

IS THERE ANY PLACE FOR RITUALISM AND IDOLISM IN SIKHISM?

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ABSTRACT

Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh Religion, took positive steps to free the humanity from meaningless ritualism and idolism. The Gurbani is replete with verses endorsing the Guru's view. This article attempts to highlight some of the extraneous and unacceptable ritualism and idolism that have crept into Sikhism.

INTRODUCTION

Guru Nanak founded the most scientific and logical religion for humanity. It is a pity that like other religions, it is being practiced as a ritualistic religion by its followers. Moreover, in their writings many scholars of Sikhism continued to represent it as such. During the time of Guru Nanak idolism and a plethora of meaningless ritualism was the most essential part of religion of peoples belonging to various religions, sects, and cults [10, p 40]. Guru Nanak freed the people from meaningless rites. The ritualism and idolism has been condemned in Nanakian Philosophy as follows:

Ritualism:

*If they happen to know the nature of God, they will realise that all rites and beliefs are futile [2].
Rituals and ceremonies are chains of the mind [3].
Cursed be the ritual that makes us forget the Loved ... [4].*

Idolism:

Those who consider stone images to be God, their worship is wasted. Those who fall at the feet of the stone idol, their prayers and service are futile. All worship and adoration of the idols end in nothing [5].

Incarnation of God:

Burned be the tongue that says that God came to earth as a human being [6].

However, if one looks around carefully one will find that the number of rituals, and the variations thereof, and idolatry that have crept into Sikhism is reminiscent of 'Brahmanism', the very thing that the Gurus had condemned in the Gurbani incorporated into the *Aad Guru Granth Sahib* (AGGS) [1]. These rituals and idolatry are not only practiced by individuals in the

privacy of their homes but also by the most of the Sikhs in the Gurdwaras. This article deals with some of these rites.

I. RITUALS AND OTHER DEVIATIONS PRACTICED BY THE SIKHS

A. IN INDIA

1. Aarti: The practice of doing *Aarti*, in Patna Sahib (one of the five *Takhts*), described by Jatinder Singh [15] as follows, is surely against *Gurmat*: "Near the end, *Aarti* was performed. During the whole of this prayer a tray of candles was circled in front of the Guru Granth Sahib, as part of the worship. Flowers were distributed to the *sangat* to be thrown at the appropriate time towards the Guru Granth Sahib." Now if this isn't 'Brahmanism' what is this? If we can condone this practice at such an important Gurdwara, as Patna Sahib, then how can we disapprove of extraneous rituals at lesser-known shrines? The *Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee* (SGPC) cannot, in fact **should not**, drag its feet in correcting this practice at Patna Sahib. The fact that it (*Aarti*) has been traditionally performed there is no reason to allow the practice to continue.

2. Associating Sikh Gurus with Hindu Deities:

Evidently attempts are underway to associate Sikh Gurus and Gurdwaras with Hindu deities, practices and scriptures. Jatinder Singh [15] again reported his personal experience at Patna Sahib as follows: "I saw a striking painting...of the Sikh Gurus, with Sri Krishna. What was so striking was that their faces were all placed on the body of a cow...The statement made by this painting is unmistakably misleading, especially at the doorsteps of a *Takht*.

The particular link with Sri Krishna is also entirely misplaced...I found myself looking at a miniature idol of Guru Nanak...I unwittingly purchased a *Kara*... which had the inscription '*Jai Mata Ji*' with Hindu religious symbols inscribed on it!"

3. A New Ritual: At various Gurdwaras *Granthis* and *Kirtanias* have started a practice that is distinctly inappropriate and against Sikh teachings. Another eyewitness describes a scene in a Gurdwara celebrating the birth anniversary of Guru Nanak: "As the clock strikes the midnight hour, the *kirtan* is suddenly interrupted. Instead the *Ragis* begin chanting extraneous words like '*Guru Nanak teri jai hovay*' and '*Pariyan phull barsavan aiyan*'. They urge the audience to follow them, '*saaray bolo*'. Simultaneously the *Kirtanias* and the *sangat* start showering flower petals...The rituals go on for a few minutes before the *Kirtan* is resumed [12]." This eyewitness then goes on to rightly condemn this absurd ritual, as well as to ask some very pertinent questions.

4. Socks: Some *granthis* disallow devotees from entering a Gurdwara if they insist on wearing socks [18]. And yet it would appear that it is all right to wear socks if the devotee / visitor to the temple is the Queen of England. The less said about this petty issue the better it is.

5. Applying of the Kirpan to the Parshad midway through the *Ardas* and thereby having to break ranks while the *Ardas* is still going on [18]. This may not seem very important to some but is it really necessary to do so midway through the *Ardas* and thereby cause someone to break ranks?

6. Pictures/Portraits of Gurus: The practice of hanging pictures/portraits of Gurus in the Gurdwaras seems to be almost universal now. As if that wasn't bad enough (not to mention misleading) in some places "some devotees place flowers and place garlands on these photographs and some pay obeisance. This is nothing but *Murti Pooja* which is prohibited in our religion [18]."

7. Sikh incarnation of God? The claims of two eccentrics that they were reincarnations of Guru Gobind Singh (one at Anandpur Sahib and the other at Mukatsar) were laughable enough, but the claim of a certain Gurdev Singh from Canada, that he is God must surely rank high on the list of madmen [11]. It would be good to say that such individuals are best ignored, but the fact of the matter is that they attract, and lead astray, gullible and innocent Sikhs.

8. Goat Sacrifice at Hazur Sahib: An interesting letter in the *Spokesman* of March 1998 describes an incident regarding a he-goat sacrifice at Hazur Sahib, Nanded on *Hola Mohalla*. This, it seems, is an annual affair even though "no sanction of any Granth was behind this practice, and such practices were observed only in Hindu temples, but under Brahmanical influence somebody had introduced it at Hazur Sahib, and so far none had been able to stop it [17]." A good Sikh actually tried to stop the slaughter as it was against Sikh tenets but wound up in a police cell. The goat was, however, dispatched and "given salvation" on schedule. Once again, it is strange that the SGPC, *Akal Takht* and other relevant Sikh authorities have allowed this to be carried on at one of the five *Takhts* even though it is blatantly against Sikh tenets.

9. Glorification of Hindu Deities at Gurburb: The February 1997 issue of the *Spokesman* carries an interesting letter regarding the celebration of the birthday of Guru Gobind Singh at Rishikesh [7]. According to that letter the Gurdwara management committee of that place actually invited about 60 Hindu sadhus, bare chested and heads uncovered, into the Gurdwara. These sadhus interrupted the *Kirtan*, took over the function, chanted Hindu prayers and shouted slogans glorifying various Hindu deities. The entire letter must be read to appreciate the magnitude of the "crime" against *Gurmat* that the Gurdwara committee committed. No reason can justify such conduct.

10. A Bath for the Guru Granth Sahib: It appears that some Sikhs in Jammu "worship Guru Granth Sahib in the manner Hindu idols are worshipped" by "wrapping the volume (*bir*) in a plastic cover and bathing it [8]." That does not leave much difference between Sikhism and Brahmanism, does it?

11. Pooranmashi Prayers [14]: "In Dhapai village, at 'Nanaksar Thath' (Gurdwara), special *Gurbani Kirtan* is arranged on the night of *Pooranmashi* (Full Moon Day)...At many places in the Gurdwara, playcards carried this statement: 'Food will be served only if it is brought by the devotees otherwise the pots will remain upside down.'...A life-size portrait of Sant Mihan Singh was placed near Guru Granth Sahib...'Ragis' were singing self-composed refrains...Before *Ardas* too, this refrain was sung: 'Reveal Thyself Babaji'...' Is this our *Maryada*? Is this Sikhism?"

12. Gurdwara Managers and Tantrics: When the *Golak* of Kendri Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha was stolen the management committee of that Gurdwara "approached a 'tantric' baba in village Ghuri...to find

out the whereabouts of the thief with the help of a small box-like object...[16]". Can we trust such management committees to guide us in the way of *Gurmat*?

13. Picture-worship at Sri Darbar Sahib? It would appear that "at our central shrine Sri Harmandir Sahib, garlands of currency notes have been put on the paintings/pictures of Sri Guru Ram Dass Sahib displayed at many places...pictures of Guru Ram Dass...inside and outside the hall...decorated with expensive garlands and coloured electric bulbs [13]." Has anything been done about this?

B. In Malaysia

Let us now turn to some of the strange practices/rituals observed by the Sikhs in Malaysia:

1. Aarti Again: At least one prominent/popular Gurdwara in Malaysia carries on with the practice of doing *Aarti* with lamps in front of the AGGS. This is done despite the fact that the Sikh *Rahit Maryada* rules that "Rituals derived from other religions, such as...worship with lamps (*Aarti*)...is strictly forbidden [10, p 40]." However one could argue that if the practice is 'okay' for Patna Sahib, then it is 'okay' at other Gurdwaras.

2. Burning of Incense: During a recent *Akhand Path* at one of the Gurdwaras incense (*dhoof*) was burnt at the door of the Gurdwara. The 'fumes' from the incense were fanned towards each person entering the Gurdwara in order "to cleanse the 'ritually impure' person, who enters." The case of a menstruating woman was given as an example of a 'ritually impure' person to justify the practice.

3. Simultaneous Recitation of 'Jap': At the same *Akhand Path* (# B-2) a second person sits next to the *Pathi* (person doing the *Akhand Path*) and silently, or very softly, recited the *Jap* (commonly called *Japji Sahib*) over and over, in relays, during the entire *Akhand Path*. Is this acceptable or in keeping with the any *Maryada*? At one of the more favored Gurdwaras in Perak State (Malaysia) the demand for *Akhand Paths* is so great that more than two *Akhand Paths* are arranged at the same time. Where one *Pathi* recites aloud whilst the other *Pathis* sitting next to him read simultaneously at the same speed silently from other volumes of the AGGS. Does this serve any purpose? Is it allowed? Does it even make **any** sense?

4. Kumbh Rakhna: At some *Akhand Paths* some wet

sand is put in a tray (*thali*). Some wheat grains are then sprinkled on it. Thereafter, an earthen pot filled with water, and wrapped in a red cloth is placed on this sand. Later a coconut is placed over the mouth of the pot. It is said that if by the end of the *Akhand Path* the wheat germinates then the *Path* is accepted and it is a good omen, if not the converse is true. This whole ritual is called *Kumbh Rakhna*. I am not even sure what it means, or if there is such a term as *Kumbh Rakhna*. What I **am sure** about is that this is **not** Sikhism. The Sikh *Rahit Maryada* states that "no jug of water, coconut or ghee lamp should be placed near the *Adi Granth* [10, p 173]."

5. Non-stop Mool Mantar: At the behest of a 'holy' man some have been known to do just *Mool Mantar* repeatedly in relays over a period of 2 to 5 days. It is

Rituals and ceremonies are chains of the mind.

reassuring to know that at least one such family, which was conned into doing this, on being told that this was wrong, has vowed

not to do it again, and to be cautious in future.

6. Burning Lamp near the *Adi Granth*: Placing a burning ghee lamp near the AGGS, throughout the duration of the *Akhand Path*, seems to be an almost universal practice here. Resisting this practice is not looked upon favourably (personal experience). See the injunction mentioned in 'B-4' above.

7. Jug of Water near the AGGS: Even though the Sikh *Rahit Maryada* strictly forbids it (see injunction in 'B-4' above), the practice of placing a jug of water near the AGGS during an *Akhand Path* is universal in this country. Many individuals place their own bottles of water near or under the AGGS during the duration of the *Akhand Path* to use it as "holy" water to ward off evil.

8. Sprinkling Water: Whenever the AGGS is moved from one place to another one person sprinkles water in the path of the AGGS. The reason I believe is "to make the path pure and to ward off evil". The absurdity of this is again obvious.

9. Sach Khand: Every night, at the close of the day, after the last prayer, the AGGS is 'put to bed'. A special place (named as *Sach Khand*) has been prepared in almost every Gurdwara for this purpose. Many have air-conditioned these special rooms, or at least put in a fan. When questioned, one 'learned' *Granthi* replied, "If you need an air-conditioned room for your comfort don't you think *Babaji* deserves one?" I am told that

this practice of providing a separate room for the "rest and retirement" of the AGGS for the night is not only universal (and practiced in India too), however, it is an approved procedure in the *Maryada*. If this is really so then I for one find it **very hard** to reconcile it with our strict aversion to idol worship. A separate rest room for the night is difficult enough to accept, but the need to provide a fan or air-condition is too much to swallow. I hope some truly learned Sikh out there can explain the need for all this. Perhaps the SGPC/Jathedar Akal Takht would care to comment. Remember the Sikh Diaspora looks to them for guidance.

10. The AGGS in Procession: In recent years it is becoming fashionable to take out the AGGS in ceremonial procession during *Gurpurbs*. Several Gurdwara committees have started this practice, which was not in evidence before. This is reminiscent of the Hindu practice of taking out a chariot with the *moorti* of a deity in procession during certain Hindu festivals in this country. I believe that this practice is common in India also. What purpose does this serve? To me this again smacks of idol worship. Again, will some good Sikh out there care to comment?

11. Ceremonies surrounding the Nishan Sahib: In some of the Gurdwaras the *Nishan Sahib* (flagpole) is lowered down on every *Vaisakhi* and is washed in milk then it is clothed in yellow cloth and a new flag is unfurled before raising it again. What is the logic behind this? The stone/concrete base of the pole of the *Nishan Sahib* is invariably fenced off. Why? I have been told that "people sit on the base, children play on it, and this constitutes disrespect for the *Nishan Sahib*." **Really?** Isn't this being petty and carrying things a bit too far? I distinctly remember as a child that the concrete base of the *Nishan Sahib* in the Police Sikh Gurdwara in Ipoh was deliberately made wide, and of a suitable height, to serve as a place to sit, and sit everyone did. Were Sikhs of that era disrespectful of the *Nishan Sahib*? In India, at a historical Gurdwara in New Delhi, I have actually seen *Gursikhs* bowing and paying obeisance (*matha tekna*) to the *Nishan Sahib*. Is **this** what respect means? **If** it is then I want no part of it.

12. Sangraand: Some of the Gurdwaras celebrate *Sangraand* (the first day of each month of the Punjabi calendar) every month. The appropriate verse pertaining to that month from *Baran Mahn* is read to the *Sangat* (congregation). Is this in keeping with Sikh ideology?

13. Akhand Paths for Sale? There are some professional *Akhand Pathis*, who supposedly have completed

a certain number of *paths* for which no *bhog* has been done. Anyone in need of a *Path* can then buy these *Paths*. How convenient! How can a *Path* mean anything if the one requesting for the *Path* does not even listen to it? In another small Gurdwara the *granthi* is a well-known firebrand. He is in the process of doing 101 *Akhand Paths*. I presume that the purpose is to have "ready made" *Paths* for "emergency use" and for "sale". What's more, at the end of every *Akhand Path* the *granthi* changes the "clothes" of the "Babaji" (AGGS), puts on a new set of *romallas*, etc., burns incense (*dhoof*) around the AGGS and in the Gurdwara, and then starts a new *Akhand Path*.

14. Fatigued AGGS: The same firebrand *granthi* mentioned above, after completing an *Akhand Path* puts the *Bir* of the AGGS used 'to rest in the *Sach Khand*' since that *Bir* of the AGGS 'has been kept awake for 48 hours.' A second (and presumably 'fresh') *Bir* is then installed before starting a new *Akhand Path* and the whole process is repeated. This is certainly **not** in keeping with the tenets of Sikhism.

II. IDOLISM AS PRACTICED BY THE SIKHS

Are we treating the AGGS as an Idol?

Before answering this question it is necessary to look at and analyze some of the practices associated with the AGGS.

1. According to the Sikh *Rahit Maryada* [10, p 170]:
 - a) The AGGS should be opened each day...should not be left open at night...
 - b) The AGGS should be placed in an elevated position on a form or stool (*manji*)...Small cushions should be used to support it and a *romalla* (square of cloth) used to cover it between readings whilst it is open. An awning (*chanini*) should be erected over the *Adi Granth* and a *chauri* should be available for waiving over the Book.
 - c) A person who carries the AGGS should walk barefoot but shoes may be worn if circumstances make it desirable.
 - d) Whenever another copy of the AGGS is brought into the Gurdwara everyone present should stand up as a mark of respect.
 - e) If anyone walks around the AGGS or the Gurdwara it should be in a clockwise direction.
2. Although not specifically stated in the Sikh *Rahit Maryada*, it is customary to carry the AGGS on the head by the bearer moving the copy from one place to another.

When Guru Hargobind became Guru he donned the two swords of *Miri* and *Piri* and thereby became the spiritual as well as the temporal leader of the Sikh community. The treatment of Guru Hargobind by the community thereafter had all the trappings of royalty. This practice obviously was carried on by his successors. Guru Gobind Singh, prior to his death, ordered that after him the *Sabd* incorporated in the AGGS would be the eternal Guru of the Sikhs. Did this declaration make the Granth as a Guru?

Traditionally the AGGS had become our "living Guru". Treating the living human Gurus as 'True Kings' (*Sacha Padsha*) was inevitable and only right by our reckoning. However, to treat the AGGS (i.e. the book or volume) as one would treat a (human) king just does not seem right. If one carefully reads the injunctions of the *Maryada*, as given above, it **does** appear as if we are treating the AGGS like a living human.

Even if Guru Gobind Singh had used the exact words "living Guru" when referring to the AGGS there can be no doubt that he was referring to the *Sabd* (Word) (i.e. the essence of the words contained in the AGGS.) There was certainly no intention of encouraging the Sikhs to treat the 'book' like an idol. Whilst revering the scripture is not only acceptable but also desirable, worshipping it like an idol is not. In fact no copy of the scripture anywhere in the world is accorded more respect than the AGGS. Sometimes concern has been expressed that the treatment of the scripture is so excessively reverential that it amounts to idol worship [9]. The practice mentioned in Section 'II. 9.' under the heading of *Sach Khand* lends weight to this assertion. Certain practices attached to the Guru Granth Sahib which do not seem consistent with the teaching of Sikhism have occasionally crept into Sikh devotionism. There is a practice of putting the scripture to bed, like a statue of Krishna or some other Hindu deity [9]. The only difference between idol worshippers and Sikhs seems to be that in the case of the former the idols are carved out of stone, whilst in the case of the latter the 'idol' is in the form of a book. Of course the real difference is that in the case of Sikhism the Sikh Gurus **explicitly** forbade idol worship, and it was not their intention to allow the AGGS to be worshipped as such. However, somewhere along the line we have reduced the book to the level of an idol, and forgotten that it is the essence of the scripture that we hold in reverence.

Often when writing about the AGGS some writers tend to omit the word 'the' when referring to the AGGS (e.g. "It is written in Guru Granth Sahib..."). It is almost as

if the intention of the writer is to say that the Guru Granth Sahib is a person with a proper name. A similar omission of 'a' and 'the' is noted when referring to the *Khalsa*. I am not sure of the reason for this, but perhaps it is a very 'Indian or Punjabi thing' since I notice it only in the writings of Indian writers. This is only an observation and it is not my intention to hurt anyone's feelings.

Now to answer the question "Are we treating the AGGS as an idol?" From the foregoing passages it **does** appear that we are, even though that was not the intention of the Sikh Gurus. The placing of the AGGS in an elevated position in the Gurdwara, the bowing to the sacred volume, and the making of offerings to it (in the form of money commonly) as is the practice now is unlikely to change; nor is there a need to change it, since it **does** provide a point of focus during our prayers (akin to an altar), so long as we understand that we are **not** praying to the book *per se*.

CONCLUSION

It is evident from the discussion that too many extraneous rituals and practices, condemned in the Nanakian Philosophy, have crept into Sikhism. The number of such practices are certainly on the increase not only in Malaysia but in other countries wherever the Sikhs have settled. This condition is still more deplorable in India where ritualism and idolism is going on in the sanctum sanctorum, the Darbar Sahib and the Akal Takht at Amritsar. How can we put a stop to all this? To whom should we turn to? Turning to the SGPC or to the Akal Takht is not going to solve all our problems. The SGPC is often referred to as the 'Central Sikh Parliament' and the Akal Takht is considered to be the highest authority on Miri-Piri. It is an impression of the Sikhs in general that both the authorities are very powerful to put Sikhism on the right track and their decisions are binding upon all. That, however, is a myth. It does not appear that both the institutions command the respect of all the Sikhs. It has been well-established that many of their members are ill-qualified to make sensible or learned decisions for the welfare of the Sikhs in general and dissemination of Sikhism and Gurbani in their real perspective. Only when well-respected, highly qualified, and learned Sikh scholars (who are well versed in Sikh scriptures, history, natural sciences, Social and Political Sciences, philosophy, languages, law, administration, etc.) are in a position to guide the Sikhs then majority of the Sikhs will accept their decisions. There is no dearth of such qualified

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Sikhs but no one cares to elect them.

At this point it may not be entirely out of place to suggest that the Sikh *Rahit Maryada*, published by the SGPC, needs drastic revision before it is accepted as a code of conduct. To me at least there are some rules/injunctions contained therein that are inappropriate/irrelevant, and should, therefore, be either eliminated or modified for the Sikhs, who are now settled in places that are quite different in respect of climate and social orders than that of the Punjab and India. I am sure there bound to be a lot of controversy on the revision of the Sikh Code of Conduct but it has to be done for the guidance of the Sikhs of the Science Age.

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