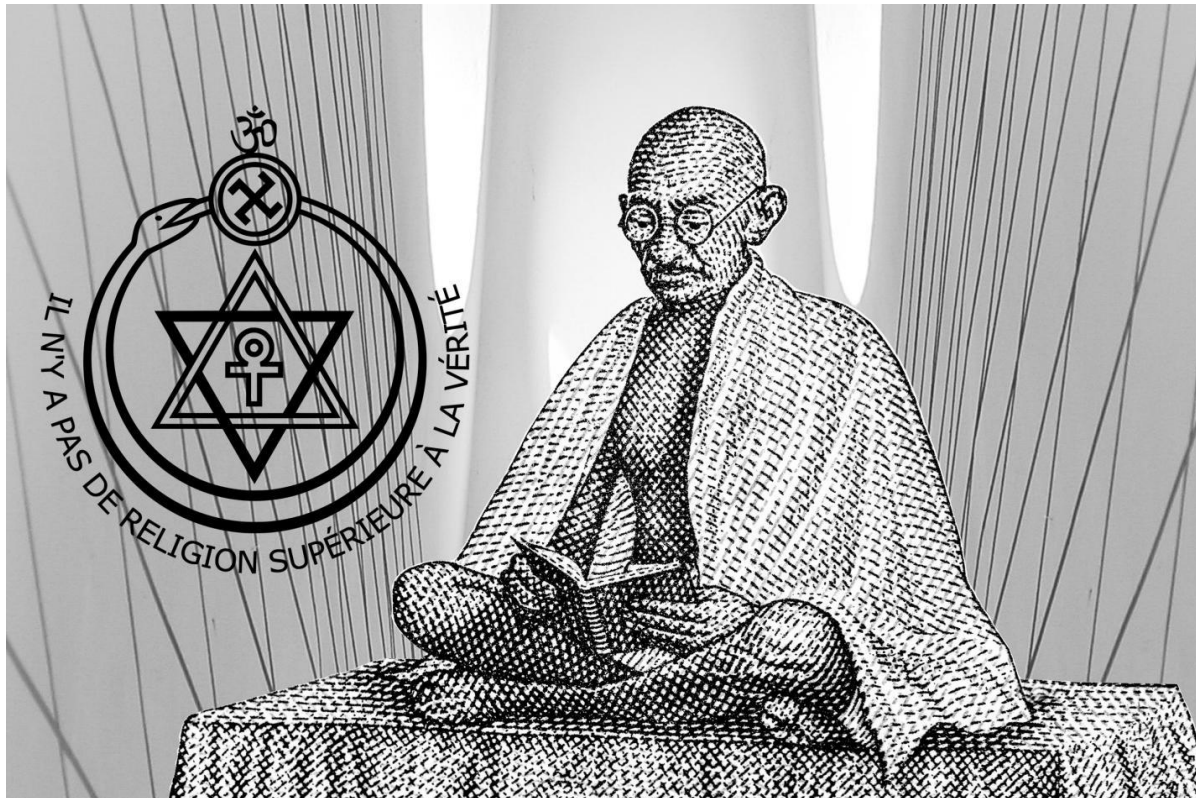


Gandhi – Sikh Relationship - 2

Commentary # 2

Meeting the Sikhs

Part 1



Mahatma Gandhi's contact with the Sikhs is limited on the surface. But don't be misled here: It is lacking introspection at depth. You will see shortly.

M. K. Gandhi lived in South Africa from 1893 to 1914. While there we encounter him mentioning "Sikh" in his writings (or speeches) --strangely in the subject matter on Hinduism.

In March 1905, while in Johannesburg Gandhi began delivering a series of four lectures on Hinduism at the Masonic Temple, under the auspices of Lodge of the Theosophical Society. This meeting was chaired by Major Peacocke, who actually functioned as its vice-president.

On March 4, 1905, Gandhi delivered his first speech. He said:

"The Hindus themselves claimed that the date of their scriptures was veiled in the mist of antiquity, the scriptures themselves being God-given. As against that, some Europeans contended that the scriptures were not more than 3,000 or 4,000 years old. Mr. Tilak, a well-known Indian Sanskritist, has, however, calculated that, from certain astronomical observation made in these works, they were at least 10,000 years old, although they were only committed to writing some three hundred years after Christ. The *Vedas*, as these scriptures were known, consisted of separate hymns, each being

held to cover a definite period, and quite independent of each other. And, typically, not one author's name had passed down to posterity! The *Vedas* had inspired the thought of many illustrious men of the West, amongst whom might be mentioned Arthur Schopenhauer and Professor Max Muller."

During this lecture, Gandhi never failed to mention the introduction of Buddhism and Jainism only to underscore the point that Hindus bore no ill to the followers of new religions. One highlight of Hinduism had been, as per Gandhi, it being not a "missionary religion."

Sikh religion did not make the cut in the first lecture.

A week later, on March 11, 1905, Gandhi delivered his second lecture at the same place in a packed hall. We begin to read about the era of Islamic invasions and their impacts on Hindus and Hinduism. Something had to be done and that brought in Kabir to handle the situation. How?

"In keeping with the spirit of Hinduism, an attempt was made at first to bring about reconciliation between the two faiths, and in the

city of Benares, there arose a holy man about the 13th century, by name Kabir, who endeavoured, by keeping intact the chief tenets of Hinduism and by borrowing somewhat from Mahomedanism, to bring about a fusion, but the attempt was not quite successful.”

This set the stage for introduction of Guru Nanak to his listeners:

“The Punjab, through which the Mahomedan conquerors poured into India, and which bore the first brunt, produced Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh religion, which drew upon Kabir for his doctrines and added to it militant Hinduism. He offered the olive-branch by respecting the Moslem susceptibilities, but if that were not accepted, he was equally ready to defend Hinduism from the Moslem aggression, and thus Sikhism was a direct result of Islam. It was well known how brave the Sikh was and what service he had rendered to the British Government. The influence of Mahomedanism on Hinduism was that it gave rise to Sikhism and it brought out one of the chief characteristics of the religion, namely, toleration, in its true light and fullness.”

During the course of his 3rd and 4th lectures (last lecture was on March 25) we possess summary of his lectures. Here is what Gandhi phrased it as follows:

“Kabir was born in Benares. He thought that, according to Hindu philosophy, there could be no distinction between a Hindu and a Muslim. Both of them, if they did good works, would find a place in heaven. Idolatry was not essential part of Hinduism. Reasoning thus, he attempted to bring about a synthesis between Hinduism and Islam; but it did not have much effect, and his became no more than a distinct sect, and it exists even today. Some years later, Guru Nanak was born in the Punjab; he accepted the reasoning of Kabir and made a similar attempt to fuse the two religions. But while doing so, he felt that Hinduism should be defended against Islam, if necessary with the sword. This gave rise to Sikhism, and produced the Sikh warriors. The result of all this is that, despite the prevalence of Hinduism and Islam as the two principal religions of India today, both the communities live together in peace and amity and are considerate enough not to hurt one another’s feelings save for the bitterness caused by political machinations

and excitement. There is very little difference between a Hindu *yogi* and Muslim *fakir*."

What do we learn?

It appears Gandhi had never met a Sikh person while living in South Africa. We do not know what reading literature Gandhi had consulted in order to prepare for these lectures. One can entertain a thought that perhaps Gandhi had ready-made literature most likely authored by some Westerner coupled by some sprinklings added by a fellow educated India-based Hindu.

You can see how easy is it to concoct a history by way of pseudo-history. In Gandhi's mind, Guru Nanak was a Hindu and the Sikhs fared no better. You can see how easy it was to bring about the existence of "militant Hinduism." First we are told that Hindus and Hinduism are rooted in peace and then out he plucked the entry of Kabir attempting a sort of fusion of Islam with Hinduism in which he failed. This is followed by bringing in Guru Nanak who added his own "concoction" to "militant Hinduism" thus producing Sikh and Sikhism. This is your no-frills Gandhi who was notorious in making senseless arguments.

This initial Gandhi's understanding of Sikh history will continue to reshape once he left South Africa and settled

in British-India beginning January 1915. This is where he entangled himself with the Sikhs of Punjab with far reaching disastrous consequences.

Sikh Heritage Education