

Is This The End of Religious Studies In The Land of the Gurus?

The End of The Love of Wisdom

Sach Kanwal Singh
PATIALA/AMRITSAR

In an intensely material world, will no one ever bother about questions that have agitated human minds over centuries? In a neo-liberal economy, will no one bother about philosophical questions? Will our children now only study because studies will lead to a job that will lead to a good salary that will lead to a good life? Do all paths to good life now pass through an economic construct of the world?

Answers to such questions seem to be frightening if you look at the way certain disciplines of study in Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar and Punjabi University in Patiala are being managed. Student interest in areas like religious studies, comparative religion, and philosophy has turned out to be zilch, and while that says a lot about the kind of world we have created, it is also a comment on the way our educational institutes are being managed and the vibrancy of the academic world.

In the Religious Studies Department of Patiala's Punjabi University, the seven teachers this year do not have a single student to teach. In the GNDU at Amritsar, the MA courses in religious studies and philosophy are on the verge of closure for want of students. There are also no takers for M.Phil in Philosophy. The department needs at least five students to keep running, or the course cannot continue. So far, the numbers are not more than two. There are 15 seats each in these

courses. Last year was no different when religious studies attracted only the bare minimum, five students.

In Punjabi University, of the 80

seats available in the department — ranging from Sikhism and Hinduism to Jain and Buddhist studies — not one has been filled up this year, a situation much

worse than last year when at least half of these were taken up.

Head of the department Rajinder Kaur Rohi says, "Our discipline is not linked to the job

market. And in these recessionary times, everyone wants a job." But that is not a convincing explanation. People in a cut throat economy like the US continue to study Philosophical strains and other courses in humanities. And there is never a dearth of those for whom education is more than a route to an assured fat-sum salaried job.

In any case, the society needs to look beyond the immediate and quick fix explanations to understand why humanities as a whole are suffering. Since the SGPC offers a stipend of Rs 2,000 per month to students of religious studies, it also needs to engage with the larger academic debate.

The fact remains that even in the current rush in India to create more and more Central Universities, the entire focus is on job-related courses. The National Knowledge Commission, a brainchild of Dr Manmohan Singh and run by corporate child Sam Pitroda has woefully failed to address how to allow the humanities to bloom in the larger scheme of things. Most talk about higher education does not move beyond a plane higher than the job market, and Vice Chancellors of universities feel no hesitation in saying that their decisions are based on the fact that students are opting for professional courses over social sciences, as their ultimate goal is to get jobs. The fact that universities are supposed to be battle-grounds and nurseries for ideas seems to have been a lost thought even for the vice chancellors.



UK govt cracks down on tantriks, babas, other fraudsters

LONDON : British authorities are cracking down on the many 'tantriks', 'babas' and psychics who prey on the fears and desires of the Asian community by promising them remedies, everlasting love and good fortune.

Most newspapers published in Indian languages here carry hundreds of advertisements from such individuals, promising '100 per cent guarantee' of love and riches, or promising to cure cancer and lift curses.

The soothsayers industry is said to be worth 40 million pounds every year.

Now, authorities in the east Midlands town of Leicester, better known as 'Little India', have announced a campaign against such 'babas' and 'tantriks', most of whom have origins in the Indian sub-continent.

Deputy mayor Manjula Sood said: "I have heard of people being asked for 500 pounds and more for prayers or talismans. They think a curse will be placed on them if they refuse. One recently came to Leicester and took a room at a hotel where she charged clients 500 pounds for 10-minute sessions."

Resham Singh Sandhu, chairman of the Sikh Welfare and Cultural Society, said the Sikh community was lobbying with newspapers to stop publishing advertisements from such people.

Sandhu said: "What these people are doing is exploitation. In Leicester, we are talking about them in the prayer halls. We are saying 'don't follow these people, they cannot help you, they are only after your money'."

Anasudhin Azeez, Kerala-origin editor of the Manchester-based 'Asialite' publication, said that as a matter of policy, his newspaper refused to carry such advertisements, and hoped other Asian publications will also follow his example.

John Fox, trading standards manager with Leicester City Council, said the unit tracked down some "healers" during a campaign two years ago, and is now preparing another campaign later this year.

Fox said: "This is not alternative therapy, it's mumbo-jumbo. The real danger is that people who make these claims can stop people from seeing their doctors. We will be monitoring the relevant foreign language newspapers, having the adverts translated and contacting the people concerned. We'll also be looking at the cards going through people's doors."

In the latest case, the Leicestershire police is searching for a man called Ali Shah, who they believe tricked a Glasgow taxi driver into handing over 10,000 pounds with the promise of making his wife love him again.



Insufficient progress in health points to a persistent and profound gap in many countries between formal recognition of indigenous peoples' rights and actual situation



Indigenous Peoples Need You Ban Ki-moon

The world's indigenous peoples — 370 million in 70 countries — are the custodians of some of the most biologically diverse areas on earth. They speak a majority of the world's languages, and their traditional knowledge, cultural diversity and sustainable ways of life make an invaluable contribution to the world's common heritage.

The adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by the General Assembly in 2007 was a landmark in the struggle of indigenous peoples for justice, equal rights and development. There have also been recent welcome steps at the national level; some governments have apologised to indigenous peoples for past injus-

tics, and others have advanced legislative and constitutional reforms.

Still, indigenous peoples remain some of the most marginalised populations, suffering disproportionately from poverty and inadequate access to education. Many face discrimination and racism on a daily basis. All too often, their languages face strictures or are threatened with extinction, while their territories are sacrificed for mining and deforestation.

Indigenous peoples also tend to suffer from the low standards of health associated with poverty, malnutrition, environmental contamination and inadequate health care. With that in mind, this year's observance of the International Day focusses on the threat of

HIV/AIDS. It is essential that indigenous peoples have access to the information and infrastructure necessary for detection, treatment and protection.

Insufficient progress in health, in particular, points to a persistent and profound gap in many countries between the formal recognition of indigenous peoples' rights and the actual situation on the ground. On this International Day, I call on governments and civil society to act with urgency and determination to close this implementation gap, in full partnership with indigenous peoples.

(From the text of a message from U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, on the eve of the International Day of the World's Indigenous People, observed on