

The Materiality of the Past-History and Representation in Sikh Tradition

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The title of the book clearly reveals that Anne Murphy has built the entire thesis on material aspects of Sikh history, with an obvious objective of reducing Sikhism to a set of materials. The origin and foundation of Sikhism has been well documented and subjected to rigorous scrutiny ever since the British invasion of India. The intent to understand Sikhs and their religion continues to be largely political. In the late eighteenth century the British, when started their advance towards Northern India and Punjab, encountered Sikhs not as a religious body but a growing and surmountable political power, as noted in British writings. Westerners do realize that the basic source of Sikh political and religious strength is the Sikh scripture: Guru Granth Sahib. One wonders why an Assistant Professor of Sikh Studies turns a blind eye to the universally acknowledged doctrines of Sikh theology that form the basis of a very sound historical tradition of the Sikhs. The author has distorted, misinterpreted, and undermined the very foundations of Sikh faith and its institutions, with her spurious definition of Sikh identity, based on materials of the Sikh past. She has cast doubts and created undesirable controversies regarding the well-entrenched religious identity of the Sikhs. She has thrown all caution and academic integrity to the winds, when treating subjects like *Gurdwaras*, *Sikh Rahit Maryada*, *The Granth Sahib*, Five Kakaars of the Khalsa, and nature of Sikh identity. Her entire account, apart from being unreasonable, is unauthentic and non-academic. It's not only offensive to Sikh sentiments, but also greatly

degrading to the fifth largest religion of the world. She has propounded her thesis, on basis of following assumptions:

1. Nature of Sikh identity has not been wholly static and consistent. It has been inconsistent and has evolved over a period of time.
2. In the pre-colonial period, Sikh identity was fluid. It was not clearly defined. Academic work of Deol and Rinehart on Dasam Granth exhibits a New Sikh conception of spiritual and worldly responsibility.
3. Religious nature of the Sikh identity was established in the Colonial period, with the advent of the Singh Sabha Movement and under the influence of Colonial framework of knowledge. Gurdwaras created 'territorialized notions of the Sikh Past'.
4. It was a result of the Gurdwara Reform Movement that the Sikhs came to realize the historical importance of the Gurdwaras. It was in a territorialized mode that they understood their history and importance.
5. As per the requirements of the Gurdwara Reform Act, it was essential for the British Government to provide a clear definition of Sikh identity, in relation to the property rights of the Gurdwaras. It also suited the Sikhs to have their identity defined through the Government legislation.
6. In the new 'deterritorialised Diasporic and fluid environment', notions of cultural and religious sovereignty are being replaced by new notions of identity, based on material culture.

With regard to the writer's first assumption, it must be pointed out that a true perspective on Sikh identity can be obtained only in the light of the world-view of the Sikh Gurus, which aimed at harmonizing worldly pursuits with a true religious

life. There is clear and undisputable evidence that since the time of the Gurus, Sikh identity has been consistently religious in nature. There has been no question of multiple identities. Sikhism is a revelatory religion, and this claim is made by Guru Nanak himself - "O Lalo, I speak what the Lord commands me to convey". Similarly other Gurus have also spoken in the context. In the Siddh Gosht Guru Nanak says in reply to a question that his mission in life is, with the help of other god-men, to ferry people across the turbulent sea of life. As to the Guru's concept of God, it is recorded: "Friends ask me what is the mark of the Lord, He is All Love; rest He is ineffable". He is also called 'Ocean of Virtues' 'Benevolent', 'Gracious', 'Eyes to the blind', 'Milk to the child', 'Riches to the poor', etc. He is interested in the world. For, "True is He, True is His creation". God created the world and permeated it with His light." "It is the innermost nature of God to help the erring." "God created the world of life and planted Naam in it, making it the place for righteous activity". (GGS: Pages 722, 739, 459, 830, 463, 930, 828 and 468).

Guru Gobind Singh himself directed the Sikhs to follow Guru Granth and no other book nor any human being. Numinous experience is inherent in Frie's Ahndung (longing), Schleiermachar's Feeling, Kant's Things in Themselves (numina) and Kapur Singh's Antithesis of phenomena. It stands for the holy minus its moral factor and without any rational aspect. It is irreducible to any other factor. Numinous consciousness involves shaking fear of repulsion and an element of powerful fascination. It can only be understood by "ideograms" i.e. not through logic, but only symbolically. The core of religious experience is inherent in the awareness of non-moral holiness as a category of value. The numinous experience is the core and base of Sikh religion and its ingredients i.e. religiously sensitive mind in relation to his/her apprehension of himself/herself and universe around

him/her. The Ultimate Reality is not comprehensible through the sensory motor perceptions and speculations. Sikhism is a religion of Naam (neumina), which is asserted through 30,000 hymns of Sikh scripture through revealed statements, literary similes and allusions. Naam is God, and God is Naam, and the practice of religion revolves around the Naam. Therefore, Sikh religious thought – identity, cannot be interpreted through any Materials of the past.

Sikh religious system has left a very deep impact on Sikh ethos. The testimony of two English writers, Macauliffe and Cunningham, who knew the Sikhs intimately, cannot be ignored. Referring to the many-sided transformation that the Guru's ideals had wrought in his followers, According to Cunningham "A living spirit possesses the whole Sikh people, and the impress of Gobind has not only elevated and altered the constitution of their minds, but has operated materially and given amplitude to their physical frames". Macauliffe supports Cunningham's view that the Guru's ideology had 'a magical effect' on the depressed and the down-trodden of the Indian society, who had been condemned as outcaste. Macauliffe further stipulates: 'Stimulating precepts of the 10th Guru', 'altered what had hitherto been deemed the dregs of humanity into warriors'.

The tremendous driving power of the moral force of the Guru had created a new miracle, in defiance of the time-old prejudices and conservatism of the old Hindu religious system. During the 18th century, when the fortunes of the community were at the lowest ebb, it was through an unflinching adherence to the ideals of their Guru that the Sikhs carved their way to success and glory. The concept of *Khalsa Akal Purkh ki Fauj* (Khalsa is the army of God) and the watchword, and war cry of the Sikhs, *Waheguru ji ka Khalsa! Waheguru ji ki Fateh* (Khalsa belongs to the Guru and victory too is of the Guru) had an electrifying effect on their minds. Strength of these ideals had carried the Sikhs through all ordeals. It

was on the strength of these ideals that the Sikhs wrested the country's frontiers from the clutches of the Afghans. The Sikhs owe their success in all their enterprises, to the spirit of rectitude and self-sacrifice, of discipline and God-mindedness that the Gurus had instilled into them.

The second assumption that the Sikh identity was not clearly defined in the pre-colonial period is equally baseless as the first one. If the Sikh identity was not clearly defined in the pre-Colonial period, then can Murphy explain the following historical facts?

1. History of Guru Period (Sri Chand, Mohan, Prithi, and Ram Rai transgressed Sikh beliefs in early Sikh history and were isolated).
2. Martyrdom of the 5th and 9th Gurus to uphold religious freedom. Martyrdom of 5th Guru Reported by private Letter of Father Jerome Xavier,S.J. dated September 25th 1606 from Lahore To the Jesuit provincial Superior Goa.
3. Testimony of Moshan Fani (Muslim Chronicle, 1645).
4. Execution of Banda and 740 Sikhs in Delhi in 1716. That has been corroborated by two contemporary eyewitnesses, John Surman and Edward Stephenson, in a report to Robert Hedges British Governor at Fort Williams (March 10, 1716).
5. First Sikh Ghalughara in 18th century when governor Yahiya Khan issued proclamation to kill all Sikhs.
6. Why were prices on Sikh heads fixed by Mughals?.
7. Misal Raj

8. History of Maharaja Ranjit Singh period (His government was known as Sarkar-i-Khalsa; he issued coins in the name of the Gurus and all his princes were addressed as Khalsa. He was made to appear at Akal Takhat and was granted Tankhah.) .

Additionally she has willfully chosen to neglect the eloquent historical testimony of Cunningham whose unbiased monumental work was produced in the pre-colonial period, without any pressures of the Commonwealth. One is at a loss to understand why, in the face of this clear and indisputable evidence, the author goes on to assert that religious nature of the Sikh identity was promoted by the Singh Sabha leaders in the Colonial period in the light of Colonial frameworks of knowledge. Singh Sabha was not any reformist movement, which made any changes in Sikh doctrines or practice. It was just a revival movement. The author then must answer a basic question: Did the Singh Sabha create and/or compile 'new scripture' or 'new practice'? For a meaningful interpretation of Singh Sabha it is mandatory to study the Sikh movements of the Colonial period in some depth, and that too in the light of the pre-colonial Sikh Movements and Sikh scripture. An impression formed on the basis of British records and centralized Commonwealth thought only is inadequate and misleading. Standard Version of Dasam Granth has academic issues on its authenticity. Evidence shows that the British preferred Bachitar Natak rather than Guru Granth Sahib in Late 18th century because there is no evidence of any translation of Sri Guru Granth sahib by Britishers in late 18th century except Bachitar Natak composition. Malcolm obtained a copy of only Guru Granth Sahib from Punjab in 1805. He explicitly uses the translation of Bachiter Natak in his 'Sketch of the Sikhs'. British interest in the Dasam Granth and their efforts to promote it have not come under the focus of scholars so far. It needs serious investigation, which in turn may yield significant data to understand

the formation of standard and current Text version of Dasam Granth. Dr. Robin Rinehart herself raises the right question ‘Bansalinama (1769) by Chibar *Samundra Sagar*, *Avatar lila*, and Mahima Parkash 1776 A.D. (*Bidia Sagar*) are not clear about the work that later became known as the Dasam Granth and both authors do not prove or disprove anything in particular about the anthology that came to be known as the Dasam Granth?.’ According to A.C. Banerjee (1975): “He (Guru Gobind Singh) insisted as the Guru Nanak had insisted, on the worship of one god and non-recognition of different deities and incarnations. This was forgotten and popular fancy pictured him as a worshiper of Devi, or mother goddess. The legend appeared for the first time in Mehma Prakash (Vartak) written in return 1741A.D. and its full form in Bhai Sukha Singh’s *Gurbilas* which was completed in 1797 A.D”. Additionally Doel’s work has lot of misrepresentations. He does not go into any detail on the history and text of various manuscripts as noted in his work. Until authenticity issue of standard version of Dasam Granth is resolved on Sound academic basis any interpretation based on this granth will be considered non-academic. Authenticity of the current standard version of Dasam Granth as corrected & compiled by Sodhak Committee in 1897 needs a thorough history and Gurmat based independent inquiry in light of historical and Textual evidence.

Sri Akal Takhat on June 6th 2008 in obedience of Guru Gobind Singh Ji’s last command “*Accept Granth As Guru.This is my order for the Panth.*” And passed the Gurmata, which reads: “The current controversy about the Dasam Granth is totally uncalled for. No one has any right to create controversy about the specific writings contained in Dasam Granth that have been recognized and accepted by the Sikh Panth for Sikh Code of Conduct, prescribed recitation in daily prayer and Sikh baptismal(*Khandey De Pahul*). Be it known to the entire Sikh Panth that Sri

Dasam Granth is an integral part of Sikh literature and history but Guru Gobind Singh Ji did not recognize it equal to Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji. Since, he bestowed Guruship only on Sri Guru Granth Sahib, therefore, no other Granth can be installed along with Sri Guru Granth Sahib”.

Research is needed on many issues pertaining to Dasam Granth. Critical text of Dasam Granth has not yet been fixed and a committee can make edition/deletions by consulting all the available texts of Dasam Granth now available. There are many issues, which are wide open for debate within the Panth. Sri Akal Takht Sahib and S.G.P.C. are the competent authorities to take the decision on the Sikh Affairs in the larger interest of the Panth. On the issue of Dasam Granth they have already done so by issuing the Gurmata to the Sikh Sangat world over on June 6th, 2008, which is posted on the SGPC web. http://sgpc.net/akaltakhat_hukum/hukumnamas.asp. Avtar Singh Makkar, President SGPC, has made a statement on Feb 14, 2010 (Ajit Newspaper, Feb 15, 2010), that SGPC will constitute a High-level committee to settle Dasam Granth issue. Jathedar Gurbachan Singh has made a similar statement on March 26th (Ajit Newspaper, March 27, 2010) requesting all concerned to send their opinion based on evidence to Sri Akal Takhat Sahib.

Murphy’s third assumption that Gurudwara created ‘territorialized notions of the Sikh past’ is simply an utter contrary standard of judgment, which cannot be excused in a historian on Sikh chair where one of the objectives in the contract includes “to initiate, maintain and promote instruction and research undergraduate and graduate levels....Sikhism (doctrine, religious practice and philosophy).....”

Guru: means enlightenment from darkness into light, and **Dwara or duaar**: doorway gateway or portal. The Gurdwara houses the Guru Granth Sahib, the

everlasting Guru of the Sikhs. Kirtan and Gurbani singing from Guru Granth Sahib or Katha from Sikh history offers enlightenment. Any person from any religion can come to the Gurdwara to worship by entering the door or gateway of the Guru. Significance of the word Gurdwara is found in its spiritual context as noted in Guru Granth sahib Ji as follows; "*Guroo duaarai hoe sojhee paa-e-see* ||Entering the Guru's Gate, one obtains understanding." [SGGS||730](#) "*Gurduaarai laa-e bhaavaneeknaa dasavaa duaar dikhaa-i-aa* || Entering the Guru's Gate, one is blessed with loving faith, and the Tenth Door is revealed." [SGGS||922](#)" *Guroo duaarai aakh sunaa-ae* ||7||Entering the Guru's Door, utterance is heard." ||7||[SGGS||930](#)"*Gur duaarai har keertan sunee-ai* ||Entering the Guru's Gate, the Lord's adoring praise is heard." [SGGS||1075](#). To reduce the status of Gurdwaras to mere territory and to ignore their spiritual significance is to misconceive the entire issue of Sikhism and its identity. Author's close-mindedness is clearly evident.

Fourth assumption of the author can easily be academically expunged because it is baseless. Because without any meaningful discussion to support her thesis, the author hammers her assertion that as a result of Gurdwara Reform Movement, Sikhs came to realize the importance of Gurdwaras in a 'territorialized mode'. She is at pains to prove and propagate a totally false contention that dominant concerns of the Gurdwara Reform Movement were material concerns over property rights and territory, and not religious reform. She tries to mislead the readers to believe that Gurdwara as territory is more relevant for the Sikhs than as a place of worship. Sikhs find this misinformation as mischievous and highly detrimental to Sikhism. Participants in the Gurdwara Reform Movement were highly motivated Sikhs, infused with religious fervor and a spirit of self-sacrifice for the fulfillment of their mission. The Movement was totally non-violent in character. Murphy has failed to capture the true spirit of this Movement, which set a brilliant example for the entire

country, during a crucial phase of India's struggle for freedom. She has tried to belittle the character and significance of this Movement. As a result of this Movement, the Government had to pass the Sikh Gurdwara Act, which wrested control of Gurdwaras from the hands of corrupt priests, who had started treating the Gurdwaras as their personal properties and were violating the Sikh tradition. With the new legislation, the management of the Gurdwaras came to be vested with the SGPC, an elected body of the Sikhs.

Anne Murphy's fifth assumption betrays such a complete misconception of Sikh history that even a person moderately acquainted with the Sikh past would hardly take her views seriously. *It is ludicrous to quote Ruchi Ram Sahini (1863-1948) who described the Gurdwara movement as "the best and most inspiring instance of Mahatma Gandhi's teachings of non-violence in thought, word and deed."* Please note *Sufferings at Panja sahib, Tarantarn, Nankana Sahib, Jaito da Morcha and Guru ka Bagh were inspired thru 'Sikh concept of sahaj'*, which rejects any priestly authority and only recognizes Akalpurkh/God as essential for spiritual growth and advancement "*man tun joti sarupu hai apana mulu pachhanu*" (GG, 441). One dons pleasures and pains just as one changes one's garments "*sukhu dukhu dui dari kapare pahirahi jai manukh*"(GG, 149). This is how concept of *Sahaj* in gurdwara reform movement epitomized mental equipoise in which all turbulence of emotions was calmed. Sikh power of suffering severely tested by British suppression in allowing control of Gurudwaras to remain in the hands of 'heretics' who had assumed charge of them since the days when Sikhs under pressure of Mughal persecution had been forced to seek safety in remote hills and deserts. It is noteworthy that ever since the time of Gurus, the Sikhs had maintained their distinctive ethos, institutions and characteristics. It was deep faith in the Guru's ideology that had provided a strong bond of unity and solidarity for

them in all their enterprises and struggles, including the Gurdwara Reform Movement. There was absolutely no doubt or dispute about the religious identity of the Sikhs, before the enactment of Sikh Gurdwara Act by the British Government. It is a different matter altogether that a clear definition of Sikh identity had to be officially recorded, as per requirements of Gurdwara Reform Act. Anne Murphy has not clearly perceived the issue of Sikh identity, as she fails to take cognizance of the universally accepted Sikh religious tradition. Perhaps she has compulsive reasons to prove her thesis with the support of her material arguments. She fails to note that the word 'Sikh' denotes a person who adheres to Sikh religion and by virtue of being a Sikh, has a religious identity.

Guru Granth was compiled as New Scripture with New Ideology with New Religious Experience. Vedas and Upanishads are without doubt the scriptures of all Hindu systems. But Sikhism completely denies their authority. The Sikh Gurus were so clear particular about the independent and separate identity of their religious system and complete originality and newness of its character that they took significant steps, which no other religious leader in the world had done. They specifically compiled and authenticated the Sikh Scripture. Secondly, since the time of its compilation in 1604 A.D., it is the complete repository of and the final authority on the Sikh ideology and its doctrines. Since the Gurus called it revealed Bani, it has been regarded as the Shabad, having the sanction of God. The Tenth Master introduced the Nash doctrine additionally, thereby making a complete and final break with all other Indian ideologies. How can Anne Murphy describe a Sikh, in material terms, in the true sense? Having said all this, the Sikhs still have a new version of Sikh identity, based on material culture, super-imposed on them by Anne Murphy. Identity is not a set of materialities. Identity is a mind-set, a matter of faith, a set of values and institutions, a track record, a tradition, a common

heritage and historical experience shared with members of a community. Path chosen by the author is not purely academic. She strays into politics and yet claims to steer clear of political controversies. Identity issue has socio-political ramifications and is bound to create controversies.

Author's sixth assertion relates to her self-proclaimed notions of 'de-territorialized diasporic fluid environment' and new idea of identity based on material culture, as distinct from historical credentials and religious identity of the Sikhs. Such rhetorical assertions seem to be a manifestation of the 'elite-nexus' in the West, who in the name of modernism and some Western models of belief seek to undermine religious beliefs, scriptures, traditions and institutions of non-Western religious communities. Materialists, who do not believe in the existence of an unseen spiritual reality, make every bid to promote material culture. Anne Murphy comes in the category of materialist scholars who are thoroughly steeped in material culture. In this frame of mind, she looks upon the Sikh Gurdwara in territorial terms and views the Sikh scripture and five religious symbols (the five K's) as material objects, stripped of their religious significance. In her utopian 'deterritorialized vision' of the new global world order, nation-states would dissolve their separate entities and become one unit. In implicit terms, she turns her materialist lens on Khalistani vision of the territorialized nation-state, which she believes is 'a potent force in some diasporic locations.' She means to say that political claims of Khalistanis will have no scope of fulfillment in the new world order, based on a 'deterritorialized vision.' She claims to delink from politics yet her book has clear political undertones and she seems to be writing under a motivated design. One wonders why she has taken upon herself to question the traditional definition and provide a new definition of Sikh identity based solely and wholly on materialities. After all, Sikhs are entitled to their own opinion about their

identity. Why should outsiders pass definitive judgment about their identities? They should take due cognizance of the self-definition and cultural self-assertion of the Sikhs. Sikhs have a glorious heritage and great past. Anne Murphy has knowingly turned a blind eye to the ideological aspects of Sikh tradition and identity. All that is sacred in Sikhism escapes her attention. Only material things come into her reckoning, which can easily fit into her materialistic and lop-sided interpretation. The result is gross misrepresentation and distortion of Sikh history, heritage and tradition. The issue is very serious, not only from the academic point of view, but also from the angle of communal politics, which has a direct bearing on the day-to-day life of the Sikh community, in terms of its identity. Any effort to confuse the Sikh identity by using the rhetoric of modernism and secularism can have grave ramifications for the Sikhs. Academicians need to be aware and tread their path with more caution.

Sikh colonial history needs to be decolonized now. It all started with the founding fathers of the Asiatic Society Calcutta including Warren Hasting, William Jones, Charles Wilkins, Nathaniel Halhed, H.T. Colebrooke and Wilson who were responsible for the rediscovery of India and her past in late 18th century for their political and missionary motive. **‘Siyar-ul-mutakherin’**- [History of India from the death of Aurangzeb in 1701 to 1781], in Persian. Immediately translated into English by Anonymous Translator, NOTA-MANUS. William Jones annotated first 44 pages. Sikh account is misinterpreted and misrepresented on page 82-86. All British historiographers followed it onwards. Readers are advised to review it for themselves. Click on

<http://www.panjabdigilib.org/webuser/searches/displayPage.jsp?ID=1714&page=7&CategoryID=1&Searched=Hand+Book+for+Indian+army+>

In a letter of 24.10.1786 to Sir Charles Boughton-Rouse Jones writes of “an excellent impartial modern History of India from Muhammad Shah to the late Revolution at Benares, containing very just Remarks on the Administration of Government and Justice of our Nation. The Author is a venerable old man named Ghulam Husain'. Ghulam Hussain Khan, of Persian origin, had close links with the British, and the Siyar-ul-mutakherin was his chief work.”

Conclusion

One fails to find adequate words to describe the utter contrary accepted standard of Anne Murphy’s judgment of Sikh identity and her wildly unreasonable views on Gurdwaras, Gurudwara reform movement, the Granth Sahib and the five religious symbols of the Sikhs. With her lop-sided emphasis on unnecessary details of material objects and sites, she tries to engage, the reader in mind-boggling complexities. There is no substance or sense in her material arguments. She has made a complete mess and misrepresentation of the Sikh past. With her cut and dried materialistic approach, she has ventured upon a very sensitive theme of Sikh identity, which has wide socio-political dimensions. Sikhism is a living religion. But Sikhism, as the hymns and lives of the Gurus express and demonstrate clearly, has a world-view of life-affirmation, since in the Sikh ideology there is an inalienable combination between the spiritual life and the empirical life of man which lifts mankind to a higher plane of humanity and accomplishments.

As a minority group, diasporic Sikhs are facing manifold challenges, in the current socio-political milieu. Identity issue has assumed a great significance, from the Sikh perspective. At times, Sikhs have to seek legal redress, in order to assert their right to wear the five religious symbols. Murphy’s book fails to provide a correct perspective on Sikh identity and symbols. Such books can project a distorted and

negative image of Sikhism, in the contemporary situation and can prove detrimental to the community interests of the Sikhs. Recently, there have been reports of diasporic Sikhs falling victims of hate-crimes. Misrepresentation and misinformation about Sikhs and Sikhism spread by the Western academia have also generated cultural tensions.

In the new century, emerging post-modern trends indicate revival of religion. No doubt world has become materialistic and individualistic. But, religion has its own important place and role to play. In the new global world-order territorialized nation-states would co-exist in peaceful co-ordination and would not dissolve their separate entities, as envisaged by Anne Murphy. It would be a federation of nation-states. New international culture will acknowledge and respect the religio-cultural identities of all races and communities. In Sikhism there is no dichotomy between the spiritual path and the empirical path. Therefore, new international culture has already accepted Sikhism as one of the major religions of the world because whatever is within the domain of God is also within the sphere of operation of the Godman. De-territorialized vision of the new world order is nothing more than a Utopian vision, which can never be realized. It may be possible to realize when man occupies a new territory on Mars or some other planet. Murphy's book has raised so many issues with regard to historiography, research methodology and academic standards in the universities.

PS: For debates on Sikh studies click on <http://www.globalsikhstudies.net/>