

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

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Author Anne Murphy

A Review by Jasbir Singh Mann MD, D.Lit. (Honoris Causa). California.

The title of the book clearly reveals that Anne Murphy has built up her entire thesis on material aspects of Sikh history, with a clear objective of reducing Sikhism to a set of materialists. The origin 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 continues to be largely political. In the late eighteenth century the British encountered Sikhs not as a religious body but as a growing and surmountable political power as noted in British writings as they started to think about advancing into north India and Punjab. Westerners do realize that the basic source of Sikh political and religious strength is the Guru Granth Sahib. One wonders why an Assistant Professor of Sikh Studies should turn a blind eye to the universally acknowledged doctrines of Sikh theology, which form the basis of a very sound historical tradition of Sikhs. The author has distorted and undermined the very foundations of Sikh faith and its institutions, with her spurious definition of Sikh identity, based on materialities of the Sikh past. She has tried to cast doubts and create 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, the Five K's of the Khalsa and nature of Sikh identity. Full of absurdities, her entire account, apart from being unauthentic, is also unacademic and offensive to Sikh sentiments. She has propounded her thesis, on the 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.
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." Other Gurus have also spoken similarly. In the Siddh Gosht he says in reply to a question that his mission in life is, with the help of other Godmen, 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." All above is well recorded in Guru Granth sahib on 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), Schleiermachers'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

Materialities of past. Sikh religious system has left a very deep impact on Sikh ethos. Here we have the testimony of two English writers, Macauliffe and Cunningham, who knew the Sikhs intimately. Referring to the many-sided transformation that the Guru's ideals had wrought in his followers, Cunningham says, "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 also 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. 'Stimulating precepts of the 10th Guru', writes Macauliffe, '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 watch word 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 installed into them.

Anne Murphy's second assumption that the Sikh identity was not clearly defined in the pre-Colonial period is equally baseless as the first one. If Per Dr. Murphy Sikh identity was not clearly defined in the pre-Colonial period. Then can she 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 Guru 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 New Delhi (not even one desecrated while given the choice to do, 1715-16). Letter dated March 10th, 1716 By John Surnam and Edward Stephenson (Delhi Embassy) at the court of Mughal emperor Farrukh Siyar to hon'ble Robert Hedges, president and governor Of Fort William. Both of them were Eye witness to the execution of Sikhs.

5.) First Sikh Ghalughara in 18th century when governor Yahiya Khan issued proclamation killing all Sikhs.

6.) Why prices on Sikh heads were fixed by Mughals?.

7.) Misal Raj

8.) History of Maharaha Ranjit Singh period (His government was know as Sarkar-i-Khalsa; he issued coins in the name of the Guru 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 monumental work was produced in the pre-Colonial period, without any pulls or pressures of the British Colonial Government. 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. Anne must respond Did Singh Sabha created/compiled 'any new scripture' or 'any 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. Impressions formed on the basis of British records only is inadequate and misleading.

Murphy's third assumption that Gurdwaras created 'territorialized notions of the Sikh past' is simply a perversity of judgment, which cannot be excused in a historian. **Guru** : means enlightenment from darkness into light. **Dwara or duaar** meaning doorway, gateway or portal. The Gurdwara houses the Guru Granth Sahib, sacred scripture of Sikhs, and 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 also be disposed of as equally baseless. 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 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 religious 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 and particular about the independent and separate identity of their religious system and the complete originality and newness of its character, that they took very significant stage 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 Anne Murphy can 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 'deterritorialised 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 'deterritorialised 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 'deterritorialised 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 identity. 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.

Conclusion

One fails to find adequate words to describe the utter perversity of Anne Murphy's judgment of Sikh identity and the absurdity of her views on Gurdwaras, 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. 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. Deterritorialised 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/>