

# Retelling Sikh-Muslim Relation through Narrative Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

*In this paper, I would try to explore the trajectory of Muslim-Sikh relation with special reference to Sis Ganj Gurudwara in New Delhi. The very name of the gurudwara connotes Sikh-Muslim conflict. The word sis means head. The gurudwara takes its name based on the incidence of the beheading of the 9th Guru of Sikhism, Guru Tegh Bahadur Singh in 1675 by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. Whenever anybody enters this gurudwara, it reminds him/her of the conflict. The most vital thing is that past is not mere past, past lives in the present; memory is one of the crucial strategies through which past operates and remains alive. It vehemently shapes and determines the subjectivity of the community. In this paper, I shall dissect as to what extent past and memory play a role in determining Sikh-Muslim relationship in present day context for the visitors at the gurudwara.*

## 1. Methodology

To explore the dimension of Sikh-Muslim relation, I have used the qualitative method particularly narrative analysis. My unit of analysis is the visitor(s) at Sis Ganj Gurudwara.

## 2. Time Duration of the Research

I have visited the site over three months of period though not regularly (January, February and April 2019). I participated in the kirtan, had *kada prasada* in langharkhana and mixed with the worshipers.

## 3. The Relevance of the Method

The kind of research I have pursued is qualitative but the strategy employed here is of narrative analysis. According to Martin Cortazzi the term 'narrative' covers a variety of understanding and a range of the types of conversations and texts. At its most abstract conception, the term is used to refer to a structure of knowledge based on stories and anecdotes reflected in conversations. Every narrative is a version in itself and elicits the views of what is supposed to have occurred or transpired. Most narratives do not simply report events but rather give a narrator's perspective on their meaning, relevance and importance.

Four major reasons for doing narrative analysis can be suggested here. First, the concern with the meaning of the experience; second, the voice; third, the human qualities on personal or professional dimensions; and fourth, the research as a story.

In pursuing research on Sis Ganj Gurudwara I have found narrative analysis most useful to unearth the complexities of Sikh-Muslim relations.

## 4. Relevance of the Topic

South Asia is a homeland of many world religions. It has a long standing philosophical history. Unity in diversity is the most fundamental characteristic of this subcontinent. The critical encounter between various streams has actively transformed the lives of the people. In medieval India, there was a very successful and a prominent upsurge of Bhakti

movement which propagated humanism across the divisions of caste, class, race, gender and ethnicity. Dadu, Kabir, Nanak, Tukaram, Chaitanya and Ravi Das are the major figures in this movement. Apart from this, Indian society has experienced thousand conflicts among various religions. Sectarian strife is one of them. Religion was one of the main reasons for the partition of India. During the partition, Sikh community was highly affected and again in 1984 Sikh community was the victim of a great massacre. Since early 1980s across South Asia, we have been encountering repeated conflicts in terms of religion and ethnicity. A large number of studies have been done focusing on Hindu-Muslim relations, however scant attention has been paid to Sikh-Muslim relations. This topic tries to bridge this gap.

## 5. Guru Tegh Bahadur Singh and Sis Ganj Gurudwara

Guru Tegh Bahadur is the 9th Guru of Sikh community. He was born in 1621 and executed on the orders of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb in 1675. Sis Ganj Gurudwara is located in Chandni Chowk, a significant landmark of old Delhi. Every day, people in hordes come to offer their worship and pay their sincere homage to the Guru here.

## 6. Retelling Sikh-Muslim Relation

Sikhism as a distinct religion did not develop in one day. It evolved over time. In Sikhism there is no one founder/prophet like in Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. Though Guru Nanak is considered to be the founder of Sikhism, it later became articulated and crystallized by the very systematic efforts of ten gurus. Since Sikhism emerged during Mughal India, it had a very complicated relation with the then ruling ideology of Islam. Among the Mughal rulers, it was Akbar who developed a very syncretic approach towards all the existing religions of his time. During Aurangzeb's rule, this syncretic relation became contested and worsened subsequently. It may be noted that Aurangzeb was orthodox and conservative who did not follow in the footsteps of his predecessors in terms of the religious policy. Though secular historians like Irfan Habib and Satish Chandra try to offer very materialistic interpretations behind the attitude of Aurangzeb which discuss him inheriting a financially strained empire, agrarian unrest, jagirdari crisis, there are

believed to be other considerable reasons. Historians like Jadunath Sarkar identify the fall of the Mughal Empire because of the religious policies undertaken by late Mughal rulers like Aurangzeb. Imposition of *jaziya* (a kind of tax levied on non-Muslims) is, argues Sarkar, one of the reasons that disintegrated Mughal Empire.

In 1675, under the order of Aurangzeb, 9<sup>th</sup> Sikh guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur Singh was beheaded publicly in Delhi. This incidence had long-term consequences in subsequent worsening of Sikh-Muslim relations. The place where the Guru was beheaded later came to be known as Sis Ganj Gurudwara. Obviously this particular incident gave impetus to the already existing stereotyped image of the Muslim as an invader and an iconoclast. Can Sikh-Muslim strife, during medieval India, be identified as a communal? Scholars like Ashis Nandy and Bipan Chandra would argue that communalism is essentially the product of modernity, but Cambridge historian C. A. Bayly suggests that it is nothing to do with modernity. Rather, communalism already existed in medieval India and he refers to this period as the period of 'prehistory of communalism' owing to the fall of the warrior culture.

What is communalism? What is its nature? I am not going to engage with this phenomenon. What I wish to explore instead is the very crucial role played by Sis Ganj Gurudwara which is very closely linked with the murder of one of the most prominent Gurus for the Sikhs in determining the Sikh-Muslim relations in contemporary time following four narratives and their subsequent analyses undertaken over a period of three months.

#### **i) Folk wise man under the banyan tree: Amar Singh**

First one with whom I had a very long conversation was Amar Singh. He is around forty years old and unmarried. He is a driver, with little education. Though originally from Punjab, for the last twenty years Singh has been living around the gurudwara. He regularly visits gurudwara. The way he explained the killing of Guru Tegh Bahadur Singh is striking in its narration. He made a very sharp distinction between Muslim ruler and Muslim masses. According to him, Aurangzeb belongs to the ruling class as he is the ruler. The particular incidence of the execution of Guru Tegh Bahadur Singh is nothing to do with the Muslim masses. Later, he argues that there was no distinction between Muslim masses and Sikh masses. In this regard, he also invokes 1947 Sikh-Muslim violence. He very authoritatively argues that it was the doing of a few Muslims who plundered the Sikh property for which not all Muslims can be implicated. It is important to note that his family is from Lahore. Some of his long distance relatives were highly affected by the 1947 violence.

At one point, I intentionally poked him that the very name Sis Ganj Gurudwara (*sis* means severed head and Guru was beheaded here, so Sis Ganj) reminds one of the Muslim oppression. He very categorically refuted my statement that it was the king who beheaded and we cannot blame the entire Muslim community. According to him, in guru's *langarkhana* (community kitchen), everybody is allowed irrespective of their caste, class race, gender and ethnicity. Every day many Muslims visit to eat *prasada* here. He also mentions that in

Gurugranth Saheb, there are many verses from Baba Farid, a Muslim saint who contributed towards a syncretic culture in Punjab, and from Ravi Das, another medieval Bhakti saint. According to him, Sikhism nurtures syncretism. He repeatedly invokes one very important thing that Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus have been living together for over many decades with no strife, but with harmony. But there emerge some conflicts and he calls it *jhagra/nafrat* (quarrellings/hatred), but it does not imply any mutual perpetual separation among the communities. The communities have inculcated some inner mechanisms to tackle their problems. Here I remember that even Ashis Nandy also argues on the same lines.

Amar Singh's analysis of the idea of *jhagra/nafrat* is a very promising one to explain the Sikh-Muslim relations in particular and inter-community conflict in general. The way he narrates the Sikh Muslim relations with special reference to Sis Ganj Gurudwara connotes something very profound. Firstly he drew the distinction between Muslim ruler and Muslim masses. In this regard he succinctly dismantles the stereotyped image of the Muslim community and at the same time he does not blame the whole Muslim community for the injustice done by a few members of the ruling class. Rather, his narrative reflects solidarity between Sikh lower strata and the Muslim lower strata. For both Sikh masses and the Muslim masses he uses one word to describe them, *garib admi* (poor). Here his interpretation of inter-community conflict converges with the very formulation of Marxist interpretation that identifies *garib admi* as a subaltern class/proletariat, irrespective of caste, class, religion. In conclusion, it can be said that he is not so formally trained but the way he approaches the social world is reflects his syncretism that is essentially derived from the medieval Bhakti tradition. In this regard, he epitomizes the true spirit of Sikhism that developed during medieval India against the scourge of casteism and social injustice.

#### **ii) Lady with the lamp: Harpreet Kaur**

The second most important narrator is Harpreet Kaur. Harpreet is a typical lower middle class housewife. She is around thirty years old and is married. She, like Amar Singh, has been received education up until the 12<sup>th</sup> standard. She stays near Sis Ganj Gurudwara. She also regularly visits the gurudwara. The way she approaches Sikh-Muslim relations is very significant. Her interpretation seems to be syncretic as well. Here she is more or less similar to Amar Singh.

When I requested her to narrate the episode of the execution of the 9<sup>th</sup> guru after whom Sis Ganj Gurudwara is named, she told that when guru was beheaded publicly, both Sikhs and Muslims paid their homage to the guru. It shows that guru was respected by everybody. According to her analysis, Guru may have been beheaded by the order of orthodox Aurangzeb, but it did not disturb the Sikh-Muslim relations on a mass-level. Here, the most important thing is the way she explained the scenario after Guru's execution when guru's death body was lowered by both Sikhs and Muslims. The veracity of this cannot be confirmed. But the way she invoked the scenario gives us an insight into how the community relations have been largely unaffected and remain solid. Here again I am reminded of Nandy who argues that though each and every community in traditional, India was involved in some

kinds of sectarian conflict. The inculcation of some kinds of inner checks strengthened the community relations which were fractured by intrusion of modernity.

Harpreet Kaur's narrative very methodically makes irrelevant most of the stereotypes between Sikh and Muslim which are overwhelmingly prominent among the middle-classes. She also often invokes the syncretic culture of the gurudwara.

### **iii) Martial man: Harbans Singh**

Harbans Singh, 75 years old, is a retired army man. He is well educated and well aware of the modern discourse. He also often visits gurudwara. He resides in Chanakypuri. In each and every statement he is very critical to both Hindus and Muslims. He tries his best to consciously distance himself philosophically from Hinduism and establishes autonomy of Sikhism. He argues very methodologically. His argument is filled with conventional interpretation of history that is essentially divisive. It is divisive in the sense that his argument is essentially based on some old, stereotyped assumptions relating to Sikhs and Muslims, such as Muslim is an invader, an iconoclast, uncivilized tribe who came from Central Asia. According to him, it is the British who rescued Sikhism from both Muslim tyranny and Hindu hegemony. He also thinks that throughout the late medieval period, uncivilized Muslims suppressed the Sikh community and often killed them.

Here again I very tactically introduced the topic of Sis Ganj Gurudwara. He reacted violently to this and kept on arguing that Islam came to India through the power of sword. Muslim rulers by force converted Indian people. He also very succinctly argues that Sufism emerged in India as an ideology of Muslim ruling class through which they maintained the hegemony among the illiterate rural masses and henceforth very cleverly proselytized the masses. According to him, sword and Sufi ideology are the two sides of Islam.

Harbans Singh is the representative of the typical urban middle class imbued with modernist values and sees everything through the lens of modern identity politics. It may be noted that modern identity politics is very much linked with colonial intervention. Here Arjun Appadurai and Sudipta Kaviraj are very relevant who are arguing that it is through the census and codification that colonial modernity created an enumerated identity where a very much demarcated identity is pre-eminent instead of fuzzy community. Fuzzy community, according to Kaviraj, is not the imprecise identity, it is another way of defining the self.

### **iv) Uprooted educated young man: Punit Singh.**

The fourth narrator with whom I pursued a lengthy dialogue was Punit Singh. He is around 27 years old studying at one of the leading universities in New Delhi. His idea of Sikhism is very formative, very non-crystallized. Sometimes he says it is the one kind of reformed Hinduism, another time he argues that Sikhism does not believe in any kind of superstition and is traditionally associated with Hinduism. It is important to note that both of his grandparents were from Multan, both of whom were grandparents were the victims of 1947 violence and one of his distant aunts was abducted by the Muslims.

The most horrible thing that happened is that two of his aunts were strangled by his uncle before being raped by Muslims. Here, memory played a very crucial role in forming his subjectivity.

Upon the mention of the historical background of Sis Ganj Gurudwara, his already divisive subjectivity came to the surface. It reminds me of Dipankar Gupta who argues that memory played a very authoritative role in making Sikh identity. Various situations again and again compelled them to take recourse to routinized primordialism. It is not only applicable to Sikhism, it is equally relevant for making any kind of subjectivity. Punit points to the stereotype that Muslim is by nature aggressive. "Wherever you will find Muslim there would be some clashes". According to him, Muslim fundamentalism is not the response to global situations. Muslim theology theoretically permits terrorism. He also added that Muslims established their "raj" through violence. Sis Ganj Gurudwara is not a case of exception.

He also reveals how he has very amiable relations with Muslims. His attitude towards Muslims is not guided by his theoretical underpinnings. What he thinks and what he does are quite exclusive.

## **7. Conclusion**

Through this short ethnography, I have tried to explore Sikh-Muslim relations with a special relation to Sis Ganj Gurudwara. My research question is how Sis Ganj Gurudwara determines, shapes and produces a Sikh subjectivity relating to Muslim community. Because the very name of the gurudwara reminds its visitors of the execution of their 9<sup>th</sup> Guru Tegh Bahadur Singh on the order of Emperor Aurangzeb, does it breed any kind of hatred towards Muslim in the contemporary times? Does past memory play a very crucial role in making of subjectivity that creates rift in the society?

For critical appraisal of these questions, I have done qualitative research with special reference to narrative analysis. Though I have engaged in oral discursivity, here mainly I have mentioned only four narratives.

My findings are very contradictory and therefore depict the tension of Sikh-Muslim rivalry as well as a harmony. People who are relatively financially insecure, not formally so educated and belong to lower class are not trapped in a generalizing notion. It is amply clear that people who are relatively from a solvent family and highly educated are very critical against the Muslims. But to some extent it does not lead to a very antagonistic outlook against the Muslims. This is vividly manifested in Punit's case. Harbans's case is relatively complex who can still vividly remember the partition violence. His understanding regarding Sikh-Muslim is highly influenced by memory. He is not a consumer of nation-state ideology where every difference among the people is reduced to a mere citizenship. Can we say that Harbans draws on primordiality? Answer is not always easy. What I understand regarding his narrative is that his perception concerning Sikh-Muslim relation is shaped by the old assumption rather than a secular ideology. Following Nandy, we can say that people are not always necessarily driven by memory, people in general consider

those fragments of memory which do not work in society and Nandy calls it 'the principle of forgetfulness' (term borrowed from R J. Lipton). Amar Singh is the most fascinating. He is a bus driver and under-educated but the perception he holds regarding Sikh-Muslim relationship keeping in mind the violent history behind Sis Ganj Gurudwara is very interesting. He draws a distinction between *garib admi* and elite class. In his understanding, religion is not a determinant of *garib admi's* everyday perception and life. According to him, it is the *raja* (ruler) who beheaded Guru Tegh Bahadur Singh and not the Muslim community. Harpreet Kaur who is a lower middle class housewife, invoked the homage paid by Muslims when Guru was beheaded. The community routinely remembers this phenomenon that enhances community harmony. Her view corroborates with Nandy's inner check theory.

Scholars like Gyan Pandey argue that the very category of 'communalism' is a by-product of colonialism. It aims at an orientalist projection of Indian society.

In conclusion, we can argue that the Sikh-Muslim relation is determined by multiple factors in which intrusion of modernity plays a very significant role. Though memory operates at various levels, it also imposes an inner check to maintain community harmony by routinely invoking syncretic phenomenon and nurtures the principle of forgetfulness.

#### **Disclaimer**

*All the conversations I engaged in, I did not hide my identity of being a Muslim myself. I neatly explained my purpose. I had been able to convince them to express a lot of things that people usually do not share with a stranger. I participated in the kirtan, had prasada (sweet) and donated some money in the donation box. I made intensive dialogue with a lot of people but I have presented here those very people whom I believe relatively represent the Sikh identity within the shortest possible duration which accounts for three months of visiting the Gurudwara.*

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