saved her own life by flight, but instead of fleeing she sat down on the nest, covering the little ones carefully with her wings. The fire seized her and burnt her to ashes. She showed her love to her little ones by giving her life for them. If, such a small creature had such love, how much more must our Heavenly Father love His children, who were His creatures.

6. Apocalyptic Prophecies

His apocalyptic prophecies about the fate of Romania are famous in that country, but are apocryphal and were considered very controversial. He talks about a worldwide holocaust, nearly one quarter of population will disappear and another quarter will die. Earth surface will start burning, the climate will suffer some changes. Earthquakes will destroy many buildings, hurricanes and strong winds, terrestrial and maritime, will destroy the human boldness based only on the so-called power of science. Romania will pass through some stages of fundamental changes finally becoming, owing to its exemplary spiritualization, and ultimately will be considered by all nations as an authentic New Jerusalem of the world.⁵ He also talks about UK losing worldwide power, European nations forming a union etc.

These prophecies in manuscripts, were in circulation after his visit to Romania in 1922, during the communist dictatorship. Many sceptics considered these as mere presumptions and parentheses, mostly due to obvious lack of interest an Indian Christian could have had about Romania future. We cannot say how much of these sayings of this enlightened man is true, even though they are considered veridical. These can only be verified by time passing and that's why it's absolutely for the reader's personal decision to believe them or not. Still, if you read these prophecies you will find some of them already fulfilled.

7. Significance to Indian Christianity

Christianity has been in India since 1st century. Also there is strong spiritual tendency in India to sacrifice everything to the God. Yet, India is one of the few countries in the world, where Christian Missionaries met with stiff resistance. Christianity in India is highly influenced by Western personalities and methods. Even though Western missions have left strong impression in the minds of few Indian spiritual thinkers, actual number of people who accept Christ is still insignificant. One of the reasons is the incapacity of Western missions to adapt their message sufficiently to suit the Indian mind. Christianity in India is too little Indian. During last century, some great spiritual thinkers and reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshab Chunder Sen etc, were attracted to the preachings of Jesus, but they still represent an artificial combination of Christian and Indian religious thoughts. Sundar Singh, by his creative personality, set forward a true type for Indian Christians to follow. He is the first one to show how the good news of Jesus can be reflected in the soul of an Indian. He is an Indian, who remained Indian all through, yet absorbed the crux of the Gospel. Sundar Singh is thoroughly convinced, that Christianity can enter Indian hearts and souls if offered in Indian form. It is not Sadhu's external way of living that attracted Indians, but his way of preaching.

8. CONCLUSION

As German scholar Friedrich Heiler puts it, "He is India's ideal of the disciple of Christ—a barefooted itinerant preacher with burning love in his heart. In him Christianity and Hinduism meet, and the Christian faith stands forth, not as something foreign, but like a flower which blossoms on an Indian stem." He had intensely influenced tens of thousands of people. As a Christian witness, he had been rejected as well as welcomed, persecuted, and even left for dead. By many missionaries, and even Indian Christian leaders, he had been regarded as a highly eccentric convert, totally out of step with contemporary Christianity as he wandered the roads in his yellow robe and turban. Some of his biographers estimate that, even though he never heard the word "indigenization," he had done more than any man in the first half of the twentieth century to establish that "Jesus belongs to India." He made it clear that Christianity is not an imported, alien, foreign religion but is indigenous to Indian needs, ambitions, and faith. He remains one of the permanently significant figures of Indian Christianity. His life and contributions to Indian Christianity remind me of his saying, "The

true Christian is like sandalwood, which imparts its fragrance to the axe which cuts it, without doing any harm in return.”

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