

The Indian EXPRESS

CHANDIGARH, THURSDAY, JANUARY 6, 2000

'Bikrami Calendar not true to Gurbani'

INTERVIEW

PAL SINGH PUREWAL

AN engineer [teacher] who emigrated to the United Kingdom in 1965 and worked there with Texas Instruments [senior engineer] PAL SINGH PUREWAL is the man behind the Nanakshahi Calendar. In 1974 he moved to Canada and has been living there since. His interest in calendars dates back to the late 1950s. He has brought out an almanac, published by the Punjab School Education Board, which gives comparative dates on a daily basis from 1469 to 2000 [CE] in the Bikrami calendar lunar and solar, the Common Era calendar, and the Hijri calendar as well as several other scholarly treatises on calendars. In an interview with HARTOSH SINGH BAL, he answers a wide range of questions regarding the Nanakshahi Calendar.

D Why is the Nanakshahi Calendar needed at all? People have used the Bikrami Calendar since the inception of Sikhism.

The Gurbani refers to several months of the Bikrami calendar and associates them with seasons. Unfortunately, the Bikrami calendar, unlike the Common Era calendar used throughout the world, is not attuned to seasons and with the passage of time aberrations are bound to mount. The year used as basis for the Bikrami calendar differs from the tropical year, which is attuned to seasons and is used as a basis by the Nanakshahi calendar and the Common Era calendar. In the Gurbani month of Poh has been described as one of cold weather but with time, this month instead of overlapping with January [December-January] will shift to February and then to March. The Bikrami calendar then will no longer be true to Gurbani.

Seasonal festivals have also shifted over a long period of time and will continue shifting. For example, Lohri in 532 A.D. was on December 18 and Maghi on Dec. 19 but now they fall in the middle of January. In another 2000 years, these will occur in the middle of February and their association with the winter season will no longer exist.

D Why shouldn't we then adopt the Common Era calendar which is in use throughout the world?

Every faith has its own identity, months of the year, the festivals we celebrate are all a mark of our cultural identity. After all the Gurbani refers to Chet not to March. What we needed to do was to adopt the tropical year, as is done to the Common Era calendar which conforms to seasons, and use it as a base for our festivals in a calendar that espouses our own identity. For the children growing up now it will be easy to remember the dates of Gurbani as they have been fixed in the new calendar. This will strengthen the new generation's association with the religion.

D How has the Nanakshahi calendar fixed these dates?

All we needed was to fix one date, which was the date for Baisakhi. There were many suggestions but what we finally agreed upon was to use the Baisakhi date of 1999, the 300th year of the Khalsa, as the pivotal date. All the Gurbani and seasonal festivals will continue to fall on the same day from now on according to the Nanakshahi calendar, and hence, since the Common Era calendar is also based on the tropical year, the dates will be fixed in the calendar as well.

The calendar [year] commences on the first day of Chet, March 14. The first five months have 31 days [each] and the remaining months have 30 days [each]. This like all aspects of the calendar is based on scientific principles. Summer months are longer than those in winter, as the number of days from the spring equinox to the autumn equinox is greater than the number of days from the autumn equinox to the spring equinox. In a leap year, the month of Phagan will have an extra day.

D Doubts have been raised about the dates of Bandi Chhor diwas, Holla Mohalla and Guru Nanak Dev's birth anniversary. The first two were meant to be associated with Diwali and Holi, respectively. Will that still hold true?

Look, there are just two choices. Either we remain true to the Gurbani or observe the association with Holi and Diwali. But in keeping with the feelings of the Sant Samaj on this point, it was already decided at the June 30 [1999] meeting of the SGPC calendar committee that these particular festivals for the time being will continue to be observed according to the existing practice.

The same thing is true with regard to another objection to the calendar. A Bikrami sankranti (sangrand) is observed when the sun moves from one sign [rashi] of the Indian zodiac to another. Once we use the tropical year as the basis, we are not using the sun's entrance into rashis as the basis for the beginning of a new month. The first day of each month in the calendar may be termed as the sangrant of the Nanakshahi calendar. The criticism that we have created another sangrant is erroneous because even in the Bikrami calendar [some] sangrants according to some Benares almanacs are different [every year] from those given in almanacs published in Punjab.

D The Nanakshahi calendar has become a source of controversy. Do you think that it was not properly deliberated upon.

I did not take the decision on my own. In 1994, I wrote to the then Jathedar Akal Takht Prof. Manjit Singh in this regard. In 1995, I attended a seminar at the Institute of Sikh Studies, Chandigarh, and presented my work on calendars. The Institute then formed a committee comprising scholars from three Universities in the state and other institutes. These scholars thrashed out various ideas and finally submitted a report to the SGPC in 1996. In May [March] 1998, the SGPC General House passed a resolution to implement the calendar.

D Are you disappointed by the row?

I have made the calendar, whether it is implemented or not depends on the Panth. There will be no disappointment even if it is not implemented, the real enjoyment lies in the research for such a project. I am optimistic that this calendar will be implemented either now or later as it is or with minor modifications.