

THE RISE OF INDIGENEOUS CHURCHES IN INDIA: THE MISSION OF BROTHER BAKHT SINGH

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This paper deals with the rise of a Mission in India viz. Indigenous Churches. The word mission could be even said as a movement. God used a man who courageously went about the Bible way in establishing the work of God in India. The man is BAKHT SINGH CHABRA drawn from a Sikh Community, regenerated, called and commissioned by God. Before I could present the study on the rise of the Indigenous Churches, it is appropriate to know the history of the man behind this movement.

THE LIFE AND HISTORY OF BROTHER BAKHT SINGH:

Firsthand material for the life of Brother Bakht Singh is not easy to discover, for though he left an ineffaceable memory with many people, he wrote little about himself. He published few books dealing with the spiritual life, but hardly ever kept a journal or diary of his wanderings. For accounts of his adventures one must turn to two books, Daniel Smith's **Bakht Singh of India, A Prophet of God** and RR Rajamani's **Monsoon Daybreak**, which were published much against his wishes, and also to the illustrations he used in his sermons and addresses.

History of Indian Christianity has something unique when it comes to the choice of men. Before Brother Bakht Singh were two outstanding persons from the same community. One is Kartar Singh, who for his faith and profession was sewed inside a wet yak-skin and thrown in the scorching sun, and he was contracted to death. He died as a martyr for his faith in Tibet. His life and mission is little known. The other well know to most of us is Sadhu Sunder Singh, whose mission began in the year 1903 and ended in 1929. His vision was purely missionary and evangelization. The Sadhu traveled all over India and the world and his habit was to visit once every year to Tibet. His last journey to Tibet was in 1929 much against the advice of doctors and well-wishers. He left and never came back. It was at this time God had sought for a man and found in Bakht Singh in the same year. (remember the year 1929).

Family: Bakht Singh Chabra was born in the year 1903 in the Punjab. His family history reveals of his father who was a businessman of moderate wealth, a religious mother, six brothers (BS is eldest) and a sister. One of his brothers Sri Chand Chabra happens to be the former Mayor of Delhi, and a close associate of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

Education: Bakht Singh was educated in a mission high school in the Punjab. In his college days Bakht Singh showed extreme bitterness towards Christianity and derided the Bible he had never read. A beautiful Bible was presented to him after his examinations, which he publicly testifies with trembling emotion, how in those days he tore the Bible to pieces and kept only the leather cover for himself. (I personally am a witness of this confession which he made with a penitent tone every time.) In September 1926 he persuaded his father to send him to England to enter the London Engineering College for a course in Mechanical Engineering with special emphasis on Agriculture. After solemnly promising his devout mother that he would not change his Sikh religion, he was allowed to go. He confesses that very soon he fell into the vices of Western world, denounced all practices of Sikh ceremonials, shaved his beard off, began to indulge in all earthly pleasures and amusement, social functions, making friends with rich and poor, high and low, wearing expensive clothes, acquired much education and traveled all over Europe and England to museums, art galleries, and picture palaces. In spite of all these pleasures he found himself unhappy.

First encounter: In 1929 he left for Canada on a holiday trip. For the first time when he attended a "Divine Service" on board ship he found himself in the midst of two men, both knelt down for prayer. Breaking his national and religious pride, he too knelt down and found great change coming into him and his whole body trembling and could feel a divine power entering him and great joy

flooding his soul. The Name of Jesus became sweet to him since that day.

Second encounter: In 1929 during his second visit to Canada, he was a resident at YMCA building at Winnipeg, he asked a friend to lend him a Bible, who gave his New Testament to the same hands which had once torn the Bible to pieces. While he began to read the Bible he sensed that Someone standing and speaking by his side to him saying “Verily Verily I say unto thee.” He found his hidden life uncovered and shame covered his face and in tears he cried out for God’s forgiveness and cleansing. He heard a Voice saying, “This is my body broken for you, this is my blood shed for the remission of your sins.” At this point his whole life was transformed and filled with great joy and peace. This occurred on December 16th, 1929.

THE VISION:

First Vision: In his childhood days Bakht Singh had a recurring and frightening dream. In the dream he saw himself climbing a high and steep hill with tremendous struggle and reach the top, and somebody would come and hurl him down to fall on sharp points of rocks bruising his ribs. He would cry in pain in the dream and in the end would find himself lying on a soft silk cushions giving him sweet rest. After a few years when the same dream came, the second time, a Voice said, “This is your testimony.”

Second Vision: In 1930, one day in America, Bakht Singh recalls, as he was lying on the bed, suddenly he saw a map of India with a bright shining Cross in the center, and heard a voice saying “If you want to serve me you have to lay down your life at the Cross.” Little did he realize that a great work was awaiting him.

Call and Commitment: In 1932, after his baptism in Vancouver, Canada, he had plans to return to India as an Engineer and establish an agricultural colony and give the proceeds to missionary work. But God said “I do not want your money, I want you.” It was on April 4th, 1932 at 2.30 a.m. Brother Bakht Singh gave up his life in total surrender. The Lord gave three conditions for him to follow: Firstly, he should withdraw all his claims of his property in the Punjab, and never tell any man of his needs; Secondly, never join any organization and thirdly, never make his own program, to which Brother Bakht Singh agreed. Since that day door began to open.

Faith tested: In 1933, one day Brother Bakht Singh heard the Lord saying “I want you to leave for India on the February 6.” He informed his friends, who arranged a farewell gathering on the 4th. The day before on hearing that he had no money they cancelled the farewell meeting. After a couple of days he received sufficient funds for the passage and traveled as scheduled.

THE MISSION:

Miracles, healing and mass conversion always are the beginning for any movement. And so was with Brother Bakht Singh. When he returned to India on April 6, 1933 at the port of Bombay it was the saddest moment of his life. He was met by his parents, only to be forsaken by them, who did not want to take him home, because he refused to keep his faith a secret. Brother Bakht Singh’s answer was “how long can I survive keeping my nose and mouth closed.” His father made a last appeal by putting his turban at his feet and pleaded him, (Sikh’s headgear laid at a person’s feet, implies it demands that person’s respect and total submission to the authority) but Brother Bakht Singh declined. And so the WORK BEGAN in Mumbai (Bombay). His home was the street; his food was a cup of tea, which would be his breakfast, lunch, tea and supper. He used to meet people and share his experiences and those who heard him their lives were transformed. His sister invited him to Karachi and when she came to know that he changed his faith, he was asked to leave the house. So the WORK BEGAN in Karachi. The Public Park became his home. Soon his work began to increase as peoples of all races, castes and classes were receiving this faith through his witness. There were invitations from many places to preach. In 1936 the revival began in Punjab, Pathankot, Sialkot, Martinpur and several other cities in North India. And further spread to cities like Poona, Kedgaon, Indore, Mhow, Jhansi and Agra. During his meetings it is said that people who came under deep

conviction were seen falling to the ground as though bitten by a scorpion, throwing dust, pulling their hair and beating their chests, repenting and seeking forgiveness and having their lives transformed.

Miracles: It is recorded; one evening he saw a mother with a child crying very bitterly, when enquired she said there is no milk and all the shops are closed, as it was too late. When he prayed, there was a voice asking him to go in a particular direction. As he went, he met a person by name Dr Oliver who asked him if he would like to have some milk, as there was a good quantity in the hospital. He prayed for a cup of milk but received a gallon. The next morning one lady came to him crying that she was hungry and had nothing to eat. As he prayed, there was a voice telling him to go in a certain direction, he found a tent to his surprise with so much food more than enough to meet the lady's need.

Healing: It has also been recorded, in one of the meetings a leprous man covered with blankets sat in a corner of the church with two great sores in his leg. After the meeting he requested Brother Bakht Singh to pray and instantaneously his infirmity was cured. I remember my own aunt suffering from lung cancer. She was virtually rejected from home because of foul smell emanating from her. She almost decided to commit suicide. But when she heard of Brother Bakht Singh's meeting she went to him for prayer, instantly she was cured of her sickness. Brother Bakht Singh never publicly announced of healing in his meetings although he had the gift of healing. It is said that he prayed so this gift may be taken away from him, because he believed healing of the soul was more important than healing of the body. However, the people used to throng, to have him pray after every meeting standing in long queues.

ESTABLISHMENT OF INDIGENOUS CHURCHES:

True to his commitment, Brother Bakht Singh totally depended on God's will for all his travel plans and finance. He will be always on his knees with the Word of God to receive his orders from above for every move and every decision. It is recorded that never did he even whisper for any of his own or the Church's need nor did he ever entertain any kind of advertisement for his meetings. As the hunger for God's Word grew he was being invited to neighbouring countries as well. Very soon he became an itinerant preacher touring Pakistan, India, Burma and Ceylon.

A new beginning: For the first time there was an invitation from South India in 1938 by the one-to-one band and the first meeting held at the Tamil Methodist Church at Vepery, Madras. He stressed the importance of the Bible as the Word of God. At the beginning of every meeting all present were invited to display their Bibles by raising them above their heads and to feel ashamed if they had not brought one. Hundreds of Bibles were sold out in the various languages in Telugu, Tamil, Hindi and English. It is said that people in Madras began to read the Bible as never before and were asked to carry it wherever they go. Yes Brother Bakht Singh preached the Bible and expounded from the Scriptures the way of Salvation through Jesus Christ as he himself found it. As a result, many each night gave their lives and obtained New Birth. Next he preached in Park Town Memorial Hall, followed by CMS Tucker Church, St Andrews Church and various other churches, where there used to be huge gatherings. At this time the demand for Bibles were so great that the Tamil Bibles in the Society's Sales Depot were sold out without any stocks left. It could be said about Brother Bakht Singh that he taught the Indian people to love not only the Bible but also the God of the Bible. He feared no man and spoke out courageously as the Lord had commissioned him. He spoke straightly to the pastors and missionaries. Some appreciated, others found it difficult to take. Nevertheless whenever or wherever he preached people flocked around him. Meetings would sometimes last until 10.00 p.m. or 11.00 p.m. with three hour-long sermons. Through his faithful preaching hundreds and thousands found new life in Jesus Christ. The wind of God was blowing and Joy was flowing in Madras as the people passed through the streets with singing.

Revival Praying: For the first time an all-night prayer was announced at the end of the weeklong retreat. About one hundred and twenty gathered to pray. It was a unique thing never heard of before. It is said insistent, persevering and trawailing prayers always follow every revival. Before he returned to Punjab Brother Bakht Singh preacher on "PRAYER", which triggered a wave of prayer

meetings and prayer groups all over Madras and thus the revival of prayer continued to burn fervently for two years. During these periods only public meetings were held.

Traditional pattern: People were thronging to hear Brother Bakht Singh at his meetings because of the hunger for God's Word, which they could not get in their own churches. They felt like little orphans and like sheep without shepherd going here and there seeking spiritual food. There was a dearth of preachers as the local churches had only a traditional pattern of one-hour-service on Sundays, and governed by set guidelines which do not meet the spiritual needs of the congregation. They were more concerned about decorating their beautiful church buildings and go to any extent to increase membership, than the practice of love for the lost souls and their spiritual upbringing. Such was the sad conditions of the churches, which were unfitted for the care of new converts. It was to such spiritual bankruptcy and traditional practices that Brother Bakht Singh was called upon to bring in the Divine Order of establishing churches built on scriptural principles. In the year 1941 the doors were closed to Brother Bakht Singh in Madras to preach in the churches. The church leaders and pastors passed the following resolution. I quote "We in the Indian Ministers' Conference have met and passed a resolution never again to make any place available to this Punjabi preacher. Our objection is that he is not an ordained minister, and therefore had no right to baptize anyone." Unquote.

The need for Indigenous Churches: People who attended Brother Bakht Singh's meetings were literally excommunicated. During this time a few godly and experienced men were by his side viz. Brother RR Rajamani, and Brother RP Dorairaj (blood brothers), Brother George Rajaratnam, Brother Moses Dawn and also two Englishmen, Brother AJ Flack and Brother Raymond Golsworthy, who were given the responsibility to care for those who needed help. Brother Bakht Singh was burdened to take a new direction regarding the follow-up work, went to Coonoor for spending two months in prayer to seek God's plan for the future. He was at the height of his ministry at this time with 400 hundred invitations to attend from India and abroad and was unable to decide where to go. There was a Macedonian Call from Madras, which he resisted, and one night he fell on his face and said, "Lord I promise to pay any price even though I get no more invitations to speak, but I want to be in Thy Will." Like a flash a Voice came "Behold I make a covenant, and I will do marvels." After this commitment he received several scripture passages by revelation for building the church according to the heavenly pattern on scriptural principles.

The birth of the local Church: In obedience to God's call he went to Madras and gathered his co-workers to spend a whole night in prayer, (one unique practice of Brother Bakht Singh is every move was soaked in prayer) went to Pallavaram Hill, which lies beyond the Madras airport. Centipedes, snakes, scorpions and other creatures were alive to intrude for a while and quietly dispersed to keep the prayer session undisturbed till 6.00 a.m. in the morning. The problem arose when one of the group members requested for baptism, which again after prayer was arranged the following Sunday at the foot of the Hill. Sixteen men and women confessed and testified in baptism their union with Christ, before wives, husbands, friends, relatives and enemies as witnesses. Then in prayer by laying on of hands over each one's head, showing oneness in Christ with every child of God in His whole Body worldwide, and with everyone joining in worship and breaking of bread. That was a significant day in Madras, for on that day the "Assembly" we now know of came to birth. So far the gatherings were in small hired houses, but one day Brother Bakht Singh told about a vision of a house and grounds spacious enough for the tasks ahead of them and also said it would be available for rent for two years and then will be freely available. True to it, there was a large isolated house with a very big compound, having a large central hall with extensive side rooms, verandahs and kitchens and out-houses. This was dedicated on 12 July 1941 under the name Jehovah-Shammah meaning "The Lord is there" (Ezekiel 48:35). Being a city congregation there were people of various languages. Numbers began to increase steadily and some young people dedicated their lives for whole time service leaving their profession and families. Every need was being met materially and spiritually. The doors were open for anyone to walk-in to seek counsel and guidance for any matter in any part of the day or night. People coming from various castes, creed and race were all under one roof as a family.

The growth of the local Church: Brother Bakht Singh is an apostle in the sense that he is a founder of churches. Much of the churches started by him were born out of travail of an evangelistic campaign. It is an invasion of a town or city sent by divine inspiration after much prayer. Scores of volunteers seek time off from their regular employment to join such campaigns. One of them happens to be my father, who in one of the campaigns surrendered for whole time service and returned only to submit his resignation from his post as Canteen Manager, Indian Air Force. Since then he is still “in service” going from place to place preaching and teaching wherever sent. He is 86 years old and still going strong. Team members when they arrive at a place they rent a house, go in processional march at 6.00 a.m. to every street with God’s message of love, distribute tracts and booklets, bibles and then houses are visited. More open-air work is done in late afternoon, and then all is set for the big evangelistic meeting at night. Many souls are saved and the doors begin to open for a New Testament assembly (church) in such areas. Sometimes one campaign used to reach almost 30 towns or more, and thus the work began to spread rapidly. **Indigenous, Yes!** The churches are indigenous in its real sense. Brother Bakht Singh’s heart always throbs with passion for the establishment of a strong church in his own land without any outside influence. He built church structures with simple bamboo or asbestos sheds for the main pandal, he sat his people on floor mats, native style, he had gifted fellow-workers compose their own hymns and psalms and set them to native lyrics, he brought in Indian instruments of music to lead congregational singing; he kept meetings going for long hours; he taught believers to give and not to beg; he showed them how to seek guidance about every matter direct from the Lord. Thus lifting the believers into a realm far above the cold dead things of religious formality.

After the establishment of the sound scriptural principles in the churches at Madras and surrounding areas, the scene moved towards Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh. One lady, whose husband was admitted in the hospital at Madras, totally recovered when Brother Bakht Singh prayed for him. She invited him to come to Hyderabad in 1948. After nearly two years of prayer, Brother Bakht Singh landed in Hyderabad 1950-51. Since then Hyderabad began to be his home. First a place was rented and named it as “ELIM” and later moved to a donated estate and that was named “HEBRON.” Soon the work began to grow and spread into wider areas and far away lands from here. Missionaries were sent to America, Europe, Middle-East and Australia. Today it is estimated at 1000 assemblies all over India, 250 in Pakistan and few in America, Europe, Middle-east, Sri Lanka and Australia.

Brother Bakht Singh had anointed elders both in Madras and Hyderabad to have oversight of all these local churches called as assemblies. And deacons for administrative and domestic needs. Normally the local churches choose responsible brethren to run the assembly, and wherever help is required God’s Servants (pastors) are sent to assist them.

Vacation Bible School: In the early 1960’s a Jewish-American missionary lady Blanche Sarah Abbis, married to GG Abbiss, an Englishman both from the World Evangelical Crusade Mission, joined with Brother Bakht Singh in his work. They were instrumental in introducing the Vacation Bible School, a way of training children, preparing a five-year course material for the students. These are being used even today in almost 50 different centers all over the India each year. In Hyderabad alone about 1100-1200 children are gathering to study these course lessons. It is said these courses have produced some fine young men and women who have totally dedicated for the service and are being used in various assemblies now.

Holy Convocations: Brother Bakht Singh holds Holy Convocations once a year where all are invited to participate. It is a weeklong meetings, containing morning and evening sessions of Bible study with separate sessions for youth, children. People come from all over the country to participate and enjoy the fellowship of one another. Breakfast, lunch and dinner are provided for all for the entire week. No fee is charged, no registration fee is taken. It is all organized by faith and freewill offerings. Sometimes the crowd would be around 15,000 to 20,000. This is one of the means that believers from all over the country come to know each other.

PRINCIPLES GOVERNING THE CHURCHES:

For Brother Bakht Singh, the word 'church' means God's people among whom God dwells, (a living organism) according to Exodus 25: 1-9.

1. There is no membership to the churches. All who obtained New Birth have the right to take part in the activities of the churches.
2. The Bible is the constitution of the church. There is no separate set of rules for any crises. Able servants of God clarify all matters through the help of the scriptures.
3. Baptism has a four-fold testimony. To testify
 1. a) Before God the Father, that a believer has now a clear conscience and is His child (I Peter 3:21)
 2. b) Before the Devil, that he has left his service (Colossians 2:12)
 3. c) Before the World, that he is crucified to it (Romans 6:3)
 4. d) Before the Church, that he has become a living member of it (I Corinthians 12:13)

The Meaning of the church: In the book of Ephesians he shows seven names for God's people:

1. **Church:** People who are called out from the World.
2. **Body of Christ:** The same life flows through every member.
3. **One New Man:** All human and national differences forgotten.
4. **Family:** All enjoy the divine love of heavenly Father.
5. **God's Building:** As lively stones being built together.
6. **God's Temple:** God dwells in the midst of God's people who worship Him.
7. **The Bride of Christ:** Living for Christ as a Chaste Virgin

The foundational doctrine of the church: Brother Bakht Singh points out from Acts 2:42 four truths which are necessary for a strong spiritual lives of the believers, which he compares with four anchors to the ship which weathered the storm in Acts 27:29. "And they continued steadfastly in the Apostles doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers.

1. 1. **Apostles doctrine:** Believers fed and nourished by pure Word of God.
2. 2. **Fellowship:** Believers meet as often as possible to exchange and share what they receive from the Lord.
3. 3. **Breaking of Bread:** Believers remember the Lord's death and the Lord's coming.
4. **Prayers:** Believers learning to depend on the Lord through prayer for all their needs.

Worship Service: Brother Bakht Singh calls this as the Lord's Day. Sometimes the service lasts for four to five hours or even more. Let's have a glance at what takes place on any *one Sunday*.

1. The elders meet for prayer before the service and the Lord's anointed messenger is made known for the day.
2. After the opening songs of praise, a message on the meaning of worship to remind believers to give the Lord the worship worthy of His great Name. Then any brother and sister constrained to do so was then free to lift his voice, clearly and audibly in his own language based on the experience with the Lord to praise, thank and worship the Lord.
3. After the worship, a message of solemn and stern warning to refrain taking part in the Lord's Table. Brother Bakht Singh always was insisting on living a holy and separated life. There are some occasions where if someone has offended his brother, they immediately seek forgiveness and set right and take part in breaking of bread.

4. After all had partaken in the Lord's Table, there would be a prayer in some detail for the Church around the world, including for sick and any special requests.
5. Then the gifted Lord's messenger expounds the Word of God according to the spiritual needs of the congregation.
6. In conclusion, people's offering was accepted as an act of public worship. No subscriptions are taken nor appeals made for money. It is a willing offering, giving of tithes (which Brother Bakht Singh teaches of contributing 10% and more, even 40 or 50% of monthly income).
7. The service ends with gospel witness (open air preaching) in the neighborhood areas followed by a love feast sitting down together to eat a communal meal, overcoming former caste or social distinction.
8. Again in the evening, new contacts are invited to the gospel meeting. Thus the whole environment is filled with joy and holiness surrounded by God's presence.

Some unique characters of Brother Bakht Singh:

1. He was a great and outstanding man of prayer. He prays for a small need of his to the great and complex problems he faces in the church. It is said most of the problems are solved through prayer. A few testify sometimes when it demands heavy responsibilities to discharge, he never sleeps for several nights, and one could see him on his knees seeking divine counsel. Twenty times in a day one could hear him say 'shall we pray.'
2. He was a man available to all classes at all times. His heart was always to the needs of the people. In the 1970s he was on his way to catch a flight to Madras, and just at the gate he saw a man requesting rather pleading to come home to pray for his child who was taken ill. He made a detour, prayed and proceeded to the airport only to find the flight had left. He was undisturbed but his associates were ferociously charging him with folly and negligence. As he was praying, an announcement was heard that the flight to Madras was landing. The flight returned and Brother Bakht Singh boarded. The fact is, a rich lady forgot her wedding ring in the washroom, and pleaded the pilot that she would pay whatever costs to return.
3. He had a unique memory so much so that he was able to recognize people by their names from places like to Kashmir to Kanyakumari and abroad as well.
4. We need to learn much of his challenging faith, which has kept him steadfast and unmovable and abounding in the work of the Lord.

Brother Bakht Singh was suffering from Parkinson's since 1986 and survived for 97 years and slept in the Lord on September 16, 2000. About 200,000 people from all over the Indian subcontinent, USA, Dubai, Australia, Pakistan, Srilanka and Nepal, attended his funeral held on September 22, 2000.

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