

WHAT TYPE OF SIKHISM IS REPRESENTED AT WESTERN UNIVERSITIES?

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ABSTRACT

It is remarkable and commendable that within a short span of time, the first generation of Sikh immigrants to the West, has endowed several chairs for Sikh studies in the USA, Canada, and England to project Sikhism in its true perspective based on the Nanakian philosophy enshrined in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib. Unfortunately, the work published by these Sikh chairs on Sikhism undermines the uniqueness of Nanakian Philosophy and diffuses Sikh identity. It is incumbent upon the Sikh intelligentsia in general and the sponsors and advocates of Sikh-chairs in particular to evaluate this work! Does this kind of research carried out by these chairs promote Sikhism in its real perspective?

INTRODUCTION

In the *Sikh Review* of February 2006, pp. 56-59, Profs Raghbir Singh Basi, I J Singh and Harbans Lal, and Dr Inderjit Singh (group of four) have advocated for the establishment of Sikh academic chairs in Western universities. However, the editor of the *Sikh Review* in his cautionary comment questioned the benefit of such chairs by pointing out the “contribution” of Profs Pashaura Singh and Harjot Oberoi.

I want to make it clear at the outset that the purpose of my rejoinder is not to diminish or undermine in any manner the importance of establishing Sikh chairs at Western universities for the academic study of Sikhism. It is remarkable and commendable that the first generation of Sikh immigrants to the West has endowed several chairs for Sikh studies in the USA, Canada, and England to project Sikhism in its true perspective based on the Nankian philosophy enshrined in the Aad Guru Granth Sahib. Nankian philosophy is unique among the world religions. Academic study of Sikhism could be very effective in projecting the uniqueness of Nankian philosophy and propagating its universal message of love, respect, justice and equality for all. Now, some of these Sikh chairs are in operation for several years. It is time for the Sikh community to evaluate the work published by holders of these chairs by asking whether it fulfils the objective for which the Sikh chairs were endowed? Is their research based on the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS), which is the only authentic source of the Nankian philosophy or on spurious literature that is written by others to undermine the uniqueness of Nankian philosophy [8]?

The Group of four says: “We do believe, however, that in general an endowed Chair at a university is an excellent and also the least expensive way to have a place on the

table in the hallowed halls of academia.” I agree with this statement without any hesitation. However, judging from their enthusiasm for Sikh chairs, one would suppose that they have an added expertise in Sikhism to evaluate the work done at the University of British Columbia, University of Michigan, University of California at Santa Barbra, and the University of Toronto. Could these gentlemen point out what these chairs have done to enhance the understanding of Sikhism in its real perspective for Sikhs and non-Sikhs?

Has Prof I J Singh or Prof Harbans Lal ever critiqued the work of Profs W H McLeod, Pashaura Singh, Harjot Oberoi, and Gurinder Singh Mann? If they have, what do they think of it? They say, “An endowed Chair is the highest honor that can be bestowed upon a professor, who has already accumulated an excellent track record in the specialty area.” If that is so, could they point out Harjot Oberoi or Pashaura Singh or Mann’s “already accumulated excellent track record” before they became the occupants of Sikh chairs? To my knowledge the one “common outstanding qualification” of the three is their relationship to McLeod, who supervised Pashaura Singh’s thesis and was consultant to Oberoi and Mann for their PhD theses.

It is deplorable that they fabricated false statements to buttress their argument:

“While Muslims swordsmen conquered for the faith, Christian missionaries were willing to explore tentatively on the frontiers of empire to bring the good news to even a few more souls. ... In our own Sikh tradition, beginning right from the time of our Gurus, Sikh theologians were sent to the centers of higher learning such as the famous Benaras Hindu University for research and dialogue.”

Could these scholars tell us when did the Islamic armies invade Indonesia, Malaysia, Nigeria and Tanzania? Would they enlighten us as to what happened to the aborigines of Australia, Americas and Africa? Do they know that Maharaja Dalip Singh, a ten years old boy was kidnapped by the British colonists and put in the custody of a Presbyterian missionary couple, Dr & Mrs John Logan. The young boy was totally cut off from his mother and other relatives, brainwashed and then converted to Christianity and, his long luxurious *Kesh* were presented as a trophy to Mrs. Logan [3].

Now, who were those Sikh theologians who were sent to the famous “Benaras Hindu University”? Could the four gentlemen name a single Sikh who was sent by the Gurus to the famous place--Benaras Hindu University? Did this university or anything like that exist at the time of the Sikh Gurus? What are the names of Gurus who sent Sikh theologians to this university? Don't they know that Guru Nanak rejected all the essentials of Hinduism: incarnation of God, caste system, transmigration, karma, hell, heaven, gods, goddesses, and idol worship? Guru Nanak also rejected the method or approach of attaining salvation preached by the Semitic and the Indian religions. Besides, he rejected Sanskrit as well as its script as a medium for the propagation of his philosophy. Keeping in view the above facts a question arises: Why would any Guru send Sikhs to Benaras to learn the ancient philosophy, which has been rejected by Guru Nanak? For example:

ਬੇਦ ਕਤੇਬੀ ਭੇਦੁ ਨਾ ਜਾਤਾ ॥

Neither the Vedas (four Hindu texts) nor the four Kateba [Semitic texts: the Torah, the Zabur (Psalms), the Injil (Gospel), and the Quran] know the mystery of the Creator of the cosmos.
AGGS, M 1, p. 1021.

ਨਾਨਕ ਨਿਰਭਉ ਨਿਰੰਕਾਰੁ ਹੋਰਿ ਕੇਤੇ ਰਾਮ ਰਵਾਲ ॥
ਕੇਤੀਆ ਕੰਨ ਕਹਾਣੀਆ ਕੇਤੇ ਬੇਦ ਬੀਚਾਰ ॥

Nanak says: *The only sovereign is the Formless One; the other numerous incarnations like Rama are insignificant. The numerous stories about Krishna and the numerous ideas of the Vedas are also insignificant.*
AGGS, M 1, p 464.

And Guru Angad elaborated and amplified Guru Nanak's critique of the Vedas as follows.

ਕਥਾ ਕਹਾਣੀ ਬੇਦੀ ਆਣੀ ਪਾਪੁ ਪੁੰਨੁ ਬੀਚਾਰੁ ॥
ਦੇ ਦੇ ਲੇਣਾ ਲੈ ਲੈ ਦੇਣਾ ਨਰਕਿ ਸੁਰਗਿ ਅਵਤਾਰ ॥
ਉਤਮ ਮਧਿਮ ਜਾਤੀ ਜਿਨਸੀ ਭਰਿਮ ਭਵੈ ਸੰਸਾਰੁ ॥

It is the teachings of Vedas, which has created the myths of sin and virtue, hell and heaven, and karma and transmigration. One reaps the reward in the next life for the

deeds performed in this life — goes to hell or heaven according to the deeds. The Vedas have also created the fallacy of inequality of caste and gender for the world.
AGGS, M 2, p. 1243.

In recent past I wrote a critique of Harbans Lal's three articles in which he portrayed Sikhism as an appendage of Hinduism [9]. He has not bothered to reply. He says that the Gurus sent Sikhs to Benaras for “research and dialogue.” It is ironic that he himself is reluctant to have a dialogue on his own controversial writings on Sikhism. He ought to follow Gurus' example and come out in the open to resolve the controversy. As for I J Singh is concerned his expertise on Sikhism is limited to what he learned “on his grandmother's knee” or the writings of Sir Sobha Singh's son, Khushwant Singh, whose views about Sikhism change from day to day [7]. Khushwant took a tour of Punjab with that notorious killer K P S Gill urging him to kill Sikh young men [7]. But after reading *Reduced to Ashes: The Insurgency and Human Rights in Punjab* [5], the same Khushwant laid the entire blame on K P S Gill: “K P S Gill, You have Questions to Answer [7, 10].

Profs McLeod [8], Oberoi [6] and Mann [8] locked up their theses until their objectives were achieved. Do academic scholars hide their work from public scrutiny? Isn't research for public good? McLeod and Pashaura Singh [8] bitterly complain that Pashaura Singh's unpublished thesis was copied and distributed among Sikhs. What is wrong with that? Did he not get PhD for that thesis and didn't the Sikhs pay for his research?

Besides, isn't it true that the Sikhs paid for the research work done by McLeod's associates? Do Sikhs have the right to attend seminars or conferences where they present their work? Why don't they allow Sikhs, who criticize their work, to attend such seminars? If Sikhs can't participate and discuss the research on Sikhism then who should? Isn't their research on Sikhism for Sikhs? A scholar who ignores the criticism of his/her work is no better than a propagandist is. For the sake of academic integrity of a scholar, he/she must be open to debate his/ her work! Since the group of four have argued for the establishment of Sikhs chairs, are they aware of a book published in 2003 by Dr Doris Jakobsh under the direction of Harjot Oberoi (British Columbia University, Canada): *Relocating Gender in Sikh History: Transformation, Meaning and Identity* [4]? Using Talib's literal and incorrect translation of Aad Guru Granth Sahib, Jakobsh distorted Guru Nanak's ideology to argue that Guru Nanak was for keeping the status quo; Nanak supported the rulers; Nanak wanted women to bear sons, especially those of noble birth; and Nanak was biased against women. Moreover, this work degrades the Sikh community, especially Sikh-Jats and the leaders of the Singh Sabha Movement. She seems to upset over why did the Sikhs declare that they are

not Hindus and ask for the legal recognition of Anand marriage ceremony? Do these four gentlemen want this type of research on Sikhism? They claim that the Sikh academic chairs would help the overseas Sikh community get better acquainted with their neighbors or vice versa. Does Jakobsh's research accomplish that? Did any of the holders of Sikh chairs challenge her work? On the contrary Pashaura Singh applauded her work [12] in a publication he co-edited with Prof Barrier:

“Notwithstanding these criticisms, Jakobsh's book still stands out as a major contribution to Sikh studies and to the field of gender studies in general. It is written in an engaging style. It is likely to generate a lively debate within the Sikh community on the position of women in Sikhism. I strongly recommend it to both specialists and lay readers.”

Since Prof Lal and Prof I J Singh have assumed themselves the role of “Ashoka's missionaries” for Sikhism, have they ever challenged her work? They need to wake up and smell the rat.

On what basis do these four gentlemen argue that Sikhs should endow more chairs, when in fact they seem to have no idea how many publications misinterpreting Gurbani and misrepresenting Sikhism are coming out from such chairs? Let us look at the case of a newly established chair at the University of California at Riverside. Dr Kapany was heavily involved in funding of this chair, which now is occupied by Prof Pashaura Singh. Singh's background is worthy of bringing out: He was hired as an assistant professor at the University of Michigan, but was demoted to a lecturer and he worked in that position until the time he moved to UC, Riverside with the rank of a full professor. Is it fair that someone being demoted from assistant professor to lecturer at one university and then hired as full professor at another university, everything else as being equal? Prof Pashaura Singh has published “Recent Trends and Prospects in Sikh Studies,” in *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, 1998, 27(4), pp. 407-25. Can anyone explain to the Sikhs what is academic about this article and how does it advance the understanding of Sikhism in its real perspective? Another good example of their poor performance is of textual analysis of Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS). With respect to Mann's work, his thesis rests on the manuscripts of schismatic sects of Baba Pirthi Chand Sodhi and Baba Mohan Bhalla [2]. Interestingly Bhai Gurdas had called the former “*mina*, crooked” and the later mentally “*kamla*, deranged” [13]. Moreover, the *mina* manuscript is extinct. Then how is it possible to conduct textual analysis of an extinct manuscript? Further, in 1994 at a Sikh congregation when people questioned Gurinder Singh Mann about his “locked up” thesis, he gave his favorite answer: “*I am a historian not a theologian.*” In that case how could someone who is not a Sikh theologian, is

qualified to perform textual analysis of Aad Guru Granth Sahib? Furthermore, Profs Manjit Singh Ahluwalia and Balwant Singh Dhillon, and Pritam Singh have refuted Mann's work [1, 11]. I have not seen Mann's response to date. The same is true about Prof Pashaura Singh's textual analysis of Aad Guru Granth Sahib.

Dr Kapany's financial contributions in the name of his late beloved mother are commendable. In doing this *seva* (service) of setting a Sikh chair at UC, Riverside, he must carry over on his shoulders a high degree of responsibility and must exercise a degree of oversight. His failing to do so has forced me say the following: I would urge the Sikhs to put a moratorium on the establishing new Sikh chairs. Let us dispassionately evaluate the work produced by the already established Sikh chairs.

CONCLUSIONS

We know that research in any field is the determination of facts. Obtaining facts and their further analysis to drive home the truth through careful investigation is no easy skill to acquire. The integrity of a scholar is fundamental to objective research. Research done with a bias or motive leads to erroneous and unsustainable results. In other words, a research scholar is the disseminator of truth, and not a propagandist. The words of Guru Nanak are very pertinent to research, academic freedom and integrity.

ਝੂਠ ਨ ਬੋਲਿ ਪਾਡੇ ਸਚੁ ਕਹੀਐ ॥

ਹਉਮੈ ਜਾਇ ਸਬਦਿ ਘਰੁ ਲਹੀਐ ॥

O Priest (pandey)! Do not tell lies, speak the truth; cure your self-conceit by imbibing the Word (wisdom).

AGGS, M 1, p 904.

ਅਪਨੀ ਪਰਤੀਤਿ ਆਪ ਹੀ ਖੋਵੈ ॥ ਬਹੁਰਿ ਉਸ ਕਾ ਬਿਸਵਾਸੁ ਨ ਹੋਵੈ ॥

One loses credibility by one's own actions and no one trusts him/her again

AGGS, M 5, p 268.

ਕੂੜ ਨਿਖੁਟੇ ਨਾਨਕਾ ਓੜਕਿ ਸਚਿ ਰਹੀ ॥

Nanak, ultimately falsehood is defeated and the truth triumphs.

AGGS, M 1, p 953.

A scholar must keep in mind that a violent terrorist act harms only a limited number of innocent people whereas terror of the “pen” harms a whole community of people.

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Editorial Note:

Dr Baldev Singh has raised a very good point that it is time to evaluate the work of the Sikh chairs in Western countries since a continuous controversy is going on about the contributions of the incumbents of these chairs. I just came across the following statement of Prof I J Singh and Laurie Bolger in their review about "Historical Dictionary of Sikhism":

"In his outline the teachings of the Gurus, as he has done in many of his writings, once again McLeod casts Nanak as a teacher of the Sant Tradition. This diminishes the revolutionary nature of Guru Nanak's message and its enduring effect on Indian society." (Abstracts of Sikh Studies, 8 (2): p 108.). Yet I J Singh has no problem in describing this book as ***"a worthy addition to the excellent series by Scarecrow Press."*** It is worth noting that in the same review published in the *Sikh Review* (April 2006, pp 89-93) I J Singh has added another paragraph in which he lauds this publication by strongly recommending it to ***"Gurdwaras, academic and public library collections"***.

If Prof I J Singh, one of the four scholars, who have advocated for the establishment of Sikh chairs in the Western universities, accepts the damage done to the revolutionary nature of Guru Nanak's message (Nanakian philosophy) by Prof McLeod, then he could easily understand that how much damage is being done by member of McLeod's schools in such chairs?

Devinder Singh Chahal
Editor-in-Chief