

## Interview with Dr. Doris Jakobsh@

*Jagpal Singh Tiwana\**

\* 134 Greenwich Drive, Dartmouth, NS. Canada. B2N 2V5.

@ Reference is invited to Dr Kashmir Singh's Critique of her book "Relocating Gender in Sikh History" (SR: July 2006)

*Dr. Doris Jakobsh is assistant professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Waterloo, Canada. Sikhism is one of the courses she teaches there. I came to learn that Dr. Doris Jakobsh, and her family, was vacationing in Halifax area. Taking advantage of this opportunity, I contacted her to interview her. She readily agreed to meet me at my place.*

- JST

Jagpal S Tiwana (JST): Jakobsh? Is that an East European family name?

Doris Jakobsh (DRJ): It is a German-Czech family name. My parents moved to Canada in the early 1950s from Germany. As a matter of fact, my first language was German; my parents insisted that we speak the language at home. I was born in Alberta, and began my university education at the University of Calgary. I then had the opportunity to study in Germany for a year, then finished my undergraduate years at the University of Waterloo (where I now teach), then my Master's degree at Harvard University and PhD at the University of British Columbia.

JST: How did you get interested in Sikhism?

DRJ: I was doing my Master's in Religious Studies at Harvard....

JST: It is very difficult to get acceptance at Harvard. How did that happen?

DRJ: I went there on scholarship. I was encouraged to apply to Harvard University by one of my mentors at the University of Waterloo, Dr. Darrol Bryant, who had also done his Master's degree there. He felt that it was a good match for me.

JST: And back to your interest in Sikhism?

DRJ: While I was at Harvard I visited the Gurdwara at Medford. It was managed by Gora Sikhs of Yogi Bhajan. I found this 'marriage' of East and West fascinating and decided I needed to know more about Sikhism. At that point in time, 1990-1992, Sikhism was not a subject that was often taught at the University level. That has changed somewhat since then. It was a new field of study as a lot of work had already been done on Islam, Hinduism and other Eastern religions. No serious study had been done on gender equality in Sikhism, so I chose this subject for my PhD.

JST: How did you end up at University of British Columbia?

DRJ: Prof. Hew McLeod was at University of Toronto in 1992. I approached him to see if he could be my supervisor. He politely declined to take me. He thought that my work would be immediately declared blasphemous by a small group of what I would call hostile Sikhs if he became my guide. Then I went to Harjot Oberoi at UBC and he accepted me.

JST: Oberoi is also controversial. Did he influence you in your findings?

DRJ: His most enduring influence was of course, in his area of his expertise, the Singh Sabha movement, and in his insistence that I leave no stone unturned in making sense of historical documents and attitudes. He is a hard task master, and not easy to please. He would reject second hand sources off hand and insist that I go deeper.

JST: Still your work is perceived as biased to the extent that you don't like the Sikh religion.

DRJ: Listen, if I had not liked the Sikh religion, I would not have spent seven years of my life writing my thesis exploring Sikhism. Remember, this was the time when I was also having my two children. My family and I even went to India and lived there at Patiala University campus for ten months as I did my research there.

JST: What is so good about Sikh tradition to you?

**DRJ: Oh so much, don't know what to begin with. Sikh Scriptures are just beautiful.**

It is a sheer pleasure to become engrossed in reading it, even from English translations, which of course cannot capture the essence of the original script. And Japji! I feel that it captures the heart of God.

I also enjoy listening to Kirtan; some of what I would consider my most sacred moments have taken place sitting quietly at the Darbar Sahib in Amritsar, listening to the beautiful music as I watched the sun setting. I observed some of my students (on a trip to India in 2004), even though they are not Sikhs, be mesmerized by the same sacred music.

*Langar*, free food to all Sikhs and non-Sikhs, is wonderful institution of the Sikhs. Once I saw street people at a Gurdwara in Vancouver partaking of *Langar*. I think this is a profound contribution from the Sikh Gurus to humanity at large. Rich or poor, regardless of color, caste, gender – all are invited to share food together. I am also delighted to hear that wherever there is a disaster in the world, whether it is an earthquake in Gujarat or tsunami in South Asia or Katrina Hurricane in Louisiana, or a child slipped into a 60 feet hole at Kurukshetra in Haryana, Sikhs are there with free *Langar* food for the hungry. I remember once you put on Sikh Diaspora forum that 70,000 people partake *Langar* every day in Golden Temple kitchen in Amritsar. Sikhs in general are very hospitable people.

Here is another one I like: free board and lodging in Gurdwaras for travelers. It is a great tradition of this religion. This is how Bhagat Puran Singh was inspired to join Sikh faith.

And then there is the holy pudding, *Karah parshad*. My children love it. Once I took them to a Hindu temple in Chandigarh. They were given candies as parshad. “This is not that soft yummy pudding that they gave us in Sikh temple, this is too hard”.

JST: Don't worry; you will have plenty of that pudding (*Karah*) today.

DRJ: But perhaps what I find most profound about Sikhism is its theology of Grace, Nadar. My favorite verse from Gurbani says that if you take just one step toward God, God will take a thousand toward you. I find that message incredibly hopeful, in a world where hopelessness and despair are often not far from the surface. It is a wonderful message to pass on to the world. Also, Sikhism's positive attitude toward humanity in general is inspiring.

JST: And now the difficult question, what you don't like about the Sikhs?

DRJ: I don't like when I see Sikhs going away from the teaching of Gurus. Punjab has a very dismal record of male to female sex ratio – perhaps the lowest on the subcontinent according to some records, this, in the region where the Sikh gurus revealed their truths - Guru Amar Das preached against female infanticide and denounced purda (veil). He appointed women to Manjis, sent them out to preach Guru's message of emancipation. Now women are not allowed to do *kirtan* nor take part in the *Sukhasan* procession at Golden Temple. Whenever I hear of another lawsuit stemming from internal fighting or violence in Gurdwaras I get sad – for those of us who are trying to teach Sikhism within the University setting, these portrayals do not help to undo the stereotypes already surrounding the Sikh tradition here in the West; nor does the in-fighting do credit to the teachings of Sikh Gurus. But then again, can you point to one religious tradition that does credit to the glorious truths taught by their founders?

JST: Do you cover the whole of Sikhism in your course? Tell me something about your course.

DRJ: I cover important themes of Sikhism, like concept of Grace, God, Sikh theology , history, colonial Punjab and Singh Sabha, gender and, Diaspora issues for Sikhs,

JST: Your favorite period in Sikh history?

DRJ: Colonial Punjab and the Singh Sabha movement. I hadn't planned on studying this time frame when I began my PhD but, I became increasingly convinced it gave a definite form and shape to Sikhism as we know it today. The Singh Sabha leaders drafted the Sikh 'code of conduct' and defined the boundaries of the Sikh faith. Their contribution is massive and praiseworthy.

JST: Do you invite any local Sikh as guest speaker to your classes?

DRJ: Yes, the late Kuldeep Singh Chhatwal came to the class and spoke to the students. He was quite knowledgeable and well respected Sikh leader in the area. I have also brought in individuals from the Sikh Students Association.

JST: Do you send your students to Sikh families in the area or to local Gurdwara to learn Sikhism in practice?

DRJ: There was no need for it. Ninety percent of my students in the class were from Sikh families.

JST: How do you keep yourself up-to-date on Sikhism?

DRJ: I order new books for my personal collection and for the university library. I read magazines covering Sikh issues. Old issues of *Punjab, Past and Present* ably edited by Ganda Singh is a mine of information. I get *Journal of Punjab Studies*, *Sikh Formations*, *The Sikh Review*, *Sikh Courier* etc. I am also a member of Internet discussion forums, Sikh Diaspora and Gurmat Learning Zone where current Sikh issues are debated. I also attend conferences and seminars.

JST: Have you attended any conference recently?

DRJ: Yes, I just returned from two international conferences, one in Leiden, Netherlands, at the 19<sup>th</sup> European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies (ECMSAS) where my paper was entitled '**Representation, Mobilization and Globalization: Sikhs and Women's Seva on the WWW**' and another in Sigtuna, Sweden, at the 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Media, Religion and Culture, where I presented '**Who is a Sikh? Colonial and Contemporary Media constructions of Sikh Identity.**' I was fortunate to run into Dr. Shinder Thandi and Dr. Karen Leonard in Leiden, both of whom are exemplary scholars of Sikhism.

JST: Your favorite authors on Sikh Studies?

DRJ: I have tremendous respect for Dr. Harjot Oberoi, my guide for my PhD dissertation. He is brilliant, perhaps the best I have come across.

JST: This is also the view of my friend, Dr. Gurbhagat Singh. According to him Oberoi is the best among the Sikh scholars teaching abroad. Dr. Gurbhagat Singh was Professor of English and Dean of Languages at Punjabi University, Patiala. At present he is translating Sri Guru Granth Sahib into English.

DRJ: Who else?

DRJ: Of course, Hew McLeod, he is the elder statesman of scholars of Sikh Studies.

Both as scholar and a human being he is remarkable. Then I also respect the works of J S Grewal, Harbans Singh, Kirpal Singh and Pashaura Singh. And, of course, my friend Nikki Singh.

Oh gee, I almost forgot N G Barrier. He did the pioneer work on Singh Sabha, which was profound and thorough. Both Dr. Oberoi and I stand on his shoulders for information on Singh Sabha movement.

Of course, we cannot forget the 'Greats' of Sikh and Punjab history, Ganda Singh and Fauja

Singh.

JST: So you firmly belong to the McLeodian School in Sikh studies.

DRJ: There is no such a thing as a McLeodian school or group. We agree and disagree on issues. Hew McLeod and Pashaura Singh differ on some issues and so do Gurinder Mann and Pashaura Singh. Nikki and I focus on aspects of the same subject, though use different approaches, but still she is my good friend. I critiqued McLeod in my works for accepting Kaur as surname for women at the 1699 Amrit ceremony at Anandpur without checking contemporary sources and J.S. Grewal for not even mentioning women at all in this regard. In fact, Kaur was added to women's name during Singh Sabha period. There is no such a thing as a McLeodian school. We respect each other's views, work and build on each others' research.

JST: And how about Khushwant Singh

DRJ: I adore Khushwant Singh. He is fiercely independent, and speaks out his mind bluntly. Another Punjabi writer I greatly respect is Amrita Pritam. She is the ultimate Punjabi poet. She had a fine mind. Look at her poem *The Annunciation* where Mata Tripta had Guru Nanak in her womb. She focused on the hopes and dreams and bodily experiences of the pregnant Tripta. Her poem on partition "Aj Akhan Waris Shah Nu..." made her immortal. Her heart bleeds for the daughters of Punjab.

JST: Do you know Punjabi?

DRJ: When I was at Patiala in 1996 to research material for my PhD thesis I learned to read from Gurmukhi script. I could also speak *tuti-phuti* (broken) Punjabi, but since there was no practice here I almost lost it now.

JST: Any plans to write a new book?

DRJ: In fact I am working on two books. One is a book I am editing focusing on issues relating to women in Sikhism; I'm delighted that so many important scholars will be contributing to this book. I'm also hoping to publish a volume on the Internet and Sikhism. And, recently I was approached to consider being the general editor of a new two volume edition on World Religions by a major publishing company.

JST: Sikhism is a new religion. Western scholars should exercise caution in applying rigorous Western methodology in examining it, especially influence of Hinduism. Already some Hindu organizations are trying to enter the fold and Sikhs fear its absorption by Hinduism.

DRJ: Do you really believe that Sikhism will be absorbed into Hinduism? This has been a concern for more than a hundred years, but, in my opinion, if one looks around today, Macauliffe's assertion that the Sikhs would be swallowed by the 'boa' which is the Hindu tradition within a few years was way off the mark. As for questioning, applying rigorous scholarship, first of all – that has been done by non-Sikhs and Sikhs, in the West and in Punjab universities; it certainly isn't a 'western phenomenon' in that it is only undertaken by Western scholars. In my humble opinion, Sikhism represents truth and goodness; that which is 'true' cannot be shaken by questioning and that which is 'good' is so at its core, its essence. Sikhism has solid, beautiful foundations which cannot be shaken by questioning some of its practices based on oral tradition or even textual traditions. If I understand the Gurus' message correctly, as an outsider, their message was one of internal transformation, of becoming fully human, of constantly striving to become a *Gurmukh*, God-inspired if you will. That amazing message cannot be undermined by historical inquiry; it never has and it never will.

JST: Thank you for your time.

DRJ: It was my pleasure to meet you.

