

A Barren Controversy (Part II)[®]

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* For reference, please see **SR July & Aug. 2002: Sir VS Naipaul's Misconstruction of Sikh History.** **SR Nov.2002: Sir VS Naipaul's Blindspot?** **SR April 2003: Whose Blindspot: Naipaul's or Gurtej Singhji's?**

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I CHARACTERISED THE controversy raised by B. S. Mahal as barren because it was hinged on to a chance remark and was not based on any thesis that I had presented in the matter of Ali's sword. I had already replied to it explaining my position on the net. It was raked up again in *The Sikh Review* without even conceding the obvious and self-evident points brought to the notice of Mahal and his readers on the net. I still do not get reprieve though, for lack of genuine points of contention, the controversy has become somewhat more barren.

I had deliberately not commented on some of the points raised before as the Sikh view about these was very well known. I suppose there is no alternative to 'discovering the wheel' again. I beg the reader's indulgence for harping on the obvious.

Of Humility: I was also quite enamoured of Nietzsche when I was studying for my graduation. I read every word written by him and eagerly awaited for the translation of his last work, *Will to Power*. I was really grateful to my friend in USA who sent a copy to me after a long wait lasting till eternity, as it then seemed (three months in mundane reckoning). I still like Nietzsche's resounding phrases which sound nice on the eardrums but, in effect, are just 'sound and fury signifying nothing'. Soon thereafter, I discovered the hollowness of his philosophical formulations and on closer consideration saw them opposed to the profound doctrines of *Sikhi*. I found myself rejecting his new ethics, which glorify war (even when without a cause) as sublime activity and the will to power as the primary virtue.

I have no sympathy for his atheism, 'dead are all gods - came to an end long ago (*Thus Spake Zarathustra*). About woman he believed that she was a mere "child bearer" and at best "a dangerous toy." I consider that shameful view for one who was born of a woman. His statement, "not mankind but superman is the goal" seems diabolical in the background of humankind's experience with his prominent disciple, Hitler.

His glorification of war is so warped: "good war halloweth any cause," and so also his thundering pronouncement about "will to war, will to power, will to overpower." (*The Young Nietzsche*, London 1912, p. 235.) My views are somewhat closer to those of Voltaire to whom "war is the greatest of all crimes."

His morbid preoccupation with death is inexplicable and does certainly constitute a denial of God's Will to accept which is the core of *Sikhi*. He approves of Silenus whom he quotes as having defined the best fate for humankind, "the best of all - not to be born, to be nothing. The second best is to die early." His morbidity extended to believing it to be, "the highest philosophical thinking — all married men are suspects." For a Sikh an honest householder's life is a passport to salvation.

His digs at Christianity are also notorious. Of Christ he observed, "he died too early, he would have revoked his doctrine had he reached a riper age." In the remark about humility, quoted by Mahal, he appears to be denigrating the *Sermon on the Mount*, which talks of the exaltation of the humble. His is not the last word on the subject of modesty. Schopenhauer articulates another aspect of the western secular view. He has something interesting to say on the subject: modesty "is a hypocritical humility by means of which in a world swelling with envy, a man seeks to obtain pardon for excellence and merit from those who have none." (*The World as Will and Idea*). We in the East do not agree with these wisest men of the secular West.

Seeing the vastness of the Creation and His clear reflection in every created being, the Jagat-Guru Nanak was overwhelmed, filled with wonder and was plainly awe struck. A warrior on the path of God, he made humility his mace (*garibi gada hamari*). He preferred to be known as 'lowly amongst the lowest.' (*neechn ander neech jaat neechee hoon at neech*). A tale has it that a certain elevated saint begged of God to give him the gift of a quarter kilogram of humility. God expressed inability saying, 'only one kilogram of humility is all that is there in existence. Three fourths of it has already been granted to Guru Nanak. Half of the remaining is bestowed on the rest of the world.' Guru Nanak considered humility to be an ornament of the human race. (*nivan so akhar khaven gun jehva mania mant*). He considered pride or *haumai* as core of the most serious problem of humanity and the greatest of its snares.

Sri Darbar Sahib, the central Sikh shrine is topographically located at the lowest point in Amritsar. Guru meant it to be symbolic conformation and concrete manifestation of the Sikh doctrine of humility. That in many ways is in recognition of a fact in a universe in which the world itself is but a speck of dust. **Self-denigration an Eastern cultural trait, is not born of a longing for exaltation but is a genuine expression of a human being's true status in the mind-boggling expanse of the Universe.** That is how knowing persons in the centuries gone by, have understood it. This much should be assumed to be above controversy and expression of humility should not be construed into something sinister just to add sauce to an argument.

Of Prophets and Prophet-hood: Simplest answer to Mahal's objection could be to quote 'at His door stand lakhs of Muhammads' (*te dar lakh Muhammada*) but that would not clarify the issue to the general reader. Mahal has once again erred in treating the *Janamsakhi* as history instead of a theological statement that it is. That is the basis of his misconception. He is thus succumbing to a trick played upon us by certain western Batala based Christian-missionaries-cum-scholars who first assumed it to be history and then went about tearing it apart to show how bad a history it was. The purpose of the *Janamsakhi* is to elaborate the doctrinal position of Sikhi on various issues relevant to spiritual development of humankind.

The purport of "*Gosht mian mittha*" [See *Puratan Janamsakhi*, (Ed.) Bhai Vir Singh, Khalsa Samachar, Amritsar, (7th edition) April 1971, pp.132-135] particularly is to clarify Guru Nanak's position on the status conferred on Muhammad Sahib in Islam. It has been very perceptively stated that 'in Islam one may take liberties with God but none with the Prophet.' Discourse with Mian Mitha addresses this peculiarity and has nothing to do with the status of a prophet in general.

Mian Mitha politely solicited Guru Nanak's views on the importance of Prophet in Islam by making a statement to the effect: 'Primary position in Islam belongs to God. Second in importance is the Prophet. Anyone who accepts that is alone entitled to recognition at God's Court.' This indeed is the position of Islam. Several verses from the Koran could be culled to substantiate it. Some of them are: "Believers - have faith in Allah and his apostle" (Battle Array); "Paradise is for Muslims alone" (Ornaments of Gold); "True faith is Islam alone" (The Greeks); "True believers are those who have faith in Allah and His apostle" (The Chambers); "the only true faith in Allah's sight is Islam" (The Imrans); "He that chooses religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted of him, and in the world to come he will be one of the lost" (The Imrans); "Islam is the only true religion, Muhammad is the only Prophet."

Islam, it must be understood, is the religion nearest to Sikhism but that is only a relative term. In as many ways it differs very widely and fundamentally from it. One such difference is over the position of the prophet and the consequent special status of 'the only valid faith' conferred on it. The Guru is of the opinion that to God, who is the God of all humankind, alone must go all the importance. So in his reply he likens the prophet to a doorkeeper at His entrance. The Guru also affirms that according to his own belief, mere formal assertion of allegiance to any faith is of no avail in the eventual reckoning. Salvation is a matter of rigorous ethical self-discipline and self-transformation through the practise of truth, humble service to humankind. His grace is still necessary and cannot be taken for granted by merely chanting a prescribed incantation. In such a situation mere verbal announcement of allegiance (in the form of Kalima as suggested by Mian Mitha) is of no importance whatever. So the Guru's appropriate and cryptic reply to Mian Mitha was, 'to God alone goes all the importance and the prophet is like a doorkeeper at His door. You can be accepted at His court only if you revise your fundamentals in accordance with His Will.'

The status of Guru in Sikhism still remains to be discussed. That may also be done to complete the answer, though the stance of Sikh theology is well known.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines prophet as "a teacher or interpreter of the supposed will of God." God reveals himself through the Guru (Teacher) is Nanak's basic observation in "Var Asa" M1 SGGs page 466 (also at p.1024 *Maru Sohle*). Significantly, he describes himself as 'an unemployed singer taken into service (by God).' In "*Gauri ki Vaar*", the Fourth Nanak also claims divine sanction for the message of Nanak (p.309 see also p.306), 'recognise that Nanak was commissioned by God the Creator Who is his refuge.' This is also the import of Guru's word being actually the word of God. (See SGGs pp. 628, 1275, 944 and 795) 'Whatever I say is in conformity with the Will' (SGGS p.763). All his successors upheld the prophetic status of Guru Nanak as also the concept of divine sanction for his mission. The Bhatt contributors to the *Guru Granth*, notably Kirat (p.1395), Mathura (p.1408) and Harbans (p. 1409) emphatically uphold the proposition. Two other profound doctrines of the Sikh faith are derived from this thesis: that God himself is the only Guru eventually (see SGGs pp. 278, 759, 864, 442, 53 and 79) and that Gurbani through which God's will is articulated, is therefore the Guru (SGGS p. 442).

The same dictionary defines a philosopher as "a person engaged or learned in philosophy or a branch of it," and a poet as a "writer of poems, a person possessing high powers of imagination or expression, etc." A prophet claims direct knowledge of

Ultimate Reality and a capability to instruct humankind according to its will. A prophet cannot be called a poet or a philosopher without committing the most serious impropriety – or even blasphemy. Poets and philosophers, respectable as they certainly are, are at best a step above the common folk and, even there, they share the ground with myriad others equally respectable. It is therefore no honour for a prophet to be called a philosopher or a poet. This was the basis of my impugned observation and I believe it is valid in every conceivable way. 'I do no honour to You an Emperor, by addressing you as `mister,' says the Gurbani, (*tu sultan kaha hau mian teri kavan vada*).

More about the sword of Ali: Sirdar Kapur Singh's intention is clear from the very fact that he has chosen to write the article on the subject. By no stretch of imagination is the article written to discredit the proposition. He further makes it clearer by choosing to name it, "An Islamic Sacred Heirloom at the Kesgarh Takhat." His key statement on the subject is as unequivocal as any can be. He says, "Bahadur Shah I made a present of it to Guru Gobind Singh who was personally present at the coronation ceremony on July 23, 1707. CE. at Agra, saying the following words:

"Holy Reverence, this is the most precious treasure in the possession of the Imperiously Mughals. We have been keeping and guarding it so far. But its proper place is in the hands of an exalted holy person of your status so that it may remain as a memory of the holiest in the hands of the holiest."

The rest is clear from the way he musters evidence for the proposition. The qualifying phrases he uses, a couple of which are quoted by Mahal, are the usual stock phrases relevant to scholarly approach and mindset. Last, but not least, who can claim to know the truth? Who can take such liberties in view of the implications of jesting Pilate's remarks 'but what is Truth?' A scholar cannot use the language of arrogant Nietzsche but is obliged to be humble in presenting what he conceives to be true.

Of 'Professor of Sikhism': In my previous reply, repeated twice, I had given somewhat detailed history of the institution of Professor of Sikhism. A summary is all that is relevant here. The state fully controls education in India. It has a character and a strong bias based and supported by a determined, sinister permanent cultural majority. This majority has a history of abject slavery of centuries and feels religiously, politically and socially threatened by any expression of distinct identity possessing a definable culture. It has come to believe that existence of such identities militates against the unity and territorial integrity of India which country, in a special way, is deemed to belong to the cultural majority exclusively. It has evolved a strategy for obliterating the perceived threatening identities. One aspect comprises of distorting the culture and history of such nations as seem to offend.

The Sikh people value their heritage. They believe it will make a significant contribution to the evolving world culture. In creating the institution of Professor of Sikhism, the Sikh people have provided themselves a symbolic instrument whereby they seek to safeguard their vital cultural and historical impulses as these have come down to them from their ancestors. 'If there be no twigs in the garden, we will gather the thorns for under even adverse circumstances, we must have a nest' (*nahin jo*

tinke chaman me to khaar chun lenge, kisi tarah to hamai ashiana banana hai) They have appointed their own interpreters of faith. Professor of Sikhism is one of them.

That is the basic purpose for which colleges and universities are created by states and professors are appointed to do the actual job. Just because the Sikhs lack the State power to do the same, must they also deny themselves the interpreters of their choice? My predecessor, the great Sirdar Kapur Singh was formally associated with Khalsa College, Bombay by a special arrangement, and I have similar relationship with Guru Gobind Singh College, Chandigarh and other educational institutions run by the Sikh Educational Society. Sardar Gurcharan Singh Tohra who has been the president of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee for a quarter of a century, is also the President of the Sikh Educational Society. This is the best that the people I represent are able to manage in the circumstances of their “political slavery.”

There is no need to be very pedantic about formal designations in these circumstances. We are not talking of divinely ordained institutions. It is the people’s concern and will that create them and that is how the present institution has come into existence. There are no circumstances in which a people are not entitled to appoint their own persons to defend their cultural mores. Validity of the institution created by the Sikh people depends upon the sound methodology it employs, quality of work it turns out and its acceptance within the *panth*. No honest person should be raising unbecoming and invalid questions about it. By and large the perception about Pashaura Singh and his kind within the Sikh *panth* is that they serve the interest of an overbearing State and follow the foreign missionary scholars propped up by it. That they serve doubly alien interests and distort Sikh history and culture appears to be a demonstrable proposition. ‘When the gardener himself set my nest on fire, the very leaves committed to protect me started fanning the flames’ (*baagban ne aag di jab ashiaane ko mire, jin pe takia tha vahi patte hava dene laga*) Mahal is quite right in leaving me to deal with their comments as best I can. I will try to cross the river when I come to it.

I hope I have met all the points raised by B.S. Mahal.



[This discussion is now closed. Ed. SR]