

Endowed Chairs in Sikhism at Western Universities

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We compliment the group of distinguished scholars for elucidation of the milieu - as well as academic requirements - for setting up a Chair in Sikh studies in the universities in Western Hemisphere.

The Sikh Review agreed to feature this Note in its February 2006 issue. However, we take little comfort from the collective exposition. The sum-total of the Monograph is: 'Heads they win, tails we lose.' The universities' gains is Sikhism's loss. The output or benefit of such chairs, in terms of disseminating the Sikh lore, can be put on the back of a postage stamp, even as their 'fall-out' often lingers painfully for years. Pashaura Singh and Harjot Singh Oberoi are not exactly revered for their contributions.

This journal, now in 53rd year, has looked in vain for any feed-back that could enlighten its readers. No chair has thought it worthwhile to have a reciprocal arrangement of keeping open channels of communication. No cross-winds blow in these corridors of learning! Yet we marvel at the persistence of Sikh philanthropists in USA in unleashing funds for these 'temples' of learning.

- Editor, SR

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.

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 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.

Ergo, to Support Sikh studies at universities and institutions of higher learning, whether North American or otherwise, would be natural. Over the past two decades, therefore, Sikhs and their friends established and supported "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 and books have been published by supporters and detractors of the research published by the occupants of these academic positions.

We will cite no specific personal examples that highlight the controversies; 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. Briefly we will focus on the role of a University, and what to expect from a scholar appointed to occupy a position at a University *vis a vis* that of the community.

As most people know, an endowed Chair at a University is generally funded by an individual/ entity for a specific area. It is named after the funding source and the area is mentioned in the title - as for example, the "Kundan Kaur Kapany Chair of Sikh Studies" at the University of California at Santa Barbara. The purpose is to arouse interest and scholarship in the subject's teaching, research and service. The purpose of a Chair in Sikh studies would be to interest students in Sikhism, its history, religion, language, arts, culture and philosophy.

Universities, especially in the western world, are autonomous bodies and protect their independence rather jealously. It is called "academic freedom." Thus, when a University accepts funds from a donor for the establishment of a Chair, these are accepted with the understanding that the University will have full control over the management of the funds as well as the selection and tenure of its occupant. For the management of the funds, University administration normally establishes a specific trust account that is not mingled with other funds. And for the selection and tenure of the would-be occupant, a selection or appointment committee, consisting mostly of faculty members with expertise in the academic area is constituted. In order to avoid any conflict of interest, the donors or their representative, is not a member of such a specially constituted committee.

As the selection process begins and applications are invited, anybody including the donor can make recommendations to the committee. The final decision is made, however, by the specially constituted committee in conjunction with the University administration.

To be sure, at times there are pressures from outsiders as well as insiders, but they are rare, and are generally corrected in a speedy fashion. 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. The integrity of the process is highly guarded and there is no room for compromise in principle or in practice.

An illustration: While one of the authors (Dr. Basi) was Provost of a Methodist sponsored University in Alaska (like the University of the Pacific in Stockton or University of Southern California in Los Angeles), the Archdiocese of Alaska wanted to establish a Chair in Catholic Theology at this University. The Archbishop of the Diocese was a member of the Board of Trustees of the University and wanted to have a say in the appointment of the would-be incumbent. But the University would not allow such an encroachment in its academic freedom even by a member of its own board of Trustees. So the negotiations proceeded no further and the Chair never got established.

Many of the larger world wide religions have established missions to spread the word about them. As early as the 2nd century B.C. King Ashoka sent scholar missionaries to neighboring countries to carry the message of Buddhism. In 2nd century A.D. Christians founded a missionary college in Alexandria and in 404 A.D. another one in Constantinople. "While Muslim swordsmen conquered for the faith, Christian missionaries were willing to explore tentatively on the frontiers of empire, hoping to bring the good news to even a few more souls". (p 123) So writes Daniel J. Boorstin, Librarian of the Library of Congress in Washington D. C. And he states, "The history of expanding Christianity was a history of missions". (P 122)*. In our own

Sikh tradition, beginning right from the times of our Gurus, Sikh theologians were sent to centers of higher learning such as the famous Benaras Hindu University for research and dialogue.

Modern missionaries work through such human service organizations as Universities, hospitals, habitats for the homeless, Salvation Army, and the like. In matters of faith, it seems persuasion facilitated by caring souls is more effective than preaching. Mother Teresa's ashram in Calcutta is an excellent example of this. Actions speak louder than words.

A Gurdwara is an effective institution for preaching gospel to keep the faithful in toe and nurture their souls. But it is not always an effective institution for reaching the uninitiated. Non- Sikhs generally do not go to a Gurdwara, just like non-Christians do not go to a Church or non- Muslims do not go to a Mosque. If your goal is to reach the non- Sikhs, establishment of a Chair in Sikh Studies in a University is one of the tried and tested methods to get there. Pen is mightier than the sword. Knowledge is power. Universities are citadels of pen and power. A Chair is the most prestigious position in a University. It serves to highlight the subject and expose students to pursue scholarship in it through dialogue and discourse as well as research and service. That is what appeals to the hearts and minds of those who are endowed with reason and are seekers after the truth.

By definition, " a Professor is one who thinks otherwise". In the halls of academia scholarship is prized. There is no place for gospel, for nothing is sacrosanct. Questioning and hypotheses followed by appropriate research to authenticate its validity is what counts. Distinctions between the sacred and the profane get blurred. Whatever passes the test of reason and reasonableness stands front and center. As knowledge changes so does the truth.

The points made above are not meant to imply anything about any specific appointment. It is quite appropriate for insiders as well as outsiders to make both pro and con representations and arguments pertinent to the appropriateness of the appointment. And University should listen to them all. It must be recognized, however, that the onus for the final decision rests with the University.

It may be added that at times such an appointment by a University may range from outstanding to one that is not- so- good. But that is the risk that the donor takes when establishing a Chair. 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.

Academic traditions are embedded in the past, anchored in the present and beacons for the future. As such they are time-honored ways to advance the exposure of Sikhism to one and all.

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