

“DASAM GRANTH”: A Red Herring?

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JUST ABOUT A YEAR AGO I was at a conference; its goal was celebrating 300 years of Guru Granth. In attendance were people of all religions and also a fair number of Sikhs.

For the 30 minutes or so that I spoke, I never once referred to the “Dasam Granth.” But during the Q & A the first question from a Sikh in the audience was “What is your take on the Dasam Granth?”

It is not that I had not thought about the matter. It has ‘intruded on our consciousness’ by the intensity and variety of battles over it within the worldwide Sikh community that occurred at fairly regular intervals. Even the Akal Takht, the seat of temporal authority in Sikhism, had issued a rather gratuitous edict banning any discussion on the matter, but discussion has not ceased; it remains even livelier today than before the edicts. But my topic was Guru Granth, not Dasam Granth; moreover, with a mixed audience of Sikhs and non-Sikhs, opening this Pandora’s Box on our internal dissensions would have been inappropriate. I gently tried to point that out but perhaps the questioner sensed a weakness on my part for he became even more insistent that I respond.

The controversy over the authenticity, authorship and importance of the so called ‘Dasam Granth’ continues to rile some people in the community and what I say now is not likely to settle the dust. Today I take on this issue and hope that, given the contentious reality at this time, it does not turn out to be self-destructive for me. I offer you a view that is largely non-scholarly, but neither historically inaccurate, or inconsistent, nor devoid of some common sense.

Why now? Because the controversy has gone on long enough and shows no light at the end of the tunnel. And because a pillar of the community with an enviable track record, Professor Darshan Singh, has been vilified, pilloried and abused all over the world and then just as staunchly defended by others.

Matters of honest disagreement that we should expect in any good and honest people are hard to isolate because they are intertwined and covered in personal innuendo and vilification. In the past decade or so, there has been a plethora of writings on Dasam Granth by writers on both sides of the controversy. Click on the site *Sikh Spectrum* or a host of others to delve into the nitty gritty of the debate. The most trustworthy *secondary* sources of our history and tradition, among others, Punjabi University’s *Encyclopaedia of Sikhism* and Kahn Singh (Nabha)’s *Mahaan Kosh*, tell me this:

The longish (almost 10 page) entry in the Encyclopedia is by C. H. Loehlin and Rattan Singh Jaggi; certainly their academic credentials, especially of the latter, are unquestionable. During the evacuation of Anandpur by Guru Gobind Singh, many of his own writings and those of poets in his court were lost. After an effort of several years, Mani Singh salvaged what he could from wherever he could. Thus was the first recension of the Dasam Granth compiled - some two decades after the passing away of Guru Gobind Singh.

Based on copies of this, several recensions appeared some years later, many with significant variations.

Kesar Singh Chibber author of the historical documents *Bansavlinama* and a *Rehatnama* asserts that the two tomes, Dasam Granth and the Adi Granth (that later became Guru Granth in 1708), sat separately during Guru Gobind Singh's lifetime. When asked by Sikhs to combine the two, the Guru declined stating that the "Adi Guru Granth is the root book; the other is only for my diversion. Let this be kept in mind and the two stay separate." This remains the bedrock principle in Sikhi and the two thus can never be equated.

During the Singh Sabha days in the last century, the Khalsa Diwan explored the authenticity of the writings in the Dasam Granth. Copies of Dasam Granth that could be located – numbering 32 — were collected and a group of eminent scholars worked them threadbare from July 5, 1895 to October 17, 1897. The recension based on their findings was first published in 1902. This committee identified what exactly is the writing of Guru Gobind Singh and what is likely not.

Parsing authorship is not a simple matter. It requires an in-depth understanding of language, culture and context, and remains a matter where scholars will spend a life and more and even then remain unsure. But why and how exactly did such a massive problem of authorship arise in the first place?

History tells us that at least 52 prominent poets made their home under the patronage of Guru Gobind Singh. They composed a lot of poetry as did the Guru in many of the Indic languages extant at that time. That's what poets do. I would imagine that, like us, these poets, too, were occupied by many ideas, with a whimsical muse sometimes. They did not spend all day in worship and prayer but did all the things that people do — some of them even playful. And their poetry showed it. The so called Dasam Granth, therefore contained much that was the Guru's serious contribution, mixed here and there with what was neither serious nor from his pen. It never was an easy matter separating the wheat from the chaff and, despite the best efforts of scholars, still not so easy a matter.

I often wonder, for instance, Dasam Granth speaks eloquently of the past life of Guru Gobind Singh, and from that has emerged the legend of Hemkunt. But no Guru ever talked of a previous life. We don't ever venerate any places where any Guru(s) might have visited or worshipped before they became Sikhs. For instance, history tells us that (Bhai)Lehna, before he became a Sikh and later Guru Angad, went on yearly pilgrimages to Hindu holy places as did Amardas. But once they came into the fold of Sikhism they never again spoke of the need of a pilgrimage anywhere; Sikhs do not regard those sites as holy. It is inconceivable to me that Guru Gobind Singh would deliberately go against the unbroken tradition of Sikhism in such a weighty matter. So why should we mix history and mythology to convert Hemkunt into a pilgrimage? But that's what we do when we interpret literally what is in the Dasam Granth.

Remember that the Guru, himself, called his writings "a play and diversion" and denied it the status that he himself accorded to the Adi Granth.

In a play that has diversionary writings of many authors should we be shocked to find sexual innuendos and references? I think not. They are part of life and no Guru taught us to abandon life. Keep in mind that it was the traditional Indian culture that produced the erotic art of Khajuraho. Yet the same society, as we know it today, will outdo the Victorians in prudery. Why should we react like deer caught in headlights when such stories of old find

their way into another book of stories? Except for certain parts, this book – Dasam Granth – has many stories and was not designed to become the Guru.

There are also a different set of questions that come to mind. Why is Dasam Granth being promoted as scripture at a level with the Guru Granth? Clearly, such promotion creates division within Sikhs and is contrary to Guru Gobind Singh's directive. Who benefits from seeding dissension among Sikhs? Is there a political agenda at work here directed by the forces of *Hindutva* in India?

The controversy seems to be driven by a visible and highly vocal minority with an agenda of destroying anyone who does not quite toe their line. And now there are charges floating around that some hotheads have doctored the evidence to suit their purpose and push their arguments. This hardly helps. Believe me I am no acolyte of Darshan Singh or anyone else.

Let me digress. Ever since I was in high school, I have loved to write short essays on a variety of topics. Early on, I discovered that my essays fared better if I dressed them up with some appropriate citations from well known or even anonymous authors. And so I did. But sometimes no apt quotation would come to mind. I would then construct a short epigrammatic sentence that I would credit to some author in the confidence that the teacher would likely be unfamiliar with the citation or its source. Remember these were pre-Google days.

I recall a quotation from George Bernard Shaw that I once used. It went: "He who can *does*; he who cannot *teaches*." So I embellished it with the words "and he who cannot teach teaches teachers." My words seemed to blend perfectly with those of Shaw. It flew by the teacher.

I suspect poets routinely play such games with words; they are wordsmiths after all who delight in word play.

I would be absolutely surprised if such addenda and additions do not exist in what we call Dasam Granth.

Let scholars and lexicographers continue to parse the text; many a doctoral theses will surely result. Dasam Granth is an important part of Sikh literature and should be treated as such with respect. That is the bailiwick of scholars and I leave it to them.

For most of us – lay Sikhs – suffice it to know that even though parts of it we accept as Gurbani, Dasam Granth has absolutely no place alongside the Guru Granth. It is not the Guru. So decreed Guru Gobind Singh when he sealed the Sikh Cannon in 1708.

The controversy remains what it is – a red herring.

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