

HISTORY OF THE SIKHS AND THEIR RELIGION

Vol. 1 (The Guru Period, 1469-1708)

Edited by Kripal Singh and Kharak Singh

Published by Dharam Parchar Committee, SGPC, Amritsar Feb. 2004

*A Review by Prof. Prithipal Singh Kapur**

Sikhism has received a rather casual treatment from most scholars. Most of them describe this dynamic faith as an off-shoot of Bhakti Movement or the Hindu renaissance of Middle Ages. But it need not be difficult for a perceptive scholar to notice that Guru Nanak repudiated the very fundamentals of Bhakti: adoration of incarnations of God, renunciation, and contempt for women as also family life. He vehemently denounced the caste system so as to shake it from its roots. He stood for a purposive life. That is why, some historians have tried to look towards Sikhism as some kind of synthesis between Hindu Bhakti and Islamic Sufism, not knowing that Guru Nanak declared without any inhibition "My God neither finds mention in the Vedas nor in the Semitic texts." With vast information, having since become available on Sikhism, it is not necessary to take serious note of those who described the rise of Sikhism and creation of the Khalsa as a Hindu challenge to the might of Islam in India.

Despite this general approach to the study of Sikhism, we do come across scholars like J. D. Cunningham who have not failed to identify the fundamentals of Sikhism, as distinct from Hinduism and Islam, notwithstanding their failing in comprehending facts while delineating the lives of the great Sikh Gurus.

With the emergence of a few Sikh scholars in the early twentieth century who adopted scientific methodology, we come across two parallel streams of scholars studying Sikhism from different standpoints. The European scholars led by Trumpp (who translated some portions of the Adi Granth and two *Janam Sakhis*) repudiated Sikh tradition as source of history. On the other hand, the Sikh scholars kept the Scriptural sources in focus. Later, Macauliffe and a few others accepted the validity of tradition in the study of religious history. Others deliberately stood aside to bring forth such studies on Sikhism that lacked objectivity, remaining oblivious of the contribution of religion towards the growth of human civilization. They failed to notice that Guru Nanak appeared on the horizon when religious strife and socio-moral degradation had destabilized not only the social life but also the beliefs and practices of principal religions. Guru Nanak's positivist approach to human life in its totality and role of religion as a vehicle of human existence was taken as a challenge by those who sought to perpetuate the decadent socio-religious systems. It is in this light that we have to view the wholehearted acceptance of Sikhism by the people inhabiting that region of India which had remained the seat of the sophisticated urban Indus Valley civilization and their ruthless persecution and denigration by *status quoists*.

The development of historiography as a distinct discipline, sought to change the entire approach to the study of religious histories. Insistence on empirical evidence and turning back on the study of tradition remain its major forte. Sikhism came under the strict scrutiny of the scholars following this methodology because of its young age – only five hundred years or so. In the process, no attention was paid to

historical awareness or scanty knowledge on Sikhism available to the people who gave the earliest accounts of the Sikh Gurus and their teachings. No doubt intensive study of the life and doctrines propounded by the Sikh Gurus was called for, but it has to be kept in mind that more emphasis on methodology could not bring forth any objective study of a faith, the preceptors of which had the privilege of looking at the experience of earlier religious denominations. With such a state of Sikh studies, it was necessary to present an integrated account of the development of Sikhism and history of the Sikhs, that could be called fusion of tradition and modern historical methodology. A former president of the S.G.P.C., Late S. Gurcharan Singh Tohra who remained ever responsive to constructive suggestions of intellectuals, sponsored a four-volume project for such a study. The book under review edited by Dr. Kirpal Singh and Dr. Kharak Singh is the first volume of the proposed four volumes which includes contributions from nine scholars. The editors have made the scheme as well as approach amply clear in the preface and the introduction. Dr. Kirpal Singh has cogently brought out the importance of tradition in the writings of religious histories and asserts, "**tradition is one of the basic sources of history**". He justifies this assertion by giving analysis of the approach adopted by early Sikh historians like Santokh Singh and Giani Gian Singh. An example of the scrutiny/analysis of Sikh tradition is also provided by giving a detailed account of the methodology adopted by Karam Singh 'Historian', a pioneer Sikh historiographer. Dr. Kharak Singh advocates an intensive and holistic study of Sikh history and religion, keeping in view the Sikh doctrine and tradition.

The first hundred pages of the book have been justifiably devoted to the life, time, teachings and an assessment of the work of Guru Nanak. While the historical portion presents a graphic picture of the conditions of the age of Nanak and his life story, the chapter on 'Work and Teachings' lacks clarity and precision. The basic postulates of the message of Guru Nanak have been made to occupy only a secondary place, by such statements given, at the out-set, as "To de-institutionalize the concept of *Varn ashram* that had trained the Indian society, Guru Nanak evolved the concept of *Sangat*, a congregation of God-oriented people without distinction of creed and caste, wedded to the sacred *Naam*, and filled with humility, that Guru Nanak hailed as man's greatest virtue". However, it is heartening to note that this book pays full attention to the contribution of each of the Gurus to the development of Sikhism. Dalbir Singh Dhillon's article on Guru Hargobind is based in reliable contemporary Persian sources and appropriately puts focus on the fanatic policies of Shahjahan that led to the conflict between the Guru and the Mughals. Thereafter, we find 150 pages contributed by an accomplished scholar, S. S. Gandhi. His study of four Gurus in these pages appears to be an extension of the work that he already has to his credit. A unique feature of this book is exclusive chapters on Guru Granth, the Udasis, Nirmalas, Sewa Panthi's, eminent Sikhs of the Guru period, principal sources of the Guru period, besides an exhaustive Bibliography. All in all, the book is a welcome addition to the existing available literature on the Sikh Gurus. Having been issued under the seal of the S.G.P.C. the book will be treated as an authentic account of the origin and development of Sikh religion.



THE OTHER SIKHS, A VIEW FROM EASTERN INDIA

By Himadri Banerjee

Published by Manohar Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi 110 002

*A Review by Dr. Bhupinder Singh**

The title of the book would have one believe that this work relates to mostly sociology and religion of the Sikhs settled outside Punjab, in the eastern States of Assam, Orissa and Bengal. But this impression is soon dispelled as one runs through the preface in the book. The work deals with the writings on Sikh-related subjects in Assamese, Oriya and Bengali languages. Once that is understood and illusions cleared, interest is aroused. Doubtlessly, Prof. Banerjee has undertaken extensive research to present a range of studies on Sikhs in the three States in the pre-Independence times.

The moulding and remoulding of perceptions of historic events and personalities according to the perspectives and capacities of historiographers, playwrights, novelists and litterateurs of various genres has been an age-old observation. **It may not be far too wrong to say that the too-near and too-distant visions are usually befogged. The contemporary chronologist injects his own interpretation coloured by his inclinations and idiosyncrasies. The distortions may get magnified with the time-distance of the observer, particularly related to temper of the age in which he is placed.** Thus, we find Lakshminath Bezbarua of Assam, Sivaprasad Das of Orissa and Tinkari Banerjee of Bengal viewing past occurrences through the tints of the colonial prism, counting the blessing of the British Raj. There was another group wrapped up in nationalist fervour, invoking the example of the Gurus and the Khalsa to inspire the Indian people against foreign subjugation.

The tallest among them whose overflowing creativity has enriched Indian literature and culture, was Rabindranath Tagore. Profusely gifted as he was, he extolled the Tenth Guru for his idealism, dedication and leadership in "*Guru Gobinda*", for disinterest in worldly possessions in "*Nishphal Upaha*" and for universal equality among men in "*Sesh Shiksha*", three poems written by him 1888 – 1899. Within a decade, he revised his view of the Guru, saying that the "finale of Sikh history was 'very tragic' and the Tenth Guru bore the lion's share of responsibility for that" (quoted from Banerjee, page 150). He agonized over the utterances of contemporary national leaders, communal riots, bloodshed, etc. and juxtaposed them with the prolonged bloody warfare between the Sikhs and Moghuls that had shattered the ..." serene, tender and broad-minded humanistic idealism of Guru Nanak ...". That the transient volatile happenings of the day constituted fragile foundation for his evaluation of momentous historical episodes, was clear. That much later in his life, in the 1930s, he revised his opinion to make amends, could not; have offset the damage already done.

In this context, it is relevant to refer to the Tenth Master's *Zafarnama*, an epistle to the Emperor Aurangzeb, wherein we get some glimpses into the relevant aspect of his philosophy. He expostulates that a tyrant, who tramples under foot, poor and

weak humanity, should first be verbally persuaded, asking him to desist from oppression. If need be, he should be begged. Should he remain adamant in misdeeds, there is no alternative to meeting force with force. The Guru further explained that Aurangzeb had compelled him to take up arms. If the battery of the eastern writers had access to the *Zafarnama* and other Sikh Scriptures, perhaps they might have been in a better position to form a different and balanced judgment.

Banerjee's account clearly suggests that a few pre-independence Bengali, but hardly any among Assamese and Oriya authors, consulted original works in Punjabi. Adaptations from English works, like those of Macauliffe, Cunningham, M'Gregor, Malcolm, Cave Brown, had a purpose in view, like a play becoming vehicle for nationalism, a tract vaunting Sanatanism or, on a baser plane, ingratiation with the alien rulers. Of course, historical authenticity could be entrusted to historians, but literature has had an impact all its own. **The core issue was presentation to the laity in Eastern vernaculars an authentic and holistic picture. As for post-independence research in Sikh history, Banerjee rightly notes the apparently diverse trends of rigour in the academic discipline of history and "dominant tradition of Sikh studies at the all-India level". Undeniably, the gulf needs to be bridged.**

It is difficult not to conclude this piece with a critically vital observation relating to the Guru period 1469-1708. In 1909, Tagore wrote trenchantly *against* Guru Gobind Singh for providing leadership that led to loss of "direction in a desert of sands... It is an inglorious failure". The Tenth Master was eulogized and placed by Hindu Nationalist and Sanatani authors in the same gallery as other medieval heroes, like Prithviraj Chauhan, Rana Pratap and Chhtrapati Shivaji, for resisting Muslim tyranny and domination. Banerjee has referred to the "Guru Nanak of the Oriya folk memories, which is strikingly different from the Guru Nanak of the Gaudiya (Bengali) Vaishnava perceptions (page 231). In the clutch of such perceptions, one becomes acutely aware of an umbral region, of the eclipse of an outstanding dimension. **First and foremost, the ten Gurus were spiritual personages. Its conspicuous and ample demonstration lies in their utterances couched in mellifluent poetry set to music in Punjabi enshrined in the Guru Granth Sahib, Dasam Granth and other scriptures. The portrayal in terms of merely lay and secular parameters may betoken an understandable human limitation. It needs emphasis that the aura of their spirituality transcends common human apprehension.**

In conclusion, while lauding Banerjee's labours, one cannot help appreciating the interest evinced by the intellectuals and litterateurs of Assam, Orissa and Bengal. Partly in lack of access to the originals, their perspectives may not concur with that of a majority of the members of the community to whom the book relates. In being predominantly historico-secular, it contrasts with the character of a community that prides itself on its saint-warrior credentials. Be that as it may, Banerjee has done a great service in producing this volume. One looks forward to its successors.

GURDWARAS IN INDIA & PAKISTAN

Text by Mohinder Singh

Photographs by Sondeep Shankar

Published by UBSPD/National Institute of Punjab Studies

Pages (Coffee Table Size) 96 Price: Rs. 395/-

This album is replete with breathtakingly beautiful colour photographs of some of the most important shrines sacred to the Sikhs. Sondeep Shankar is a gifted photographer with an uncanny sense of the detail, capturing spiritual aura. His inspired camera work gains depth from the condensed historical text on Sikh history provided by the eminent scholar of the Sikh lore Dr. Mohinder Singh of New Delhi's Bhai Vir Singh Sadan. The narrative explores many events connected with the life and times of Gurus (1469 – 1708) leading upto the Khalsa Raj (1799 – 1849) which extended upto the Afghanistan border.

The new generation of Sikhs who may not have the opportunity of visiting the holy Nankana Sahib or ever setting eyes on Guru Nanak's Panja Sahib, less than 50 km from Islamabad, will find this compressed guide book a delightful drawing room pilgrimage. Particularly striking are double spreads of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Samadhi adjoining Gurdwara Dera Sahib in Lahore. Evidently the team was not allowed to visit trans Indus monuments like Samadhi of Akali Phoola Singh at Nowshera and Gurdwara Bhai Joga Singh in Peshawar.

- S.S.

UNDERSTANDING THE SPIRIT OF SRI GURU GRANTH SAHIB

Written, Compiled & Edited by Surjan Singh, PBM, PBS, FRGS

*Published by The Sikh Community of Singapore
C/o Central Sikh Gurdwara Board, 2, Towner Road, Singapore 327804*

Pages 108 Price (not stated)

The fourth Centennial of Sri Guru Granth Sahib's installation at Amritsar in 1604 has been celebrated across the world in a variety of ways: congregation conferences, seminars, and scores of publications. This impressive album size pictorial volume represents the labour of love by a distinguished Singapore educator, our much beloved Sr. Sujan Singh, known for many social and humanitarian services not only within the Island Republic, but far beyond.

The slim volume is studded with many gems of Gurbani wisdom, tracing some of the key features of the Sacred Scripture, and providing background information on its musical format. Its illustrated bilingual text is evidently aimed at the youthful readers and school going children who will find the presentation visually pleasing and conceptually enriching. Indeed the book dishes out valuable tidbits of information/translation, biography and poetry – a true devotee's *oeuvre*, gleaned from many sources, including *The Sikh Review* and *Nishaan*.

- S.S.

LEST WE THE SIKHS GO ASTRAY

By Gajindar Singh

Pages 168 Price Rs. 220

A Review by Sikandar Singh Bhayee

The title is a polite reminder, but also highlights the extent to which the precepts and practices of the Sikh way of life have deviated. This book with its 19 essays outlines the key practices of Sikhism as dictated by the *Gurbani* and Sikh history, its traditions and ethos.

The practice of the Sikh way of life has been laid out by the Gurus in simple, practical manner, emphasising hard work, honest living, love of fellow humans and through them service of the Almighty. This way of life had been stripped of charms and myths, jargon, rituals and exploitation of man by man in the name of religion or economically by precept of birth.

The last three-four decades have seen the Sikh practices being infected with what the Sikhs themselves term ritualistic and find them in total violation of their code of conduct as documented by the community collectively and has the formal sanction of the Panth-document called the *Sikh Rehat Maryada*.

Questions are being raised about almost every Sikh practice, as more and more practices are deviating away from the true Sikh ethos and purpose. An erosion of massive magnitude is taking place.

In this concise and topical book, the author highlights the meaningful and correct approach of the Sikh practice and confronts them with what is actually happening: be it mechanical rendition of prayers, reading of the holy book or individuals buying salvation of payment, the wasteful spending of the institutions and treating historical places as sources of income by encouraging “pilgrimages” so clearly decried in Sikh scriptures.

The clarification of the *Sehajdhari* concept is enlightening and sets at rest the unnecessary controversies being raised today with political and disruptive intents. The emphasis on every individual being required to be ready for all tasks underscores the Sikh emphasis on individuals’ own practices rather than buying religious services from professional granthis, which is very nearly creating a new priestly class among the Sikhs and which the Gurus had categorically and decisively banished from Sikh society.

The book warrants reading by all who want a better understanding of Sikh practices, especially for the Sikhs for whom it is a course corrective reminder where they have already gone astray. The author speaks from his heart and brings to the book the correct Sikh perceptions he has inherited. It would have added to the pleasure of reading if the *Gurbani* passages quoted were also given in original, alongside the English transliteration.

□