

SIKHISM AND HISTORY

Ed. by Pashaura Singh & N. Gerald Barrier

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*A Review by Ishwinder Singh**

THIS OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS publication is a collection of papers presented at the international conference on Sikh studies at the University of Michigan during September 27-29, 2001. Two previous compilations of similar papers presented at earlier conferences in the same university were published by Manohar Publishers, Delhi. The volume under review is dedicated to the ailing Prof W.H.McLeod, and includes contributions by Pashaura Singh, N. Gerald Barrier, Nikki-Guninder Kaur Singh, Louis E. Fenech, Robin Rinehart, Tony Ballantyne, Doris Jakobsh, Arthur Helweg and Darshan S. Tatla. The contributors hold various positions in western universities and regard themselves as 'critical' and 'objective' commentators on Sikhs and Sikhism. However, critics often label their research as 'Eurocentric' and belonging to the 'revisionist' 'McLeodian' school of thought.

The book starts with a two-part introduction. The first one is an essay by **Pashaura Singh** on the contribution of Prof W.H.McLeod in the field of Sikh Studies. This essay contains a brief biography of McLeod, extracts from an earlier article by McLeod on 'Methodology and Belief' and a list of McLeod's publications. With McLeod's autobiography already out on sale, there is little that the reader will find new in the first part. Interestingly, Pashaura Singh reproduces a private communication between McLeod and himself as a proof that McLeod encouraged Singh to be his 'own person'. Predictably, Singh is all praise for McLeod's research, and is quick to label criticism of McLeod's research as 'polemic'. The listing of McLeod's publications is likely to be of benefit to students and researchers of Sikhism. In part II of the introduction, N.G.Barrier neatly summarizes the themes of various papers contained in the book.

In the keynote speech, **W.H.McLeod** discusses some of the challenges he faced while researching the Sikh *Rahit*. His paper focuses on three issues- how Dr Jeevan Deol's discovery of MS 770 in the GDNLU library helped McLeod's research on the *Rahit*, the difficulties involved in translating some words found in the *Rahitnamas*, and as to how the *Guru Kian Sakhian* hindered his research. McLeod also reiterates one of his favourite theories- that the *Rahit* of the Five Ks was not enjoined by Guru Gobind Singh but was "formulated later by the Singh Sabha scholars"! McLeod has been obsessively into researching the *Rahit* for about quarter of a century and the fruit of his labour- *Sikhs of the Khalsa* was released in 2003. Those who have read this book will find nothing that is new in his keynote speech.

In his response to the keynote address, Pashaura Singh tries to counter McLeod's theory on the Five Ks. However, his reasoning only ends up making matters worse. Singh informs us that Guru Gobind Singh gave the injunction to the Khalsa to wear 'five weapons'. At the time of annexation of Punjab in 1849, the British put a legal ban on carrying arms. Therefore, in order to meet his new situation the organizers of the Singh Sabha movement replaced the tradition of the 'five weapons' with that of the 'five religious symbols', known as the Five Ks. The *Kirpan*

now no longer remained a weapon but was worn as a matter of religious conviction along with natural long hair 'concealed' under the turban. To justify his theory, Singh gives the following disingenuous apology-'This is not surprising since every dynamic community is always involved in the process of re-definition and renewal in response to new historical situations'.

The weak footing on which the above theory stands would at once be evident to any discerning reader. The carrying of weapons was banned by the British under the Arms Act of 1878 and not in 1849. Writing in 1877 (i.e. before the ban on carrying weapons by the British), Ernest Trumpp clearly states that Sikhs are required to always have with them five things all of which commence with the letter *K*.

Any compromise on the Sikh symbols has always been unacceptable to the Sikhs, as would be amply evident from the protracted legal battles fought by the Sikhs all over the world for wearing their symbols. If compromise with the British authorities was the intent of the Singh Sabha leaders, then why was a *Hukumnama* issued from Akal Takht in 1913 stating that the minimum length of the Sikh *Kirpan* should be 12 inches, and why did Sikhs feel compelled to launch agitations against restrictions on keeping *Kirpans*? In 1914, yielding to the pressure from the Sikhs, the British had removed the restriction on Sikh wearing keeping *Kirpans*.

One wonders what purpose Pashaura Singh's research has served in the cause of Sikh Diaspora? Every other day one hears of legal battles undertaken by Sikhs to fight for their right to wear the turban* or *Kirpan*. If an 'expert witness' testifies that the Sikhs have already changed their religious symbols once because of the British ban on carrying weapons, wouldn't it strengthen the opposition's case? Wouldn't the authorities expect the 'dynamic' Sikhs to 'redefine and renew' their tradition in response to their foreign laws? What would happen to the case against the ban on wearing the turban in France? In the past, Pashaura Singh's 'expert testimony' in the Air Canada case ensured that Sikhs lost their right to wear the *Kirpan* on Air Canada flights.

Pashaura Singh's other contribution in the book is an essay on '**Sikh Identity in the Light of History: A Dynamic Perspective**'. This is essentially a rehash of McLeod's book *Who is a Sikh?* - with Singh being at pains to gloss over some of McLeod's controversial statements. It is only in the concluding section of the essay that Singh offers something original. In this section, Singh introduces a new term "*Ichhadhari*" into the Sikh lexicon. He informs us that "clean-shaven Sikhs" do not like the term "*Mona*" as the designation of their status within the Panth'. In order to overcome this difficulty he has coined this new term. He avoids using the equivalent term *manmukh* because 'it is loaded with pejorative connotation'. However, in his enthusiasm, Singh forgets Gurbani's clear injunction that:

ਸੇ ਸਿਖੁ ਸਖਾ ਬੰਧੁ ਹੈ ਭਾਈ ਜਿ ਗੁਰ ਕੇ ਭਾਣੇ ਵਿਚਿ ਆਵੈ ॥ ਆਪਣੈ ਭਾਣੈ ਜੋ ਚਲੈ ਭਾਈ ਵਿਛੁੜਿ ਚੋਟਾ ਖਾਵੈ ॥

He alone is a Sikh, a friend, a relative and a sibling, who walks in the Way of the Guru's Will. One who walks according to his own will, suffers separation from the Lord, and shall be punished. (SGGS, M 3, p. 601)

Even this avowedly well-meaning gesture by Singh seems to have misfired because some "shaven Sikhs" feel that by labeling them as *Ichhadhari*, Singh seeks

to bracket them with snakes. Also, some of Singh's statistics in this section are widely off the mark. For example, his statement that 85-90% of the Sikhs are *Amritdhari/Keshdhari* reflects an ignorance of the ground realities.

Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh's paper entitled 'Mythic Inheritance and the Historic Drink of the Khalsa' is one of the best essays in the book. The paper explores the similarities between Guru Nanak's mythic initiation by the Divine in the river Bein and the Guru Gobind Singh's initiation of the five beloved ones on Vaisakhi 1699. The author concludes that it was Guru Nanak's experience that was organized and systematized by Guru Gobind Singh into an essential rite during his unique performance on Vaisakhi 1699. Emphasizing the powerful message of continuity and tradition at the heart of the Sikh religion, the author notes that when researchers of Sikhism get preoccupied with contrasts and contradictions it leads to historical aberrations and prevents them from understanding the liberating process inherent in the *Amrit* initiation.

Louis Fenech is currently working on a book on **Bhai Nand Lal 'Goya'**. The current volume contains a paper by him on '**Bhai Nand Lal Goya and the Sikh Tradition**' in which he shares with the readers his current line of research on the Farsi poet laureat. He explores why Nand Lal's Persian works remain unreported in *Rahit* literature, the value and limits of Persian in evolving Sikh tradition, Sufi influence and the changing attitude of Sikhs towards the Muslims. His research on the subject still seems to be in the preliminary stages, since even Fenech accepts that what is mostly offered in the paper is speculation.

Robin Rinehart's paper on '**Strategies for Interpreting the *Dasam Granth***' is topical and quite interesting. Without taking any sides, the author aptly observes that in the current debate on the authorship of the *Dasam Granth* the same arguments are repeated *ad nauseum*, often without full consideration of the available evidence. The author feels that the existing evidence may not be sufficient to reach a conclusion on authorship that will satisfy everyone. She further adds that even if such evidence, were to be found, it is quite likely that everyone would not accept the validity of such evidence and come to an agreement. In conclusion, the author suggests that scholars need to rethink the strategies that are being used in considering the text of the *Dasam Granth*. At the same time she reminds us that in the past the theological issues raised by the *Dasam Granth* had been deflected for the sake of maintaining unity in the *Panth*.

*Tony Ballantyne's paper on '**Maharaja Dalip Singh, History and Negotiation of Sikh Identity**' reflects themes that he plans to develop in his forthcoming book on the Sikhs, colonialism and issues facing the community in the diaspora setting. Ballantyne shows how Maharaja Dalip Singh has been viewed differently by Sikhs at different times and places. He argues that Dalip Singh enjoys an iconic status* amongst British Sikhs because for them his travels and life in Britain laid the very foundations of their community. His paper also explores the ongoing interaction between Sikhs and British culture, and concludes by stressing that, for any useful understanding of the Sikh experience in the last two centuries, the researcher needs to consider factors internal to Sikhism as also outside it.

Doris Jakobsh's contribution to the current volume is a paper entitled '**What is in a Name?: Circumscribing Sikh female nomenclature**'. The main point pursued

by her in this paper is that Guru Gobind Singh did not add 'Kaur' to the name of Sikh woman. Sikhs had been using it in a culturally significant manner since long, and it was only in the Singh Sabha period that the appellation 'Kaur' as a specific Sikh appellation was for the first time sanctioned. This conclusion seems to have rattled Pashaura Singh as, in an endnote, he refers to Jakobsh's theory and remarks that the actual naming practice was there since pre-modern times, though the formulation of the convention may have come as the result of Singh Sabha reforms. As in the case of the Five Ks, Singh's comments once again end up marginalizing the contribution of Guru Gobind Singh.

N.G. Barrier is in familiar territory when he analyzes issues relating to the Akal Takht, SGPC, *Rahit Maryada* and Law in his paper on 'Authority, Politics, and Contemporary Sikhism'. Barrier explores as to how Sikhs have constantly struggled with balancing the need for consolidating traditions with the political task of expanding numbers and compromise. Even though the author tries to take the position of a detached observer, his sympathies are quite evident throughout.

In his paper on '**Ethnic Dynamics within a Transnational Framework: The Case of the Sikh Diaspora**', **Arthur W. Helweg** tries to understand the recent Sikh experience from the perspective of migration studies. Focusing on Sikhs in England, he applies a "field-theory framework" with the stages of decision-making, freedom, conflict, settlement and nationalism, and illustrates how that helps explain initial Sikh reaction to life in England, changing norms, interaction with homeland and the rise of militancy and organizations.

Darshan S. Tatla's essay entitled 'Writing Prejudice: The image of Sikhs in Bharati Mukherjee's Writings' explores how non-Sikhs view the Sikh community and portray them in fiction and history. The essay is a balanced critique of the fictional and non-fictional writings of Bharati Mukherjee, Professor of Literature in University of California, Berkeley. By quoting portions from Mukherjee's writings, the author clearly brings out *the distorted portrayal* of Sikhs and Sikhism in her writings. Tatla shows how Mukherjee indulges in wholesale and crude generalizations in her books through which a religious tradition as also the majority of its followers are denigrated.

After going through the book, the reader is left with mixed feelings. Some of the essays in the book are quite interesting and provide valuable information and insightful analysis. Pashaura Singh's contributions are however deeply disappointing considering his religious background. Some of his 'research' reminds the reader of George Santayana's observation: "**History is a pack of lies about events that never happened, told by people who weren't there**". On the whole, one gets the feeling that the two and a half year delay in the publication of the conference proceedings has killed the book's novelty factor. This is because the contributors have repeated their points in other publications that were released since the conference was held. In light of the repetitive material, the book appears overpriced.

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THE SACRED BURDEN

By Reema Anand

Published in Penguin India

Pages: 140 Price: Rs. 250/-

A Review by Deepali Singh

BY WRITING THIS BOOK, a biography of Bhagat Puran Singh, Reema Anand has to some extent redeemed what she rightfully rules, the shameful fact that when Bhagat Singh passed away, except for one regional paper, no one carried even a small obituary on him. Stories like that of Bhagat Puran Singh, who dedicated their lives to the service of others, working in the most difficult of circumstances rather than swank foreign-funded NGOs, almost always fail to get highland.

Bhagat Puran Singh's life was simply lived. With no funds in his pockets, no grandiose projects in his head, he simply did what his heart told to do. Starting with his most loved Piara Singh, a mentally impaired, deaf and mute boy, whom he carried on his back and adopted with love and care, he went on to gather around him many more such handicapped fellow human beings, as well as those left alone and doomed to suffering. He gave all of them a home and shelter at Pingalwara, and a community dedicated to serve and carry this sacred burden.

Of course, he had his own idiosyncrasies, and Khushwant Singh, in his effusive tribute by way of introduction, points out that clearly Bhagat Puran Singh was a bit eccentric. A staunch environmentalist, Bhagat Puran Singh would not even use a lift, and admonished those who came to visit him in a taxi, instead of a rickshaw. Truly, an inspiration for most of us who wait for funds to rain from heaven, before we can stretch out a helpful hand to the sick, disabled and destitute.

**[*Courtesy: The Statesman,*
Sep. 26.2004]**

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HE REMAINDER (Quarterly Magazine celebrating the saint-soldier Spirit)

**An organ of the National Regeneration Society of India
B-XI/2183 Vasant Kunj, New Delhi 110 070**

Managing Trustee & Editor: Dr. Munindra Kumar Singh

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THIS THOUGHT PROVOKING initiative is the outcome of an uncommon missionary who is imbued with Sri Guru Gobind Singhji's inspirational doctrine centering on the saint soldier philosophy. He is the Patna-born social scientist, Dr. Munindra Kumar Singh. After a long quest and deep heart searching he has taken the plunge to further explore and discover the true breed of "warrior saints" who truly hold the key to the future of humanity.

The first issue is a *Tour de resistance*, presenting a bouquet of good writings for all those who care at Rs. 250/- a year, the beautifully designed Quarterly is worth its weight in gold.

- Saran Singh



1. *Gems of Gurbani* (Selected Quotations from SGGS)
English rendering and commentary by (the Late) Mrs. Uttamjeet Kaur (USA)
Published privately by Brig. (Retd.) Dr. Sangat Singh Syalee, New York
II Edition: 2004. Pp. vii+102. Price: Not mentioned.
2. *Sabd – Guru to Granth – Guru: An Indepth Study*
By Devinder Singh Chahal (Canada)
Published by Institute for Understanding Sikhism
4418, Rue Martin – Plouffe, Laval. Quebec H7W 5L9, Canada
Distributors in India: Singh Bros. Bazar Mai Sewan, Amritsar 143 006
Pages 84. Price Rs 150. US\$15 (Hard Cover)
3. *Kiv Sachiana Hoiey* (ਕਿਵ ਸਚਿਆਰਾ ਹੋਈਐ) (*In Punjabi*)
Key Gurbani selections with Annotations in Punjabi
Explanation & Publication by Sr. Gurbux Singh (Jewellers, New Delhi)
Pages 266. Price: [Distributed free on request]
4. *Mangal Kalash*: [Gurbani Section & Commentary in Hindi, Bengali & Urdu]
By Sr. Kuldip Singh, Published by author from Gurmeet Vichar Kendra
C-127 Guru Tegh Bahadur Nagar, Allahabad 211 016. UP
Pages 288. Price Rs. 70 (Paperback Rs 50).

SET TO MUSICAL MEASURES, the hymns of Guru Granth Sahib bring solace to readers of the original text. Its infinite wisdom embraces every section of human race, even as it explores and celebrates the mystery of God's multitudinous creation. *Gurbani's* thought process spans stellar spaces even as it explores the deepest of human urges, moods and motivations.

Yet, in so far as the original text is in Gurmukhi script embodying scores of languages, dialects and idioms, people of most faiths (and even some Sikhs) have no access to *Gurbani* profoundly inspiring wisdom. University "chairs" in India and North America are barely beginning to disseminate the divinely inspired message with a steadily growing number of scholars as well as laymen. Gurdwara "management" bodies have also worked on the sidelines to carry forward the *Dharam Prachar* in fits and starts. In consequence it is often left to individuals, acting on their own initiative, to SHARE their experience and spread the GEMS of Gurbani for the benefit of common people.

Everyone of the above writers has been known for her or his piety, devotion and sincerity. The late Uttamjeet Kaur (1919-2000) has been a sort of crusader as well as caring mother and devoted wife of our revered Dr. Sangat Singh Syalee, long time Representative of *The Sikh Review* in New York. Good upbringing and the

Theological degree of *Gyani* qualifies her eminently to probe the spiritual and moral verities enunciated in Guru Granth Sahib, as mentioned in the Preface to this second edition, she always studied *Gurbani* with a notebook by her side to collate the thoughts as they emanate from Gurus hymns.

The first edition was distributed free at the Parliament of World's Religions at Chicago in Sept 1993. The second edition now coincides with the Parliament at Barcelona in July 2004. It has copious contribution from Dr. Syalee, in an introduction and a section classifying themes, and adding a guide to pronunciation. A study of the book – random, or systematic – opens doorways to inspired thought.

Dr. Chahal's second book (first was on *Japji*: SR August 2004) is a scholar's manual, since it probes the philosophy embodied in Guru Granth Sahib. He prefers to call it the *Nanakian philosophy* – a term first used by the late Sardar Ishar Singh of New Delhi, India. From applied microbiology to the scientific study of scriptural text may be an incredible transition for Dr. Chahal. But dedication comes naturally to the Canadian scientist turned theologian. His single – minded mission is to trace and interpret true Sikhism in accordance with the letter and the spirit of *Gurbani*. The compelling logic of his analysis constitutes the chief merit of his latest work.

The third book in Punjabi is the outcome to sheer devotion and love of Guru Granth Sahib dedicated to 400th *Prakashotsav*. *Sr. Gurbux Singh* is no professional scholar. In fact he runs a reputed jewellery business in Delhi. In the past he joined hands with the late *Babu Ram Chand Bhatiani* to publish a series of "*Gurbani Made Easy*" books distributed free. Some 200 shabads from holy *Gurbani* are selected for simple but elaborate explanation or *Vyakhya*.

This handy and luminous volume helps explain how to understand the Guru's Way and steer our lives through the troubled times. It is everyman's guide to *Gurbani*.

In *Mangal Kalash*, **Sr. Kuldip Singh** sets out to build bridges across subcontinental regions by providing an insight into *Gurbani* through Hindi, Bengali and Urdu. This profusely illustrated collection of essays serves to disseminate Gurmat thought and moral tradition among people of diverse cultures. The selection of essays includes a Farsi poem by the 17th century Poet Bhai Nand Lal Goya from his *DIWAN-E-GOYA*. We have reason to be grateful to the writer.

Saran Singh

