

Need to Correct the Hindu Perception of Sikhism

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From time to time Hindu-Sikh relationship suffers diverse kinds of strain for various reasons. For a decade and more, a vicious debate has been built-up, in a subtle but premeditated framework, by certain non-Sikh organizations pretending to propagate the message of Guru Granth Sahib, the Dasam Granth and the Sikh religion. The problem with Sikhs is that they do not believe in semantics and hardly ever care to understand or scrutinize the designs of the hidden forces. The ordinary Sikh regards all humanity as friend and loves to socialize with the Hindu as well as with other fellow human beings. This sentiment is not reciprocated.

Confusion: It is a well know fact that Swami Dayanand, - the 19th century reformer – was born and brought up in Gujarat, educated in Madhya Pradesh and traveled to Bengal, but his movement, Arya Samaj could not take roots anywhere in these liberal regions. In contrast, after listening to his non-dual philosophy, his ideas about the equality of castes, the Sikhs of Punjab invited him to deliver his sermons because, three centuries earlier, the Sikh Gurus, by propagating their tenets had already expanded the vision and horizon of the people here. The perennial knots of caste system were considerably loosened and the gaps between the so-called lowly and the high-caste had been minimized. Assuming this love and regard as the weakness of the people here, when besides eulogization of Hinduism and declaration of its supremacy, Swami Dayanand started using low level abusive terminology for the Sikh Gurus, especially Guru Nanak, the fountainhead of Sikhism. Then the Sikhs awoke from their slumber of complacency. The result was severe opposition of the Swami, which ultimately divided the harmonious life of Punjabis in two warring camps who, upto day, are not at peace with one another. So much so that Bhai Kahn Singh had to write a book – ‘*Hum Hindu Nahin*’.

After six-seven decades of this episode, in the same way W.H. Mcleod, a priest at Christian College, Batala, studied Sikhism after learning Punjabi language. He wrote a book on the religion of Sikh people. Almost all the Sikh scholars pampered him, and honours were heaped upon him. Many well-meaning historians of this land became his staunch followers. With the props of his fame, knowledge of English writing and, above all, his agility, when he started the condemnation of the *Janam Sakhi* which are foundation of Sikh belief and further tried to establish that Guru Nanak never went out of Punjab, let alone Assam in the east and Baghdad and Mecca in the west, the Sikhs got a rude shock. Meanwhile, having completed task given him by his masters he left Batala and the confusion created by him is being suffered by Sikh community upto this day. His followers are still on the job which he left incomplete, and the Sikh studies are almost at a stand still.

Misinformation: During the last two decades, many societies have been created, many institutes came into existence, many self styled professors and scholars came to plough the field of Sikhism; and many a Missionary College being run with the financial help of ‘*sangats*’ in the West have emerged. But instead of bringing into focus the egalitarianism of Sikh thought and its all-embracing down to earth doctrines, the Sikh principles are being blurred and befogged by

creating unsavory controversies and offering lopsided solutions. Last 15-20 years have not witnessed much spontaneous writings on Sikhism; they are rather *reactions* to the complimentary or derogatory pieces written by Sikh or non-Sikh scholars. Most of the Punjabi knowing scholars in the Universities and Colleges of Punjab seem to have a firm belief that for reaching Amritsar one has to undertake journey via Moscow.

The study of philosophy of Sikhism, which is deeply rooted in Sri Guru Granth Sahib and other relevant textual sources, has remained relegated to the back seat. Indeed history is being taught as philosophy, with the result that our so-called preachers stand no match to the well equipped philosophers of the East as well as the West. Hardly five percent Sikh scholars deal with philosophical ideas, and unfortunately they are pressed hard to fall in line with the above majority and Sikh philosophical studies are almost negligible, because it is nowhere on the agenda of either SGPC or any other cognizable institution. Less said the better about the Sikhs factions and their factional fights, who are supposed -and expected - to meet the challenges being posed by ever spreading apostasy in Punjab on the one hand and 'Sanatani' ideology or well knit Hindu philosophy on the other.

It is well known that ancient Indian thought has assimilated in itself not only many contradictory thoughts but also the cultures of pre-Aryan Nigreto, Proto-austroliod, Austroloid, Dravid, Mangoloid, Shaka and Hun races. However this assimilation is given the name of broad vision and vastness of the heart, but how this impinges on literary, social and political levels is another story. The Sikhs need to delve deep into the history of Indian religions and their critical philosophical appreciation. Darkness can be dispelled only by lighting a lamp. The lamp of knowledge alone can dispel darkness; only the broom of knowledge can cleanse our inner selves of the weeds of helplessness and fears deeply entrenched in the minds and hearts of the people. By knowledge - or *gyan* - I do not mean for the time being the very higher knowledge or the *brahmgyan*, but simply information and its deep but objective scrutiny.

Despite declaration of the distinct status of Sikh religion by the Supreme Court of India and the Minority Commission of India, some pseudo-scholars are busy in the amalgamation of Sikhism with the Hinduism. Such scholars generally put forth their postulate by saying that Hinduism is a great banyan tree and Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism are just its branches, leaves and flowers. In fact even the *prima facie* scrutiny of this analogy easily brings forth the hollowness of this claim. Could somebody name a branch of a tree as the stem of the tree or could a root be presented as a flower? These all are the parts of the same tree but every part has its own identity and its distinct quality. If it is so then why a hue and cry against the separate identity of Sikhism and why the protagonists of the homogeneity of Indian religions and people are trying to vitiate the already surcharged religious atmosphere by enacting mischievous pranks?

Pan Hinduism: In November 1995 a seminar was organised by the Vishav Hindu Parishad at the Mavlankar Auditorium in Delhi. The theme of the seminar was 'Unity among Religions originated in India' and the religions included in it were Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. I was also invited as a representative of Sikhism, but somehow I felt caught myself in a dilemma of whether to go or not to go there. The purpose of the seminar was obvious that the same refrain of "Hinduism as a big banyan tree and all others are its branches and flowers" will be replayed. And then the organisers would expect me to endorse their view point. Of twenty-

seven speakers listed, twentyone were to speak on Hinduism, one (myself) for Sikhism, three Buddhists – His Holiness Dalai Lama, Dr. S. Rimpoche of Sarnath and one *bhikshu* from Bodhgaya for Buddhism, one Sadhvi Sadhna Ji for Jainism and one scholar of Gandhian studies, Anand Shankar Pandya. Seeing the card I could very well realise the presence of the cat in the bag which was to be thrown open on the day of seminar.

After deliberating a lot in my mind I finally decided to go and put up my views on the theme fearlessly. Having reached the venue I found that the lectures were going on. I was given a seat at the dias where His Holiness Dalai Lama, Professor Rimpoche, Swami Vasudev Nand, known as Jagatguru Shankaracharya of Jyotishpith, Acharya Dharmendra Ji, Professor Vijay Kumar Malhotra, Sadhvi Sadhna Ji, the disciple of Acharya Sushil Muni, were already sitting. When I glanced around the expansive hall and its balcony, I could find no Sikh there except myself. In the first row of the hall I could clearly see Ashok Singhal, the VHP chief, along with important leaders of Bajarang Dal and Shiv Sena. On the one side, after the first row, were about 20-25 press reporters and photographers sitting in their seats reserved for them.

The Banyan Tree: In fact my anxiety increased further. The speaker eulogising the great 'Banyan tree' soon finished and the floor was handed over to Professor Vijay Kumar Malhotra (who had become B.J.P. M.P. after defeating Congress candidate Dr. Manmohan Singh, the ex-Finance Minister of India). By this time I also got composed and had decided from where to start and where to finish. Professor Malhotra started with a factual statement that in the 1951 Census of India the Hindus were 88% of the population of India but now the figures of 1991 Census tell that they have been reduced to 85% i.e. they have incurred a loss of 3%. "This is a matter of grave concern. We should import vigour to the Hindu pride and should undertake programmes for spreading Hinduism far and wide" etc. When he was speaking, the author of these lines requested the person conducting the stage that he be given time after the learned speaker had finished.

My request was readily accepted. Speeches were going on in chaste Hindi and, since 1983 when I shifted from Banaras Hindu University to Punjabi University, Patiala, this was first occasion on which I could make full use of my knowledge of Hindu, Sanskrit and the literature pertaining to ancient, medieval and modern period. Picking up some quotes and episodes from *Mahabharat*, *Ramachritmanas*, *Mimansa Shastra*, *Gita*, etc. I explained the concept of *dharma* therein and, then, on the basis of Guru Granth Sahib, put forth the distinct thought frame of Sikhism. Purpose behind this preliminary exercise was to make the audience understand that the speaker is not only Professor of Sikhism at Punjabi University, he knows equally about the intricacies of Hinduism and other native religions.

Expressing my heartfelt sympathy with the statement of Professor Malhotra, I said that this really is a matter of great concern for all of us that in India itself the number of Hindus was dwindling. Direct impact of 3% was three crore. We are fortunate that Shri Shankaracharya Ji was also present in this assembly. But one mad idea was pressing me very hard that maybe this decrease in number is due to the fact that this great race of India is still clinging to the thousand of years old traditions, particularly the obsolete *Varna* arrangement. Perhaps the people wished to escape the heavy rod of inequality under this system, are running helter skelter. As a matter of fact, other religions are told, time and again, that their religious codes were outdated now they are no

more wanted and hence should be discarded. Is everything fresh in this great religion-Hinduism; Should the innocent people not be freed from the artificial fetters of caste compartmentisation? Should we not abolish the tradition of calling the people first rate, second rate, third rate and fourth rate citizens? Should we expect that, in this august gathering, honourable Shankaracharya Ji would give some positive guidance on this issue?

Sovereign faith: Sikhism has already abandoned this caste classification about five hundred years ago. Another surprising spectacle here before me was that, from this platform, the idea of unity is being floated with all fanfare, but the diversity of the Indian people, and their respective cultures, are unacceptable to the majority community of India. Diversity in fact is the basic position and condition of unity. The crux of this whole exercise seems to me that under the veil of unity we are being forced to swallow and digest 'uniformity'. This is unacceptable. This is not possible because in whole of the creation God is accepted as all - pervasive, yet none of the objects - animals - humans is similar to other entity. Everyone is unique and different beautiful pieces of craftsmanship of the Lord. If a group of people planning to go against Nature thinks and forces others to think that in the vast meadow known as India, there should be a uniform vegetation, and animals grazing should also be the same, then I feel their dream can never be transformed into reality. Every Sikh, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist or Jain feels proud of being Indian. However, if any single group would try to become champion and custodian of Indianness and would further endeavour to humble others because of the sheer strength of numbers, then indeed that group will be considered as the biggest enemy of India and Indian nationalism!

Through a well-planned *Hindutva* programme, the Sikhs are reminded that since words: Ram, Krishna, etc. have been used thousands of times in the Guru Granth Sahib, and there is mention of many other gods and goddesses in the Sikh literature, the Sikh religion is nothing but an offshoot of Hinduism. Innocent and less-informed people have started accepting this premise, and are attending the assemblies of Rashtriya Sikh Sangats. One question may be asked of these hysterical nationalists. The whole world know that Christ was born in a Jew family and thus Christianity sprang out of Judaism. In the Holy Qur'an and prophets of Judaism and Christianity have been remembered with great respect and regard. Could the zealots of the new found Indian nationalism say on this basis that the Muslims are Jews, or the Jews are nothing but Christians? All middle-East Religions are accepted as different and distinct from each other. But the punishment to Sikhism for using the names of Ram, Krishna and the inspiring episodes of their lives is that Sikhs should brand themselves as Hindus! The relaxation is that if they do not call themselves Hindus they should declare themselves Kesadhari Hindus! Keeping away the primary sources of Sikhism, the episodes and texts from the secondary sources are being put forth for inciting and misleading the Sikhs.

But the pivot of Sikh thought frame is Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the only Indian scripture which, after having salvaged the Indian people from the bottom of ritualistic delusions, teaches us the art of dignified living. Guru Granth opens the gates of equality for all so-called high and low people. To respect somebody and to accept him as God are altogether different aspect. It is one of the basic premises of Sikhism that God is self born and, by his nature, cannot be born or die in a human form – as an *Avatara*. Yet Sikhism does not show any disrespect to the mythical gods of great epics who are held in veneration in the hearts and minds of people for various temporal acts of benevolence, and came to be hailed as gods and goddesses. Says Guru Amar Das – *Jagah*

Jugah ke raje kie gavahi kar(I)avtari – SGGS: p. 423). No amount of incitement can compel Sikhs to heap any disrespect upon these great men of India and if it so happens, the responsibility will solely lie upon these hysterical followers of pseudo nationalism and upon their mentors sitting at their headquarters.

Stunned! After my above statement there was pin-drop silence in the hall. The organizers started feeling as if they happened to invite a wrong person. However, one dimension of this episode was appreciable: none obstructed my speech and no applause or hue and cry was raised there. I advanced my arguments on the basis of my study of Indian Philosophy at the Department of Philosophy of Banaras Hindu University. I had to remind the audience that history of Indian Philosophy accepts the starting points of philosophy from the *Rigveda* and feels that it stopped somewhere with the commentaries of Ramanuja, Madhava, Vallabhacharya and Nimbark, in the 13th and 14th centuries. From there we jump direct to the twentieth century wherein we are told that Tagore, Aurobindo, Prof. K. C. Bhattacharya, Dr. Radhakrishnan, and Mahatma Gandhi, et al. have been great philosophers, though this may be said about them that instead of giving any new philosophy, they have only given a grand exposition to an already existing Indian Philosophy.

Would somebody tell me as to why in the history of Indian Philosophies a place, even equal to a footnote, has not been provided to Sikh philosophy which was created by the Gurus after accomplishing a successful experiment upon Indian masses from 1469 (the year of Guru Nanak's Birth) to 1708 (the year of the demise of Guru Gobind Singh)? What type of brotherhood or unity is it? Sikh philosophy has obliterated the age-long proverb prevalent in India that neither the sacrifice of an elephant nor that of a horse is necessary. As and when some sacrifice is to be offered, the poor lamb is put up at the sacrificial altar; god is represented as killer of the poor ones: *gajam naivah hayam naivah vyghram naiva cha naiva cha. Aja sutim balim dadyat daivoh durbal ghatakah!*

Sikh Philosophy: One might ask what type of this separatist thinking is under whose direction Sikh Philosophy has not been included in any curriculum of any philosophical studies in India. People's should be utilised in strengthening of the beautiful diversity of Indian cultures and religions instead of using it for rousing the communal fervour.

The ritual of thanksgiving was performed by Narendra Mohan, Editor-in-Chief of *Dainik Jagran* Group of newspapers and he tried to convince me that the objects of the seminar were not those which I had understood. Ashok Singhal, VHP Supremo expressed his happiness over spade-a-spade presentation of my thesis. After me, Professor S. Rimpoché, an eminent scholar of Buddhist studies, also endorsed my viewpoint over unity and diversity and stressed upon the organisers that without caring much for homogeneity we should strengthen the diverse religions and cultures of Indian cosmopolitan society. The net result was that, in spite of the presence of a battery of correspondents and photographers, no reporting of the occasion was carried out (or allowed to be carried out) by any paper. This is VHP approach toward unity and integration of India.

Wake-up Call: In this context, I feel tempted to address the Sikhs as well. The powerful Sikh institutions, instead of becoming religion-centred have been reduced to the status of fiefdoms of

certain chosen personalities. They revolve around them. Who is unaware of the fact that, during last three decades, through a well planned manner, the historical shrines of the Sikhs have been changed into the big halls which have become a show window for displaying gaudy marble work? These halls have come up as a question mark over the Sikh historiography and the faith and devotion of the Sikh youth who are reading something else about these holy shrines, and thanks to the *karseva*, they are seeing them in altogether different shapes. Thousands of years old Jagannathpuri temple, Tirupati temple and the Meenakshi temple of Madurai are being maintained by Hindus in their *original* shape with the help of modern technological advancement, and I appreciate their this endeavour of saving art and culture.

However, it is a matter of grim disappointment that Sikhs could not keep intact their shrines constructed just two centuries back. The other bad luck of Sikh community may be summed up in the writhing pain being suffered by the so-called leaders of Sikh institutions for the catching hold of some "chair" of power, and those who are holding these chairs are out to save their prized possessions. During the last five-six years, the Sikh community must have spent at least ten billion rupees merely on festivities, processions, Marches, Welcoming or Thanksgiving rituals. But could anybody tell about the results achieved? The worst type of political precedents have been set up in the last few years of Sikh politics and, maybe, one is unable to find so low a level of politics in the whole history of Sikh political affairs since the very inception of Sikhism. In the countryside, 90% youth have clipped-hair and talk about consumption of alcohol. Almost all the films being produced in Punjabi are named after the Jat of Punjab and the heroes of those films are shaven. No Committee or Institute, upto this day, has taken any notice of this sacrilege, or cautioned people to see that the man belonging to the soil of Punjab having 'Singh' suffixed to his name must have a special appearance - with hair and beard. The Sikh psyche and intellect are being pushed to abysmal depth by the fact that the definition of a Sikh is being asked from the Government! Now, after the declaration by the Minority Commission about the distinct identity of the Sikhs, does it not become incumbent on the Sikh leaders to demand suitable amendments in the Constitution?

