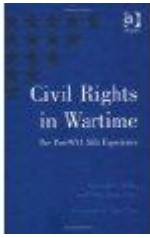


Civil Rights in Wartime – The Post-9/11 Sikh Experience: Dawinder Singh Sidhu & Neha Singh Gohil (2009) [214P] ISBN:978-0-7546-7553-2 www.ashgate.com



Book Review by Kavneet Singh

The authors Dawinder Singh Sidhu and Neha Singh Gohil, are both activist attorneys who have done a yeoman's job of coming out with this much needed book. Some of the first part of the book is a collaborative effort by Khuswant Singh, Gurinder Singh Mann, Gurharpal Singh and Darshan Singh Tatla.

Part I – Sikhism and the Sikh Turban

Punjab is the birthplace of the Indian civilization.the Rig Veda and the Upnaishads, two seminal and sacred Hindu texts, were written in Punjab. The Bhagavad Gita, a fundamental Hindu scripture and a revered religious composition dated approximately 500 BC and 200 BC, is said to have been recited by Lord Krishna.....The battles depicted in the Mahabharata took place in the Punjab.....[Page 9]

The Hindus do consider the Vedas, Upanishads, Mahabharata and the Ramayana as sacred but readers have to be keenly aware that bulk of the writings, within all those texts are epic fairy tales similar to the Greek myths of the past. There is no time frame, multiple authors have written and added their own material with hundreds of renditions, most of the material is highly unethical, contradictory, obscene, violent, the list goes on. *What Nanak taught was not startling in its originality.....[Page 18].*

Khuswant Singh does admit on one hand that the culmination of ideas made Guru Nanak's system unique yet denies him the originality of the same philosophy, which actually changed and revolutionized that part of South Asia forever.

Then the Guru came out with the five 'victims' (he had slaughtered goats instead) and announced that the panj piyare.....The five who had until then belonged to different Hindu castes (one probably a Brahmin, one a Kshatriya, and the remaining three lower castes) were made to drink out of one bowl.....[Page 23]

Khuswant Singh should realize that readers are smart and understand that a beheaded man's head cannot be put back together unless it's a miracle, which in itself is anathema in the Sikh Faith. Therefore using conjecture by stating that 'goats were killed' is irrelevant. Further he has no proof that there was a Brahmin as part of the 'panj piyare'. Khuswant Singh has always had a cavalier attitude in life and it carries through his writings therefore most Sikhs do not take his writings on Sikh history or religion seriously.

The only change Gobind brought in religion was to expose the other side of the medal.... Gobind's God destroyed his enemies.....[Page 25]

Khuswant Singh has used Bachitar Natak to completely misinterpret the philosophy of the Tenth Nanak (Gobind Singh). Bachitar Natak is spurious material, allegedly written by the Tenth Sikh Prophet, instead was written by various Hindu authors-poets of the 18th century. Except for 70 pages attributed to Guru Gobind Singh from the voluminous (copycat) volume the rest of the spurious material does not pass muster based on the touchstone of the Guru Granth Sahib the ‘final’ Sikh Scripture.

The Sikhs consider the Adi Granth as the highest authority within the community.....[Page 27]

Gurinder Mann continues to use ‘Adi Granth’ repeatedly when he is keenly aware that the accurate and correct usage ‘is’ Guru Granth Sahib especially being a Sikh academic albeit of the McLeodian school.

‘and Gobind Singh subsequently altered the Sikh Faith by enlisting an army of Sikhs and establishing the Khalsa panth’.....[Page 31]

This statement is patently wrong because enlisting Sikh soldiers started right from Guru Hargobind’s time the 6th Prophet. Furthermore there was absolutely no change made in the Sikh faith rather a culmination and fruition of the seed germinated by Guru Nanak. Guru Nanak was very vocal about the oppressed and downtrodden by the ruling authorities, which is clearly espoused in the Sikh Scripture.

Several actually sent out their own missions to India to check the veracity of the asylum seekers claims that brutal repression had driven them overseas.....[Page 38]

A prolonged ethnic cleansing of the Sikhs by the Indian government between, 1984 - 1998 resulted in the rape, torture and murder of over 250,000, innocent Sikhs. The west still does not believe that the Sikh Genocide happened in the world’s largest so-called democracy, just like some around the world do not believe the Jewish Holocaust ever happened.

The tension between the Sikhs and the government culminated with the October 31, 1984 assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.....The retaliation by Indians and government authorities towards Sikhs was immediate and intense.....[Pages 44-45]

Indira Gandhi had masterminded a diabolical plan exactly like Hitler’s ‘final solution’ code named ‘Operation Shanti,’ to completely exterminate the Sikhs countrywide and to be carried out around the first week of November 1984. Her plan got shortchanged due to her premature demise but was carried out with deadly precision and impunity by her son Rajiv Gandhi and later Narasimha Rao both Prime Ministers in quick succession.

Part II – Targeting the Sikh Turban

I.J Singh, a Sikh historian and commentator, writes.....Sikhs wore long unshorn hair neatly tucked away under a turban.....[Page 59]

With all due respect, Dr.I.J Singh is a good commentator and an essayist but not a historian. Further the usage of the word ‘unshorn’ used repeatedly by him and others, is wrong! Only sheep are shorn of their wool. The correct word to define a Sikh is one with ‘uncut’ hair!

Even in areas like California, where Sikhs have been living for over 150 years, no mention is made of Sikhs in history textbooks or social science curricula.....[Page 71]

The earliest record of Sikhs landing in the US is on April 6, 1899. It is astonishing that no mention has been made in school textbooks for over 100 years of a highly visible and vibrant religious minority living in the midst of a mostly ‘Anglo Christian’ community.

“Sikhs are protected by hate crime statutes, even if the perpetrator believes the Sikh to be a Muslim terrorist,” notes lawyer Marc Stromer. But a substantial difficulty in prosecuting hate crimes is obtaining evidence of hate.....[Pages 79,80]

One, its a major uphill battle for the plaintiff and secondly because of this, the vast majority of hate crimes against the Sikhs have gone unreported. I can personally attest to the fact that since 9/11 in the last 8+ years there have been several minor incidents and three major verbal threats out of which I followed through on two till the end successfully. The police in fact tried to downplay all three incidents but fortunately both the judges were reasonably fair. I did not have the energy to follow up on the third.

“See the man up front with the turban on, he’s the one who is going to cause trouble.” The stewardess later told Bindra to keep a “low profile,” “stay seated,” and not to “cause any problems.”.....[Page 84]

Comments such as the one made above are not due to ignorance, but primarily due to base racism combined with a paranoia of the Eastern religions and cultures. Sikhs are distinguished with no chance of blending into the crowd because they were meant to stand out. Even a child understands that in order to do something evil one has to blend in rather than be obvious. So profiling Sikhs is not only stupid but absurd, with not a single case in North America of even suspected criminality, it boggles the mind why ‘Anglo-whites’ just do not get it.

In early 2002, a turbaned Sikh New York City police officer, Amric Singh Ratour, was terminated for refusing to remove his turban only a few weeks after he had completed training to be inducted into the NYPD.....[Page 92]

Prior to 1960 there were simply very few Sikhs in America but for last 50 years there are nearly 500,000 of them and it is only recently a very small minority have started to file employment based discrimination lawsuits. For decades Sikhs have swallowed the very bitter pill of blatant employment discrimination and ended up being self-employed in the thousands by buying farms and small businesses without putting up a legal fight.

On September 12,2001, Sher Singh, a turbaned Sikh man, was taken off an Amtrak train, bound from Boston to New York, in handcuffs.....[Page 99]

An innocent man gets arrested and humiliated for simply having an open beard and turban in front of the world media for three days. The sheer ignorance, racism and paranoia just beneath the surface of most ‘Euro-Americans’ is so ridiculous that it borders on stupidity.

A Sikh was denied entry to an establishment because management judged that his turban violated a “no hats” policy.....[Page105]

Literally 100% of the time the “no hats” rule has been applied by ‘whites’ all over the western hemisphere, when paradoxically in fact most are Christians whose religious leader Jesus himself wore a turban. So it is quixotic and strange that they deny Sikhs entry when Sikhs look exactly like their prophet rather than those ‘whites’, who refuse to follow the dictates of their own faith. Let us not forget the thousands of catholic nuns across the globe who wear a ‘habit’ by covering their head and hair in public at all times – even within the church.

Part III - Marginalization of the Sikh Turban

Overall, 138,000 Sikhs fought to stop German advances in France and Belgium during World War I.....[Page 112]

It is exactly these two countries who have chosen to ban the turban inside all public institutions. Over 83,000 Sikh soldiers died to a man and over 109,000 were wounded fighting to save the French and Flemish yet it is the height of being absolutely ungrateful and shameless with a total lack of good conscience to forget the unbelievable sacrifices, Sikhs made for their liberty and so-called secularism. It is indeed sad that the French have forgotten the true meaning of liberty. Instead of honoring the Sikhs they have become totally xenophobic with an acute case of amnesia.

The longstanding Sikh military tradition in Britain has been largely immune from the growing disenchantment with easily identifiable minority communities....[Page 112]

While the British have been much more mature in being just and liberal in their attitude because they have realized long ago, it is to their great advantage to let the Sikh practice their Faith properly to gain and use their patriotic fervor. The French have had a relationship with the Sikhs since Napoleon's time but have regressed to medieval chicanery rather than the mental sophistication they claim to profess.

Furthermore the Garda claims it is being impartial, not racist, by upholding the ban.....[Page 124]

In the 21st century most western countries cannot claim ignorance of highly visible religious groups especially with the free flow of information, so the real reason is not to upset their status quo because they are inherently racist and this is true in Ireland too!

Quebec itself has long struggles with notions of identity and sovereignty in political, cultural and linguistic contexts:Herouxville, which is almost exclusively "white, French-speaking and catholic," posted a code of conduct for immigrants wishing to move into town. The list was riddles with extreme stereotypes.....[Page 135]

Modern Canada like America is entirely made up immigrants of recent origin within the last few centuries albeit primarily from Europe. By applying their 'own imported' religious mindset they intend to dictate their own norms, instead if a benchmark is used, it should be the one set by the original Natives instead of the more recent but powerful 'white' immigrants bulldozing, more recent immigrants with less legal clout.

Given the immediacy, depth, and global scale of the backlash against Sikhs, the question invariably is: what can they do about it?.....[Page 149]

Sikhs have to remember that micro-minorities will always have a problem especially in regards to the conspicuous Articles of Faith and will continue to fight an uphill battle in various Western countries. The problem can be ratcheted down radically provided Sikhs either pool their resources to effectively and sensibly lobby their causes or collectively have their own homeland just like the Jews because powerful governments have little time to waste on a miniscule minority who do not have a collective voice as a nation.

Part VI - The Response to the Post 9/11 Climate

Sikh Americans have "stopped flying altogether in the months and, in some cases, years after 9/11 to avoid potential problems."[Page 161]

Sikhs have literally have been living and hibernating within a limited space so as not to arouse unwarranted suspicion, harassment, humiliation for no fault of their own except that by proxy are the imagined "Muslim Osamas," out to do evil in the eyes of the "whites." For a normal law abiding "Sikh-citizen" the daily stress level is compounded many times over due to the fear factor that his co-citizens may cause him bodily harm simply because of their deluded perception of him as their enemy at any time.

As Sikhs continue to work to counter the ignorance about Sikh turbans and the apparent link between turbans and terrorism, they will be prudent to explore and expand non-traditional avenues to inform others about their identity and religious teachings.....[Page 183]

As Dawinder aptly puts it, Sikhs have started to think out of the box and are using novel methods to be proactive in the public sphere of Sikh advocacy. Sikhs do require lots of resources with a heavy dose of unity amongst themselves if they are going to make a major dent in changing the public's perception of the Sikh Turban and the 'Kirpan.' *Almost two weeks after Balbir Singh Sodhi's death, President Bush addressed the targeting of turbaned Sikhs.....[Page 186]*

It is the maturity of a leader like Bush that he addressed the issues relating to Sikhs immediately upon being informed by a group representing their interests.

For example, in 2007, the Transportation Security Administration made an overnight decision to place turbans on a list of "suspicious headwear" that must be secondarily searched at US airports.....[Page 187]

Again this is a combination of many factors but primarily ignorance and paranoia. If items can be hid inside a turban supposedly, then anyone could hide items within body cavities and elsewhere, therefore 'everyone' should be strip searched using the "suspicion" excuse.

While hate crimes against turbaned Sikhs have diminished, they continue to be a serious problem that requires continued vigilance.....[Page 200]

Unless Sikhs continue to be seriously proactive and think ahead, rather than being typically reactive and insular these issues will continue to fester and very possibly rear their ugly head again.

'1) how have turbaned Sikhs in America been targeted for discriminatory behavior, and 2) how have the turbaned Sikhs globally been subject to marginalization on account of their conspicuous religious identity?.....[Page203]

It is really a paradox of sorts, that most of the prophets of the various Faiths across the globe have always been turban wearing with beards yet in the modern primarily Judeo-Christian 'white' countries they have conveniently chosen to ignore that glaring fact and let common sense fly the coop. Instead an insecure xenophobic attitude with the jihadist terrorism of the Middle East coloring their better judgment seems to be the norm in reference to 'other' religious groups such as Sikhs.

Both the authors are born and bred in the US therefore maybe unfamiliar with the academic quirks and alignments of the contributing writers in the first part of the book. There seems to be a problem of precise theological accuracy and it is largely due to Khuswant Singh and Gurinder Mann being neither, historians or theologians but pretending to be both. It would have been better to have the first part of the book vetted by possibly the World Sikh Council – America Region to be theologically accurate.

Detailed statistical data providing hard numbers on various hate crimes however small, nationally against the Sikhs would have been very helpful. I am sure Sikh NGO's like the Sikh Coalition will come out with something more substantive down the road. The writers being attorneys have used minimal legal jargon to make the book readable for a wider audience. A much needed book which; without going into minute details gives a

lucid picture of the ongoing problems and issues facing the Sikhs. This book is recommended for all, but particularly for security officials, academics, teachers, clergy, and the human resource departments of corporate America.