

# **THE CONSTRUCTION OF RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition**

by Harjot Oberoi

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*A Review by Dr S. S. Sodhi & Dr J. S. Mann*

Dr Harjot Oberoi is a second generation dislocated Punjabi Sikh from West Punjab. While living in Delhi he got his exposure to History at the Centre of Historical Studies at the Jawahar Lal Nehru University in Delhi. At JNU, he came under the influence of Marxist professors, such as Bipan Chandra, Romila Thapar, K.N. Pannikar and Satish Saberwal. He also wrote his M. Phil, thesis on Bhai Vir Singh. From the style of his writing English as his second language, it appears he must have gone to an English medium school in Delhi where the elect and the elite sent their children in the 60's.

At the Australian National University, he studied for his Ph.D. degree with Dr J.T.F. Jordan, who shaped his thoughts on Indian religion from an Eurocentric point of view.

The Eurocentric gang of self-appointed researchers on Sikhism led by Dr W.H. McLeod, J.T. O'Connell, Milton Israel, Bruce de Brack, J.S. Hawley, Mark Juergensmeyer, Jerry Barrier and Rolin Jeffery, after reading Dr Oberoi's thesis entitled "A World Reconstructed: Religion, Ritual and the Community - among Sikhs (1850-1901)", Faculty of Asian Studies, A.N. University Canberra 1987, advised him to expand it into a book by collating into it the following few articles that he had written earlier from time to time:

- I. 'Bhais, Babas and Gyanis: Traditional Intellectuals in Nineteenth
- II. Century Punjab', "Studies in History" (Vol. 2, 1980, pp. 33-62).
- III. 'From Gurdwara Rikabganj to the Viceregal Palace: A study of Religious Protest', "Punjab Past & Present" (Vol. 14, 1980, pp. 182-98).
- IV. 'The Worship of Pir Sakhi Sarvar: Illness, Healing and Popular Culture in the Punjab', "Studies in History" (Vol. 3, 1987, pp. 29-55).

- iv) 'A Historiographical and Bibliographical Reconstruction of the Singh Sabha in the Nineteenth Century', "Journal of Sikh Studies" (Vol. 10, 1983, pp. 108-30).
- v) 'From Ritual to Counter-Ritual: Re-thinking the Hindu-Sikh Question (1844 - 1915)', J.T. O'Connell, Milton Israel, W.G. Oxtoby, eds. with W.H. McLeod and J.S. Grewal visiting eds. "Sikh History and Religion in the Twentieth Century." South Asian Studies, University of Toronto (1988, pp. 136-158).

So the present book entitled, "The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition," is a careful mixing of his thesis and articles (paragraphs lifted from articles to the book). It also clearly shows that Dr Oberoi has become prisoner of Mc Leodian Eurocentric research paradigm.

As Dr Oberoi is very fond of quoting Sapir-Whorff to show how language constructs the thought and reality of persons, a Sikh psychologist would like to construct Dr Oberoi's reality by using the written statements taken from his book (CRB) and the articles.

1. "Adi Granth is an amorphous religious text." (CRB. p. 22). 'Amorphous,' according to Webster's Dictionary (1988, p. 30), means formless, not conforming to normal structural organization, having no crystalline form, unstratified.
2. "By the closing decades of the Nineteenth Century, the Singh Sabha, a wide ranging religious movement, began to view the multiplicity in Sikh identity with great suspicion and hostility." (CRB, p. 25)
3. "A new cultured elite aggressively usurped the right to represent others within a singular tradition." (CRB.p.25)
4. "*Tat Khalsa* imposed monolithic, codified, and closed culture on the Sikhs by dissolving alternative ideals." (CRB.p.25)
5. "This effort created many marginalized Sikhs who turned their backs on Sikh tradition and went their own way." (CRB.p.25)
6. "Pluralist paradigm of Sikhism was replaced by a highly uniformed Sikh identity, the one we know today as modern Sikh existence." (CRB.p.26)

7. "Through the process of silence and negotiation Sikh historians of the past have not given true picture of what Singh Sabha did to the un-Sikh beliefs of the population." (CRB.p.27)
8. "The ideas of what Sikhism ought to be were picked up by the *Tat Khalsa* from men like Ernest Trumpp, John Gordon and Macauliffe." (CRB.p.32)
9. "Ideological blinkers imposed by various complex forces led by *Tat Khalsa* produced many distortions in understanding the Sikhs." (CRB.p.32)
10. "Mr. G.S. Dhillon's Ph.D. thesis on Singh Sabha movement is based on the principles of negatives of Sikh Studies." (CRB, p. 35). Dr Oberoi is upset because Dr Dhillon has given what could be called 'Khalsacentric' view rather than the Eurocentric social science-anthropological view.
11. "Sikh Studies need to fully open to this gaze of history so that the Sikhs become 'sociologically respectable'." (CRB.p.35)
12. "Guru Nanak's paradigm of interior religiosity was cut with the axes of identity by;
  - a. Producing allegiance with Guru Nanak.
  - b. Identity with Guru *bani*,
  - c. Foundation of *sangats*.
  - d. Setting up pilgrim centres at Goindwal and Harmandir Sahib, Amritsar.
  - e. Convention of a communal meal (*langar*) was introduced.
  - f. And compilation of an anthology commonly known as the Adi Granth, whereby the Sikhs became a textual community." For further information on this topic, Dr Oberoi recommends that Dr Pashaura Singh's Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto. (1991), is a major contribution to the study of Adi Granth.
  - g.

Please note how Dr Oberoi is under the influence of Dr McLeod's writings. It is strange that he, a professor of Sikh Studies, accepts everything that Dr McLeod has formulated and even endorses Dr Pashaura Singh's very controversial thesis as a major study. It is group thinking of "birds of an Eurocentric research get-together" to further trample over the subjective faith of Sikhs. (CRB.pp.52-53)

13. According to Dr Oberoi, in the early Guru period, Sikh as a category was still problematic and empty. It needed to be correlated with historical intervention.
14. Dr Oberoi thinks that "Adi Granth was collated" (CRB.pp.54-55), whereas Pashaura Singh thinks that Guru Arjun Dev ji used a process to change Guru Nanak's *bani* before formally including it in the Adi Granth, and that Guru Arjun Dev *ji* was also influenced by social and political considerations to produce the Adi Granth. Like Trumpp, Dr Oberoi thinks that Adi Granth is the most voluminous and structured early seventeenth century devotional anthology. Is Guru Granth an Anthology? According to Webster Dictionary, 1988, p. 38 an anthology is a collection of poetry or prose chosen to represent the work of a particular writer, a literary school or a national literature.
15. Dr Oberoi compares Adi Granth with Surdas Ka Pada, Fatehpur Manuscript of 1582 A.D. As Surdas Ka Pada had the same features as Adi Granth, Dr Oberoi feels that "Adi Granth was neither the first nor the last of such collections." So the uniqueness of Adi Granth as a sacred *dhur ki bani* is called in question by Dr Oberoi (CRB.p.54).
16. "Stories of Guru Nanak's travels are created out of *Janam sakhis*, which are mythical texts" (CRS, p. 55). "These stories take Guru Nanak to Mecca or Hardwar and make him behave as if he has no fixed identity." (CRB.p.56). (Here Dr Oberoi is dancing to the tunes of Dr McLeod's research on *Janam sakhis*).
17. "Just as there is no fixed Guru Nanak in *the Janam sakhis*, there is no fixed Sikh identity in the early Guru period" (CRB.p.56). "Sikh world view of earlier Guru period allowed Sikhs to cut and sell their long hair to feed Guru Nanak." (CRB.p.56). It is important to note that the Eurocentric Social Sikh historians will readily pick up such episodes from *janam sakhis*, (which they call mythical texts) as suit their purpose. Dr Oberoi forgets that the quest for early Sikh identity was enshrined in challenging the *status quo*. The displacement of Brahmin, the non-use of Sanskrit, the challenge to *sati and purdha* custom, the institution of *langar* to get rid of the caste system, and the writing of *gurbani* in Panjabi, so that the common man could benefit from it, were the pillars of Sikh identity in the early Guru period.

18. "Guru Arjun was executed, not martyred." (Oberoi, Pashaura Singh, McLeod and J.S. Hawley do not use the word martyrdom for Guru Arjun. It appears it comes out of their collective group thinking!).
19. The Jat influx into Sikhs produced the real Sikhs. So the Sikhs became Khalsas with their own dharma.

It is sad that a "Sikh Scholar" sitting on an University of British Columbia Sikh Chair is so anti-Sikh, that he does not seem to respect the Sikh Scripture, the Sikh Gurus, and the Sikh traditions because of his Eurocentric-Racist Scholarship.

He has no idea of the pain and hurt he is causing to those who collected money, so that a Sikh Chair could be started to enhance the image of the community.

He is a misplaced Marxist anthropologist who should be removed from the "Chair" and sent to teach Social Sciences in other departments of the University of British Columbia.

If he stays longer in the Sikh Chair, he may do further damage. If the University of British Columbia does not respect the sentiments of Canadian Sikhs, legal and political measures should be taken.

What Freud was to females, Jensen and Rushton to Blacks, Oberoi is to Sikhs.

In the Name of God did he fashion  
Anandpur and the New Order.  
The Khalsa is verily the Face of the Lord!

Puran Singh

