

Advocacy of Endowed Sikh Chairs at Western Universities

Baldev Singh

316 R Glad Way, Collegeville, PA 19426, USA
(Phone no: 610-454-1079, e-mail: BALDEV6@aol.com)

In the *Sikh Review* of February 2006, pp. 56-59, Prof. Raghbir Singh Basi, Prof. I.J. Singh, Prof. Harbans Lal, and Dr. Inderjit Singh (group of four) have argued for the establishment of Sikh academic chairs in Western universities. However, the editor in his cautionary comment questioned the benefit of such chairs by pointing out the "contribution" of Pashaura Singh and Harjot Oberoi.

The Group of four says: "We do believe, however, that in general an endowed Chair at a university is an excellent and also the least expensive way to have a place on the table in the hallowed halls of academia." Judging from their enthusiasm for Sikh chairs, one would suppose that they have an added expertise in Sikhism. One would also suppose that they are aware of the "Sikh-work" done at the University of British Columbia, University of Michigan, University of California at Santa Barbra, and the University of Toronto. Could these gentlemen point out what these chairs have done to enhance the understanding of Sikhism for Sikhs and non-Sikhs? Have they studied or critically examined the publications coming out of these Universities?

I am not aware of the expertise of Prof. Basi or Dr. Inderjit Singh on Sikhism, but I am quite familiar with Prof. Harbans Lal and I.J. Singh's writings on Sikhism. Has I.J. Singh or Harbans Lal ever critiqued the work of W.H. McLeod, Pashaura Singh, Harjot Oberoi, and Gurinder Singh Mann? If they have, what do they think of it? They say, "An endowed Chair is the highest honor that can be bestowed upon a professor, who has already accumulated an excellent track record in the specialty area." If that is so, could they point out Harjot Oberoi or Pashaura Singh or Mann's "already accumulated excellent track record" before they became the occupants of Sikh chairs? To my knowledge the one "common outstanding qualification" of the three is their relationship to McLeod, who supervised Pashaura Singh's thesis and was consultant to Oberoi and Mann for their Ph.D. theses.

It is deplorable that they fabricated false statements to buttress their argument:

While Muslims swordsmen conquered for the faith, Christian missionaries were willing to explore tentatively on the frontiers of empire to bring the good news to even a few more souls.... In our own Sikh tradition, beginning right from the time of our Gurus, Sikh theologians were sent to the centers of higher learning such as the famous Benaras Hindu University for research and dialogue.

Could these scholars tell us when did the Islamic armies invade Indonesia, Mylasia, Nigeria and Tanzania? Would they enlighten us as to what happened to the aborigines of Australia, Americas and Africa? Do they know that Maharaja Dalip Singh, a ten years old boy was kidnapped by the British colonists and put in the custody of a Presbyterian missionary couple, Dr. & Mrs. John Logan. The young boy was totally cut off from his mother and other relatives, brainwashed and then converted to Christianity and, his long luxurious *Kesh* were presented as a trophy to Mrs. Logan.

Now, who were those Sikh theologians who were sent to the famous "Benaras Hindu University"? Could the four gentlemen name a single Sikh who was sent by the Gurus to the famous place--Benaras Hindu University? Did this university or anything like that exist at the time of the Sikh Gurus? What are the names of Gurus who sent Sikh theologians to this university? Don't they know that Guru Nanak rejected all the essentials of Hinduism: incarnation of God, caste system, transmigration, karma, hell, heaven, gods, goddesses, and idol worship? Guru Nanak also rejected the method or approach of attaining salvation preached by the Semitic and the Indian religions. Besides, he rejected Sanskrit as well as its script as a medium for the propagation of his philosophy. Given these truths I ask: Why would any Guru send Sikhs to Benaras and for what purpose?

ਬੇਦ ਕਤੇਬੀ ਭੇਦੁ ਨਾ ਜਾਤਾ ॥

Neither the *Vedas* (four Hindu texts) nor the four *Kateba* [Semitic texts: the *Torah*, the *Zabur* (Psalms), the *Injil* (Gospel), and the *Quran*] know the mystery of the Creator of the cosmos.

AGGS, M 1, p. 1021.

ਕਥਾ ਕਹਾਣੀ ਬੋਦੀ ਆਣੀ ਪਾਪੁ ਪੁੰਨੁ ਬੀਚਾਰੁ ॥
ਦੇ ਦੇ ਲੇਣਾ ਲੈ ਲੈ ਦੇਣਾ ਨਰਕਿ ਸੁਰਗਿ ਅਵਤਾਰ ॥
ਉਤਮ ਮਧਿਮ ਜਾਤੀ ਜਿਨਸੀ ਭਰਿਮ ਭਵੈ ਸੰਸਾਰੁ ॥

It is the teachings of Vedas, which has created the myths of sin and virtue, hell and heaven, and karma and transmigration. One reaps the reward in the next life for the deeds performed in this life—goes to hell or heaven according to the deeds. The Vedas have also created the fallacy of inequality of caste and gender for the world.

AGGS, M 2, p. 1243.

In recent past I wrote a critique of Harbans Lal's three articles in which he portrayed Sikhism as an appendage of Hinduism. He has not bothered to reply. He says that the Gurus sent Sikhs to Benaras for "research and dialogue." Prof. Lal needs to come out in the open to resolve this conflict. As for I.J. Singh is concerned his expertise on Sikhism is limited to what he learned "on his grandmother's knee" or the writings of Sir Sobha Singh's son, Khushwant Singh, whose views about Sikhism change from day to day. Khushwant took a tour of Punjab with that notorious killer K.P.S Gill urging him to kill Sikh young men. But after reading *Reduced to Ashes: The Insurgency and Human Rights in Punjab*, the same Khushwant laid the entire blame on K.P.S. Gill: "K.P.S. Gill, You Have Questions to Answer."

McLeod, Oberoi and Mann locked up their theses until their objectives were achieved. Do academic scholars hide their work from public scrutiny? Is not research for public good? McLeod and Pashaura Singh bitterly complain that Pashaura Singh's unpublished thesis was copied and distributed among Sikhs. What is wrong with that? Did he not get Ph.D. for that thesis and didn't the Sikhs pay for his research? Isn't it true that the Sikhs paid for the research work done by McLeod's associates? Do Sikhs have the right to attend seminars or conferences where they present their work? Why don't they allow Sikhs, who criticize their work, to attend such seminars? Since the group of four have argued for the establishment of Sikhs chairs, are they aware of a book published in 2000 by Doris Jakobsh under the direction of Harjot Oberoi (British Columbia University, Canada): *Relocating Gender in Sikh History: Transformation, Meaning and Identity?* Using Talib's translation of Guru Granth Sahib, Jakobsh distorted Guru Nanak's hymns to argue that Guru Nanak was for keeping the

status quo; Nanak supported the rulers; Nanak wanted women to bear sons, especially those of noble birth; and Nanak was biased against women. Do these four gentlemen want this type of research on Sikhism? They claim that the Sikh academic chairs would help the overseas Sikh community get better acquainted with their neighbors or vice versa. Does Jakobsh's research accomplish that? Did any of the holders of Sikh chairs challenge her work? On the contrary Pashaura Singh in a publication he authored with Prof. Barrier applauded her work. Since Lal and I.J. Singh have assumed themselves the role of "Ashoka's missionaries" for Sikhism, have they challenged her work? They need to wake up and smell the rat.

On what basis do these four gentlemen argue that Sikhs should endow more chairs, when in fact they seem to have no idea about the poor performances of established chairs? Let us look at the case of a newly established chair at the University of California at Riverside. Dr. Kapany was heavily involved in funding of this chair, which now is occupied by Prof. Pashaura Singh. Singh's background is worthy of bringing out: He was hired as assistant professor at the University of Michigan. Then was demoted to a lecturer until the time he moved to UC, Riverside with the rank of a full professor. Is it fair that someone being demoted from assistant professor to lecturer at one university and then hired as full professor at another university, everything else as being equal? Pashura Singh has published "Recent Trends and Prospects in Sikh Studies," in *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, 1998, 27(4), pp. 407-25. Can anyone explain to the Sikhs what is academic about this article and how it advances the understanding of Sikhism? Another good example of their poor performance is of textual analysis of Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS). With respect to Mann's work, his thesis rests on the manuscripts of schismatic sects of Baba Pirthi Chand Sodhi and Baba Mohan Bhalla. Interestingly Bhai Gurdas had called former "mina, crooked" and the later mentally "kamla, deranged". Moreover, the *mina* manuscript is extinct. Therefore, how is it possible to conduct textual analysis of an extinct manuscript? Further, in 1994 at a Sikh congregation when people questioned Gurinder Singh Mann about his "locked up" thesis he gave his favorite answer: "I am a historian not a theologian." In that case how could someone who is not a Sikh theologian, is qualified to perform textual analysis of Aad Guru Granth Sahib? In addition, Mann's work has been refuted by Prof.

Pritam Singh and Prof. Balwant Singh Dhillon of Guru Nanak Dev University. I have not seen Mann's response to date. The same is true about Pashaura Singh's textual analysis of Aad Gru Granth Sahib.

Dr. Kapany's financial contributions in the name of his late beloved mother are commendable. In doing this *seva* of setting a Sikh chair at UC, Riverside, he must carry over on his shoulders a high degree of responsibility and must exercise a degree of oversight. His failing to do so has forced me say the following: I would urge the Sikhs to put a moratorium on the establishing new Sikh chairs. Let us dispassionately evaluate the already established Sikh chairs.

Last year I published a detailed article on McLeod, his writings, and his associates. Currently that article is posted at three Internet sites. There has been no response from McLeod or his associates as yet. Since these four gentlemen are urging Sikhs to establish more Sikh academic chairs, I invite them to debate my article on the Sikh Spectrum or any other medium. If they think that McLeodian research is off limits for discussion to Sikhs, I would encourage them to see the merits of open and free discussion. There is a lot to learn through that forum. Research is search for truth, which involves exchange of ideas and debate on ideas, not one-sided propaganda. What good is research if holders of the Sikh Chairs are unwilling to debate their work? Our known Sikh intellectuals/scholars, including this group of four should reflect upon themselves and seek out the wisdom for what is right.