

REMEMBERING PARTITION

By Gyanendra Pandey

Published by Cambridge University Press

Price: Rs. 595; Pages: 218

A review by Swapan Dasgupta

Partition was the bloody curtain call of the struggle for independence. Simultaneously, it became the starting point of more contemporary movements to shape modern nationhood in India and Pakistan. Far from being relegated to history, the memories, mythologies and histories of the movement for Pakistan - that, in essence, was what Partition was all about - have shaped the mentalities of peoples as Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. As was tragically reaffirmed in Gujarat last March, the modern origins of the "us" and the "other" divide can be located in the happenings between 1940 and 1947.

What is the role of the historian in this explosive interplay of the past and the present? Does it begin and end with recreating the past "as it really happened" and, by way of bonus, locating it in a larger context? Gyanendra Pandey, one of the most stimulating historians from the Subaltern Studies stable, is impatient with such an approach. The preoccupation with "statist" history, he feels, has glossed over the experiences of ordinary people in the Partition drama, condemning them to the status of lifeless statistics. It has also reduced "local" events to casual footnotes, as if the details of the heat and dust of conflict are incapable of contributing to the big picture.

Methodologically, Pandey's endeavour to rescue the little men and women from what E.P. Thompson once called the "condescension of posterity" is laudable. Oral histories, obscure diaries and novels can enrich history-writing enormously and complement the months of painstaking perusal of official documents generated by the custodians of the state.

The problem with Pandey's work is that both projects remain incomplete. In completely overlooking the multivolume Transfer of Power documents culled from British sources, Pandey proceeds on the incredible assumption that what was being deliberated on in London, Delhi or the provincial capitals had only tangential bearing on people on the ground. Such an omission, while good subalternist posturing, makes for bad history.

Secondly, in absorbing the oral histories and testimonies of those who lived through Partition, he relies excessively on the research of others, notably Urvashi Butalia and Shail Mayaram. Yet, in highlighting the emotive issue of abducted women on both sides of the communal divide, Pandey glosses over the fact that Partition was also a battle for religious honour. Those who were Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan could have stayed on and kept their property had they converted. That they didn't exercise that option is revealing. Pandey's suggestion that "the general discourse on Partition still functions as something like a gigantic rumour" is, under the circumstances, demeaning to those who equated faith with honour.

Finally, in dissecting the novels about Partition, Pandey can barely conceal his preference for the wistful nostalgia of the Urdu-speaking elite who left for Pakistan in 1947, not out of choice, but for their own personal safety. He tries to internalise the *angst* behind the lament of Ebadat Barelvi that "Delhi was a Muslim city", but doesn't extend the same measure of generosity to those Sikhs who commemorate the mass suicide of women in Thoa Khalsa. Likewise, his sneering asides on Sir Francis Toker's "memory" is unbecoming. What makes Barelvi more authentic than either an SGPC functionary or Toker? The historian's own cultural and political preferences?

Pandey, it would seem, was faced with the choice of either playing the historian or donning the mantle of a political activist. The historian rightly assumes that nationhood is constructed from popular memory but the activist is anxious that it be refashioned along more fragmented lines. Yet, what persists as memory isn't simply an outcome of elite manipulation; it is also born of lived experience. In arguing that the idealised "community" is blinkered and should be different, Pandey unwittingly falls back on the hoary Marxist notion of "false consciousness". His book, in fact, confirms the prescience of what G.R. Elton once wrote: that historians should stick to what they are good at - history.

- Courtesy: *India Today*



HISTORY OF THE SIKHS

By Joseph Davey Cunningham

Published by Rupa. Pp 474. Price Rs. 295.

This book first appeared 153 years ago, and has since been re-published. It traces the birth and rise of Sikhism, besides recording the history of undivided Punjab in the context of geo-political situation prevailing in the early part of the Nineteenth century. It is written by an Englishman, Joseph D Cunningham, who started his career as an officer in the army of the East India Company. Cunningham saw the first Anglo-Sikh war in 1845, just six years after the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Despite being on the opposite side, Cunningham's respect for the Sikh faith shines through notably in his account. His eye for detail and his grasp of an alien culture are striking.

SOME ASPECTS OF SIKH HISTORY: A FRESH LOOK

By Hakam Singh

Sikh Welfare Foundation of America

P.O. Box 783, Duarte, California 91009 [115 Pages]

*A review by I.J. Singh**

How did the unassuming disciple Bhai Jetha become Guru Ram Das? Was it because he was more obedient and a better man than Guru Amar Das's sons; was it because Bibi Bhani asked for the favor, or was it because of some quirky tale out of Hindu mythology that might be entirely imaginative, and supposedly predated the event by unknown millennia?

Is it even remotely possible - or realistic- that Guru Arjun did not have access to the *bani* of all of his predecessors when he sat down to compile the Guru Granth, and finally resorted to the stratagem of applauding Baba Mohan, who had the manuscripts, to part with them by singing a *shabd* in his praise? How reasonable and logical is such an explanation or assumption?

When did the so-called "Dasam Granth" come about and under what circumstances? It was never given the status of scriptural writing in Sikhism though it is now being promoted as such. Which of its contents may be the writing of Guru Gobind Singh and which compositions appear entirely - and outrageously - spurious?

If you listen carefully to the *granthis* and *raagis* in gurdwaras - something that not many of us do - you will be simply amazed at many of the parables that are recited. There is in most of them a tinge of historical truth perhaps embellished with a mound of imagination.

Hakam Singh has taken nine such historical anecdotes from the lives of the Gurus and subjected them to rational and reverential analysis. Why these nine? Because they are universally cited in gurdwaras around the world, and will be most widely known to Sikhs. His tools consist of history and reason. He looks for the explanation that seems the most sensible in light of what we know of our Gurus and their character through history and tradition. He finds that many of the explanations offered by *granthis* and *raagis* are more fanciful than reasonable.

Admittedly, the reason why the record in Sikh tradition is so murky is not so difficult to grasp. Indian lore and culture have always been passed through to generations generally via the oral - *shruti*, *smriti* - tradition. There has always been a paucity of written records in the traditional writings and even those are not easily available.

This becomes even truer when we look at Sikh history. Sikhs have had scant time and peace to record their history for they were too busy making it. Add to it the Indian penchant for oral tradition; as a result there have been few attempts to capture authentic history and test it against the traditional construct.

Parsing historical fact from cultural fiction has, therefore, not always been easy but it is necessary. In this exercise, the process of thinking and attempting to sift truth from fiction becomes most important to self-awareness.

T.S. Elliot speaks of the "cunning passages and contrived corridors" of history. Dr. Hakam Singh is a scientist by training and a thoughtful Sikh besides. In dissecting these nine widely quoted parables that underlie Sikh lore he is pointing to a path - and a process - for navigating our way through some of these convoluted passages of history.

This small book is indeed much appreciated. I hope Hakam Singh will continue the process of focusing his eagle eye on more such anecdotes from Sikh history.



1. CHARHDI KALA ATE CHARHDI KALA DE PUNJ

(Punjabi)

2. SAYINGS OF GURU NANAK

(in English & Punjabi - Revised second edition 2002 - original 1969)

By Dr Harnam Singh Shan

Published by Dharam Parchar Committee, SGPC, Amritsar. 143001

(1) Pages 272 (2) Pages 628

A review by Saran Singh

It is refreshing to see these two significant additions to the basic studies and literature sponsored by the Dharam Parchar Committee, the ecumenical wing of Sikhism's premier body, the SGPC.

The Sikh moral and cultural tradition has been endowed with the humanist virtues of truth, justice, honesty and dignity. Its ideology is rooted in the divine Spirit that is forever true and beyond death. In so far as these basic values were demonstrably lived, as well as taught, by the Ten Gurus, the collective doctrine of *Charhdi Kala* or 'Spirit Ascendant' has been inherited by succeeding generations of Sikhs over five centuries and more.

Guru Nanak and his nine successors, as architects of a humane society, preached against withdrawal from the real world. They lived in a tempestuous age when the Indian subcontinent had to cope with invading hordes and tyrannical regimes, aggressive dynasts and a degenerate priest-hood, whether the Muslim Quazi or the Hindu brahmin, to organize an oppressed people into a disciplined community. The Gurus not only laid down certain ground rules and established a framework of religio-social institutions, they also - in doing so - courted kingly displeasure and two of them laid down their lives as the medieval era's greatest martyrs: Guru Arjun Dev in Lahore, on 30 May 1606, and Guru Tegh Bahadur at Chandni Chowk, Delhi on 11 Nov. 1675.

These supreme sacrifices infused a steely determination among the growing number of Sikhs across north India, culminating in the historic Vaisakhi day in 1699 when Guru Gobind Singh dramatically sanctified the Khalsa Panth with *Amrit*, the elixir of life everlasting. The transformation was total, not only in lifestyle but in spirit.

This - first - volume probes the undying spirit. The author - an eminent scholar of Sikh lore traces this death-defying spirit not only from history and chronicles of the times but, more

significantly, from the holy text of Guru Granth Sahib - the scriptures of the Sikhs. The book traces this definitive inspiration to Guru Nanak's *Japuji* - the seminal scripture linking the emancipation of human spirit to God's principal attributes: Without fear, without rancour, the ever present, self born God.

In seven lucid chapter, the author traces and analyses the principle and power of ascendant optimism that characterizes our life on earth, indeed, all creation. The *Guru-vani* is profusely quoted: whether to discover the truth, or debunk doubt and superstition, on the one hand and tantrik ritualism or obscurantism on the other. It took generations to build up character and confidence.

The author argues that the Tenth Guru, Sri Guru Gobind Singh sealed this spirit of acceptance, confidence and optimism by giving Sikhism a purpose and a goal in this worldly existence: of life, liberty and justice: goals worth living for and worthy of sacrifice. Extensive quotations give substance to the analysis - that ushers us into the present times, while the long bibliography is proof of the author's erudition, even as it encourages serious students of comparative religion to explore the makings of a nation.

The second book, *Sayings of Guru Nanak* has been aptly given the subtitle of "A Dictionary of the Thoughts of Guru Nanak Dev". This volume extensively (if not exhaustively) quotes specific *bani* of Sri Guru Nanak Devji in the format of a dictionary of philosophic themes arranged alphabetically. First published in 1969 - to commemorate the Quincentennial of advent of Sri Guruji - it has now been "thoroughly revised, recast, re-edited and enlarged" - as the author-editor declares at the outset. The short introduction set out the objective: "This book is a collection of some pithy, popular and representative quotations gleaned from the sacred writings."

Evidently this objective rules out any in-depth discussion of the seminal ideas and beliefs as adumbrated by the founder of the Sikh religion, for Guru Nanak's hymns - of exquisite beauty - embody some of the most profound philosophical truths.

The book is indeed a handy source and reference point for students of the Sikh scripture. The English translation is lucid, terse and idiomatic. As a "digest" of *Gurbani* this volume is indispensable for institutions as well as individuals. It is hoped that the SGPC will ensure a network of distribution points (or agencies) for disseminating its publications such as these two.

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CHALLENGES FOR SIKHS IN 21ST CENTURY

Ikeevin sadi vich sikhian layi chunautian (Punjabi)

Ed. by Dr. Harchand Singh Bedi

Post-Graduate Deptt. of Punjabi Studies, Khalsa College, Amritsar.

Published by Dr Mohinder Singh Dhillon, Principal, Khalsa College

Pp 256. Price Rs. 180 (Hard Cover)

Thoughtfully dedicated to Bhai Kahan Singh Nabha, this is a scintillating anthology of 20 essays by a galaxy of scholars, published under the auspices of Sikhism's premier institution, the Khalsa College, Amritsar, to commemorate the Tricentennial of Khalsa Panth. A companion volume in English has been similarly published and reviewed in these columns earlier.

Some of the best known scholars of Sikhism have contributed their monographs characterised by consistent merit, reflective wisdom and futurist perspective. Dr Gurbhagat Singh writes perceptively on the future of humanity and institutional Sikhism. The Akal Takht is the focus of Dr Harjinder Singh Dilgeer's essay, while Drs Wazir Singh and S.S. Hans dwell on the Sikh philosophy. Prof. HS Sodhi visualizes a new renaissance, even as Prof. Manjit Singh and Dr. Navtej Singh explore the challenges to Sikh identity in the new age. The same theme is taken up by Dr Harnam Singh Shan - if from a different perspective. Study of Gurbani and its musicology are discussed by Dr. Amrit Pal Kaur and Dr. Gurnam Singh. The future of Punjabi language, literature and journalism is the theme of some of the essays. The anthology closes with an interesting Paper on Sirdar Kapur Singh's basic concerns scripted by Sardar Avtar Singh of Ramgarhia College, Phagwara. This is a treasury of good reading for scholars as well as libraries.

S.S.

KESARI PUSTAK: GURU GYAN OR THE THE PATH DIVINE

By Joginder Singh, with Foreword by Patwant Singh

**Published by Hemkunt Publishers Pvt. Ltd. A-78 Naraina Indl. Area (I) New
Delhi. 110020.**

Pp. 212. Price (Hard cover) Rs.200

A collection of short essays, part biographical, part philosophic, this tastefully designed book focuses on the Sikh Gurus and their seminal scriptures. Essentially a devotee's outpourings, the text not only provides an insight into a wide range of human emotions, it also kindles the thought process and guides the earnest reader to dwell on *Guruvani's* inspiring message.

The wisdom of Guru Granth Sahib shines through many of the passages: intellect is a gift, but devotion is the key to happiness. Love of the divine is ambrosial; however, lust leads to misery. The company of the pious is a blessing. Self-centredness is a destructive impulse, while the dilemma of duality only brings confusion. Suffering and pain are inalienable part of our mind's working; only meditation on God's name can alleviate stress and pain, because remembrance of God transports one to the realm of bliss. Its methodology is best learnt by following the True Teacher's instruction embodied in the holy Guru Granth Sahib.

The author, who rose to the highest echelons of public service, had been fairly regular contributor to *The Sikh Review* combining innate wisdom with an intimate style of writing and an intuitive faculty.

S.S.

TURNING POINTS IN THE HISTORY OF THE SIKHS - A NEW TESTAMENT ON THE PUNJAB

By B.S. Danewalia

Published by Orion Publishers, S.C.O. 21, Sector 17E.

Office: 94, Sector 8-A. Chandigarh.

Pp 500 + index. Price Rs. 525 (Rs. 470 for readers of *The Sikh Review*)

In a hard-hitting and rivetting book, Sr. Bhagwan Singh Danewalia offers a new and unsettling view of the history of the Sikhs. Essentially a realistic recital of the glorious heritage, his indictment of the Post-Ranjit leadership is relentless. The author traces contemporary events to the fateful 1984, right up to the present times, and in today's context - deplores the folly of the incipient casteism that characterizes Punjab politics, because - as he avers - 'the Sikh ideal is a classless society and caste plays havoc' with this egalitarian principle.

In a wider sweep over two millennia, the book reinterprets the entire gamut of the history and culture of the Land of Five Rivers - wherein (in the Seventh Chapter) Sikhism makes an epochal entry. It is not until the 25th Chapter that the author comes to grip with the events precipitated by the Partition of the sub continent in 1947.

The return of normalcy to Punjab, notwithstanding, books on the history of this border state in general and its turbulent years in particular, continue to hit the stands regularly.

In "*Turning Points of the Sikh History - A New Testament on the Punjab*" B.S. Danewalia (a retired Inspector General of Police) now in his 70s, took almost two years to complete this "scholarly work". In fact, this is his third book. The point he wants to make is that Sikhs are the only community which has not changed its leadership while all others have done so.

The Punjab and the Sikh politics need renewal and redemption. The malaise that afflicted the Sikhs after Maharaja Ranjit Singh was the class of Sikh leaders who preferred *Jagirs*, property to liberty and sovereignty. Mr. Danewalia says that the Sikh Sardars preferred *Jagirs* and property - and then became decadent but clever to exploit the Sikh masses for their personal ends, by exploiting the Sikh past of sacrifices and suffering.

Mr Danewalia maintains that his latest book is of extraordinary historical scope and inquiries into the history of the Punjab. It brings out the historical turning-point in its religious, cultural and military-political conflicts since the Aryan times which determined the fates and faith and political fortune of the people. This is hopeful antidote to the ordinary historians who routinize and construct the study of the history.

The last chapter of his book deals with events since 1947 as politics of passions and since 1982, the role of the Akali leaders, intellectuals and human rights leaders, since 1986, who acted the same way as Sikh Sardars on the eve of the first Anglo-Sikh war. Nothing has changed during the last 150 years since 1845 - in their destructive role, and the Sikhs suffered due to want of leaders with qualities of leadership - except as exploiters, doing what the earlier sardars and chiefs had done.

Mr Danewalia also has come down heavily on Sikh intellectuals and human rights activists who never asked militants to desist from innocent killings. He believes that societies fail for many reasons but the most important is when these fail to throw up new leadership.

Sikhism is supposed to be a classless society. But, unfortunately, in the Gurdwaras Act, reservation was made. Now most recently, the Shiromani Akali Dal government in the State has decided to place 'Ramgarhia' in the OBC list.

"If Sikhism is surviving today, it is because of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's rule in the State nearly 200 years ago," adds Mr Danewalia.

[Contributed]



BOOKS RECEIVED

SIKHISM (in Chinese)

by Gurdev Singh Bath*

Formerly resident of Hong Kong, Sr. Gurdev Singh Bath currently lives in Canada. He has, at his own initiative and expense, published over a dozen pamphlets on the basic ideals of Sikhism in order to create a better understanding of the faith as well as its followers.

His latest is an admirable booklet of 32 pages summarising the essential concept of monotheism and the message of Guru Nanak. A thumbnail sketch of Sikh history is followed up with selected quotes from Guru Granth Sahib, a reference to the institution of *Sangat*, *langar* and *gurudwara*, as also excerpts from observation of eminent writers like Pearl Buck (who wrote *The Good Earth* story based on China), historian Arnold Toynbee, Dorothy Field, and prof. H L Bradshaw. All of this in intricate, but immaculate, Mandarin - the world's most picturesque script.

Sr. Gurdev Singh deserves grateful thanks of the Sikhs everywhere for this yoeman's service to humanity.

S.S.