

# Endowed Chairs in Sikhism at Western Universities: A Rejoinder

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# The writer may see the Book Section of this issue. - Ed. SR

It is with a little trepidation that we publish this rejoinder to the American and UK scholars' exposition of 'endowed chairs' of Sikh studies (SR Feb. 2006) because it is far from our intention to hurt professional sensibilities. All theological scholars must, in the final analysis, stand before the bar of their own conscience to evaluate their contribution. In this context, we readily recall a recent Time magazine essay by Nicholas Lemann (March 06, 2006) which is scathingly critical of the elite American universities, including, Harvard, that "serve the faculty better than students." We reiterate the conclusion of that essay - in our context - "Don't mess" with the Sikh ethos.

- Ed. SR

In *the Sikh Review* of February 2006, (pp. 56-59), Prof. Raghbir Singh Basi, Prof. I.J. Singh, Prof. Harbans Lal, and Dr. Indarjit Singh (group of four) have argued for the establishment of Sikh academic chairs in Western universities. However, the editor in his cautionary comment questioned the benefit of such chairs by pointing to the "contribution" of Pashaura Singh and Harjot Oberoi.

The group of four says: "We do believe, however, that in general an endowed Chair at a university is an excellent and also the least expensive way to have a place on the table in the hallowed halls of academia." Judging from their enthusiasm for Sikh chairs, one would suppose that they have an added expertise in Sikhism. One would also suppose that they are aware of the "Sikh-work" done at the University of British Columbia, University of Michigan, University of California at Santa Barbara, and the University of Toronto. I wish these gentlemen could point out what these chairs have done to enhance the understanding of Sikhism for Sikhs and non-Sikhs. Have they studied or critically examined the publications coming out of these Universities?

I am not aware of the expertise of Prof. Basi or Dr. Indarjit Singh (UK) on Sikhism, but I am fairly familiar with Prof. Harbans Lal and I.J. Singh's writings on Sikhism. Have they# at any time critiqued the work of W.H. McLeod, Pashaura Singh, Harjot Oberoi or Gurinder Singh Mann? If they have, what do they think of it? They say, "An endowed Chair is the highest honor that can be bestowed upon a professor, who has already accumulated an excellent track record in the specialty area." If that is so, can they point out Harjot Oberoi or Pashaura Singh or Prof. Mann's "already accumulated excellent track record" before they became the occupants of Sikh chairs? To my knowledge McLeod not only supervised Pashaura Singh's thesis but was the consultant to Oberoi and Mann for their Ph.D. theses.

It is therefore hardly creditable to buttress their argument with a conclusion such as the following:

"While Muslims swordsmen conquered for the faith, Christian missionaries were willing to explore tentatively on the frontiers of empire to bring the 'good news' to even a few more souls.... In our own Sikh tradition, beginning right from the time of our Gurus, Sikh theologians were sent to the centers of higher learning, such as the famous Benaras Hindu University for research and dialogue."

When did the Islamic armies invade Indonesia, Malaysia, Nigeria or Tanzania? Would they enlighten us as to what happened to the aborigines of Australia, the Americas and Africa? Surely they know that Maharaja Dalip Singh, the ten years old prince was virtually

kidnapped by the British colonists and put in the custody of a Presbyterian missionary couple, Dr. & Mrs. John Logan. The young prince was separated from his mother and other relatives, brainwashed and then converted to Christianity and, his shining luxurious *Keshas* were presented as a trophy to Mrs. Logan!

Now, who were those Sikh theologians who were sent to the famous “Benaras Hindu University”? Could the four gentlemen name a single Sikh who was sent by the Gurus to the famous place—Benaras Hindu University? Did this university (or anything like that) exist at the time of the Sikh Gurus? What is the name of Guru who sent Sikh theologians to this university? Surely they know that Guru Nanak rejected all the essentials of Hinduism: incarnation of God, the caste system, transmigration, karma, hell, heaven, gods, goddesses, and idol worship. Guru Nanak also rejected the method or approach of attaining salvation preached by the Semitic and the Indian religions. Besides, he rejected Sanskrit as well as its script as a medium for the propagation of his philosophy. Given these truths, why would any Guru send Sikhs to Benaras, and for what purpose?

byd kqybl Bydu nw jwqw ]

Neither the *Vedas* (four Hindu texts) nor the four *Kateba* [Semitic texts: the *Torah*, the *Zabur* (Psalms), the *Injil* (Gospel), and the Quran] know the mystery of the Creator of the Cosmos.

[SGGS, M 1, p. 1021.]

kQw khwxl bydl Awxl pwpu puMnu blcwru ]

dy dy lyxw IY LyY dyxw nrik surig Avqwr ]

auqm miDm jwql ijnsl Birm BvY sMswru ]

‘It is the teachings of Vedas, which has created the myths of sin and virtue, hell and heaven, and karma and transmigration. One reaps the reward in the next life for the deeds performed in this life goes to hell or heaven according to the deeds. **The Vedas have also created the fallacy of inequality of caste and gender for the world.**’

[SGGS, M 2, p. 1243]

In recent past I wrote a critique of Dr. Harbans Lal’s three articles in which he portrayed Sikhism as an ‘appendage’ of Hinduism. He says that the Gurus sent Sikhs to Benaras for “research and dialogue.”

All research must serve a public purpose. Sikhs have the right to attend seminars or conferences where they present their work. Since the ‘group of four’ have argued for the establishment of Sikhs chairs, they must be aware of the book, published in 2000, by Doris Jakobsh under the direction of Harjot Oberoi (British Columbia University, Canada): *Relocating Gender in Sikh History: Transformation, Meaning and Identity?* Using Talib’s translation of Guru Granth Sahib, Jakobsh distorted Guru Nanak’s hymns to argue that Guru Nanak was for keeping the status quo; that Guru Nanak supported the rulers; that Guru Nanak was biased against women.

Do these four gentlemen want this type of research on Sikhism? They claim that the Sikh academic chairs would help the overseas Sikh community get better acquainted with their neighbors, and vice versa. Does Jakobsh’s research accomplish that? Did any of the holders of Sikh chairs challenge her work? On the contrary, Pashaura Singh, in a publication he co-authored with Prof. Barrier, applauded her work.

On what basis can we argue that Sikhs should endow more chairs, when in fact they seem to have no idea about the indifferent performances of established chairs? Prof. Pashura Singh has published “Recent Trends and Prospects in Sikh Studies,” in *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, 1998, 27(4), pp. 407-25. Can anyone explain to the Sikhs what is ‘academic’ about this article and how it advances the understanding of Sikhism?

In 1994 at a Sikh congregation when people questioned Gurinder Singh Mann about his “locked up” thesis, he is said to have retorted: “I am a historian, not a theologian.” In that case how could someone who is not a Sikh theologian, is qualified to perform textual analysis of Aad Guru Granth Sahib? At any rate, Prof. Mann’s work has been refuted by Prof. Pritam Singh and Prof. Balwant Singh Dhillon of Guru Nanak Dev University. I have not seen Mann’s response to date. The same is true about Pashaura Singh’s textual analysis of Aad Guru Granth Sahib.

Dr. Kapany’s financial contributions in the name of his late beloved mother are commendable. In doing this seva of setting a Sikh chair at UC, Riverside, he must carry on his shoulders a high degree of responsibility and must exercise a degree of oversight. In all humility, I would urge the Sikhs to put a moratorium on the establishing new Sikh chairs. Let us dispassionately evaluate the already established Sikh chairs.

Last year, I published a detailed article on McLeod, his writings, and his associates. Currently that article is posted at three Internet sites. There has been no response from McLeod or his associates as yet. Since these four gentlemen are urging Sikhs to establish more Sikh academic chairs, I invite them to debate my article on the Sikh Spectrum, or any other medium. If they think that McLeodian research is off limits for discussion to Sikhs, I would encourage them to see the merits of open and free discussion. There is a lot to learn through that forum.

Research is indeed search for truth, which involves exchange of ideas, and debate on ideas, not one-sided propaganda. What good is research if holders of the Sikh Chairs are unwilling to debate their work? Our known Sikh intellectuals/scholars, should reflect and seek out the wisdom for what is right.

