

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

Oxford University Press (2012) Author: Anne Murphy

A Review by Dr Kashmir Singh

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The book 'The Materiality of the Past- History and Representation in Sikh Tradition' authored by Anne Murphy is quite descriptive encompassing various aspects of Sikh and Punjab history. To justify title of the book, the authoress has labelled the Sikhs, Sikhism and Sikh institutions as the creation of materiality, territoriality etc. and totally ignored the Sikh tenets, ethos, ideology, spirituality and religiosity as comprised in Sri Guru Granth Sahib-the eternal Guru of the Sikhs. Picture of Sikh Gurdwaras and the Movement to liberate them, *Kar Sewa*, *the Sikh Gurdwaras Act* etc. is painted as an obsession to control and capture property devoid of any pious and righteous cause. Overall tenor, slant and emphasis of the book seem to question the very foundations of Sikhism and to denigrate it. A great number of observations in the book express pre-conceived notions of the authoress.

The authoress follows the McLeodian line to condemn the Singh Sabha Movement of nineteenth century as orthodox and evolving new practices in Sikhism. She ignores the fact that the said Movement was to awaken the Sikhs for removing the distortions contradictory to Sikh Scripture which had infiltrated into Sikhism.

Similarly while analysing another movement, the Sikh Gurdwara Movement; the authoress wrongly presents it as if it was meant to snatch the premises and property of Gurdwaras from the mahants. She does so even after quoting

dignified contemporaries and eye witness of the movement like Prof. R R Sahni that it was purported to “rescue the Gurdwaras from the hands of corrupt and debauched mahants.” She ignores that thrust of the Movement was to secure the Gurdwaras from the corrupt custodians and also to constitute a central Sikh representative body to look after the Gurdwaras which the British authorities wanted to avoid at all cost. The book dealing with materiality does not take into account the quantum of extra-ordinary heavy price paid by the Sikhs to get the Movement concluded in their favour in which **30,000 Sikhs were imprisoned, 431 were martyred, 2000 were sentenced under criminal law, 54 editors of newspapers punished and lacs of rupees was paid as fine** (Narain Singh, Pb. Leg. Council Debates, July 7, 1925). More details of this materiality are provided by Manjit Singh from Montreal (Management of Gurdwaras, Sikh Review, Calcutta, October 2001). He tells Rs. 1.6 millions were recovered from the Sikhs as fine and forfeiture of property during the Gurdwara Reform Movement; this amount would have been Rs. 3.2 billion in 2001 if counted @ 7% compound interest even without adding the cost of inflation.

R G Fox is quoted more than once terming the Movement as “Third Sikh War” but it was S. Sardool Singh Kaveeshar who had coined the epithet of “Third Anglo-Sikh War” for it (M L Ahluwalia, Landmarks in Sikh History (1996) p. 322). Then S C Mittal uses the term “Third Sikh War” (Freedom Movement in Punjab (1977) p.179). Prof R R Sahni calls the Movement “Second Mahabharata War”. Above-mentioned Sikh sacrifices can be considered as casualties of this War. It may be mentioned that Murphy avoids quoting Fox when he says that the Movement “was one of the largest, longest, strongest and most popular mass protests against the colonial rule in India.” The authoress conveniently highlights Fox’s statement that initially the movement was a conflict between

“two sorts of Sikhs”. It is submitted that the Mahants were not any kind of Sikhs but mere usurpers; they were mostly Hindus whose cause was openly propounded by the Hindu members of the Legislative Council. Misuse of Gurdwaras and performing non-Sikh rituals and ceremonies therein was the only reason for the commencement of the movement.

The circuitous arguments and observations of the authoress at page 219 of the book that the “participants in Gurdwara Reform Movement were ‘creating’ these sites (Gurdwaras) and evolving notions of Sikh identity” and dubbing the movement as reflecting “agrarian territorialism” at page 221 are totally unjustified and misplaced. It seems the authoress is either lying or is ill-informed.

The authoress repeatedly refers to Sikh leader Master Tara Singh’s speech on the Sikh Gurdwaras Bill in the Punjab Legislative Council. She is ignorant about the fact that **Master Tara Singh has never been a member of the Council. In fact it was S. Tara Singh MLC from Moga** who had introduced the Bill in the Council and delivered the speech.

At page 236 of the book, there is mention of the Hindu Religious and Charitable Trusts Act 1924. It may be clarified that no such legislation has ever been passed by the Punjab Legislature. However an enactment by the name of ‘The Charitable and Religious Trusts Act 1920’ passed by the Central Legislature is available on the statute book.

The authoress asserts Sikh patronisation by the Britishers but she fails to clarify whether they collided in fighting the third war. She avoids noting that Act of 1925 was extracted by the Sikhs from the hands of unwilling British Government on the basis of their sacrifices. By reading the book one gathers

the impression that she is not happy with the Sikh Gurdwaras Act and its provisions. It will be appropriate to quote for her from the speech of Dr. Gokal Chand Narang in the Punjab Legislative Council on July 6, 1925, "I am not aware that in any country any religious community felt so keenly about its holy places and made such sacrifices for their preservation and protection,Those who object to the bill for its sweeping character must find solace in the fact that those who have got it have paid and paid very heavily for it." It may be relevant to mention that the authoress wrongly refers to the 'Sikh Gurdwaras Act' as 'Gurdwara Reform Act' time and again. Further, she is unnecessarily dissatisfied with the definition of 'Sikh' in the Act as believer in ten Gurus and Guru Granth Sahib and having no other religion. **It is very much in consonance with the teachings of Guru Nanak-Guru Gobind Singh who told, "We are neither Hindu nor Muslim"** and "Sikhs are ordained to regard Guru Granth Sahib as their living Guru".

The authoress also does not relish the description of 'Sikh Gurdwara' in the Act. She considers it inappropriate simply because the debate in the legislature was only about proper management. The argument is totally inappropriate. Was it possible to provide in the Act only for proper management without defining 'Sikh Gurdwara'? It was not possible to leave the question 'whose management' open. The principles of legislation require that basic terms around which a piece of legislation revolves must be defined in the beginning of the enactment. Invariably section 2 of the every Act consists of definitions of terms used in the Act. More than twenty terms including 'Sikh' are defined in section 2 of the Sikh Gurdwaras Act. However, detailed description of 'Sikh Gurdwara' is given in section 16 of the Act.

Anti-Sikh bias is patently evident from the work of the Assistant Professor of Sikh Studies. Minute study of the second half of the book leaves the impression that authoress laments over the mahants losing their case. She is not prepared to accept the well known fact that the mahants were not the proprietors but the custodians of Gurdwaras and the property attached therewith.