

PUNJAB: A CATAclysmic SHOWDOWN: AFTERMATH AND CHALLENGES

By Bhupinder Singh Mahal

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A Review by Prof. Himadri Banerjee

It is a significant study of a 'Diasporan' Sikhs' experience of the Sikh social mores in the West. His own early cultural ties go back to Kenya and Tanzania in East Africa, but he is not exclusively concerned with the story of a 'Twice Migrant.' Like many of his generation, his intimate links with West London are underlined, but he goes well beyond Europe. In subsequent years, he moved to other countries across the Atlantic. These small pieces of biographical information are relevant for a better understanding of a gifted writer who is not a professional social scientist. On the contrary, he has - humbly - projected himself as just as 'an accountant by training' occasionally facing 'covert racial discrimination.' A brief spell with the different multicultural activities in Canada widened his understanding. It has perhaps stimulated him to outline some of his varied experiences embracing India and the West - in the last few decades.

The volume is a collection of interesting essays, beginning with the 'Punjab Tragedy and the Delhi Carnage' (1984). He feels sorry that, on both the occasions, the Indian State had abdicated its authority/duty of protecting a religious minority in the country. As victims of the Partition of 1947, the Sikhs certainly did not expect to witness another massacre that threatened to disrupt India's unity in 1980's. Sikhs had started their "second innings" in Delhi but faced - in 1984 - some of the worst forms of human sufferings at the hands of Delhi's goons. Those tragic days are often termed as "*third ghalughara*" in popular parlance, suggesting a large-scale bloodbath of the Sikhs. The importance of memory in the reconstruction of the Sikh past is emphasized in numerous studies; Mahal's introductory essay also deals with it. In this sense, it is well-timed when the community remembers the tragedy in November 2009, after a gap of twenty-five years!

With these experiences in the background, Mahal focuses his sights on various issues involving the community, while interacting with the wider social space shared by other ethnic groups with conflicting social background and religious experiences in the West. The problem of Sikh identity constitutes one of these areas which he seeks to locate in the context of relevant critical literature. The author takes note of how the Sikhs of the Diaspora are responding to the important issues of multiculturalism. He surveys how they would possibly be reacting to issues related to the preservation of important community 'markers', like Five Ks and the turban. In his opinion, their answers may vary regarding *kirpan* owing to a number of Western states' 'zero tolerance' against weapons - post-9/11. But Sikhs would not budge 'an inch when it comes to their turban.'

The book refers to attempts at recasting Sikh image by a section of 'insiders' settled in the Diaspora. He feels that there is a deliberate attempt at maligning it and traces the debate which had sometimes dominated discussion among a section of the Online Sikh Group. It led to his unceremonious exit; his individual reaction is recorded in a few words, which is likely to stimulate further debate in the Sikh ranks.

Mahal's study is arguably, more concerned with the Sikhs of the Diaspora. Perhaps his reviewing some of the major issues linked with the Sikh identity should have been more contextualized with reference to other Sikh settlements in Malaysia (south-east Asia) and Australasia. In stead of restricting it to the writings of Hew McLeod, he should have taken

note of Verne Dusenbery's scholarly study *Sikhs At Large* (2007) dealing with similar issues. It underlines how the Sikhs continue to live in *Chardhikala* in many parts of the globe, making minor adjustments/compromises with the host community, without ceasing to be Guru's Sikhs.

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SQUARE PEGS, ROUND HOLES: The Art of living in two cultures: A Collection of Essays

By Dr. Jaswant Singh Sachdev, MD

Pages 252 Price US\$ 14.95 [Half the cost to charities]

A Review by Prem Kishore

To write a book you must be passionate about your subject, and author Dr. Jaswant Singh Sachdev, a board certified fellow of the American Academy of Neurology, is determined to write about the challenges and the empowerment of living in a Western country. The 237 page paperback "Square Pegs; Round Holes" is a provocative, perceptive, candid and observant reflection upon the Cross-Cultural Dilemma of the Indian Subcontinent Diaspora.

The book is a collection of 38 essays (most of them previously published) bringing into sharp focus the polarity of cultural differences from adoption, shaking hands, accents, domestic servants, funerals and health issues to culture, faith alcohol abuse, architectural treasures in India, and more.

The doctor quite simply is concerned with us- Immigrants who are trying to integrate and adapt to an adopted country while maintaining one's culture. Can a square peg be fitted in a round hole? Can East and West meet and live peacefully no matter where one was born and where one lives now?

In one of his essays he elaborates saying a good amount of effort is required, for the edges of the pegs have to be smoothed out or else the round hole will require widening.

The distinct contours of the peg symbolizing the previous cultural lifestyle of an immigrant will have to be smoothed maybe even remolded to a certain degree to allow the transition into an alien Western culture.

Thus embracing immigrants, you and me in a delightfully charming anecdotal fashion and reminding us of contrasting behavior Dr Sachdev says that many readers have told him that what is being stated in the articles is what they had always wished to communicate.

There is no definitive book about the transition of moving from India to the West, or about living one life at the work hub and metamorphosing into another lifestyle at home as many Indians do. The first essay on adoption caught my attention right away when the author states that "our faiths do not specifically speak against adoption and yet adoption is not considered to be a normal or acceptable" by many Indians.

He stresses that there is a real need for childless Indian couples to consider adoption as an option. In another essay, "And Tomorrow It Could Be Your Child or Mine," he details the bone marrow donor project cause and the difficulty of finding volunteers in the Indian community.

Get in shape, he urges seniors who ease into an indolent unhealthy style, because they imagine they are fading away. The show is still on, he motivates. He writes of his visits to

India and bemoans the fact that we do not give respect to blue collar jobs and trades, and that may be the reason for unemployment in India.

Young people who have no jobs are “oblivious to the amount of hard work put in by their counterparts in the Western world and are sweating it out in kitchens of restaurants, washing dishes, or stacking boxes in warehouses and grocery stores”, he writes.

These young immigrants would not have been able to put themselves through school or send money back home if they had not realized the dignity of work. In another essay, he talks about our chameleon personalities when returning to India.

Why is it that we who are so courteous and polite in the USA shockingly revert to ill mannered, pushing, jostling crowds when getting off the plane in an Indian airport? On another note, why do we insist on speaking in our mother tongue when those around us do not comprehend?

One of the essays that struck a chord was about funerals and cremations. Dr Sachdev reminds us that whereas a cemetery is well kept, crematoriums are usually stark, clinical and soulless. He asks Indians to petition for a hall where prayers could be held, and mourners could gather.

Usually they stand around in clumps outside the mortuary and are unable to join in the proceedings. Environments can be customized to our needs, he urges. “Various Indian associations are concerned about political issues back home fail to realize” the respectful cremation of our remains in foreign lands should also be on top of the agendas.”

The concept of family in the West is not defined in the same manner as in India. In the West, first names are used for addressing elders, even if they are your in-laws. There are no specific names for the sister-in-law on the mother’s side or the father’s side. In India we have Saali Sahiba, Nanand or Bhuji or Bhabhi, distinguishing the individual in a special way.

“The language of the West” according to the author, “seems to give us a hint that such family relations do not mean much in the Western culture. Something to ponder about. One of the hilarious incidents the author describes is in the essay on safety and our indifference to it, particularly in India.

The style is easy, beguiling and entertaining leading you from one essay to the next, expressing viewpoints, pitfalls and redefining the concept of success as an immigrant. Put your best life forward, says the doctor and pursue your passion without succumbing to the pressures of being a stranger in a foreign land.

The book is brimming with good ideas and startles and shakes you awake. The titles of the essays are intriguing. To shake hands or Fold hands/Laddos vs Ansoos/Snakes in the Hole or Snacks in the Hall/About Indian parties and gifts and lure you to read further. When we come into a country so different from our homeland, India, it seems everything changes, but we must develop self worth, and each of us has the opportunity to grow.

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