

Sociopolitical Impact of Sikh Religious Studies

By

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Abstract

Sikh and Punjabi Studies pose a challenge to the scholars due to various methodologies used to study religion. While the Euro-centric and Judeo-Christian methodologies have proven illogical to study Sikhism because of its written tradition of scriptures, juxtaposing heretical literature with Sikhi has become alarmingly common. Furthermore Sikh community has done sleuthing and reported that there is wide use of fraudulent data in Sikh Studies, which misinterprets and misrepresents Sikhism. There is constant yearning among select group of scholars and government agencies to engulf the Sikhs into Hinduism. Sikhism is neither a part of any religion nor that of a Dharma. Suppressing Sikhs in Punjab by pushing Hindustan and changing the region's demography the Indians have failed to capitalize the British scrutiny, which concluded that to avoid Sikhs from relapsing into the Hindu fold, it was imperative to keep militarism of Sikhs and its subjective relevance to the Sikh cannon protected by state support.

The origination and foundation of Sikhism has been well documented and subjected to rigorous scrutiny ever since the invasion of India by the British. The intent to understand Sikh Religion, Sikhism as such was and continues to be largely political. In the eighteenth century the British encountered Sikhs not as a religious body but as a growing and surmountable political power. Evidence has shown that the westerners realize and accept that the basic source of Sikh political and religious strength is the Guru Granth Sahib. Complexity of Guru Granth Sahib's teachings is perplexing for the western interpreters because to date it remains the most comprehensive and authentic scripture composed of hymns written in Persian, mediaeval Prakrit, old Punjabi, Hindi, Marathi, Multani, and several other local dialects of the region. This unique repository of the

reveled word of God, as preserved in the Granth Sahib, is incomparable to other scriptures of the world. They put forward a systematic life-affirming and dynamic view of the world to lift mankind to a higher plane of humanity and accomplishments.

The period of Sikh Gurus reigned for two hundred and thirty nine years from Guru Nanak (1469 – 1539) to Guru Gobind (1675 – 1708). During which critical events leading to canonization of Sikhism and their appropriate interpretation are of utmost importance not only for today's historians or theologians or Sikhs but for other nations of the world as well. If any part of these historical events is misinterpreted then the core of Sikh belief is in doldrums.

One such intriguing event was the adaptation of *Miri* (temporal) and *Piri* (spiritual) doctrine into Sikh tradition by Guru Hargobind (1595 – 1644). It significantly authenticated the close relationship between Sikh temporal and spiritual principals, which not only encompass the religious and political thought but also, in fact, govern the Sikh societal structure and attitude.

Many regions of the world, in the past, such as Punjab have historically been under duress due to several factors, which include and are not limited to, invasions of foreign powers, atrocities of Emperors and religious leaders alike, Princely egos, and State and Central policies etc. While few of these factors can be individually summarized or generalized their denominator unquestionably remains the same – Power.

Whether it was the power to control the region politically or suppress a minority to dominate as a religious majority it is the Sikhs of Punjab that ultimately paid the price of being followers of a religion that asserted principles of freedom of conscience and human justice. In part affirmation and establishment of truthful religious order lead to the execution of Guru Arjan Dev ji (1563 – 1606) by Mughal Emperor Jahangir. Guru Arjan's martyrdom exemplified the principals of Guru Nanak: Personal piety must have moral strength at its core, a courageous soul must be virtuous, and it is religiously imperative to suffer trail for one's convictions.

Nanak's prophecy was clearly evident in the idealistic form of Sikh government (1801 – 1839) that is exemplified by the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1789 – 1839). He ruled an area of 100,436 square miles, which was inhabited by 5,350,000 people. The eleven confederacies under his rule are to this date a model form of government in itself.

During the struggle of the British to snare in more territory into their Empire's grasp they realized that it was imperative to keep militarism of Sikhs and its subjective relevance to the Sikh cannon from relapsing fast back into the Hindu fold. They commissioned Max Arthur McAuliffe in late 1800s to take up a humongous task of exposing Sikhism to the western world. Although their

motives were sinister, McAuliffe's work remains one of the most important references in Sikh history from the perspective of religion and heritage. Keeping the politics of the British rule aside and ignoring the repercussions of his research he opined:

“Hinduism is like a boa constrictor of the Indian forests. When a petty enemy appears to worry it, it winds round its opponents, crushes it in its fold, and finally causes it to disappear in its capacious interior. In this way many centuries ago, Hinduism on its own ground disposed of Buddhism.... in this way it has converted uneducated Islam in India into a semi paganism, and in this way it is disposing of the reformed and once hopeful religion of Baba Nanak. Hinduism has embraced Sikhism in its fold, the still comparatively young religion is making a vigorous struggle for life, but its ultimate destruction is, it is apprehended, inevitable without state support.”

Sacrifices made by Sikhs to preserve Sikhism, and during fight for freedom and justice for downtrodden are too numerous to count. One such statistic is noteworthy. Their total population according to 1941 census was 1.47% of total India's population. Yet by 1947, at the time of struggle with the British, 3697 Sikhs laid their lives for India's Independence. Many Sikhs were indiscriminately arrested in 1942 – 43 and put in jails and constituted 70% out of all the Punjabis arrested where as they consisted of only 13% of total Punjabi population.

Sikhs and their gallant sacrifices suffered a devastating blow when the leaders of Indian Congress struck a deal with the British and Muslim league and separated a large part of Sikh land to form Pakistan. More than 40% Sikhs became refugees. As if this was not enough, the boa constrictor policies of the upper caste Hindu state of thought further reduced the size of State of Punjab post Independence. (Figure 1.)

The onslaught on the Sikhs and their religion took a new shape in the twentieth century when self-propagated theologians and philanthropists started to indulge into formation of Sikh Study chairs in the west. Self-propagation in the name of lord is sinful in Sikhism. Chairs of Sikh and Punjabi studies in the name of individuals are being glorified as conducting authentic Sikh religious studies. Proponents of these Sikh Studies Chairs contend that through the endowment programs of the North American Universities Sikhs will have the opportunity to present their religion and create a better social understanding within the community. On the contrary they are publishing distorted literature complimenting the heretics and maligning the Sikhs of Baba Nanak. Sikh community scholars believe their stated goals are ingenuous where the real

intention is to spread schismatic theosophies. Sikhism, they contend, is being misrepresented and misinterpreted through the use of dubious sources and falsified data.

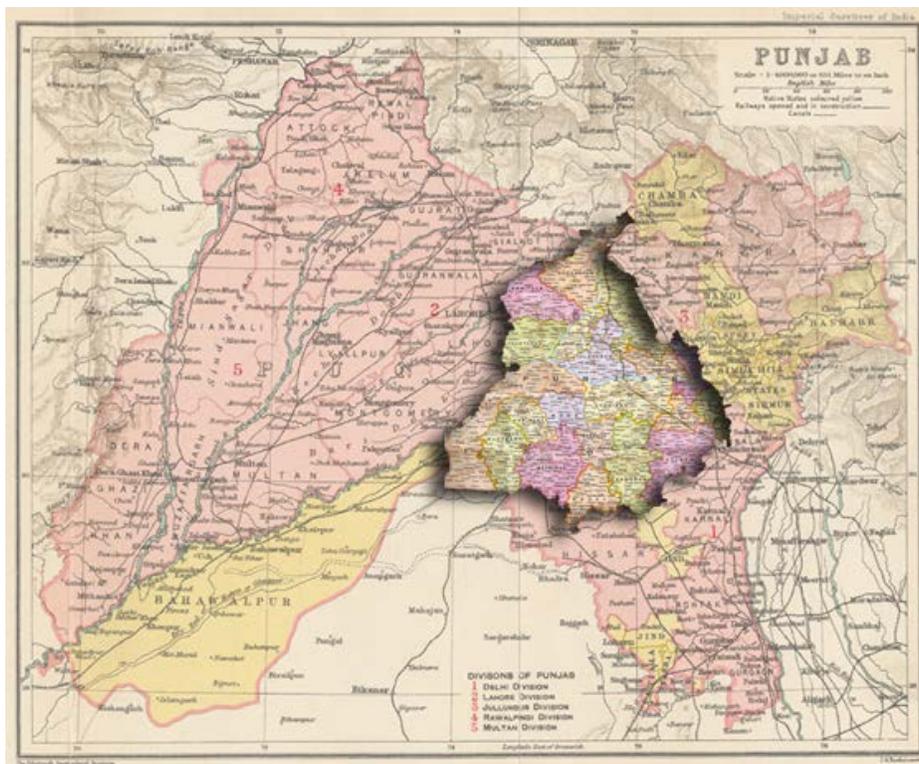


Figure 1. Imperial Gazetteer of India, The Edinburg Geographical Society (1790), Maps of Punjab (2013)

Interestingly when the Sikh community a few years ago met with a local university's officials, where a Sikh chair has been established, to question their intentions, they were perceived as a mere intrusion into the agenda of the academic institution. They were not only humiliated but also portrayed as illiterate by the university officials and the media. The officials in academia justified Sikh Studies based on fundamentals that these halls of pedagogy study religion by citing the theory of "pulpit and podium," in which a religion is studied through confessional and

academic approaches. According to them “these differing approaches to the understanding of religion are not oppositional. But neither ought they to be confused with each other, for each has its own distinctive mission and purpose.” The Sikh community was deeply concerned and wanted some assurance that wide spread use of fraudulent material in studying the Sikhs would perhaps cease. Sikhs are well aware of the published reports that fraudulent research is very easy to publish in reputable journals. As seen in the cases of: (a). Karen Ruggiero (2001, psychologist), (b). Hwang Woo-Suk (2005 - 06, scientist), (c). Jon Sudbo (2006, scientist), (d). Mark Hauser (2010, psychologist), (e). Diederik Stapel (2012, psychologist), where fraudulence has been reported by the internal whistleblowers. Recently another case of fraudulent research has embarrassed the world community where Dirk Smeesters (2012, social psychologist), has been implicated after an external source sleuthing data exposed the tainted data.

It is a moral responsibility of every Sikh to stand against disparaging of their religion and history especially when it is being contorted through fraudulent sources by printing houses or the academic institutions. Intellectually raising a voice through allegiance to One Granth (Guru Granth Sahib), One Panth, and One Maryada, which guides us towards pious thought and teachings of the Gurus to once and for all end blasphemy and tyranny on the underprivileged and suppressed communities of the world is ethical responsibility of the Khalsas.

It is imperative to mention that universities in the U. S. are protected under the first amendment and freely execute freedom of speech through academic freedom. The social implications of religious studies are rarely given importance unless a particular community is proven to be hurt. Again the Power of the politicians and the socio majority plays a hypocritical role in charting the course of humanity. As evidenced in past couple of years, both the Universities of Colorado and Florida had to investigate academic charges brought against instructors: at Colorado, Professor Ward Churchill was criticized for comparing the victims of 9/11 to Nazis and praising the suicide hijackers for their “gallant sacrifices,” while at South Florida, Dr. Sami-al-Arian was terminated for his pro-Palestinian views. Similarly as our first amendment circles around the academic freedom issues some of us find our selves asking questions as to how far should we go with individual academic freedom and institutional academic freedom? While the debate about the facts that the universities have suffered in the hands of State legislatures continues, philanthropist and theologians have academically found a chance to influence masses with their socialistic ideology in order to further their political agendas.

It is a grave concern that in the twenty first century a few raw and self-proclaimed historians under the guidance of ill-intentioned academicians and banner of formidable publishing houses are continuing to fire salvos at Sikh Religion and history to disrupt and destroy the fundamentals of Sikhism and its social structure. To underscore how a historian's study of Sikh religion methodically contorted the Sikh scripture and heritage, one can begin with Ernest Trumpp who in 1877 published translation of portions of the Guru Granth Sahib under the title The Adi Granth. Some of his misconceived Euro-centric insults are:

“The Sikh Granth is a very big volume and couched at the same time in dark and perplexing language, in order to cover these defects. It is for us “occidentals” a most painful and almost stupefying task to read on a single raga. The way in which Nanak used the disciples who attached themselves to his person was not very conducive to impart to them any considerable knowledge. They were little more than his menial servants. The masses of Nanak's disciples were ignorant Jats who on an average could neither read nor write. Angad was altogether unlettered and could him self neither read nor write. The tradition, which makes him inventor of the Gurmukhi letters, is without any foundation. The few verses of Angad, which are contained in the Granth, are but a poor repetition of the words of Nanak and shallow in the extreme. Sikh gurus strictly observed the caste system of India. Moral views of Sikhs of Guru Tegh Bahadur's time were confusing. Guru Tegh Bahadur was outlawed by the Delhi government and captured as a criminal at Agra”.

To continue the Eurocentric insult along with Judeo-Christian ideology in researching Sikh scriptures the leader of the pack – Hew McLeod, since 1975 employed Judeo-Christian methodology to defame. Now many of his flag bearers and disillusioned Sikhs, are indulging in rhetoric beyond comprehension of a true Sikh.

McLeod and his followers propagate ideology, which incorrectly interprets Sikhism's core thought process. According to them:

“Guru Nanak was the founder of Sikh religion in the organizational sense, and not in the religious sense. Guru Nanak was in a way Sant Nanak and never went abroad. Guru Gobind lost all his battles. Regression from Sikhism to Hindu religion took place at the time of Guru Amar Das. Guru Arjan was murdered and not martyred in 1606 AD. Bhagat Bani was included in Sri Guru Granth Sahib to please the minorities”.

In North America, Sikhs and Sikhism are being studied through research on several topics: (1) Sikh scriptures [Guru Granth Sahib], (2) Apocryphal literature (heretics and schisms of Sikhi), (3)

Martyrdom, (4) Valorous and martial race, (5) Militancy and non-violence, (6) Modernity and epistemology, (7) Hermeneutics (heretic texts), and (8) Musicology: *Gurbani Sangit*. The examples of twisting and misinterpreting Sikhism and Sikh heritage in religious study departments across United States are too many to mention. However, I would like to direct the individuals to globalsikhstudies.net for appropriate references.

As though juxtaposing heretical literature with that of authentic Sikhi was not enough, some of the Chair holders are now on the advisory board of foundations that are trying to redefine Sikhism through Sanatan philosophy. Dharma Academy of North America and Uberoi Foundation are two such foundations. Sikhs are now in a very precarious position because both, the universities and foundations are promulgating Sanatan Dharma doctrine and distorting Sikhism in Diaspora. There is little doubt that Sikhi cannot be compared and or made part of a study that defines other eastern religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Sikhism is not only unique but also independent. It is neither a part of any religion nor of a Dharma as promoted by the supports of Sanatan Dharma and exemplified in table 1.

Sanatan Dharma	Religion
It was/is determined by the Creator	It is founded by a human being
It is eternal. It has no beginning and no end too. We cannot live without it.	It was born on a certain date. What takes birth must die too, and hence, it will not exist forever. We lived without it and we shall again live without it.
It doesn't go through any modification/ revision.	It needs to be modified with the passage of time.
It is applicable to all human beings irrespective of their gender, color, culture, national origin, etc. It favors none. Every human being has fundamental right to heed and follow it.	It originates from a mortal human being, and therefore, it's likely to be preferential to a section of the human population. It may have discriminatory clauses.
The world is dependent on it like it depends on the sun, air, water, etc. It is as basic as anything we can imagine. The day <i>dharma</i> vanishes from the world the world will vanish too. <i>Dharanat iti dharmah</i> , i.e. <i>dharma</i> holds the creation, the creator being the <i>Dharmaraja</i> .	It is a fabrication of a mortal human being who is not likely to be all knowing and as benevolent as the Cosmic Spirit is. It can certainly not be a basic thing because the humanity managed without it before it came into being.
It is so natural that a few wise people can sit together to discuss and search in their conscience what our <i>dharma</i> is.	It requires an extraneous authority for its determination.
It has universal acceptance.	It can never have universal acceptance.
It has nothing that contradicts the laws of nature because the <i>dharma</i> and the laws of nature originate from the same source, the creator.	It often contradicts the laws of the nature.
Its purpose is to guide the humanity towards righteousness for our overall personal and collective good.	Its purpose may be the selfish interest of an individual or a group of individuals.
It brings universal love, brotherhood and peace among the entire humanity as parents desire in their family.	It often causes conflicts and strife leading to wars among followers of different religions.
An intelligent person through his/her intellectual faculties can understand it.	It discourages us to use our intellectual faculties. It requires blind faith in a human being.
It appeals to the natural human compassion and love.	It may give rise to hatred among its followers towards the followers of

	other religions.
It encourages us to know and understand the Cosmic Spirit and to be in communion with Him directly.	It gives importance to a human being, past or present and positions that man between the Cosmic Spirit and us. Thus, it creates an artificial distance between 'me and God.'
One is encouraged to maintain pure innocence to see and enjoy every event as a miracle, such as a bud blossoming into a flower.	It brings in false concepts of miracles and thereby snatches away our pure innocence, encouraging irrationality, blind faith, conceit and hypocrisy.
There is considerable individual freedom for personal growth provided it doesn't hurt others.	There is no freedom because there is fear that an individual may become equal or even superior to the person who founded that religion.
One can follow <i>dharma</i> anytime, anywhere at any age.	One must go through certain rituals to be initiated into a religion. There may not be an appropriate guideline applicable to every place and at all times.
If <i>dharma</i> sees its decline thenreligions flourish and create havoc for the noble people.
<i>Dharma</i> is one and only one.	Religions are many.
<i>Dharma</i> gives rise to higher moral and intellectual stature.	Religions may cause decay in moral and intellectual stature.
<i>Dharma</i> is a unifying force towards a global village of the entire humanity.	Religions are divisive that the entire earth can become a battlefield.

Table 1.

Sikh religious thought cannot be interpreted through any phenomenal process as proclaimed by Christian Missionary ideology and McLeod group's dogma or Sanatanism doctrine as publicized by Dharma Academy of North America's mission. Numinous experience is the core and base of Sikh religion with its own identity and only one of its kind scriptures. Some of its salient and distinguishing facts are:

1. Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh Scripture is purely monotheistic. It accepts only one God and rejects all other deities, spirits, angels, etc. Only God is immortal. All other deities are mortal and prone to death.
2. The religion of Guru Granth Sahib, being free from inhibitions of any kind regarding the way of life and its adaptability in all the religions of the world vouches its universality. It is not a religion of the chosen people (like Judaism), but instead, it is the religion of the entire humanity. It raises above all the regional barriers.
3. It rejects all ritualism, formalism, and symbolism. It has no belief in any sacrament.
4. It focuses all its attention on the enfoldment of discipline for the attainment of the unity of the soul with God. The emphasis has been laid on the adoption of godly qualities by the seeker.
5. It repudiates the prevalent theories of Creation and scans the universe as the work of the Creator, whose existence pulsates everywhere in His Creation. The extent and expanse of the Creation of the Infinite Lord cannot be delimited.
6. It lays great emphasis on honest and sincere labor. Its religion is the religion of workers and householders. Therefore it decries the renunciation and all types of ascetic practices.
7. It advocates the equality of all human beings, irrespective of birth and sex. The woman is in no way inferior to man. It rejects all distinctions of caste and color.

8. The State has to play its part in the provision of food, shelter, and clothing to the members of the society. There can be no devotion, if the individual is not carefree about his requirements.
9. It presents a balanced combination of action, devotion, and knowledge. Whereas the body has to work for the wellbeing of family and society while the mind has to remain in tune with the Lord. Service is, thus, the motto of an adherent of Guru Granth Sahib. His best service toward the Guru and the Lord is the remembrance to the Name.
10. The religion of Guru Granth Sahib is most practical. The devotee over brims with love and devotion. The whole world appears as a family to him. The earth is a spiritual abode for him.
11. Breaks dichotomy between spiritual and empirical lives.
12. Rejects Asceticism.
13. Rejects Varnasharm Dharma, which incorporates basic caste system.
14. Rejects Ahimsa.
15. God Never incarnates. He is Un-Incarnated and Transcendent.

In the present context, India's policies towards minorities raise challenging questions. Is it fair to assume that the Sikhs of Guru Nanak may as well be considered extinct? Sikhs have found their way into Smithsonian and perhaps time will tell whether they are extinct or at the brink of extinction to justify preservation in Museums.

In Punjab, since 1996 the ethno-religious issues have been replaced with politico-economic issues with the support of the central government. The political alliance of Shiromani Akali Dal and Bhartiya Janata Party has effectively suppressed Sikhism by breaking away from Gurdwaras and promoting the Sanatan Deras. Such a disastrous cooperation has resulted in alarming decrease in Punjab's contribution to Indian Armed Forces. The reasons listed by various agencies are: (1) Drugs and alcohol (73.5% youth between 16 – 35 years of age are affected by drugs), (2) Lack of physical exercise due to migrant labor, and (3) Poor Standards of education, especially in rural and boarder areas. However, it is quite evident that Sikhs are far removed from Guru Granth Sahib. The coalition has failed to understand what the British, in nineteenth century, had summarized while learning about the Sikhs that it was imperative to keep militarism of Sikhs and its subjective relevance to the Sikh cannon to avoid Sikhs from relapsing into the Hindu fold. Just to skim the issue of lack of Sikhs to defend Indian Boarders is no longer just a national matter but an international logistical catastrophe. With Indian Armed Forces devoid of skilled Sikhs, the region is bound to become unstable. Point in turn the last course of Indian Military Academy (IMA), 615 officers passed out on December 8, 2012, out of which only 20 of them were from Punjab as compared to 40% in previous years, a dramatic decrease of

36.74%. A genuine propagation of Sikhism and Sikh thought is being lost in contorted academic jungle where the scholars are hypothesizing and theorizing topics, under Sikh Studies, only for satisfying publishing requirements. Sikh community through tremendous hard work has put their savings, without any strings, into establishing Sikh Study Chairs keeping in mind that they will have a positive impact on North American scholarship about Sikhism. Sikh community understands the philosophy of Sikhism and need no more theoretical explanations. **Sikh Studies chair holders must address:**

1. Genuine propagation of Sikhism in north America and attempt for a better understanding of Sikhs in north America Pluralistic and multicultural environment.

2. Must attempt for initiation, maintenance and promotional instruction and research at undergraduate and graduate levels in Sikhism (uniqueness, doctrines and religious practices).

3. Must address Political problem of Sikhs, especially the Minority suppression in India.

4. Must raise awareness about Amendment of Article 25 (2) (b) (II) in Indian constitution to state that Sikhism is unique/independent religion and not a part of Hindu religion. Recommendations by the commission ten years ago must be adopted. Accordingly, on 23 February 2000, the President of India appointed Justice Shri M.N. Venkatachaliah, former Chief Justice of India as the Chairperson of the Commission and the following persons as the other Members of the Commission: Justice 1. Shri B.P. Jeevan Reddy, Chairman, Law Commission of India; 2. Justice Shri R.S. Sarkaria, former Judge, Supreme Court of India; 3. Justice Shri Kottapalli Punayya, former Judge, Andhra Pradesh High Court; 4. Shri P.A. Sangma, former Speaker, Lok Sabha; and Member of Parliament; 5. Shri Soli J. Sorabjee, Attorney General for India; 6. Shri K. Parasaran, Senior Advocate and former Attorney General for India; 7. Dr. Subhash C. Kashyap, former Secretary General, Lok Sabha; 8. Shri C.R. Irani, Chief Editor and Managing Director, *The Statesman*; 9. Dr. Abid Hussain, former Ambassador of India in the USA; 10. Smt. Sumitra G. Kulkarni, former Member of Parliament, (Rajya Sabha). Click on to read Report of the National Commission Review to the Working of the Constitution set up vide Government Resolution dated 22 February, 2000. <http://www.lawmin.nic.in/ncrwc/finalreport.htm>

5. Must raise awareness about Freedom and Glow of independence to Sikhs in northern India as promised to Sikhs prior to 1947 by Indian congress

6. Must promote and do more research on History of Sikh Pioneers of North America: Highlighting correct position of Sikh pioneers in North America who initiated *Sikh Gadhara (1907 – 1918)*: a revolutionary movement for Indian independence inspired by their core belief in Guru Granth which guided them to fight for freedom of India and equality of mankind.

7. Must raise awareness that the Sikh religion is the only major religion of the world which has its recorded revelation available in the form of Kartarpuri Bir 1604 compiled by 5th Guru and Damdami Bir finally rewritten edited and standardized at DAMDAMA SAHIB/SABO TALWANDI 1706 AD By 10th Guru Ji. Many Sanatani and Missionary organizations are very envious of Sikh treasury and are making attempts to confuse it.

The Sikh community encourages all Sikh Chair holders, and people from all walks of life to seek the true word of Guru Granth Sahib for preserving Sikhism. Be a Sikh – who is a protector of the suppressed, the voice of equality, and strives for the religious freedom and social justice for all.