

# Gandhi – Sikh Relationship

## Commentary # 3

### Meeting the Sikhs

#### Part 2



Sir Michael F. O'Dwyer (1864—1940)

As stated in Commentary # 2, Mahatma Gandhi's contact with the Sikhs is limited on the surface. But let's not be misled here. Year 1919 brought Gandhi in close proximity to the Sikhs and that was a fateful contact with far reaching consequences for which Sikhs paid a heavy price.

In 1919, British-India faced a new kind of war under the title of "Satyagraha," master minded by Gandhi, promoted under the euphemism of nonviolence to seek justice. Colonial authorities in India, soon after the First World War, encountered a growing extremist threat. To control such activities, Rowlatt Act was being formulated. Sensing an opportunity, Gandhi jumped the gun and turned against the British. This scenario brought about the first nationwide Satyagraha. Punjab ended up becoming the focus of this satyagraha accompanied by much violence.

At this time, Punjab was governed by Sir Michael F. O'Dwyer who had been its Lieutenant Governor since 1913.

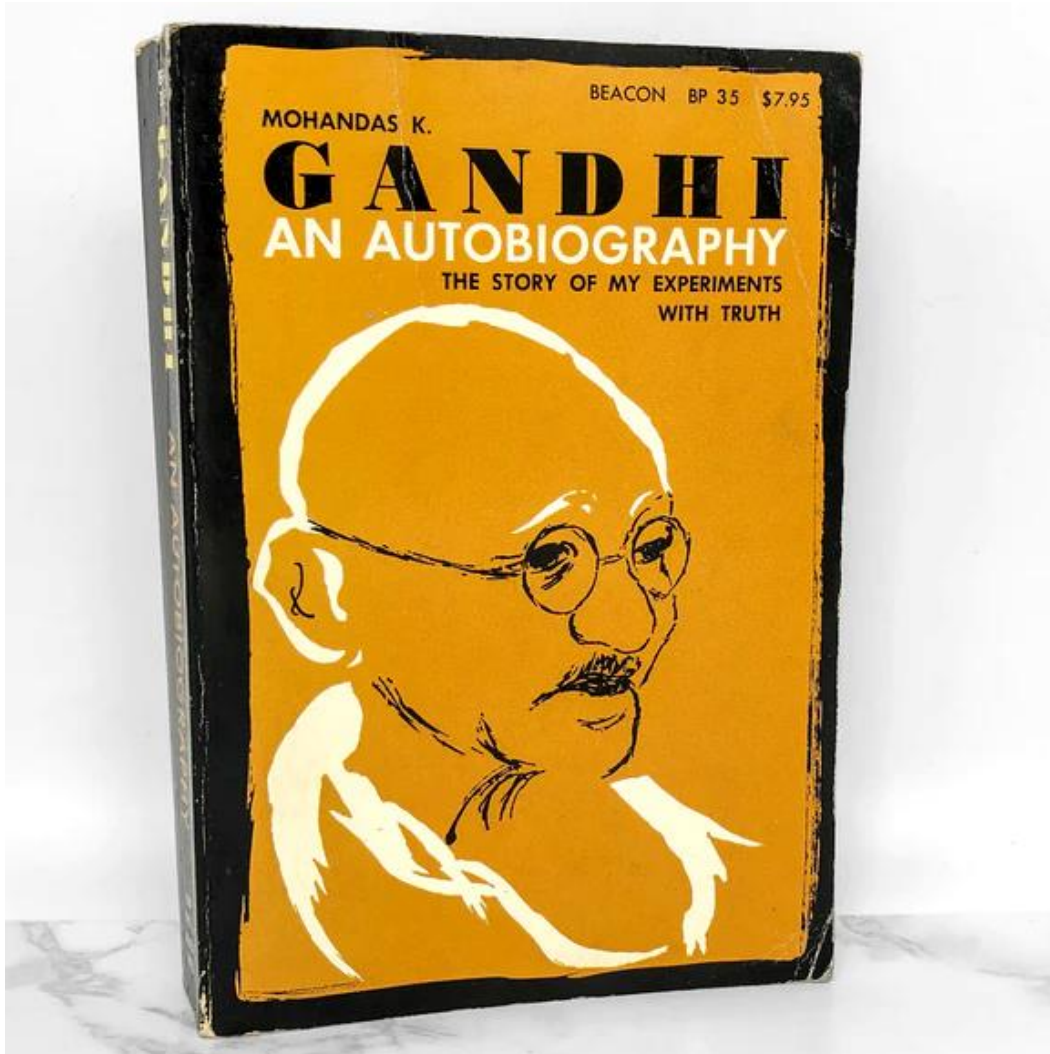
Rightly so, and with foresight in action, he banned Gandhi from entering Punjab. One of the tragedies of this Satyagraha was the bloodshed at Jallianwala Bagh on April 13, 1919, where about 379 people were gunned down under the orders of Colonel Reginald Dyer (1864-1927).



Colonel Reginald Dyer

Such disastrous events set in motion (thanks to Satyagraha) profound changes that nobody expected earlier: Least but important--one of which was Sir Michael O'Dwyer lost his job, and another one was Reginald Dyer being cashiered out of the Army.

While these two British officials paid the price, something else came out in which Gandhi made a momentous entry into Punjab by way of attending the annual meeting of Congress Party to be held in Amritsar in December 1919. Earlier his ban to enter Punjab had already been lifted on October 15, 1919. This opened the door for him to stage his presence in Punjab and that included the Sikhs among others.



Chapter 35 of M.K. Gandhi's *Autobiography* is titled "In the Punjab." Gandhi wrote in the first paragraph:

Sir Michael O'Dwyer held me responsible for all that had happened in the Punjab, and some irate Punjabis held me responsible for the martial law. They asserted that, if only I had not suspended civil disobedience, there would have been no Jalianwala Bagh massacre. Some of them even went the length of threatening me with assassination if I went to the Punjab.

Now think about it carefully. Gandhi is correct in saying that Michael O'Dwyer blamed Gandhi for the tragic Punjab events. What Gandhi didn't address was that Michael O'Dwyer happened to be the first India-based British colonial official who sounded the alarm on Gandhi's "Method of Operation:" create racial hatred in India especially against the British white population stationed in India. The Indian masses were to become a pawn in his hands to be used effectively against the British.

Audacious as it might sound, while reading the above Gandhi's frank admission that there existed some "irate Punjabis" who held him responsible, just like what O'Dwyer said, for the bloodletting in Punjab, Gandhi decided to go and enter Golden Temple in November 1919. Why?

Writing a communique from Lahore on November 17, 1919, Gandhi authored "Punjab Letter" under a heading "Amritsar's Love" reproduced here the relevant part:

From Delhi, I went to Amritsar with Mr. Andrews. What I experienced there was truly unique. It was well-nigh impossible to make our way through the crowds. The entire area outside the station was packed with the citizens of Amritsar. Their cheers and shouts almost overwhelmed me. This huge procession proceeded towards the city. The people filled the car with flowers. I was taken to the mosque, which was thronged with Hindus and Muslims. With great difficulty I made my way from the mosque back to the car, and it was a long time before it reached the Golden Temple of the Sikhs. They call this temple the Durbar Sahib. Its dome and some other parts are gilt and there is a large lake by its side. The adjoining area is also fairly extensive. I found it an impossible feat to cross

this open space and reach the main temple. Thousands stood on all sides. There was no dearth of women. I saw them boldly joining this thick crowd. Yet the men were conducting themselves with the utmost courtesy and restraint. This made me particularly happy. This should not, of course, be any special cause for joy. But I know only too well that this is not the usual state of affairs in India. It is my experience that in such crowds restraint is not always observed. We have read that it is disappearing even from the pilgrim bands which proceed to Dakor. Consequently, I was greatly pleased to see it at Durbar Sahib and I should very much like to see it at every place.

I took it upon myself, in this multitude, to teach discipline for a while. Just as the crowd surged forward I would stop, ask the men and women to be seated and remain so until I reached the Durbar Sahib. As long as I stood before them, they remained sitting, but the minute I began to walk, all would suddenly stand up and try to follow me. I made five or six such attempts. I even walked backwards, but the people could not control themselves. Finally, I decided to go ahead and, by the end of about an hour, I had covered the distance of a few steps. This was obstinacy on the people's parts. They could not repress their affection. Those who had suffered much washed away their grief with the waters of love.

But what about me? How much of this did I deserve? Those who showered their love were of course blessed, but what about the one on whom it was showered? Many women whose relatives were in jail expected, perhaps, that they would be released through my efforts. But who was I to secure their release? All I can say is that I offer all this love at the feet of the Lord in whose name I serve.

When I had paid my respects at the shrine, I was presented with a scarf and turban; I tied the turban over my cap and put the scarf round my neck. It was no less difficult to go out of the temple than it had been to enter it. This going and coming in a procession took five hours. Yet the people were not satisfied. I was taken to Lala Girdhari Lal's. Thousands remained round the house till six in the evening and I had repeatedly to go out to meet them. Both men and women came. The people of Amritsar say that never before had women come out in such large numbers. They refused to disperse without *upadesh*<sup>1</sup> "Let us have

*upadesh*” is a phrase in common use here. I tried to comfort the women in their sorrow and encouraged them to abandon fear. I requested them not to grieve for those who were in jail and told them that, as long as we did not have thousands of Indians courting the hardships of jail deliberately, we could not make progress. I then advised them to use only swadeshi and suggested that they should spin every day, for some time at least, as a religious duty.... (The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Volume 19, Document #110)

Today may we ask: how many Sikhs know that M.K. Gandhi had visited the Darbar Sahib in 1919? For five hours?

He says that while at Darbar Sahib he was presented with scarf and turban—most likely he was bestowed with *Saropa*.

But why? Up until this time Gandhi had no viable history of any meaningful links with the Sikhs or for expounding the Sikh philosophy/religion. It is fair to say that bestowing *Saropa* carries a significant meaning, and this is time honored tradition bestowed on someone who has earned it. Strangely there is not an iota of record that M.K. Gandhi had earned anything even close. On the other hand, regrettably, Gandhi through his bizarre first nation-wide Satyagraha brought about bloodshed in Punjab. May we even say that the casualties at Julianwala Bagh were not Sikhs per se; most likely far majority of those innocents killed there were non-Sikhs.

Again, a million-dollar question: Why was Gandhi honored with *Saropa* at the Darbar Sahib? Today in 2024, about 105 years later we may never know the answer to our satisfaction.

Also not addressed above is what propaganda was aired days earlier to the Amritsar residents, convincing them to assemble within the precincts of Golden Temple to offer a rousing reception to Gandhi. Is it possible that Mr. C.F. Andrews (1871-1940), an Anglican priest, had played a crucial role of introducing Gandhi to the Sikhs? and steered them in the wrong direction. C.F. Andrews was a well-known Gandhi's white apologist.

In the above narrative, Gandhi not once mentioned the crowd as Sikhs. He seems to be surprised by the large assembly of disciplined women. Were this crowd actually Sikhs? Or mixed to a higher proportion by non-Sikhs? Or is Gandhi exaggerating the account? Regretfully we Sikhs cannot corroborate Gandhi's narrative because we lack viable contemporary authentic history written by the Sikhs.

During this visit, did Gandhi meet Sikh leaders? If yes, who? Five hours of stay at Golden Temple needs to be accounted for in more robust fashion. Gandhi's above narrative fails to address our seeking attention for details.

Mind you that at this time period, Sikh leaders as well as Sikh masses had no inkling of knowing Gandhi's true views on Sikh religion and the identity of Sikhs which he had earlier uttered in March 1905 in South Africa. Please read commentary # 2.



In accordance with the chronology as published in the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, it is pointed out:

*November 4* : At Amritsar Golden Temple, was presented with a turban; spoke on swadeshi at women's meeting; visited Jallianwala Bagh and Khalsa College. Left for Lahore with Andrews.

We have a definite date: Gandhi visited the Darbar Sahib on November 4, 1919, which is Tuesday of the week.

There is more irony here. This letter of Gandhi's titled "Punjab Letter" was published in one of Gandhi's newspapers called *Navajivan* on November 23, 1919. And the entire letter was printed in Gujarati language. It is fair to say that Sikh leaders and other Sikhs never read the Gujarati written letter. Whereas the Gujarati reading audience had no or limited knack to understand intricacies of Gandhi's Golden Temple visit.

This commentary pertains to 1919 only.

**Sikh Heritage Education**