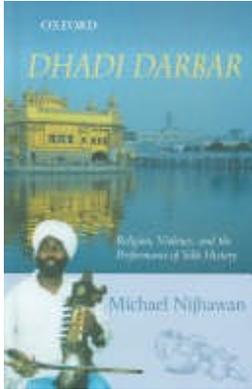


Dhadi Darbar; Religion, Violence, and the Performance of Sikh History by Michael Nijhawan (2006) [272P] ISBN: 978-0195679670

A Book Review: Kavneet Singh



Michael Nijhawan is an Associate Professor of Social Anthropology at York University, Canada, with a Ph.D from Heidelberg University, Germany in 2002. He has authored two books.

Michael has written on a very interesting part of the Sikh Religious tradition. Troubadours (Dhadi Singers) or Heroic Ballad Singers have always been around for centuries in many areas/countries of the world. Troubadours have been part of 'people' of the middle ages, from Ireland to Japan. Ballad Singers in various religions and cultures have performed their part based on the hardships, persecution, battles and the environments that they live in. The minstrel-poet's job is to evoke strong emotions among his or her audience but the intensity may vary depending on place, venue and time frame. Heroic ballad singing is not unique to the Sikhs as the author mentions but the Sikhs have evolved their own unique kind of Dhadi singing. Most troubadours around the world do sing about the fallen heroes, martyrs, great leaders, political turmoil, etc. Nijhawan does allude in the book to the fact that Dhadis.....

Chapter 1.....

There are strong reasons to underline this historical continuity in aesthetic format (heroic genres such as var) and discursive orientation (martial ballads). The memory of persecution and war, specifically among the Sikh population, is vivid for all sections of the society. Contemporary dhadi performers recall this history day after day at various public occasions in Punjab and amidst the Sikh Diaspora. The genre has certainly retained the language of martyrdom and violence that has come from this history... [Page 34]

Michael correctly points out the memorization and relaying the events of martyrdom and violence. I am concerned though of the negative connotation of violence that the dadhi ballads can or are alluding through the methodology and description by Micheal.....

Chapter 2.....

Guninder Kaur has described very well the various poetic devices used in the Dasam Granth to create a heroic mood (here raudra rasa instead of bir rasa). I will quote from her book at some length in order to show how the concept of the dhadi voice has to be used in terms of the particular aural aesthetics of the Dasam Granth.....[Page 64]

Whether the dhadis incorporated some of the Dasam Granth literature and infused it into its tradition and/or it's a mix of many previous forms with only a sprinkling of the Dasam granth literature is a big question. It's a well known fact which Michael acknowledges rightly that there is a huge amount of spurious literature which is being passed off as the writings of the Tenth Sikh Guru.

Chapter 3.....

Is it by mere accident that the person holding the drum is clean shaven, wearing a loosely tied turban and thus does not appear to be a religious performer in the first place.....Since contemporary performers in the Indian Panjab appear almost entirely to be Khalsa Sikhs, it seems to me no coincidence that, about a century earlier, Sikh religious symbols displayed in bodily attire.....[Page 75]

The photograph mentioned by Michael has a clean shaven man amid three other Sikhs. The likelihood of that man being a Sikh who cut his hair before landing in Canada in 1905-08 is pretty strong and the fact of him being a Muslim and/or Hindu very unlikely. Tying a turban at a dhadi darbar normally held inside a gurdwara would require the head covered. There should be no reason of wonder as to why all the current dhadis are Khalsas; since that is exactly what they are supposed to be if they follow the Sikh Faith. This constant questioning of the articles of faith by western academics seems to be a favorite pastime of the Mcleodian clique.

Chapter 4....

I need to point out that there is an ongoing scholarly debate concerning the status of martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition.....[Page 108] The poem speaks of threats and revenge, of blood and counter-action legitimized through reference to the sacrosanct territory of collective memory.....[Page 116]

Scholars may continue to debate; since some scholars refuse to understand an idea/ideal which is alien to their psyche and have no compunction to keep splitting hairs till there is nothing left of it or it becomes something entirely different. My simple question would be, what would a man or woman be called if he or she takes the oath to join the armed forces of any country with the mandated uniform and then fight in a 'just' war, sanctioned by that country and finally die for it and become a hero? On one major level it is perfectly legal and not many people put that kind of violence in the context of murder or terrorism; but why not?

Michael is well aware of the violent persecution of the Sikhs continually for more than three centuries. The legitimacy or illegitimacy of violence is a very difficult issue to deal with; and can only be properly understood unless one has been through horrific violence and when absolutely no justice is forth coming; to really understand the dadhi tradition. Jews have been persecuted to the point of extinction and today are doing the same to the Palestinians albeit only the approach is different while most of the western world never bats an eyelid to the Jewish violence on Palestinians.

Chapter 5.....

It is stated cunningly in the preface to his autobiography, where he differentiates between the different 'truths' that have taken into consideration by the writer.....he was critically aware about the contested and plural character of truth. He does not offer a final vision of what type of truth should be adhered to in the autobiographic genre, but reading his text, it is clear that 'political truth' [rajnitak sacch] is regarded with utmost skepticism....[Page 139]

Michael has used a bulk of Sohan Singh Seetal's writings to write his book. Seetal was well known for being brutally honest even in his personal life. In the corrosive environment of the Indian sub-continent Seetal's explanation of the various truths is very real because that is the harsh reality, therefore to slight him in any way is to bend to one's base instincts. Most of the Dadhi traditions are based on the satire of the various truths.

Chapter 6.....

The contours of the overall situation are therefore not so clearly etched. At the same time when dhadi oral performance has come to be regarded as integral part to Sikh gurmat and particularly so against the background of the Panjab crisis in the 1980's, appropriations of dhadi aesthetics through visual and sonic innovations seem to carve away the ground upon which the more traditional dhadi performance would be based.....[Page 173]

Michael is correct as far as the dhadi tradition being and becoming a part of Sikh gurmat, since oral history; religious or cultural has been an important part of the Sikh genre. People who make history have little time to write their own history, therefore oral history becomes a strong medium to transmit information. The dhadis have plenty of material to begin with but with every momentous event or a series of events they simply have more material to work from but that does not change the dhadi performance the way Michael seems to describe.

Chapter 7.....

The possibilities of speaking in the dhadi voice against a venue of power are certainly limited, as the conditions of social marginality continue to shape the dhadi performative scene. Yet, what can be learned from this study is that the relationship between voices that hail the subject and voices of performative enactment have tended to emancipate dhadi performers at the social margin rather than further subjecting them to the command of ideology.....[Page 200]

The dhadi voice is precisely used against a venue of power as a non-violent dissent knowing fully well that the powers to be can use all methods of violence and coercion to stop them. Dhadis or Ballad Singers the world over have been from the lower rung of the respective class structures. It would be ideal that they gain better status social and economically in the eyes of their respective peers but that in the mean time does not denigrate the good work and their status. Troubadours have to be in sync with the times and environment they operate in, therefore they are not subjected to the command of any ideology, it is their choice and option as they wish.

Chapter 8.....

Religion and the different modes of piety and religious conduct given shape through public performance have thus constituted a decisive moment in the history of the dhadi tradition. Sikh religion provided a discourse in which it is placed in a continuity of communal affiliation. As a religion that places emphasis on equality and the dismissal of class and caste distinction, Sikhism has appealed to performers at the social margin of Punjabi Society. Juergensmeyer has observed this trend of 'Sikhization' in the social movements of the twentieth century Panjabi history.....[Page 208]

No doubt the religion does play a part in the public performance of any troubadour because it is directly related to the commonality of his/her own faith with the audience's faith insomuch that the relaying of the message from the bard becomes even more convincing to the receiver. The communal affiliation is an important part of any troubadour otherwise the audience will not take them seriously. If the bard is not part of the same faith group he/she cannot really understand the overall emotions of the audience, be that Irish, Mongolian or Sikh. The Sikh Faith will appeal to any underclass anywhere because it has all the ingredients to be the greatest humanistic universal faith to uplift humanity so why not the ones on the fringes of society. I think Michael is quoting Juergensmeyer to patronize the fact that there was a trend of more people converting to the Sikh Faith in the 20th century when really the fact is that most adopted the Faith in the 18th and 19th centuries, except that the weak who had shed their articles of faith in the later part of the 19th century came back due partly to the Sikh Sabha movement.

Even though the author seems to belong to the Mcleod group of writers, Nijhawan has done a fairly decent job of producing a book on the "Sikh Dhadis", Troubadours, Ballad singers, Minstrels/Poets. Anyone interested in the unique aspect of the "Dhadis" should read this book.