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## EDITORIAL

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# IS SIKHISM A VEDANTIC PHILOSOPHY OR HAS ITS OWN UNIQUE PHILOSOPHY?

**I**n literature Sikhism is usually represented as syncretism (Islam and Hinduism) and lately it is being represented as sect of Hinduism based on Vedantic philosophy. My analysis of various interpretations of the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS) [1] in English and Punjabi available in the market are mainly literal translations without any consideration to interpret the original theme or philosophy in the Sabd. Moreover, Gurbani has been interpreted in the past and is being interpreted now in such a way to show that the Gurbani is based mainly on Vedantic philosophy [2].

Guru Nanak (1469-1539) laid the foundation of *Sikhi* (**Sikhism**) during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Period of Renaissance (between 14<sup>th</sup> century and 17<sup>th</sup> century) when the scientists were challenging some of the concepts of the church in Europe. During this period Guru Nanak was busy in challenging the ancient mythology and rituals in which the peoples of South Asia were shackled for centuries and were unable to express their free will in any aspect of their lives because their lives were controlled by their religious mentors. Guru Nanak promulgated a unique philosophy that is scientifically and logically very sound and thus having universal acceptability. His philosophy is termed as *Nanakian Philosophy* [3]. It was strengthened, enriched and preached by the nine succeeding Gurus to the *House of Nanak* called *Nanakian School*. The follower of this philosophy is known as 'Sikh' meaning 'learner'. The word '*Sikhi*' gave rise to the modern anglicized word '**Sikhism**' for the modern world.

Due to historical circumstances, after the death of Guru Gobind Singh there was systematic annihilation of the Sikh population by the Mughal rulers and their collaborators, the proponents of caste ideology. During the first quarter of the 18th century there were not many Sikhs left who could read or write Gurbani, not to speak of exegete it. It was during this period when spurious literature (mentioned below) was produced and Sikh places of worship fell under the control of *Udasis* and *Nirmalas*, who created their own version of Sikhism, representing it as a military wing of Hinduism by alienating Sikhs from the teaching of AGGS. Their ironclad control over Gurdwaras was further strengthened by the British conquest of Punjab. The Sikhs liberated Gurdwaras after a bloody struggle in the 1920s against the Mahants/ Nirmalas and Udasis, but

unfortunately Nanakian philosophy continued to be interpreted in terms of Vedanta by Sikh writers/ scholars trained in the British education system, in spite of the warning by Professor Puran Singh [10] and later on by Mehboob [4]. Currently, the situation has deteriorated to such an extent that at conferences and seminars on Sikhism even some Sikh academicians vie with some non-Sikh scholars to distort Sikhism.

Now Sikhism is being represented in such a way that many Sikh and non-Sikh scholars are labeling it as a sect of Hinduism. Misinterpretation of Gurbani and misrepresentation of Sikhism was started as early as during the Gurus' period. Misinterpretation of Gurbani is going on either innocently due to its improper understanding in its originality and entirety because of the strong influence of Vedantic philosophy on the scholars, or intentionally to meet certain motives [2].

Misrepresentation of Sikhism is due to the fact that the literature that appeared during 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century is full of controversial, inauthentic, unscientific, and illogical information. The irony is that the modern scholars have taken such information as true without verifying their verity with the Nanakian philosophy, science, and logic - the touchstones of truth.

The notable writings from the old literature on Sikhism are:

*Dasam Granth*, ~1721 CE. Supposed to be compiled by Bhai Mani Singh after collecting various Banis ascribed to Guru Gobind Singh;  
*Sri Gur Subha*, 1711 CE, by Sainapat;  
*Gur Bilas Patshahi 6*, 1751 CE, Anonymous;  
*Bansavelinama*, 1769 CE, by Kesar Singh Chibber;  
*Gur Bilas Patshahi 10*, 1797 CE, by Sukha Singh;  
*Parchia Pathshayan Das*, early 18<sup>th</sup> century;  
*Panth Parkash*, 1809 CE, by Rattan Singh;  
*Sarbloh Granth*, by Sukha Singh?;  
*Mehma Parkash*;  
*Prem Sumarg*;  
*Janam Sakhis* and *Chamatkars of Sikh Gurus* by various authors,  
*Rehit Namae* by various authors;  
*Hukmnamae* issued by the Sikh Gurus at various times;  
 etc.

These old writings contain some useful historical

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information, but from theological point of view, these are contrary to the Nanakian philosophy. I would like to add here views of some scholars about the old Sikh literature:

1. According to Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha [5] the old Sikh literature (of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) has been written according to the level of intelligence and beliefs of the writers. From this old literature we are getting a lot of useful information as well as that is contrary to the *Gurmat*. He has also emphasized that the most important thing is that there is a dearth of research scholars but on the other hand there are many, who are deadly against the research scholars and would declare them as atheists or the enemies of *Gurmat*.
2. Piara Singh Padam [7] says about *Rehit Namae* that: "It is a mistake to accept information, given in every *Rehit Nama*, is according to *Gurmat*. Many authors have written according to their own level of intelligence or under the influence of *manmat* (under the influence of Vedantic philosophy, ritualism, etc.), that are not right."
3. Similarly, Harinder Singh Mehboob [4] has reported that 85 out of 87 *Hukmnamae* recorded in the book, *Hukmnamae*, of Ganda Singh are fake.
4. Prof Puran Singh [10] wrote about misinterpretation of Gurbani during 1920s as follows: "It is to be regretted that Sikh and Hindu scholars are interpreting Guru Nanak in the futile terms of the colour he used, the brush he took; are analyzing the skin and flesh of his words and dissecting texts to find the Guru's meaning to be the same as of the Vedas and Upanishad! This indicates enslavement to the power of Brahmanical tradition. Dead words are used to interpret the fire of the Master's soul! The results are always grotesque and clumsy translations which have no meaning at all."
5. The critical analysis of the following observation of Dr Gopal Singh [8] clearly indicates that due to improper understanding of Guru's Word the Granth started to be worshipped more than read, uttered as a magical formula or a Mantram for secular benefits: "The confusion of interpretation has occurred because the Sikhs themselves, for historical and other reasons, have never seriously attempted a scientific and cogent exposition of the doctrines of their faith, based on the Word of the GURU-GRANTH and related to the historical lives of the Gurus who uttered it. Without reference either to one or the other, casual attempts made at the interpretation of small portions of the Granth have resulted in such interpretations being incoherent, lop-sided, and therefore unreliable. During the present (now last) century, several attempts were made by the Sikhs to translate into Punjabi the Word of the Guru, but all such attempts ended in an all-too-literal translation, leaving the seeker as uninitiated to the Guru's Word as he was before. And the word of the GURU-GRANTH became as involved and distant for an average reader as the Word of the Vedas, and it started to be worshipped more than read, uttered as magic formula or a Mantram for secular benefit than as a disciple of spiritual life for the achievement of ideals higher and beyond the world of sense and for the integrity of mind and soul in the world of the living."
6. Parma Nand [6] undermined the originality in the philosophy of Guru Nanak by declaring that ੴ is not a new word coined by Guru Nanak but he borrowed it from Upanishads because 'Oankaar' or 'Omkaar' has been used in various Upanishads. The only thing Guru Nanak did was to add numeral '1' to confirm the 'Oneness' of God, which is also found in the Upanishads.
7. Dr Suniti Kumar Chatterji, President, Sahitya Akademi has belittled Nanakian philosophy in the "Foreword" to the book, *Guru Nanak: Founder of Sikhism*, written by Dr Trilochan Singh held in high esteem as a scholar and published by Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Delhi [11]. This book was written on the eve of celebration of the Fifth Centenary of Birthday of Guru Nanak. It is ironic that the Trilochan Singh failed to notice Chatterji's following statement belittling Guru Nanak: "The people of the Punjab (and along with them those of the rest of India) became immediately conscious of the value of Guru Nanak's advent and his teachings after he began to preach to them; and Guru Nanak built up and organised during his life time a very important religious persuasion which was broad-based on the foundations of Vedantic Monotheistic Jnana and Puranic Bhakti. **The faith preached by Guru Nanak was nothing new for India, it was basically the old monotheistic creed of the ancient Hindus as propounded in the Vedas and the Upanishads - the Vedanta with its insistence upon Jnana or Knowledge of the One Supreme Reality. And this monotheistic basis was fortified, so to say, to put the matter in a simple form by Bhakti or faith as inculcated in later Puranic Hinduism. The Sikh Panth was nothing but a reformed and simplified Sanatana Dharma of medieval times.**"
8. The study conducted by Dr Joginder Singh [9] indicated that almost all early interpretations of JAP (Sodhi Meharban, Swami Aanad Ghan, Santokh Singh, Pandit Tara Singh, and many more belonging to various schools of thought) are dominated by Vedantic and Puranic philosophy.
9. Even today many modern scholars are not free from the influence of Vedantic and Puranic philosophy. It is apparent from the above discussion that the custodians of Sikhism and the Sikh scholars have

(Continued on page 26)

(Continued from page 4)

equated the philosophy of Sikhism to that of Vedantic philosophy. Consequently, it was quite safe for some scholars like, Prof Perma Nand and Dr Suniti Kumar Chatterji and many others to openly declare that there is nothing new in the philosophy of Guru Nanak since it is based on Vedantic philosophy, therefore, Sikhism is a sect of Hinduism. The irony is that many Sikh theologians accept that too.

Now the question before the Sikhs who are genuinely concerned with the uniqueness of Nanakian philosophy is how to counter this absurd and malicious propaganda that Sikhism is based on Vedanta? The answer lies in the AGGS, which categorically and unequivocally rejects not only all the essentials of Hinduism, but also all earlier religious traditions. Sikh scholars/ writers must emphasize what is written in the AGGS, not what others have written about Sikhism.

The Institute for Understanding Sikhism (IUS) has taken up the cudgels for projecting Sikhism as a unique religion since it is based on unique and original philosophy of Guru Nanak enshrined in the AGGS. Although it is a very expensive project of millions of dollars and a difficult task, the IUS has taken up this project with its limited resources of finance but with abundant moral support from some devout Sikh scholars, expert in various sciences, languages, history, philosophy, psychology, theology, etc. to discuss the uniqueness and originality of Nanakian philosophy on which Sikhism is based. From this issue of January 2006 a **Mini-symposium – Uniqueness of Sikhism** – has been initiated to discover step by step and topic by topic the truth about Sikhism.

Scholars, who are interested in this project, are requested to join the IUS to contribute their scientifically and

logically researched articles to represent Gurbani and Sikhism in their real perspective to the humanity of the Modern Science Age.

Besides, the devout Sikhs are request to extend their financial help to make this project a success.

Devinder Singh Chahal  
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