

Endowed Chairs in Sikh Studies

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The issue of appointment to the Sikh Studies Chair in University of California, Riverside Campus, brought a heated opposition. Similar opposition - earlier - in the case of Sikh Studies chairs in the Universities of Michigan (USA) and Vancouver, Canada, virtually brought the whole process to a stand still.

In the debate on the issue of "Sikh Studies Chair at Riverside" a number of players are prominent Sikhs of USA. My friend (and namesake) Dr. Jasbir Singh Mann sent me a book, "EARLY SIKH SCRIPTURAL TRADITION" (Myth and Reality) By Dr. Balwant Singh Dhillon (1999 Singh Brothers). I sincerely request the thinking Sikhs to read this book.

But unfortunate reality is that Sikhs do not like to read. So much so that even reading Guru Granth Sahib Ji and doing Paath has been delegated to Bhai Sahibs and Paathis to do the reading for a price.

The FOREWORD of this book is by Dr. Noel King. It is only sixteen pages. It is worth reading. All those who are in the controversy of establishing Sikh Studies Chairs, at least must read these 16 pages. Who is Dr. King? He is a 'young man' in his 80's. and was a Professor of History and Comparative Religion in University of California, Santa Cruz Campus. Why is he interested in Sikhism ? Because he was in W.W. II an officer in British Indian Army and was in India for quite some time. He must have come across Sikhs and was deeply impressed by their values and so became an admirer of faith. A few salient points from this Foreword are:

(1) Whenever, any nation establishes a rule over another country, they impose their language, culture and educational system. To make the new system popular, inducements like *better government jobs and titles are bestowed*. Mughals imposed Persian. (Even Guru Nanak Dev Ji said, "*Boli awar tumari*"). The British East India Company after major conquests, in India, started the process of "Westernization" by establishing Universities at Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Lahore. They definitely crushed the indigenous forms of higher education under foot. There was resistance to this "Westernization Trend", first by the Sikhs (Namdharis) and subsequently by Mahatma Gandhi. Under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi many youth deserted the British system, (which they later regretted). *With this duality, two communities lagged behind – Shias and Sikhs*. Hindus and Muslims found a *via-media* in establishing Benaras Hindu University and Aligarh Muslim University, a 90-10 mixture of western and ethnic. Sikhs only stopped at Khalsa College, Amritsar. "*British deliberately planned the production of little Englishman with brown faces to take their places. After all, Gandhi, Nehru, as well as Jinnah, had all been to Britain, and received British qualifications which paid them off well. At that time, the Sikhs could produce no politician of that caliber to stand up for Sikh rights.*" *With the result we are suffering till today.*

(2) Luckily, the British could not completely eradicate the old traditional Sikh Scholarship. Somehow it had survived. Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha and various *taksals* kept it alive and on track. *On its side, Khalsa College Amritsar, produced Prof. Sahib Singh who takes the breath away for his academic eminence and his sheer ability to carry the traditional roots of his subject into the very front of original scholarship in our century.*

(3) After Independence, luckily, Sikhs had some enlightened scholars like Prof.

Harbans Singh, Dr. G.S.Mansukhani, and S.Daljot Singh and many others. They worked with the new system while keeping it under control. The Sikhs had, on behalf of India, gained their great victory over Pakistan in international warfare in 1965. Mr. Lal Bahadur Shastri showing some goodwill, promoted their language and culture and established Sikh Religious Studies centers on Sri Guru Granth Sahib both at Punjabi University, Patiala and Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar. *The dismal situation is that there are hardly any students registered in these studies today.*

(4) In the meantime, in the west, that is chiefly north Europe, Britain and English-speaking North America, Australia and New Zealand, the critical approach to literary scholarship was developing rapidly. The study of the sacred text itself with the use of modern western methods, was launched by Prof. Ernst Trumpp of Munich. *The catastrophic role of Prof. Trumpp and even the basic approach in the modern methods needs further examination.*

(5) Here comes Prof. Hew McLeod of Scots/Irish descent, from far away New Zealand. This Young man was not much into evangelizing but to serve and educate the world in general. With his own abilities and willing help of Sikh Scholars and teachers, initially produced first rate scholarship. *He was even honored with "Saropa."* "He is totally sincere and devoted to the truth. However, he is a sincere and honest person, and to belittle his character or his motives, or mix it up with Christianity, is just to befog our minds when we need every bit of mental and spiritual lucidity we can muster." Prof. Hew McLeod, however, carried on a remarkable work of establishing Sikh Studies in North American Universities. He was going from University to University lecturing on the importance of establishing chairs in Sikhism, or at least of getting the subject known. In 1980's and 1990's university chairs could be 'purchased' by donors at bargain prices. The Universities needed both ethnic and subject diversification and - cash.

(6) In India, the Sikhs were going through the worst persecution. *Operation Blue Star in 1984, attack on Golden Temple, and then torching the entire Sikh Reference Library is an incalculable loss to Sikhs. But Sikhs still, with their Guru's Blessings, are continuing their scholarly pursuits. The book by Dr. Dhillon is one such example.*

(7) Current controversy seems to have started with a work published in 1992, "*Gatha Sri Adi Granth*" by Prof. Piar Singh of Guru Nanak Dev University...He seems to have come upon a manuscript which is now in the special collection of Guru Nanak Dev University, under the *number MS#1245*. The bookseller who sold it to the University, when asked by the committee gave a kind of cock and bull story about picking it up from a dealer in Rajasthan. We cannot be sure where it had come from. At some point, Prof. Piar Singh had been able to spend a lot of time with it, and inserted his remarks, in English and in Punjabi in his own handwriting upon it. Dr. King says, "he had the privilege of carefully and at length examining the manuscript. He agrees with Dr. Balwant Singh Dhillon that Prof. Piar Singh's conclusion was a mistake.

(8) *The Sikh Review* (February 2006 issue) carries a highly informative article on the subject. This article, jointly written by four shining stars of Sikh Academic World, is worth reading. It painstakingly explains the "Academic Climate and System" in the western universities. We have to understand the system and then, like earlier Sikh Scholars, like Late Dr. G.S. Mansukhani, have to work the system without being swept away and losing the control. The editors of *The Sikh Review* have given critical remarks, preceding the article. This is rather unusual. Generally such remarks, or disclaimer, are given at the end. But I guess the topic is really hot and sizzling. "The output or benefit of such chairs, in terms of disseminating the Sikh lore can be put on the back of a postage

stamp.”

CONCLUSION:

I agree with the SR editor's terse comment (item 8 above) that the achievements of some of these chairs can be 'written on the back of a postage stamp.' But the fault does not lie in the "Chairs". It is the scholars who are installed in the Chairs. It is a harsh reality that we do not have impeccable scholars in India either. Consider the case of Prof. Piar Singh, who was perhaps the root cause of all the current controversy. We need sincere young intelligent scholars. What are we doing to encourage our bright youth to go to Sikh Studies ? There are hardly any registered students in the Universities of Punjab either. I at least know that one bright Sikh youth here in USA has forsaken his brilliant career in IT and has opted to go to Harvard to do his Ph.D. in Religion.

We need persons like Dr. Bhai Vir Singh Ji, who can bring back Prof. Puran Singh, and inculcate the essence of Sikhism. We need Giani Ditt Singh Ji, who can intellectually floor these pseudo scholars. We need Bhai Kahn Singh Ji, who can become inspiration, guide and mentors and produce scholars like Max A. Macauliffe. We need Principal Ram Singh who could cooperatively work with Dr. Clarence MacMullen and Dr. Carl Loehlin. Let us not blame the donors of the "Chairs". They at least have shown the vision and far sightedness that YOU CANNOT WITHDRAW YOURSELF FROM THE FORTHCOMING WORLD DEBATE OF RELIGIONS. Just think how we can be part of propagating Guru's message to the world and posterity.

Last, but not the least, do not throw away the baby with the bath water in the tub.

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Reference

1. Dr. Noel King, FOREWORD in "Early Sikh Scriptural Tradition" (Myth and Reality) By Dr. Balwant Singh Dhillon.
2. ibid
3. ibid
4. **The Sikh Review**, February 2006, pp 56, "Endowed Chairs in Sikhism at Western Universities" by Prof. Raghbir Singh Bassi, Prof. I.J.Singh, Prof. Harbans Lal and Dr. Inderjit Singh