

Review Article on “The Materiality of the Past: History and Representation in Sikh Tradition” by Anne Murphy, Oxford University Press, New York, 2012

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Before going into the contents of the present book under review, let us have a necessary prelude about the two important terms that occur in the title of the book, namely “history” and “past”. The two terms are related in a particular way and their relation has a history. Towards the last two decades of the 20th century, there was an intensive debate going on among scholars of history of religions, including those of Sikh studies, on the term “history”. The western scholars of the type of Mcleod were arguing for a west inspired empirical or rational history whereas the eastern scholars were defending the line that in religious studies things cannot be one-sidedly objective and rational as it was posed by the scholastic tradition hailed from the enlightenment mode of thought. The westerners insisted upon the raw “facts” standing at the base of all history construction whereas the easterners were questioning the possibility of such facts and they were for placing “facts as they are experienced” at the centre of the making of history. Philosophically, even it was not rationalism that stood behind the westerners’ standpoint, but it was the English analytical school and Positivism that were rendering justification to the western historians. On the other side, apart from the traditional ways, the phenomenological and dialectical approach offered its support to the easterners. The debate did not reach its end in any mediated mode. However, the debate gave birth to a new term, in addition to the term “history”, in historico-cultural studies, namely “the past”. If we go for elaborating the term “past”, then emerges another term “memory”. Memory studies have become a distinct area now not to “disturb the westernist rigor” of historical studies, as the western scholars would like to have it untouched. Whatever the easterners “desire” to put under the name of history, they are advised to include them under memory or past. Terms such as past and memory are reserved for the easterners to take in such experiential and ambiguous materials that could not be considered as historical according to the western standards. This is a type of Neo-orientalism in postmodern conditions!

The Positivist analytical school of history is again on offence that it further wants to reduce the past and memory to their bare materiality such as relics, objects, sites, territory, possession, ownership etc. This later methodology is tested in the present book on the history of Sikhism.

The term materiality may find a justification in the sense Marx once used it, that is, when an idea enraptures masses of people it becomes a material force. This is, however, said not about the strength of materiality but informs only the command of idea or belief. Unfortunately, it is not the meaning employed into the concept of materiality in the present book. The author of the book implies the bare meaning of physicality to the term materiality. It is highly unproductive that when even the hardcore materialists are preferring to turn to very thick cultural politics (at least, after Antonio Gramsci), scholars of religious studies are seeking to write on memories reduced to their abject minimum of materiality.

The book starts with an autobiographical note, "This book has grown out of my own experience of the materiality of the past. After my father's death when I was nine years old, I would periodically seek out on our shelves the old books in which he had inscribed his name: David A. Murphy. They brought me great comfort... They could not bring him back. Somehow, though, they kept him alive. It is fitting that this experience of memory culminates in a book, a history, my own answer to those memories with which I grow up." [p.ix] (1). The inscription of her late father's handwriting on the old books is not a physical thing as far as the daughter is concerned; the handwriting of the father gets a life of its own only when her "experiences of memory" get associated with the handwriting. We would like to stand by the autobiographical note of the author. But, she has not followed the prescribed methodology when she addresses the Sikh history in the entire course of the book under review, on the other hand diminishes the Sikh past into its bare materiality.

The book comprises an important historical period in the life of Sikhism, the period that begins from 1708, the year of the demise of the Tenth Guru to 1925, the year of state recognition of Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee. The description starts discussing the transition from the period of human Guruship to the primacy of the representation of the

Guru through text. It further moves to the post-Guru period using the binary of textual relics and relics in the form of objects related to the life and activities of the Gurus. The literary and textual sources of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are brought to the study. Gurshobha, Gurbilas and Rahitnama literatures of 18th century are discussed from the point of view of establishment of the doctrinal or the historical nature of the texts. Moving into the nineteenth century, references are made about Santokh Singh's Sri Gur Pratap Suraj Granth and Rattan Singh Bhanghu's Pracin Panth Parkash, and the difference in their general view points. Based on the two important works of the nineteenth century, the Sikh historiography of the period is reconstructed. The discussion expands to a specialized study of Bhai Vir Singh's novel, Sundari. The author asserts that although Bhai Vir Singh shares with Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, the famous Bengali writer of late 19th century, the "cry for history", however differs from him by not resorting to a single source of Indian history, namely, the ancient Hindu Civilization. On the other hand, Bhai Vir Singh's approach was more contingent and confederal going beyond the Sikh sources not hesitating to embrace the Islamic and Hindu sources. This assessment of the author may be interesting but taking the historical period of writing of Sundari, the great modern writer of the Sikhs can also be criticized for ignoring the Hindu mobilization that was trying to become a totalitarian force in Indian context.

The description shifts to the beginning of twentieth century and applies the next binary, namely that of objects and sites, leaving behind abruptly the debates on texts. The term 'site' is now used for Gurdwaras and lands, allegedly becoming important and central to the Gurdwara Reform Movement. A fresh term is used namely territories and further, territory is reduced to property, possession and ownership. In the last move, the description moves to the binary of territory and non-territory, the later applicable to the globalized condition of diaspora Sikhs turning to the culture of museum. These are the basic moves contained in the narrative of the work. Traveling through these moves, the author contends that Sikh representation goes from pre-colonial (pre-modern) modes to the colonial modes that were predominantly towards ownership and possession and finally enters into the post coloniality. Under the blanket term 'materiality' referred not only objects, sites and relics but also gurdwaras and even panj kakkar.

“The materiality of Sikh subject formation is also clearly seen in the case of the markers of the Khalsa, the panj kakkar or “Five Ks”” (P.13).

It is true that the recent entry of the concepts of space and geography into culture studies has yielded good results, particularly in exploring the sources of the formation of identities. But it should be mentioned categorically that space and geography never act on their own. They are always mediated by historical memories articulated in narratives infusing shared meanings of a community into the spaces, places, objects and relics. Memories further become substantial as they are mediated by conflicts and traumas. But the British analytical approach has its own encroachments into the culture studies, particularly on the themes of space, memory and identity in cultural studies. The present book is a good example on it. Despite the fact that culture studies has been developed by the English (its Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Culture Studies, for example) in a well articulated way, space is reduced to non-mediated or im-mediate materiality by the Analyticians. More frankly, space is made into site, further into territory and then into possession and property.

The concept of space is successfully made use in interpreting identity by many scholars in recent times. “Geography is not a spatial entity.. ascribed to a physical entity. It rather refers to a political construct that is being discussed as having various social as well as cultural implications. It is intricately bound up with the shared memories, narratives and sense of place. whether it refers to village or urban space, nation or state, regional or global or some other entity, it always represents a social construct and is used to denote the social setting.” (2). According to the quoted author, space is not just a physical entity but it is a social construct, it is a powerful source of collective identity and identity formations have definite spatial orientation free of any implication to transform the space into property.

Another celebrated author, Maurice Halbwachs, in his now classical essay on Collective memory writes, “Religions are rooted in the land, not merely because men and groups must live on land but because the community of believers distributes its richest ideas and images throughout space..Every collective memory unfolds within a spatial framework, now space is a reality that endures: since our impressions rush by, one after another, and leave nothing behind

in the mind, we can understand how we recapture the past only by understanding how it is, in effect, preserved by our physical surroundings. It is to space- the space we occupy traverse, have continual access to, or can at any time reconstruct in thought and imagination- that we must turn our attention. Our thought must focus on it if this or that category of remembrances is to reappear..”(3). We do not anticipate a historian or anthropologist to portray the entire course of events as purely of idea and spirit, but it does not mean that the entire course of history is nakedly that of raw materiality. In the above description of collective memory, the ideational and the material moments interact dialectically and uninterruptedly and never show themselves separate in perceptible and obvious mode. Even when Marx wrote about commodity in his economic work, he maintained the view that commodity is above all a social relation. Again when he went for defining the human individual, he upheld the view that an individual is an ensample of social relations.

“Religious groups may recall certain remembrances on viewing specific locations, buildings or objects. This should be no surprise, for the specific separation between the sacred and the profane made by such groups is realized materially in space..Together with fellow believers he [the believer] will re-establish, in addition to their visible community, a common thought and remembrance formed and maintained there through the ages...There is something exceptional about religious space: God being present everywhere, every area is capable of participating in the sacred character of these privileged sites where once He manifested Himself.” (4). The idea of Halbwachs is that raw materiality might be found portrayed in religious writings particularly when the description goes about profane things. On the other hand, religious descriptions of the sacred do not occur in bare material form. What has happened in Anne Murphy’s writings is that the entire phenomenon of religion has been written in term of profane materiality without rendering any space for the sacred at all. It is the outcome of the British analytical tradition! I recall the fact that when Positivism as a philosophical school was established by its founder August Comte, he named that school of thought as social physics. He wanted to study the social or human phenomena as raw facts of physical sciences. Making religious history into materiality serves the initial purpose of the positivist school.

The crucial period that transformed the Sikh vision, according to the present study, and not only the present study, is that of the first decades of the twentieth century. During the earlier centuries, “[the] object-role for the text is secondary to its role as the vehicle for the Word, which is not material. This must be emphasized. Indeed, the text as a physical object only derives its value from the primacy of this sacred Word.” (p.55). But this priority to Word has been shifted over, by the beginning of 20th century, to the object itself, argues the author. “[The] imagination of the community came to be linked to territory in a new way in the twentieth century, within a broader colonial episteme centered on property, but was tied to an earlier imagination of the Sikh historical landscape.” (p.250-251).

Again the author writes, “The fight for Sikh control of gurdwaras expressed in the Gurdwara Reform Movement thus represented the culmination of a transition in the making of the historicity of place in the Sikh imaginary, in relation to a new kind of colonial territoriality and new sense of the logic of ownership by and for the community.” (p.184). She continues to maintain that the entire Gurdwara Reform Movement can be reduced to the logic of property and that all that is religious in the movement can be ‘better understood’ as formations of agrarian territorialism. “The territory of the community began to take shape in a new way at this time..The logic of property in Punjab provides an important context for the Gurdwara Reform Movement..Proof of a history of ownership in the past becomes central to ownership in the present.” (p. 186). Anne Murphy brings to focus the idea of David Ludden that “many social movements that moderns might call “religious” might be better understood as formations of agrarian territorialism. The movement for gurdwara management, and the formation of the SGPC, can be seen in such a light, reflecting medieval/early modern forms of agrarian territorialism..” (p. 187). Here lies the tragedy of the present work. I wonder how the feelings expressed in the autobiographical note of the Anne Murphy, and quoted earlier, regarding the experience of memory have completely evaporated and succumbed themselves into David Ludden’s logic of property. Anne Murphy goes to the extreme of sharing the unconscious hatred of scholars like David Ludden to the peasant masses by accepting the thesis of “agrarian territorialism”.

But the history of Indian peasantry has something else to say in this regard. I bring to quote how Partha Chatterjee visualizes the situation. “By my reading, anti-colonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power. It does this by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains – the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the ‘outside’, of the economy and of statecraft of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed. In this domain, then, Western superiority had to be acknowledged and its accomplishments carefully studied and replicated. The Spiritual, on the other hand, is an “inner” domain bearing the “essential” marks of cultural identity. The greater one’s success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one’s spiritual culture. This formula is, I think, a fundamental feature of anti-colonial nationalism in Asia and Africa.”(5).

Here arises the question of methodology and also the choice of appropriate terminology so that a complex phenomenon can be creatively handled. Anne Murphy has opted for a methodology of reducing the phenomenon into bare materiality and choice of corresponding terminology. On the other hand, Partha Chatterjee proposes another methodology. He suggests to divide the phenomenon into two domains, the material and the spiritual, and informs that even when the community succumbs to the hegemony in the material domain, the strength of the community that struggles for its identity lies in the spiritual domain. The Sikh peasant insurgencies and the Gurdwara Reform Movement of the first decades of the 20th century are excellent example of the making of the resistant identity of the Sikhs. The Sikhs had to face two hegemonies from the middle of 19th century, namely the colonial one and the Hindu nationalist one. They intruded into the Sikh existence and survival not only in the form of physical forces but also in terms of epistemological supremacy. The Sikhs had to fight both of them. It was a very complex phenomenon of identity formation interacting with and resisting the hegemonies, bargaining and restructuring the identity and asserting the autonomy. This historical period for the Sikhs is written in the language of intense struggles. Simplistic and one dimensional descriptions will fail to understand the phenomenon. Possibly, the Sikhs historically worked out

a dialectical framework to meet the situation. They avoided to be onesidedly materialistic as well as othersidedly purely spiritualistic in their approach.

Anne Murphy makes use of the writings of Partha Chatterjee to discuss the early twentieth century phenomenon in Sikh history. However, the Gurdwara Reform Movement with the mass participation of the Sikh peasants remains beyond the pale of her comprehension. In her inability to understand the crux of the Movement, she resorts to fix the entire phenomenon to the single determinate namely the logic of property or agrarian territorialism. Interestingly, Partha Chatterjee warns against such modernist reductions. "The boundaries or forms of solidarity in peasant rebellions have no single determinate character that can be directly deduced either from its immediate socio-economic context or from its cultural world. On the contrary, the cultural apparatus of signs and meanings-the language, in the broader sense-available to a peasant consciousness, far from being narrow and flexible, is capable of a vast range of transformations to enable it to understand, and to act within, varying contexts, both of subordination and of resistance." (6).

Anne Murphy repeats the earlier thesis that exists among certain western scholars about the Gurdwara Reform movement that it constructed the rigid Khalsa identity against the Hinduized sanatan liberalism that was prevalent in Punjab. And this has been time and again repeated by these scholars without taking into consideration the emerging offense of Hindu nationalism and its rising hegemony over smaller (in number) identities all over India from late 19th century. The nationalist hegemony did not leave any space for a democratic process of identity formation of smaller groups of people. I quote the words of Gyanendra Pandey (From his work "In Defense of the Fragment") regarding the tussles of the so-called fragments with the so-called Nation. "Part of the importance of the "fragmentary" point of view lies in this, that it resists the derive for a shallow homogenization and struggles for other, potentially richer definitions of the "nation" and the future political community." (7). The nationalist elite could work out only a vague and abstract nationalism without accommodating the real interests of varieties of people, horizontally and vertically, in Indian subcontinent and, in its inability, was aggressive towards and overpowering the differences. It was against this ideological hegemony

that the Sikhs (or the Tamils) had to formulate and articulate their autonomy. The crux of the Gurdwara Reform Movement is that the Sikhs ought to work out their strategy dialectically interweaving the spiritual and the material asserting the autonomy of the Sikh identity. The Gurdwara Reform Movement can be properly understood only when it is located in the conflictual axis of hegemony and autonomy. The significance of Sikh consolidation of identity through the Gurdwara Reform or the Akali Movement is not limited to the cultural and political conditions of the first decades of twentieth century. It has its own postcolonial ramifications. Partha Chatterjee rightly points out that the nationalist hegemony, once formed in the second half of nineteenth century, grows into and coincides with the nationalist state apparatus and Hindu hegemony during the post independence period. "In this aspect of the political domain, therefore, the project of nationalist hegemony was, and in its postcolonial phase, continues to be, to institute and ramify the characteristically modern forms of disciplinary power...The search for a postcolonial modernity has been tied, from its very birth, with its struggle against modernity." (8). Anne Murphy regrets in the footnote to page 191 that the All-India context has been neglected by many authors. But she herself fails to describe and make sensible the colonial and nationalist pressures exerted upon the Sikhs (and so many other contingencies) starting from the late nineteenth century.

In Punjab, the Hindu nationalist possessiveness expressed itself in a still more complicated way. The minoritarian Hindus of Punjab reached the strategy of transforming themselves into a majority by speaking in terms of a pan-Indian nationalism. In no time in modern Indian history, Indian nationalism was without the religious connotation. All along the terms Hindu, Indian and Hindi were overlapping. Nationalism came into existence and strengthened itself in conditions that were highly supportive of the Punjabi Hindus. The Hindu totalitarianism and possessiveness in terms of language (Sanskrit and Hindi), religion (Hindu Spirituality, Brahmanism and Advaita), number and finally, territory are pertinent when we go for speaking about the struggles of Singh Sabha and Akali Movements. As we see, the game was not played in the plain ground of materiality as the author naively imagines.

Anne Murphy's handling of the implications of globalization too is not very productive. She takes the phenomenon of globalization in a simplistic sense. She believes that once globalization enters, territorialization, for example, vanishes. Things are not so automatic. Scholars indicate that territoriality persists. They insist upon "the importance of symbolic attachments to territory: the intrinsic value of territory (in terms of its economic or demographic significance) cannot account for..". Some other scholars speak on "re-territorialization" and "Geopiety" (wherever religion is involved) (9). The material territory passes on into the "Ancestral Homeland" which does not necessarily "possess" the land or space but just makes it into its ethnoscape.

References

1. Here and below are given just the page numbers in brackets from the Book under review: Anne Muphy, *The Materiality of the Past: History and Representation*, Oxford University Press, Newyork 2012.
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3. Maurice Holbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, 1950. Pp. 6-7. Internet Version downloaded on 18.03.2014
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5. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jercey, 1993. P. 6
6. Ibid., P. 164
7. Quoted from Partha Chatterjee, *opp.cit.*, P. 7
8. Partha Chatterjee, *opp. cit.*, Pp. 74, 75
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