

SGPC snip trip raises eyebrows

Plan to set up a censor board has raised more than a whimper among Sikh scholars



EVERYBODY'S RIGHT: A protest march against Messenger of God in Delhi

Sarika.Sharma@timesgroup.com

A year ago, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) was hunting for a writer who had penned “objectionable” content against Sikh gurus. Little did they know that William Lewis M’Gregor, author of book ‘The History of Sikhs’, had passed away around 150 years ago. SGPC president Avtar Singh Makkar then thundered that in future they will make it mandatory for any book related to Sikh religious matters or history to be allowed to publish only after the SGPC passes its manuscript. Now, as MSG—Messenger of God—a film starring controversy’s child Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh faces the wrath of Sikhs in Punjab, Haryana and Delhi, Makkar has once again reiterated the warning and said they want film scripts and books cleared to avoid consequences later, raising concerns over gagging of academic freedom.

SGPC’s past record—its own books have been withdrawn—has been murky. Former IAS officer and Chandigarh-based Sikh scholar Gurtej Singh wonders what right the SGPC has to decide right and wrong. “The SGPC has no authority to set up a censor board. It was set up to look after historical gurdwaras,” he says, pointing out that SGPC has itself been publishing books detrimental to Sikh history and had to withdraw them.

“‘Sikh Itihaas’ (in Hindi) and ‘Gur Bilas Patshahi Chevein’ were highly derogatory to Sikh history. The latter was being taught in Sikh gurdwaras around 1920 and was banned when the Singh Sabha movement began. The SGPC has been condemned for publishing these books,” he says.

Much like M’Gregor, the SGPC couldn’t do anything about Prof W H McLeod whose book, ‘Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion’ was strongly opposed by some sections of Sikhs. Canada-based scholar Doris Jacobsh, associate professor in the department of religious studies, at University of Waterloo, Ontario, has extensively written on Sikhs and women. She wonders whether or not Indian scholars will decide to subject themselves to this form of censorship or ignore it in the name of academic freedom. “And, of course, whether scholarly presses in India decide to legitimate this sort of intrusion into academic research or not. One would hope not, although the recent Wendy Doniger fiasco might be a harbinger of things to come,” she says, raising her doubts.

However, former director of Indian Institute of Advanced Study and Sikh scholar Prof J S Grewal, feels the SGPC has a point. “The

In recent history

Writer Amarjit Chandan says the idea of a censor board was first floated in 1974. “In living memory, it started with Professor Fauja Singh in 1974. I remember Amar Singh Ambalvi (senior SAD leader and SGPC member) speaking in a public meeting held in defence of Fauja Singh in Temperance Hall, Amritsar, that every Sikh scholar should show his work first to the SGPC before publication. It has taken 40 years to materialize his thinking,” he says

Rough Treatment

There have been glaring examples of rough treatment meted out to Sikh scholars. These include Prof Pashaura Singh, Fauja Singh, late Prof Piar Singh and G B Singh. Piar Singh’s book ‘Gatha Sri Adi Granth—Story of the Granth Sahib’ (1993) aroused much controversy and its publisher Guru Nanak Dev University (GNDU), Amritsar, withdrew it on the charges of blasphemy. He had written that the Kartarpuri Bir was not the original manuscript of the Guru Granth recorded by Bhai Gurdas at Guru Arjan Dev’s dictation. Piar Singh later detailed the debate in his book, ‘Gatha Sri Adi Granth and the Controversy’

Historians can err

Historian Indu Banga feels every historian is bound to make some mistakes depending on the source. She, who would be giving a lecture in a seminar organized on the first death anniversary of Khushwant Singh, says even though the author’s books on Sikh history are most popular, they too had mistakes

censor board may not necessarily be bad. Sometimes non-Sikhs may not be familiar with the Sikh tradition and may be mistaken in their view of the religion,” he says, adding that a censor board, in such a case, might correct a wrong.

Historian Indu Banga says that while the SGPC’s censor board may be an apparatus to correct the flaws, one could find its view questionable. “Its suggestion may still be open to scholarly debate and the final word should still be with Sikh scholars. In case of two parallels—the SGPC and scholarly version—the answer can lie in getting the two to coalesce,” she says. While Makkar was unavailable for comment, Prof Gurtej is doubtful. “If the censor board comes up, it will be detrimental to Sikh faith, culture and history. I shudder to think. It will make the world laugh at us,” he concludes.