

## Anand Karaj From counter-ritual to legislative act

In Sikhism, the householder's way of life has been recognised as socially the most plausible and spiritually the most beneficial approach in life. The emphasis that it has received in the Sikh religion is unmatched by what obtains in most other religious communities.

Right from the times of Guru Nanak Dev (1469-1539), the founder of the Sikh faith, Brahmanical rituals have been deprecated as "spiritually purposeless", only serving the exploitative designs of the priestly class. Yet, the ritualistic ceremony connected with Hindu marriage continued to serve even the Sikhs for a long time. This ritual was characterised by chanting of Vedic mantras by the Brahmins while the couple went around the sacrificial fire a specific number of times.

Towards the end of the pontificate of the third Guru, Amar Das (1469-1574), his sublime spiritual composition *Anand in Rakali Raga*, became very popular and began to be recited at the close of every congregational session of the Sikhs. It has been common belief among the Sikhs that regular chanting of that holy text generates the experience of celestial bliss—for that is what Anand literally means. It is not improbable that this text would have come to be chanted by Sikhs also as either preamble or prologue affixed to the Vedic marriage ceremony. As a result, the ceremony could have begun to be referred to as the Anand ceremony.

First of all, the text *Lavan* composed by Guru Ram Das (1534-1581) was not composed for the purpose of solemnising a worldly marriage. It metaphorically describes how the soul bride can realise the Divine Groom. The stages of spiritual ascent have been symbolised through the four circumambulations of the marriage ceremony.

The first stage has been described as one of responsible participation in the worldly affairs: shunning evil and observing righteousness, dwelling upon the Lord's Name, adoring the Guru and longing for celestial bliss.

The second stage is characterised by practicing the presence of God, and living in His Holy Fear thereby losing all worldly fears and the filth of ego.

The *Unstruck Melody* then begins to vibrate within.

In the third stage, the mind, filled with Divine Love, discovers the Lord, receives the Word revealed by Him and becomes able to describe the un-describable Lord.

In the fourth stage, one meets the Lord with intuitive ease, remains absorbed in Him day and night, his desire is fulfilled, and he becomes identified with the mellifluous Lord.

The symbol of marriage has been made use of as an appropriate metaphor. This was a composition of spiritual import and so had not been put to mundane use by the early Sikhs. There is evidence that even up to the time of the 6th Guru (1597-1644), the ceremony of Anand Karaj as prevalent today had not come into practice. This is apparent from the following verse of Bhar Gurdas (1551-1636).

*The Guru oriented Sikh resides ever in the house of peace*

*Even if he has to observe Vedic rituals as aliens practice.*  
Var 16.7

At that time there weren't available even sufficient number of copies of Guru Granth Sahib around which the couples could physically circumambulate. The *Pothi* had yet not become this Guru Granth.

Anand Karaj ceremony is not even prescribed or described in any of the *Rahitnamas*. Only Daya Singh's *Rahitnama* mentions that a Sikh 'must not marry except through Anand.' However, Anand, here, seems to refer to Guru Amar Das's above-mentioned composition which, by then, had become a part of almost all ceremonial occasions.

Bhai Mani Singh in *Bhagat Ratnavali*, records that in response to a petition 'Wajab-ul-Arz by Sahijdhari Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708) gave them the

following instruction relating to how they may get their marriages solemnised.

"You should first recite Anand, then Ardas and after that you may invite the Brahmins to perform the (Vedic) marriage ceremony. You need not have any reservations about it".

The distinction between Sahijdhari and Amritdhari Sikhs could not have started before the Baisakhi of 1699 AD. So until then, there was no indication that the Anand Karaj ceremony, as practiced now, had come into vogue.

Even during the times of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839) no specifically distinct Sikh marriage ceremony seems to have come into being. Not a single marriage in Ranjit Singh's family was held through any such ceremony.

Sir Baba Khem Singh Bedi (1832-1905), the founder of the Singh Sabha at Amritsar, is known to have informed his followers that there was no special matrimonial ceremony prescribed for the Sikhs. They could sing kirtan of holy hymns and follow that with the Vedic ritual to solemnise their marriages.

The Singh Sabha movement of late 19th century, however, created a political climate that stimulated and compelled the Sikhs to forge a distinct cultural identity for themselves. One way to do that was to create counter-rituals to the prevalent Brahmanical rituals. This movement resulted in attempts to replace recitation of Vedic mantras with serviceable Gurbani texts for all ceremonial occasions such as birth, naming, betrothal, marriage and death.

The *lavan* shabads were not the earliest that came to be employed for marriage ceremonies. As noted above, it was Anand, popularly called Anand Sahib that came first to be employed first. Then came the following hymn:

*Whatever work you wish to accomplish, make it known to the Lord.*

*He will, then, resolve your affairs; the True Guru truly guarantees this Truth.*

*With the Saints, you shall taste the treasured Ambrosial Nectar.*

*The Merciful Lord destroys fear; preserves and protests His slaves.*

*Says Nanak, by singing the praises of the Lord, you'll perceive the Un perceivable Lord.*

It was later, in the year 1808, that the recitation or singing of *lavan* came to be employed as an accompaniment of the four circumambulations performed around the holy Guru Granth Sahib. This practice, as vouched by Dr Man Singh Nirankari, was introduced by Baba Sahib Dayal, founder of the Nirankari sect. Followed up by his successor, Shri Darbara Singh from 1855 on, he started an inspired movement for the popularisation of what came to be called the Anand Karaj ceremony.

This movement, however, encountered much initial opposition from Sikhs and Hindus especially of the Dhan Pothohar region. Prominent opponents were Sir Baba Khem Singh Bedi, Sir Nihal Singh Chhachhi and Divan Taurti Rai. At one stage, the Jathedar of Akal Takht as also the Head Granthi of Harmandir Sahib at Amritsar, declined to permit Anand Karaj to be performed in the compound facing the said Takht.

In spite of early opposition, however, the distinctive Anand Karaj ceremony started gaining ground and quickly became more and more popular. By 1909, its popularity became so obvious and the cry for its recognition so strong, that it almost assumed the status of an edict of the Guru Panth. As a result, the Viceroy's Imperial Legislative Council had to give it official recognition by legislating. *The Anand Marriage Act*. That is how what started as a counter-ritual became a legislative act.

The purpose of this Act was simply to provide legal recognition to this distinctive marriage-ceremony of the Sikhs. It did not legislate on other aspects relating to marriage, such as registration, divorce etc. In respect of all such supplementary aspects, the Sikhs have been subjugated to the Hindi Marriage Act.

However, need has now been expressed by a section of the Sikhs that the Anand Marriage Act should be updated to incorporate in it legislative concerns about all the supplementary issues relating to marriage. A senior Sikh advocate of the Supreme Court has already voiced this view in the media. However, a convincing case has yet to be built to show how the Hindi Marriage Act fails to serve the needs of the Sikh community about the aforesaid sundry issues connected with marriage. ☞