

# Chairs for Sikh Studies in America

## Problems and Solutions\*

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The past few years have seen an inordinate amount of unseemly controversy on the so-called "Sikh Chairs" in North America. It is a controversy in which scholars from both sides of the ocean have joined. Several articles have appeared in the Sikh press and the issue has been dissected and discussed at various symposia and conferences<sup>(1-3)</sup>. This article examines various aspects of this issue, identifies problem areas and explores possible solutions.

Sikhs are no longer limited to Punjab. They are a prominent presence all over the globe from Australia to Zimbabwe. They are certainly not new to the United States and Canada: the earliest Sikh settlements in North America are almost 100 years old. Sikhs had a hand not only in opening of the west but also in construction of the Panama Canal. The first Asian to be elected to the U.S. Congress was a Sikh, Dalip Singh Saund. They are cab drivers and farmers, doctors, engineers, lawyers and research scientists, even members of the armed services.

The Sikhs are undoubtedly a prosperous, highly visible presence in the complex mosaic that is North America, but their religion is little known to their neighbors. Also, the immigrant Sikhs now have spawned a new generation of children growing up outside Punjab, away from the land of their religious roots, often isolated from their own community. Neither these young Sikhs nor their new neighbors in North America know much about Sikhism – the religion or its philosophy.

As the Sikh community in North America has blossomed, it has realized that in order to become an integral part of their newly adopted homeland it is necessary that they interact with their neighbors, learn the culture and traditions of their neighbors and, in turn, satisfy their neighbors' curiosity about the Sikh culture and heritage. This would naturally foster research on Sikhism. Thus studying the Sikhs – the history and teachings of Sikhism – is important to the community and its future.

Sikhism, like many other religions, is a religion of the Book. Ergo, to Support Sikh studies at universities and institutions of higher learning, whether North American or otherwise, would be natural. Over the past decade, therefore, fundraisers were held, appeals were made at gurdwaras, ordinary Sikhs and their friends chipped in to establish and support "Sikh Studies Programs" at several universities. Now some years later, these programs have run into problems. Charges and countercharges in the form of impassioned articles<sup>4</sup> and books<sup>5</sup> have been published by supporters and opponents of the research published by the occupants of these academic positions. A couple of examples will clearly illustrate the extent of the bitterness generated by this controversy.

The first Chair of Punjabi language and literature and Sikh Studies was stated at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in 1987 and Dr Harjot Oberoi was appointed to head the program. Dr. Oberoi has since published several research articles and a major book – "*Construction of Religious Boundaries*" published by Oxford University Press, New Delhi, in 1994. This book has stirred up a storm of controversy and attracted considerable academic criticism. Even more disturbing is the fact that many Sikh scholars feel that Oberoi has not worked towards fulfilling the agreement signed by the Sikh community and the University

when the Chair was founded. Mohinder Singh Gosal, President of the Federation of Sikh Societies of Canada, signatory to the contract between the Sikhs and the UBC has charged that the very appointment of Oberoi was part of an anti-Sikh conspiracy. There was a two year delay in the appointment of Oberoi, a fresh PhD, who was appointed despite the lack of significant teaching or research experience.

A group of Sikh scholars from India visited UBC in 1994 and met Oberoi. According to them his publications, as to their content, tone and tenor, were visibly incompatible with objectives of the Chair occupied by him, and grossly unfair to Sikh sensibilities<sup>7</sup>.

The second case, that of Pashaura Singh, further exemplifies the problems with Sikh Chairs as presently constituted.

Dr. Pashaura Singh was awarded a PhD by the University of Toronto in 1991 on the basis of a doctoral thesis entitled "*The Text and Meaning of the Adi Granth*." According to many Sikh scholars the thesis was academically unsound, constituting an attack on the theological and linguistic originality of the Sikh sacred scriptures. Numerous critical reviews of the thesis appeared<sup>8</sup>, as did some in Pashaura Singh's defense<sup>9</sup>. This controversial, inexperienced scholar was appointed to head the newly created program at the University of Michigan, even though he later appeared at the Akal Takht to recant some of his research.

The extent of bitterness and lack of trust can be further gauged by the fact that two recent doctoral theses – at the University of Toronto and Columbia University – were sealed at the request of their authors: they remain unavailable for critical examination by other scholars.

Clearly the North American feels frustrated, disappointed and betrayed. Though we have cited two examples above, in this article our purpose is not to single out any one academic program but to identify and analyze problem areas so that solutions can be explored.

Simply stated, problems surfaced because of a clear discrepancy in the expectations of the Sikh community when these "Chairs" were established and what the community felt the universities had delivered. Before one can examine the gap between expectations and results, several questions need to be explored. Briefly we will focus on the role of a University, what to expect from a scholar appointed to occupy a position at a University, and what management model can satisfy the community, the scholar and the University.

In order to fill an academic position at a university usually a panel of experts is selected. This panel (appointment committee), acting under University guidelines, decides the specific qualifications for the position, advertises the position, invites candidates to present seminars, interviews them, and usually submits a short list of qualified candidates from which a final selection is made. Naturally, this panel consists of scholars who have a record of research in the subject area and are usually from that university. This creates another problem which will become evident with time. Since there are very few scholars of Sikhism based at North American universities, these few are unlikely to be on the selection committees for any future appointments. Since many of them are highly controversial within the mainstream Sikh community, neither they nor those whom they select are likely to find easy acceptance within the Sikh community. And ultimately it is the Sikh community that provides much of the financial or moral support for Sikh Chairs or Programs.

### **I. The Role of the University**

It needs to be recognized that a University will not preach any religion, including Sikhism. To expect otherwise is to be on a confrontational course destined for failure. The university can and should conduct research on any aspect of Sikhs and Sikhism and teach courses in it, but neither preach Sikhism nor denigrate it or its adherents.

It is a University's prerogative to determine the policies for hiring, promotion, tenure, firing etc. It is the university that determines who to hire or, for that matter, whether the hired

person is a Sikh or not. Before funding is established, some negotiation may be possible in defining the general guidelines for the proposed faculty position but the specifics have to remain the university's bailiwick.

At all Universities, promotion and tenure for a faculty member depend upon an evaluation of his or her contribution to teaching, research and administration or community service. The precise expectations in each of these three areas depend upon the nature of the appointment and are determined by each university or department. Universities generally have rules and regulations on these matters which are fairly well spelled out and must be observed.

## **II. What to Expect from a Scholar, Whether Sikh or not**

Besides the usual expectation of honest and unbiased research, what can be expected from the University scholar of Sikhism?

### **IIA. Nature of research to be conducted.**

The university – primarily the scholar – usually decides what research to conduct. If, for instance, a scholar wishes to conduct research on the personal life of Chandu, one may not object that the question is trivial. This is a matter to be determined by the scholar or, in other cases, by the student, his advisor and an academic committee. Furthermore, usually the researcher decides where to publish his or her research. There are peer reviewed journals and others that are not.

### **IIB. Other Expectations.**

We think it fair to expect that the scholar, particularly if funded by the community, will speak out on areas that concern the life of the Sikh community.

As an example, in 1994 Spellman raised the issue of the turban for the Sikhs; McLeod also responded on the same issue at the time of hearings on the matter of recruitment of Sikhs into the Royal Canadian mounted police. Surprisingly however, the three scholars currently funded in part by the community – at the University of British Columbia, Michigan University and Columbia University – did not join the debate. In our opinion their conspicuous and deafening silence was an embarrassment to their scholarly positions as well as to the Sikh community. By their silence they left the matter to amateurs as best as they could. By this posture of “no comment” we think they abandoned and abdicated their scholarly responsibility, leaving aside any obligation to the community.

It would be fair to expect that the scholar would maintain some contact with Sikh institutions, including religious and political, in order to keep his/her finger on the pulse of the Sikh community. Only then can he remain an active scholar. This emphatically does not mean that he must maintain the “politically correct” opinion on Sikh issues, such as Khalistan. But it does mean that he/she should be able to speak from an informed base.

### **IIC. Controversies in research need not be squelched**

On matters of research it has to be recognized by the community, as well as by the academicians, that controversy in research is neither new nor undesirable. In fact, disagreements in interpretations often spark new and innovative research.

The cure for a bad idea or sloppy research is not censorship but the fresh air of more research in the “free marketplace of ideas.” Human history – from Socrates and Buddha to Galileo, Nanak and Spinoza – tells us that censorship never killed an idea. The lives of Sikh Gurus are testimony to the power and immortality of ideas. Any attempt to deny an idea by censoring it goes against the idea of academic freedom and also negates the basic teachings of Sikhism.

Does it mean that a scholar may write what he will and refuse to explain his position, or that the community has no recourse? Certainly not.

If a society, community or an organization funds a scholar, it has the right to know what use the funds are put to. This is not a novel concept. For purposes of illustration let us look at how the National Institutes of Health (NIH) of the United States function. The NIH supports much of the sponsored research in the health sciences in the country.

#### **IID. Specific Areas of Scholarly Accountability**

In some matters scholarly accountability may seem like an infringement of academic freedom; in other matters it is essential and is based on sound practice and a rich, worldwide academic tradition.

The NIH and most of the other supporting agencies expect accountability in the form of a) periodic (quarterly or annual) report, b) publication in referred journals, c) presentation at national and international meetings. Failure to show adequate yearly progress almost always results in non-renewal of funding.

#### **III. NIH as a Model for Research Management**

In case of NIH, scientists submit applications for research grants. The applications describe the proposed research as well as appropriate budget. Considerable detail is provided by the applicant on objectives of the research, methods and procedures by which research will be conducted and, most importantly, the significance of the proposed research.

The applications are sent to special study groups of scientists and scholars drawn from across the nation's institutes of higher learning. They evaluate the applications and rate them. Unapproved research projects are not funded.

Approved research projects are rated and funded depending upon availability of funds and their rating. The budget lists the financial support provided by the University as well funds requested from the granting agency. Often the budget lists travel needs, funds for research assistants, full or part salary of the major scholar, consultant fees, equipment and publication costs, etc. Unpaid consultants and collaborative arrangements with scholars at other universities are also listed. Some negotiations on the budget often result in some give and take.

This basic model is used not only by the NIH but also by other governmental or private funding agencies and foundations, such as the National Science Foundation or the March of Dimes. Sometimes, instead of entertaining proposals on open projects, granting agencies invite proposals on specific areas of research.

The budget of the NIH is debated and approved in the US Congress. So some give and take is inevitable. Boondoggles are occasionally exposed and granting agencies such as the NIH become responsive in some measure to the concerns of the elected representatives of the people by earmarking research projects that are clearly in the nation's interest or consciousness.

#### **IV. Concept of Sikh Chairs**

Before we go on to a specific model for funding and managing "Sikh Studies" it would be necessary to understand what we mean by the word "Sikh Chairs."

Most - though not all- universities have endowed chairs usually established in the name of a generous donor. This "Chair" is usually in a specific discipline of teaching or research. An endowed chair means a tenured, lifetime position awarded to an established scholar who already has a distinguished track record. It is truly an honor bestowed – a recognition granted by the academic community and the University. A rare professor gets such an honor; most professors never do. A new PhD at the untenured rank of an Instructor or an Assistant Professor would emphatically never hold a chair.

We are not aware of any endowed chairs that are an exception to the above guidelines – except the so-called "Sikh Chairs." By establishing Sikh Chairs we are, in a sense,

providing lifetime, tenured positions to new, young scholars who have no proven track record and, rightly, should be at lower end of the academic marketplace for appointments, promotion, tenure and research funding.

#### **V. Specific Recommendations in the Case of Sikh Studies**

Clearly we support the idea of community funding of Sikh Studies but we cannot endorse the concept of “Sikh Chairs” as presently constituted. The questions then are how best to manage funding for such programs and what to expect from the holders of such positions.

We believe that new PhD scholars should compete in the academic marketplace to find appointments in the departments of religion, history, anthropology, and South Asian Studies, etc, depending upon their area of specialization. Examples of such appointments exist with scholars of Sikhism in the history departments of the University of Otago, Louisiana State University, and also in the departments of religion at Colby College and Gettysburg College.

These scholars should then apply for funds to support their specific research and, in some cases, even their salary, whether in whole or in part. In other words we are suggesting a funding model somewhat like that of NIH discussed above.

The question here is: Can one support research without supporting a Chair? We say, yes. Support graduate fellowships. Provide research funds, travel funds, publication costs, funds for research assistants and staff. Provide grants where part or whole of faculty salary can also be covered.

In other words, why not provide grants for research projects like the NIH, NSF and many private foundations do? Let individual scholars submit a proposed research project with a reasonable budget for it. Such a grant can also be for curricular development or for a course to be taught. This way Sikh Studies Programs can be established without attaching to them a lifetime guarantee of a job. This also lets the funding agency determine which research project is meritorious and deserves support and which is not.

Major advantages of such a model would be 1) increased competitiveness and 2) it would not matter where or with whom the particular scholar has trained. What would matter would be the merit of the grant application and its fundability. There is no reason why such funding support from the community could not underwrite the development of new academic teaching also.

It would be eminently fair to expect that the funded scholars would provide:

1. Annual progress report. Renewal of further funding would then be contingent upon satisfactory progress.
2. Occasional talk at the gurdwara if that is a funding agency.
3. Some level of community involvement in the Sikh community, particularly if the scholar is a Sikh.

Even the NIH has hearings on its budgets where their activities are commented upon and questioned in the US Congress. There is no reason why such matters should not be discussed at special hearings held in gurdwaras.

In other words, you are saying to the scholars: “If you want my money keep open the communication with me. You cannot say, I want your money but will tell you nothing of what I do with it.”

#### **VI. Advantage of the Proposed Model for Funding Sikh Studies**

There are some very obvious advantages to the proposed model for management and funding of Sikh studies:

1. It would be possible to fund a greater variety of activities – from the writing of a book, travel for research, development of a course, salary support of faculty or graduate

assistants, etc.

2. It would be possible to support activities at more universities and institutions at the same time for the same amount of money. So the community would get more for its money.

3. In this model it would not matter where the applicant was trained, whether at Toronto or at Guru Nanak Dev University. What would matter would be the merit of the proposed project and whether or not it meets the expectations of the funding agency.

4. The quality of research would improve because: a) increased competitiveness and b) the candidate would have to describe his or her specific goals, research methodology and the significance of the proposed research.

5. Quite clearly, considerable accountability of the funded activities to the community and communication with the community would result. The community would not run into the problems it has hitherto encountered where some holders of positions appear non-responsive to it.

### **VII. Specific Examples where the Proposed Model is Applicable**

To illustrate the application of the proposed model let us look at some existing, active scholars who write on or about Sikhism, and live primarily outside India. Not all of them are equally admired. In fact, the writings of some are considered highly controversial, even heretical. We have deliberately selected them with only two criteria in mind: 1) They all live and work outside India, and 2) They are all based at a University or College.

Some are of Sikh descent or belief, others are not. The list is probably not exhaustive but includes most scholars who meet the above two criteria. The names are arranged alphabetically by last name; the career highlights or major activities of each scholar are very briefly summarized.

1. **Parminder Bacchu**. Department of anthropology at a Canadian university. Yet to publish a major book. Has been writing on Sikh immigrants, their perceptions and problems, etc.

2. **N. Gerald Barrier**, Professor of History, University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri. He has written exclusively and extensively on Sikhs and Sikhism, particularly on the *Singh Sabha* period. Is a prolific writer with an abiding interest in Sikhism. Has contributed to the recently published Encyclopedia of Sikhism. His view of Sikhism is that of an outsider and, for that reason, he has not been free of controversy.

3. **Mark Juergensmeyer**, University of California, Santa Barbara. He has written about Sikhs and Sikhism but does not limit his research exclusively to Sikhs.

4. **Nikky Guninder Kaur**, Associate Professor of Religion, Colby College, Maine. She is currently at a small New England college, has one credible book to her credit and has contributed to the recently published Encyclopedia of Sikhism. Basically she is at the early stage of her career.

5. **Guru Dharam Singh Khalsa**, Department of Religion, Gettysburg State College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Completed his doctoral work on Guru Ram das under the supervision of Professor Mark Juergensmeyer. Has yet to publish a book. Basically at the early stage of his career.

6. **Gurinder Singh Mann**, assistant Professor, South Asian Studies, Columbia University, York. Heads the Sikhs Studies Program at Columbia University. With Professor Jack Hawley, co-edited a decent book. Has yet to publish original research from his doctoral thesis. Basically at the early stages of his academic career.

7. **Hew McLeod**, professor of history, University of Otago, New Zealand. Prolific but highly controversial. His view of Sikhism is that of an outsider that we cannot always

endorse, but he also has credible work to his credit like the translation of a *Rehat Nama*. Has contributed to the recently published Encyclopedia of Sikhism.

8. **Harjot Oberoi**, South Asian Studies, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada, where he heads the Sikh Studies Program. He has one highly controversial book to his credit.

9. **Joyce J.M. Pettigrew**, Reader in Anthropology, Queens University, Belfast. Her latest book (1995) "The Sikhs of the Punjab" has been well received – better than her earlier work (1985) "Robber Nobleman: A study of the political system of the Sikh Jats."

10. **Pashaura Singh**, South Asian Studies, University of Michigan where he heads the Sikh Studies Program. Completed his doctoral work on the Adi Granth at the University of Toronto. His thesis attracted considerable criticism. Has yet to publish a major book. At the early stages of his academic career.

As is clear from the list, some scholars are primarily historians, others function in departments of religion, while some are in South Asian studies, and two are anthropologists. They also vary widely in their ties to Sikhism and in their track records.

To support any or all of them completely from the cradle to the grave is expensive as well as unproductive and undesirable, especially since some are controversial. Yet, even the most controversial ones may wish to embark on a project that we like and can support. It could be the translation of a rare document, or the development of a course to teach.

All we need to know before funding someone is whether the scholar has the necessary credentials to do what he/she wants to do, and whether or not we wish to fund the effort. Is the project feasible? Can it be done in the manner proposed?

By inviting project applications or funding research on specially targeted topics we, as a small community, can make a difference. Because of the accountability and increased competitiveness built into the system, both the quality and quantity of research would improve.

In short, we submit that with the proposed model we will get more research and better research. In other words, the Sikh community would get a bigger bag for the buck.

#### **VIII. Prerequisite for the proposed Model**

We are proposing away that the community can support badly needed Sikh studies at universities in North America and elsewhere. However, its implementation depends upon the ability of the community to come together and establish NIH-like private foundation – perhaps a ***Sikh Research Council*** – which will negotiate with universities and scholars to disburse funds.

If we can establish such a mechanism, it would be a fitting milestone to mark the 300 years of the Khalsa in 1999.

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