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Guru Nanak & Sikhs as Perceived by Swami Dayananda

A Commentary

- G.B. Singh



Swami Dayanand

Written in a dialogue form, Swami puts out a question and then answers it. I am not averse to this kind of narration. At the very outset, the Swami refers to < (Ik-Ongkar) as OM, which of course is inaccurate. Swami didn't know Punjabi language nor did he know the *Gurmukhi* alphabets. Given his total ignorance why Swami would set himself for ridicule? Was he really under any compulsion to resort to committing errors which he should have known would ultimately catch up to haunt his memory? Nevertheless, Swami seems to like the opening verses of *Guru Granth* within the framework of merely stating a question and then lashes out at Guru Nanak once he commences to answer.

It is obvious from what Dayanand wrote about Guru Nanak and the Sikhs that the Swami didn't know about the existence of Punjabi language. How he reaches the conclusion that Guru Nanak was devoid of scholastic knowledge or even of the Sanskrit language is left unscratched. Dayanand alleges that Nanak was ignorant of the Vedas, and Shastras. With respect to Nanak's lack of Sanskrit language, Swami provided two evidences: (1) because Nanak wrote the word "*nirbhau*" instead of "*nirbhaya*," and (2) Nanak composed "Sanskrit hymns (*satotras*)."

I am baffled at the Swami. Guru Nanak being a Punjabi person is communicating in that language to the masses who understand that particular language well. Why would Swami penalize Nanak for speaking his mother tongue? Because the Guru used "*nirbhau*" which underscores Nanak's love for his mother-tongue that in turn has absolutely no connotation (negative or positive) for any other language including Sanskrit. Swami is not being rational here, and I am afraid this is just the beginning. While giving his second evidence of Nanak's ignorance of Sanskrit, Swami says that Nanak composed "Sanskrit hymns (*satotras*)." If Nanak truly composed these "*satotras*" then it is inherently clear that Nanak knew Sanskrit. The question is when and where did Nanak compose these Sanskrit hymns? Moreover, how did Swami know that these hymns are in Sanskrit because he could not read *Gurmukhi*? Did someone else read the so-called "*satotras*" to him? And, How did Swami conclude that they are in Sanskrit?

We have no evidence in place of Nanak composing "Sanskrit hymns (*satotras*)." First, Swami tells us unequivocally that Nanak was ignorant of Sanskrit. This is followed by two examples which negate totally his first supposition. This feat of irrationality and flawed logic is accomplished in the same paragraph within the confines of a few lines.

Additionally, Swami throws more jabs at Guru Nanak and the Punjabi people. In this process the Swami commits blunders by resorting to logical flaws. If Nanak wanted to show off his knowledge of Sanskrit—as Swami alleges—then there must have been audiences who were listening to Nanak and that particular audience must also know the Sanskrit language. How else would the audience be awed by Nanak's knowledge of that language? Differently put, if Nanak didn't know Sanskrit and wanted to show off to his village listeners, who themselves knew no Sanskrit, then is it really a show off? Wouldn't it be silly for Nanak to resort to such fruitless deception? One may ask how is it possible for any person to attain fame, glory, and applause by speaking Sanskrit or even showing off to the ignorant masses of Punjab who knew nothing about Sanskrit?

Had there been an encounter between the Swami and Guru Nanak, the Guru would have politely reminded him that people of Punjab don't speak Sanskrit; in fact Sanskrit is a foreign language for them. Let alone Punjab, if we think rationally it will dawn upon us that not a single regional language of the sub-continent has ever been Sanskrit.

Furthermore, it would have been commendable had Dayanand given us examples of Guru Nanak's verses where the Guru has condemned the Vedas and also praised them. Swami appears to suggest that since Nanak used both avenues (praise and condemnation) of Vedas, the masses couldn't call Nanak an atheist, and had he resorted to condemnation of Vedas only (without any praise) then he would have been called an atheist. In this imaginary scenario, logically flawed that it is, Swami has tried to give the impression as if Punjabi masses knew the Vedas, which also means that they were knowledgeable of Sanskrit language! Earlier Swami had told us that these masses in Punjab didn't know Sanskrit. At this stage if you are getting confused

because of profound inconsistencies and contradictions, you are not alone.

Regarding the absurdities of Swami's direct quotes of the two verses from *Sukhmani*, I will ask the reader to read other critical commentaries incorporated in this e-Symposium. I might just make one comment here that *Sukhmani* was authored by Guru Arjan and not by Guru Nanak. This simply points to the fact that Swami's knowledge of *Guru Granth* is negligible, and in all likelihood he relied on someone else for information related to the Sikh scripture.

I am aware of Udasis, Nirmalas, and Akalees, mostly fringe groups outside mainstream Sikhs, and I am at a loss as to who are Suthreshahees? Moreover, What is *Nanak Chandrodaya*? Didn't Swami forget to mention Nihangs who had threatened to kill him upon his uttering disparaging remarks about Sikhism while in Amritsar. There are many such examples of Dayanand's mindless ramblings, but I will now take a closer look at his comments on Guru Gobind Singh.

Reluctantly I can make a case that Swami somewhat liked Guru Gobind Singh, which is quite odd considering Swami's unusual personality. On page 2 of chapter 11 (page number 330 of *Satyarth Prakash* translated by Bharadwaja), Swami remarked,

“... Shivajee and Gobind Singh rose against Mohammedan rule and completely annihilated the Muslim rule in India.”

Given Dayanand's anti-Islamic rhetoric one can see why Swami has good words for Guru Gobind Singh who fought against Mughal tyranny. But don't be deceived. These good words for the Guru are time restrained. They are strictly for the past as we shall see shortly. Consider Swami's description of the 5Ks (in actuality he made it 6Ks) and how these “were of great use in fighting.”

1. *Kesha* (Unshorn hair) — are there purely for the protection of head, be it from sticks and swords.

I am inclined to ask Dayananda if *rishis*, *munis*, *yogis* etc. have long hair for the protection of heads against attacks from sticks and swords?

2. *Kangan* — worn by Akalee on the turban.

Swami fails to describe *Kangan* and why it is supposedly worn on the turban. Had Dayanand given a thought he could make a better case for turban as “protection to head” against the sticks and swords. Notably Swami wore a turban during this phase of his life but he does not acknowledge this fact.

3. *Kara* — iron bangle worn on the wrist. Why? Swami alleges *Kara* is for protection of wrist and head. Protecting wrist via *Kara* may be plausible; however suggesting *Kara* to be protective of head is simply nonsense.

4. *Kachha* — Swami's description of *Kachha* for athletic purposes is plausible and in some remote sense it is conceivable that *Kachha* might protect precious gonads. From his description, it implies that Guru Gobind Singh bestowed the wearing of *Kachha* to protect the vital gonads in times of war against Muslims? Swami does not elaborate on it .

5. *Karda* — “double-edged knife” for hand-to-hand fight against the enemy. It baffles me how a knife could be an appropriate tool to fight against those wielding swords or more lethal weapons. One can forgive Swami's knowledge of warfare being nil; someone close to him at least should have corrected him that *Kirpan* is not a knife. Moreover, Swami is confusing this *karda* with *Khanda*, a double-edged sword.

6. *Kanga* — Swami says this is a comb for “dressing the hair.” Here is an example of one “K” which has seemingly no plausible utility in warfare. In keeping with consistency, Dayanand could have ascribed some military value to a comb; like the teeth of the comb can be extremely effective in hurting the enemy in close combat conditions!

Dayanand alleges these 5Ks had been useful in warfare of the past. However, he fails to describe for us how Sikhs used them on the battleground under Guru Gobind Singh and then triumphed. This crucial detail would have come handy today. Hindus too could have used these 5ks given their precarious conditions under Islamic rule. Why didn't they? Something that easy to adorn, the 5Ks could have saved Hindus if indeed Swami was correct in his thesis. If a person or a community can be transformed into some sort of a warrior clan simply by dressing up with 5Ks, then I believe even Hindus would not have missed this prospect long before Swami's nonsensical utterances.

Needless to say if Dayanand was true to his views, he might have had ready made warriors with full 5Ks for the sole purpose of protecting himself against many enemies of his own making! Given these 5Ks as anti-Islamic, from Swami's perspectives, and their alleged victory against Muslims, I am inclined to think that had Swami been alive today he might have been clamoring for more 5Ks to forge an alliance on the “Global War on Terror.” With anti-Muslim fervor prevalent among many educated Hindus, you would expect these Hindus to openly promote Khalsa-hood in India and abroad!

How absurd and devious is to compare the 5Ks with five markers of Vama Margis and five Sanskars of Chakrankits? Only Dayanand could navigate such uncharted territories. I need not dwell this deeper for sake of time and maintaining decorum and civility to this symposium.

There is no evidence in place where Swami had visited a gurdwara; I am not sure if he ever had seen a copy of *Guru Granth* and how Sikhs conduct their religious protocols inside the gurdwara. Yet, Swami alleges that bowing head in front of the *Guru Granth* amounts to idol worship. Again, as expected, Swami is wrong in adopting an improper terminology to the Sikh settings. If Swami had utilized the word “veneration” to describe Sikh mode of religious services, he would have been correct. Idol worship is simply not the correct term and abusing the Hindi language to describe the situation does not speak well of Dayanand. Today there are instances where some Sikhs employ “excessive veneration” to *Guru Granth*. Even that is not idol worship by any stretch of imagination, as *Guru Granth* has message that people can read and understand.

I believe I have proven my case that Swami was wrong at just about every level of his tirade against the Sikh Gurus. A man who was ignorant of the Punjabi language, ignorant of history, and utterly hopeless in making any solid argument, how and where did he get this false information? A little more digging provides the answer.

In 1877, coinciding with Swami's arrival in Punjab, there was published the first English translation of *Guru Granth* by Ernest Trumpp, titled, “*The Adi Granth: or, The holy scriptures of the Sikhs /translated from the original Gurmukhi with introductory essays by Ernest Trumpp*” published by Wm. H. Allen and N. Trübner, London. Ernest Trumpp (1828-1885) was a German missionary who by his own account challenged the reliability of his own translation when in frustrations he left the project incomplete. Only one-third of *Guru Granth* was translated in English. Reading the contents of Trumpp's book and matching them with what Swami wrote, it appears likely that the false information lodged in the *Satyarth Prakash* originated from Trumpp's book. Since Swami didn't know English at all, did the Swami have an intermediary (today that person's identity remains unknown) who passed the incorrect ideas to him? That in of itself doesn't absolve the Swami of his errors and culpability. Still, it was Swami's moral and ethical responsibility to make sure what he wrote was correct, which of course he neglected pathologically not once but on many other occasions.

Before I conclude, I mentioned elsewhere that Swami had written his first edition of *Satyarth Prakash* in 1875, about two years before coming to Punjab. Obviously there are marked changes from that edition

compared to the second edition published in 1884 which he had concluded after his Punjab journey. I am interested in reading what Swami wrote about Sikh Gurus in his first edition of 1875. All my attempts to procure a copy of that edition have failed. However, I am thankful to Prof. Jordens who had read the first edition and from reading his book I learned that in the first edition the Swami had accused Guru Nanak of bibliolatry. In other words, Swami before coming to Punjab held a belief that Guru Nanak adored the Bible and worshipped it as an idol!

While at one place Dayanand asked Sikhs to follow Guru Nanak's teachings, without spelling out what Nanak taught, at the same time he depicts Nanak as a fraud. Without a doubt, Swami would like Sikhs to follow the Vedic religion. Irrespective of the interpretations of the Vedic literature, Vedas have not been at the forefront of mainstream Hindus. What incentive Sikhs have to follow the Vedas? Ironically the Hindu Diaspora has built mega temples and all that you can find in them is a smorgasbord of idols. The choice is yours which idol you wish to worship or worship them all, if you so desire. Idol worship has been taken to new heights and it only shows how many Hindus of many persuasions have truly rejected the Swami. Personally I believe that idol worship is "superior" to the dangerous interpretations that Swami rendered of the ancient Vedic literature.

Conclusion

The most tragic scope of Swami's error-ridden expose against Sikh Gurus and Sikhs is not confined to what he himself wrote but how it inspired a new breed of some fanatical Punjabi Hindu followers who were bent upon surpassing Swami's foolishness and sloppiness. They concocted and published more wild stories against the Sikh Gurus and in the process created a climate of mutual distrust and communal animosities at the expense of seeking objective truths. At another time we should open the pages of these few important Punjabi Hindu followers and their unrelenting pursuit of inflicting heavy wounds on their fellow Punjabi Sikhs as well as on others. This was the legacy that Swami left behind.

It hardly matters whether Dayanand had intended to leave this kind of negative heritage or not, one thing is clear that he and his outlandish preaching left an indelible mark of bitter taste on Punjab's psyche. There might be a glimmer of light here. Reading Sangat Singh's *The Sikhs in History*, I learned that Swami before his untimely death decided to expunge some of the derogatory comments especially against Guru Nanak. Perhaps because of the strains of tragic last days he failed to finalize and see through his wish incorporated in the finished product of the second edition of *Satyarth Prakash*. Would Swami's followers carry out his wish? I doubt it.

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