

INVASION OF RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES

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An Abstract by Dr Kharak Singh

The book is a critique of Harjot Oberoi's recent publication "Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in Sikh Tradition" which attracted sharp global reaction and adverse criticism, by over two dozen scholars of Sikhism representing practically every major area with a sizeable Sikh population. Dr Oberoi holds a Sikh chair at the University of British Columbia, and is expected to provide an accurate interpretation of Sikh religion and history and a correct image of the Sikh community. The Canadian Sikhs are living in a society that believes in multiculturalism. In order to make a meaningful contribution towards progress of their country of adoption, and to earn a place of honour in the larger Canadian society, they considered it extremely important that the neighbouring communities understand their religious philosophy, culture, and history. For this reason, they raised the required funds and prevailed upon the Canadian government and the University of British Columbia to set up a Sikh Chair. Dr Oberoi has held this Chair for about five years. Unfortunately, the material turned out by him is little short of misrepresentation. In fact, it gives the impression that he is following a carefully planned scheme of disinformation against Sikh religion and its adherents.

In the present book 'Construction of Religions Boundaries', Dr Oberoi has taken pains to show that there were hardly any properly defined boundaries to distinguish Sikhs from others. Even today, he suggests that the Khalsa form is only one of the several forms of Sikhism, and that, too, is not prescribed by Guru Gobind Singh, but has been imposed by the Singh Sabha Movement to the exclusion of other forms.

The Sikh community naturally felt betrayed. Such vicious propaganda emanating from any quarters would be resented. But it is outrageous when it comes from a Sikh Chair.

Introduction to the book gives the above background, and points out that "The Sikh religion or its identity cannot be studied with such parameters as are applied to Indo-Christian Studies, because the latter are based on the concept of phenomenology, as their religion and scriptures numbering over 60, make it a history-grounded religion." Sikhism is not a product of history. It is based on its prophets' spiritual experience of reality, called numina, and

Sikh history is the unfolding of the philosophy based on that experience. Hence, application of tools that may be valid for history-gounded religious systems, will yield wrong conclusions, in case of Sikhism. Oberoi has obviously failed to see this fact, or deliberately ignored it.

Oberoi is no student of religion, and is hardly qualified to pass judgement on a delicate subject like religious boundaries. His knowledge of Sikhism is particularly superficial and borrowed from sources known for their hostility towards this great faith. No wonder, therefore, that his thoughtless exercise attracted a sharp global reaction. The present volume is a collection of the views of 27 eminent scholars, known for their understanding of the philosophy of the Gurus and history of Sikhs, on the clumsy attempt of Dr Oberoi to dissolve or obscure the boundaries of Sikhism. The composition of the authors, and their opinions clearly show that condemnation of Dr Oberoi's publication is spontaneous, unanimous and universal. The articles examine his book threadbare from all angles, and expose the hollowness of his postulates. In order that readers can properly assess Dr Oberoi's work, it seems necessary to provide some basic and authentic information on some of the issues raised in his book, as a background. This is provided in the first five chapters by distinguished authorities on Sikh religion, history and culture. In his article on Sikh Identity, Sardar Daljeet Singh has established that Sikhism is a revealed and an independent religion, distinct from all other religions, and that it is radically different from all denominations of Hinduism, particularly, Vaisnavism and Vedanta. The departure is evident in the concept of God, spiritual goal of man, the methodology prescribed to achieve the goals, and the world-view. This chapter in itself is a great contribution to an understanding of the Sikh faith. In another article, Dr Gurdarshan Singh Dhillon shows that Sikh identity is a continuing feature.

Dr Gurdarshan Singh Dhillon also gives a brief history of the Singh Sabha Movement and establishes that its aim was revival of the pristine Sikh faith as preached by the Gurus. He has very ably and successfully rebutted the erroneous proposition of Oberoi, that it was a reform movement. In fact, Oberoi went to the extent of making the ridiculous suggestion that the present form of Sikhism has been given by the Singh Sabha in supersession of the one prescribed by the Gurus.

Dr Oberoi is never tired of painting Sikhs as fundamentalists, and attributing the recent Punjab problem to their fundamentalism. Since this suggestion runs in the veins of most of his writings, it has been considered necessary to include a chapter by Dr Kharak Singh, which clearly shows that Dr Oberoi's assertions are ill-founded. After giving this background, the book presents the assessment of different scholars who have reviewed Dr Oberoi's book, in Chapters 6 to 25

The contributors to this volume are no casual observers or amateur writers. They are world authorities like Dr Noel King. They hold responsible positions in the disciplines of religion and Sikh Studies. They include Heads of departments of Religious Studies, and eminent professors, from the Punjab University Chandigarh, Punjabi University Patiala and Guru Nanak Dev University Amritsar, besides a galaxy of internationally known scholars, who are authorities on Sikh Studies in their own right.

Dr Oberoi has unethically used the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, as a base for his attack on the 'Boundaries of Sikhism', where he is currently holding a Sikh Chair. In order to understand the larger conspiracy against Sikhism and the clandestine designs of a group of 'Friends of Sikhism', Dr Jasbir Singh Mann has explained in Chapter 26 the history of this Chair. He recalls how the Sikhs of Canada contributed their hard-earned money to create the Chair in order to present the true image of their religion and culture. Dr Mann exposes the conspiracy of enemies of Sikhism who manipulated their hold on the Chair and delayed the appointment for two years, until the present incumbent, who had been properly groomed for their purpose and perfectly fitted into their requirements, was available, although he lacks the essential qualifications prescribed for the job. The article also highlights the stubborn and partial attitude of the University and its surprising insensitivity to the feelings of the entire Sikh Community. Dr Mann has built a case for investigation into the appointment of the author of the 'Construction of Religious Boundaries' to the UBC Sikh Chair. The demand is fair, and we earnestly hope it will be conceded by the authorities. The specific questions that the enquiry should address are given in Appendix VIII. In a somewhat similar situation the Government of Canada has earned the appreciation of the Sikh community by ordering a fresh enquiry into the Air-India plane Knaishka crash of 1985. The suggestion is obvious that the earlier 'inquiry' and its 'findings' could be a part of a global misinformation campaign against the community. We trust the same spirit of justice will be demonstrated in the present case.

The three chapters that follow, also deal with this Chair. Appendixes added to the book, support the story. It may be pointed out that a team of distinguished scholars from universities from Punjab, visited the UBC to assess the work done at the Chair. Their report is quite revealing, and appears in this volume as Appendix HI. Three reviews written in Punjabi are added at the end.

The present volume is a demonstration of the solidarity of the Sikhs behind their great faith, the latest among the revealed religions. It also indicates that the community is alert, as never before, and will no longer tolerate such distortion or misrepresentation of the philosophy or history of Sikhism, as have been going on for the last over one century and intensified during the last couple of decades.