

THE SIKH WEDDING

Text by Mohinder Singh

Photographs by Sondeep Shankar

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This incredibly beautiful presentation on the traditional Sikh wedding is in fact fourth in a series on Punjab Heritage, that seeks to create "awareness for proper preservation of the endangered heritage and conservation of the valuable relics" relating to Sikh history.

Marriage, in accordance with the Sikh religion, is neither a contractual relationship nor a ritualist dispensation which needs to be solemnized with intricate - often unintelligible - incantations presided over by a priest. It is no bondage. Indeed, at the spiritual level, it symbolizes an ineffable union of human soul with the Divine spirit. It is a recognition of the infinity and continuity of Life force. The core ceremony is, therefore, solemnized in the holy presence of Sri Guru Granth Sahib, and witnessed by the congregational *sangat* that is not necessarily confined to family and friends, for the Gurdwara is open to all. This inclusivity confers a certain moral ethos to the occasion.

If the book is a finely tuned collaborative effort, the photographer takes the cake - for the gorgeous pictures of the various ceremonial events. The sartorial opulence may give the impression that the Sikh wedding is a costly, luxurious and exhibitionist affair which ordinary people can ill-afford.

But, in the very nature of the theme, the actual ceremonies represented herein are deliberately selective for their visual effect. The selection is doubtless representative of the high society, and - arguably - most middle class families vie with one another to display their riches on the one occasion that calls for untrammelled ceremony and splendour.

The terse and to-the-point Foreword by the internationally respected economist, Dr. Manmohan Singh provides the back drop for this series, while the acknowledgement list could be a historiographer's delight. Sondeep Shankar's intuitive photographic skills bring alive the lucid text by the noted scholar, Dr. Mohinder Singh.

The text of the Four *Lavan* and its English rendering conclude the volume. *Lavan*, in this context, are at once metaphorical and realistic. The willing union of young bride and groom is symbolic of the relationship of God and the devotee. The sense of wonder, love, restraint and harmony constitute the Four Vows which are sealed by encircling the Guru Granth as God's Word. They apply as much to the spiritual progression as to the marital relationship.

- S. S

THE NATION'S TORTURED BODY:

Violence, Representation and the Formation of a Sikh "Diaspora"

By Brian Keith Axel

Published by Duke University Press, USA. (2000)

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*Reviewed by Kuldeep Singh**

Most of the well-known stories of Indian diaspora begin with the Colonial system of indenture, of labour in distant lands, which has been the primary factor in the mobilization and dispersal of particular communities and groups of people away from India. In this book, however, the author focuses on three aspects of the histories of displacement that constitutes the Sikh diaspora: Firstly, the position of Sikhs just prior to colonial rule, with a unique kingdom and territory; Secondly, the specific manner of mobility within and after the colonial period, and, thirdly, the emergence of the trans-national struggle for an autonomous region for the Sikhs called Khalistan.

Professor Axel has succinctly presented all the three points of emergence in the Introduction, and discussed them, at some length, in the subsequent chapters of his book. In the first chapter, Axel gives a glimpse of the history of Sikh kingdom under Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the Sikh army's subsequent surrender to the British in 1849. He outlines, for example, how Maharaja Ranjit Singh fought off the Afghans, on one side of his territory, and signed treaties of friendship with the British at Amritsar on the other side. The British, in turn, took advantage of the internal weakness of the Sikh kingdom, violated the friendship treaty of 1809 and deceitfully invaded Punjab in 1845 after the five-year-old Maharaja Duleep Singh ascended the throne. The author quotes the letter written by the Governor General, Lord Dalhousie to Queen Victoria about the surrender of March 24, 1849 in Ferozepur without mentioning the circumstances that lead to this historic event. The words were: "As they threw their arms down upon the heap, the brave Sikh soldiers said: "This day Ranjit Singh has died." What the author failed to mention here is a matter of great significance, for in fact, the British were almost ready to make an unconditional surrender before the Sikhs during the battle at the city of Pheru on December 21, 1845.

Axel utilizes a number of strong academic resources to dig out the facts and follows a chronology of events leading to the partition of the sub-continent into two dominions, India and Pakistan. In 1947 India won freedom but only after the Sikhs were forced to sacrifice more than half of the Punjab, resulting in tremendous loss of life, land, heritage, culture and material wealth. The author calls it a new Sikh 'surrender' a sequel to 1849. In his analysis of the post-independence history, he gives innumerable examples of antagonism, hostility, and oppression not only against the Sikhs but also against other minorities of India. He argues how Sikhs failed to get their most legitimate right from the British, who considered them as the protectors of their empire, as well as from the Hindu rulers of the postcolonial India, who promised "**an area and a set up in the North wherein the Sikhs can also experience the glow of freedom.**" The author elaborates the circumstances that forced the Sikhs to continue their struggle for an independent homeland, which they

thought to be essential for the preservation of Sikh traditions and identity, during and after the British colonial rule.

In the third chapter, Axel provides evidence, including significant personal experiences, of the existence of state violence in present day. He clearly elucidates how the Sikhs had been brutally repressed by the use of cruel and inhuman methods of torture by the state police and para military forces, and shows how *the official magazine of the Indian Army - Baatchet*²- portrayed Sikhs as “dangerous people pledged to commit murder, arson and acts of terrorism.” Testimonies of survivors, included in the volume, demonstrate various categories of torture to which victims have been subjected. This is what he calls as the ‘Tortured Body’, of the Khalsa.

In the same context, the author profiles a typical victim: a visibly identifiable Sikh male, complete with *beard, turban, Kirpan and Kara*. Pictures of the mutilated Sikh men have become a well-known, and singularly important, sight for Sikhs living in the Diaspora. Although it is common knowledge that Sikh males were routinely detained (hardly arrested, yet held in police custody with no charges brought against them), there is little discussion of what Sikh women had to go through. There are cases and instances in which females have been victims to the crimes of the police.

Axel traces the migration patterns of the Sikhs abroad. After annexing Punjab, the British systematically recruited Sikhs into the British army. Sikhs were sent to Burma, Malaya and Singapore, where they later settled and formed a key part of the Sikh diaspora. He also discusses the arrival of Sikhs in England around this time. They struggled hard to gain access to equal rights as producers as well as consumers during the first half of twentieth century.

The author goes into the inaccuracies of the “Restricted Zone” created by India and discusses the prohibition imposed upon the publishers of *International Journal of Punjab Studies* in regard to their proposed cover page with a pre 1947 Punjab map. He shows how the Sikh diaspora in the United States gave a head start to the fight for a Sikh homeland through their advertisement in New York Times on October 12, 1971. Now this homeland is being fought for by the overseas Sikh diaspora. Southall of England is one of the many places that has changed from a little India or an Amritsar-on-Brent of the past to a center for Khalistan struggle. The author correctly points out that the Sikhs started to differentiate themselves from other general categories of identity, such as *black* and *Asian* only after the attack on the Golden Temple complex in June 1984.

After discussing the pre-colonial Punjab and the struggle for Indian independence, the author goes through a series of events detailing the violent discrimination practiced against the Sikh people, and culminates with the demand for an autonomous state called Khalistan. This chapter, “The Homeland,” is mostly devoted to what the author calls it to be “ a conflict over the production of the Sikh Homeland: between Khalistanis and the Sikh studies scholars.” In the eyes of this reviewer, there is indeed a conflict between the Sikh studies scholars and most of the Sikh diaspora, but it has nothing to do with their association with Khalistan. Rather, the conflict exists because the majority of western scholars have neglected the mainstream Sikh school of thought, and instead relied on the influential writings of W.H. Mcleod, who chose to ignore important Sikh literature and misinterpreted the Sikh values, principles and ways of life.

The author has none the less done an excellent job of analyzing the lifestyle and unique characteristics of Sikhs in this book. His reliance on sophisticated terminology, metaphors, and heavy theorizing illustrates his in-depth knowledge and background in anthropology, though it makes the book a challenge for common readers to comprehend. The author has no doubt conducted extensive research and got to the bottom of events and factual data, and thus created an important piece of literature on the subject.

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References

1. "December 22. - News came from the Governor General that our attack of yesterday had failed, that affairs were desperate, that all the state papers were to be destroyed, and that if the morning attack failed all would be over; this was kept secret by Mr. Currie, and we were concerting measures to make an unconditional surrender to save the wounded."
2. Any knowledge of Amritdhari, who are dangerous people and pledged to commit murder, arson and acts of terrorism should immediately be brought to the notice of authorities. These people may appear harmless from outside but they are basically committed to terrorism. In the interest of all of us, their identity and whereabouts must always be disclosed. - July 1984 issue of Baatsheet, official Army Magazine.