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Issues of Sikh Identity: Sanatanist-Sikh Debate (Sheena Pall):

The earliest known leader of Sanatan Dharm movement in Punjab, Pandit Shardha Ram Phillauri did not show much concern with Hindu-Sikh identity in his Sikhan de Raj di Vithya (Story of Sikh Rule) published in 1865.

The Bharat Dharm Mahamandal did not show any interest in the issue of the identity of the Sikhs in its first report of 1889.

In 1897, however, in a large public meeting at Lahore the Sanatanist Hindus passed a resolution that the Sikhs were a part of the Hindu community.

Question of Sikh identity became a legal issue when Sardar Dyal Singh Majithia died in Sep 1898 and his widow contested his Will, claiming that "Hindu law of inheritance under which he had given his property in trust did not apply to a Sikh".

The Chief Court of the Punjab ruled that Sardar Dyal Singh was, in fact, a Hindu.

The Bharat Dharm Mahamandal took notice of this issue and passed a resolution in a meeting at Delhi, asserting that the ten Gurus of the Sikhs from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh were Hindus.

Furthermore, "Baba Khem Singh Bedi, a descendant of Guru Nanak", and "Bawa Sumer Singh (Bhalla), a descendant of Guru Amar Das", subscribed to the view that Sikhs were Hindu.

The 'Akhbar-i Am' blamed certain members of the Managing Committee of the Khalsa College at Amritsar for the unsatisfactory condition of that premier institution because their assertion that Sikhs were not Hindus had alienated the sympathies of seven-eighth of Sikh population.

The Sanatan Dharm Gazette praised the Maharaja of Patiala for declaring that it was a mistake to suppose that the Hindus and Sikhs constituted separate ‘nations’ because the Khalsa always sacrificed their lives for the protection of the Hindu religion.

The Sanatanists hoped that the Maharaja of Patiala would emulate his Gurus and his predecessors and support the cause of the Hindu religion in every possible way.

Lala Hari Chand, a Collector in the Kapurthala state, argued in the Akhbar-i Am that Sikhism was ‘an offshoot of the Hindu religion’.

The "Akhbar-i Am" denounced the radical Sikh reformers for "throwing away a Shivling" installed in a temple situated in the circumambulatory passage (parikrama) of the Golden Temple.

Similarly, a painting in another temple showing Guru Gobind Singh standing with folded hands before the Goddess was ‘obliterated’ with ink...

The Sanatan Dharm Gazette quoted verses from the Guru Granth Sahib to show that Guru Nanak and his successors had accepted the authority of the Vedas and that the Sikhs believed in incarnation.

Similarly, in the Akhbar-i-Am, a pandit quoted the Guru Granth Sahib to support the idea that Sikhs were Hindus. He also referred to the Census of 1891.

Guru Gobind Singh transformed Sikh community from a purely religious into a political association, and what was previously a quietist sect of Hindus, now expanded to such an extent that strangers and even the people of Punjab began to look upon Sikhs as a separate religion.

The removal of idols from the precincts of the Golden Temple in May 1905 raised a controversy about Sikh identity. The manager of the Golden Temple, Sardar Arur Singh, issued orders on 1 May 1905, prohibiting the Brahmans from sitting in the parikrama with the idols for worship

While complying grudgingly with this order, the Sanatanists declared in a public notice (ishtihar) that Guru Nanak and the other Sikh Gurus were Hindus. A meeting of the Hindus of Amritsar was held on 4 May 1905.

It was resolved in the meeting that the manager of the Golden Temple had offended the feelings of Hindus by his unlawful interference with their right to conduct idol worship (thakur puja) around the sacred tank.

The Golden Temple, which was founded by Guru Ram Das, was especially held in veneration by all classes of Hindus of whom the ‘Sanatan dharmis’ formed the majority.

They claimed that they had been performing their religious rites such as bathing, meditation, worshipping idols, singing hymns, and delivering sermons in accordance with the orthodox beliefs of their own religion ‘from ancient times’ at the Golden Temple.

They contended that the manager’s Aurangzebi hukum wounded the feelings of all Sahajdhari Sikhs who were more numerous than Keshdhari Sikhs who were said to belong to the ‘sect’ of Guru Gobind Singh alone, and whose temples were situated only in Abchalnagar (Nanded) and Patna.

Guru Ram Das was Ram Das (i.e. not a Singh), and being a leader of the Hindus, was also a leader of Keshdhari Sikhs. On 6 May 1905 Brahmans returned with idols to Golden Temple. Matter was reported to police by the manager and another order was issued by him on 7 May.

Seth Radha Krishan of Amritsar presented a petition, signed by 13,000 Hindus & Sikhs of Amritsar, asserting that only a small minority of ‘reformed’ Sikhs, who called themselves tat-khalsa, held that Sikh doctrines did not allow idols to be displayed in their temples.

There was no reason to offend the majority of the ‘Sanatanist Sikhs’ even if it was admitted for the sake of argument that Sikhism in its purist form was opposed to idolatry.

The memorialists warned the authorities that ‘the unprecedented step taken by the manager would create endless dissensions, disputes and sectarian animosity’

An important concern of the Singh reformers was the Anand Marriage Bill that was introduced by Tikka Ripudaman Singh of Nabha in the Imperial Legislative Council in 1908 to give legal recognition to the Sikh ceremony of marriage.

(now known as Anand Karaj Act).

Not only the Arya Samaj but also many conservative Sikhs were opposed to the Sikh Marriage Bill, including the Granthis of the Golden Temple.

The Anand marriage was regarded as an innovation of the Singh reformers by the opponents of the Bill. Hundreds of communications were sent to the government for and against the Bill.

H. Erle Richards, Member of Governor General’s Council pointed out in his letter to Sir Harvey Adamson, Home Member, that other than Arya Samajists, Hindus declined ‘to recognize that the Sikhs are a distinct community from the Hindus.

Still, in October 1909 the Bill was passed.

The Sanatanist papers and periodicals took notice of the Tat-Khalsa who were probably irritated by Sanatanist assertions about Sikh identity.

The Sanatan Dharm Gazette alleged that the Tat-Khalsa insulted Hindu gods and goddesses in the lectures they delivered in Gurdwaras.

The Sanatan Dharm Parcharak in 1912 reported that in the religious debate held at the Sanatan Dharm Debating Club at Amritsar between the Hindus and the "Tat-Khalsa" in 1912, the latter conducted themselves in an ‘unbecoming manner’ and stooped low enough to ‘abuse’.

It was further asserted that the Hindus and the Sikhs belonged to the same stock because the Sikhs, their Gurus, and the parents of all the ten Gurus were Hindus.

The Sanatan Dharm Patrika accused a Sikh named Arjan Singh of wounding the religious sentiments of the Sanatanists in a Punjabi poem in which he refers to Krishna as his brother-in-law.

In the arguments put forth by Sanatanists it is contended that Sikh claim to distinct identity was something new as it was espoused by a small minority, that is Tat-Khalsa. Sikh Gurus were Hindus; they accepted the authority of Vedas, and subscribed to the belief in incarnations

Gurus had no law code or scripture of their own; and they had not rejected idol worship nor any of the Brahmanical rites of passage.

The Sanatanists stood opposed to the "Tat-Khalsa" in all those situations in which the latter acted on the basis of a distinct faith and a distinct identity, like the removal of idols from the Golden Temple and the Anand Marriage Act.

The Singh Sabha at Lahore had been founded in 1879. Its leaders played a crucial role in sharpening the consciousness of a distinct Sikh identity.

The most important among them were Professor Gurmukh Singh (1849-1898), Bhai Ditt Singh (1853-1901) and Bhai Kahn Singh (1867-1938)

Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha wrote his Ham Hindu Nahin (‘We are not Hindus’) in response to ongoing debate on issue of Sikh identity in 1897. To address the Hindus, however, this book was first published in Devanagri script. A year later, its Gurmukhi version came out under same title.

It is in form of a dialogue between a Hindu and a Sikh. All possible arguments in support of the proposition that Sikhs were Hindus come from Hindu participant, while arguments in support of proposition that Sikhs have an identity distinct from Hindus come from Sikh participant.

The most important argument put forth by the Hindu protagonist in Ham Hindu Nahin was that the authority and sanctity of the Vedas was acknowledged by the Sikh Gurus. They are also said to have referred to the Shastras, Smritis and Puranas with approval.

There was a reference to the six schools of philosophy too. Brahmanical scriptures were not rejected in the Adi Granth. Another line of argument was that since Guru Nanak belonged to Bedi subcaste, his ancestors at one time must have been known for their knowledge of the Vedas.

Here, the "Bachittar Natak" attributed to Guru Gobind Singh was quoted: ‘They who mastered the Veda came to be known as Bedi; they propagated actions based on dharam’.

It was contended further that writings in the Dasam Granth make it clear that Guru Gobind Singh believed in incarnations (avtars). A verse carried the import that one could be freed from transmigration by worshipping Krishna.

The Chandi Charittar composed by the tenth Guru in praise of the Goddess was also cited by the Hindu participant who pointed to the invocation of Bhagauti (a name of the Goddess) in the Sikh prayer (ardas).

On the related point of idol worship, a cardinal feature of Brahmanical Hinduism, a reference is made to the Granth Sahib depicting Namdev attaining to God through the worship of an idol and Dhanna finding God in a piece of stone.

The references to Dhanna and Namdev in the Vars of Bhai Gurdas which expound the Granth Sahib were taken to mean that the Sikhs had no objection to idol worship.

The Sikhs regarded the Granth Sahib as the physical form of the Guru, offering karah by way of bhog (sanctified food). This, it was asserted, was an expression of idol worship...

It was further maintained that certain other practices were shared by the Sikhs with Hindus.

For example, Guru Nanak is believed to have observed his father’s shradh a couple of days before his own death <===

The Sikh Gurus were known to visit the Brahmanical places of pilgrimage.

In a composition of Guru Amar Das there are clear instructions regarding what was to be done after his death, including the katha of the "Garud Puran" by Keso Gopal <===

This verse refers also to "pind, pattal, kriya, diwa, and phull", the essential features of the Brahmanical mortuary rite.

This showed that these practices were observed by both Hindus and Sikhs.

The Sikh position that they did not subscribe to the varnashrama ideal was contested with reference to Guru Nanak’s supposed "regret about the obliteration of varnamaryada in his days".

In his compositions, Guru Nanak castigates the Khatri for discarding his dharam and adopting the language of the mlechch..."'the whole world has become one caste, and there is no dharam left".

The issue of the sacred thread had a bearing on the question of varnamaryada.

A composition by Guru Nanak was cited to confirm that he himself used to wear the sacred thread <====

In the "Sukhmani" by Guru Arjan, the Sikhs are said to have been instructed to revere the Pandit who understood the Vedas, Smritis and Puranas <===

The Bachittar Natak states that Guru Tegh Bahadur sacrificed his life to save the tilak (sacred mark on the forehead) and janeo (sacred thread) of the Hindus.

Guru Gobind Singh wrote the Savvayye in praise of Brahmans and instructed his followers to give charity (dan) to them.

The phrase, ‘Hindu salahi salahan’ in the Granth Sahib showed that Hindu beliefs and practices were approved by the Gurus.

The "Chhakke Chhands" attributed to Guru Gobind Singh are quoted to the effect that the Khalsa Panth was meant to spread Hindu dharma.