

Academic Freedom, Sikh Chairs and Anne Murphy's Thesis

by

Dr. Sukhmander Singh

Nicholson Family Chair, Professor of Civil Engineering

Santa Clara University

Santa Clara, California, ssingh@scu.edu

Abstract

A brief examination of Academic Freedom is presented in the context of works by Sikh Studies Chairs and as a critical review of Anne Murphy's book is included as well. Due regard to the sensitive matters cautioned by academic freedom has not been paid to in their works

Academic freedom in the universities is meant to encourage research scholarships even on controversial topics without the fear of reprisal. This has also been interpreted as a freedom to challenge established traditions/history/indoctrinated messages. However, according to Gary A. Olson, "because academic freedom is specifically intended to foster the free exchange of ideas within a community of scholars, it does not protect us from other types of utterances and behavior such as slander or libel," (Olson, 2009, 2015).

According to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), "our special position in the community imposes special obligation" (AAUP, 1970). AAUP in their 1970 Interpretive Comments on the 1940 Statement of the Principles of Academic Freedom as it related to religions stated, "Teachers are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject – but they should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no relation to their subject. Limitations of academic freedom because of religious or other aims of the institution should be clearly stated at the time of appointment." It may be recalled that such limitations were stated or implied at the time of establishment of Sikh Chair at University of British Columbia .For example in the clause 2 of the Memorandum of Understanding between University of British Columbia and Federation of Sikh Societies of Canada (1985), it is stated that "All instruction and research shall be in keeping with the established academic standards and every possible effort shall be made to present the teachings and practices of Sikhism in an accurate manner ." When truth is stretched and inaccuracy creeps in to hurt doctrinal message and hence the feeling of a community, it is clearly a violation of the terms agreed upon in the MOU.

With regards to racist speech, Charles Lawrence III, a graduate of Haverford and Yale Law School then teaching at Stanford Law School, advocated restrictions on it (Charles R. Lawrence, 1990, 1993). Recently, there has been an increase in the numbers of harassment incidents related to race and gender issues on campuses across the nation. At my university, there is now a mandatory training requirement for all employees to prevent such incidents. For example, as pointed out by Doug Bennett, President Emeritus of Earlham College, in his blog (2011), one University's policy began as follows, "Discriminatory harassment includes conduct (oral, written, graphic or physical) directed against any person or group of persons because of their race, color, national origin, religion, sex, sexual orientation, age, disability or veteran's status and that has the purpose or reasonably foreseeable effect of creating offensive, demeaning, intimidating, or hostile environment for that person or group of persons."

All of the above emphasizes that academic freedom has limits to it. Accordingly, if history is manipulated and truth stretched to arrive at a disturbing conclusion against the treasured traditions/fundamental doctrine of a religion, then it cannot be accepted under the rubric of academic freedom. At times one wonders if the research by the Sikh studies chairs who have been obsessed with history as to how and when any practice came about has been of any merit. How they kept splitting hairs on this for over 15 years with a good amount of financial resources is beyond comprehension. As such, their research to fit in the McLeodian mold has created more fog than clarity regarding the universal appeal of teachings embodied in Sri Guru Granth Sahib and Sikh identity. Granted, it is appreciable that these chairs have taught Sikhism/Sikh studies to many of their students, yet their scholarly presentations are often dry and lack the genuine appeal which a truly learned and dedicated scholar of Sikh studies/Sikh faith can make to the American audience.

Is this one of the reasons that Sikhs remain misunderstood in America? What, if any, have our academic scholars done against the mistaken identity crisis Sikhs are going through?

Dr. Ann Murphy is an academically trained scholar of Sikhism currently based at the University of British Columbia. Her book based upon her thesis appears to have included materials to overly stretch the truth about Sikh spiritually and Sikh identity. Starting with McLeod's works, attempts have been consistently made to misinterpret, distort or even denigrate Sikhism and to destroy Sikh identity. This has been done very cleverly by first confusing the readers by selective use of historical or anthropological material in order to construct a thesis to blur or dilute Sikh identity. It appears that one of the latest of such attempts is Anne Murphy's book, *The Materiality of Past: History and Representation in Sikh Tradition*. Why would she use resources which are controversial and not considered reliable in the Sikh world? For example, she would quote Ruchi Ram Sahni to make a point. A critical examination of her thesis upon which her book is based is briefly presented below.

It goes to Anne Murphy's credit that she travelled extensively in Punjab in pursuit of her works to visit places related to Sikh history and to collect and study large amounts of material

about Sikh religion. She photographed sacred artifacts. All these were the basis of her analysis and hence her book. However, she spent great amounts of time and space in her book to write about some insignificant matters which she dug out in her research. Even the choice of words or terminology is complex, confusing or unconventional, if not directly misleading.

The methods and materials applied by her are characteristically Eurocentric, and the methodologies used are relevant to Christian ideology where scripture is developed as a result of history and culture; such matters are inapplicable to Sikhism where scripture is revelatory and authenticated by the prophet himself. She does not draw or quote from Guru Granth Sahib itself, the fountain of Sikhism and the history of the Guru period. How can a study on Sikhism and Sikh identity be considered objective without adequate reference to Guru Granth Sahib and without acknowledging its pivotal role in shaping the Sikh spirituality and the Sikh identity? Sound historical basis of Sikh identity are essentially ignored by her. Some of the authentic works of Sikh writings of the period she mentions are not used as a basis for her writings. Max Arthur Macauliffe's work is not even quoted once.

In her attempt to present a materialistic interpretation, she might have crossed limits of academic freedom by distorting and confusing facts. She labels Sikh culture as purely materialistic. According to her, Sikh scriptures, gurdwaras, and Khalsa are all materials and hold no spiritual significance. Singh Sabha was formed to counter the challenges of the Arya Samajis missionaries, but Anne Murphy distorts Singh Sabha's works to paint an extremely biased and materialistic picture of Sikh identity.

In the 19th century study of the Sikhs, she chooses, just as Oberoi did, to ignore the fact that real Sikhs (Tat Khalsa) were driven underground due to the atrocities and suppression by the British. The British did not give the Sikhs rahit or separate identity; these were prescribed by the Gurus. The British, however, did not discourage them because they saw that the Khalsa-discipline made excellent soldiers, and had a tradition of glory and valor. Refusal to see these plain facts in history is deplorable. So is the publication of the book by Anne Murphy is regrettable because it undermines history and does not materially add to knowledge.

Conclusion

Insensitivity shown by works of Sikh Studies Chairs and more recently by Anne Murphy's thesis towards the treasured traditions and doctrine message of Sikhism and Sikh identity are deeply regrettable and are beyond what the principle of Academic Freedom allows.

References

1. American Association of University Professors (AAUP), (1970), "1940 Statement of Principles of Academic Freedom and Tenure with 1970 Interpretive Comments." AAUP-Publications
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4. Doug Bennett (2011), From a blog by Doug Bennett President Emeritus of Eartham College in the Observatory, April 9, 2011.
5. Memorandum of Understanding between University of British Columbia and Federation of Sikh Societies of Canada (1985) Clause 2
6. Gary A. Olson (2009), "Limits of Academic Freedom" *The Chronicles of Higher Education* , December 9, 2009

For Further Readings:

7. Louis Menand, 1996, "The Limits of Academic Freedom," in Louis Menand (ed.), *The Future of Academic Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 3-20.
8. Ronald Dworkin, 1996, "We Need a New Interpretation of Academic Freedom," in Louis Menand (ed.), *The Future of Academic Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), pp. 187-198.