

An Academic Perspective on Sikh Education in the 21st Century

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Let me begin my lecture with a personal anecdote. In the early 1980s I was writing a class exam for my Religious Studies course on ‘Human Nature’ at the University of Calgary in Canada. While all of my classmates had left I was still writing my answer. My instructor suddenly made the remark: “Moslems are left behind!” I just smiled at his remark and handed over my answer book to the instructor. Next week I went to see my professor in his office about the final term paper, seeking his permission to write on the topic of human nature in ‘my own tradition’. He said: “Well, you can write from the perspective of Sufi tradition.” I said: “I want to write on human nature in the Sikh tradition.” My professor was completely stunned at my response. He had no idea about Sikhism at that time. A large majority of people in the United States still do not know about Sikhs or Sikhism. We frequently become the target of hate crimes after the events of 9/11 because of mistaken identity.

It is important to know the master narrative of the origin and growth of Sikh Studies in the western academy. The first North American conference on the Sikh

tradition was held in 1976 at the University of California, Berkeley. It was co-sponsored by the Sikh Foundation headed by Narinder Singh Kapany who expressed the view that Sikhs formed a “fascinating source” for sociological study. The Sikhs, he argued, had demonstrated “an uncanny capability to retain their identity, beliefs, and traditions” while participating “most actively” in North American life (Kapany 1979: 208). At that conference it was generally acknowledged that the Sikh tradition was indeed “the forgotten tradition” in scholarly circles in North America. In particular, Mark Juergensmeyer argued that in world religions textbooks the study of Sikhism was either completely ignored or misrepresented as an example of the syncretistic derivative of Hinduism and Islam. He examined the various reasons for this treatment, and suggested that there are two main prejudices in Indian Studies that function against the study of the Sikh tradition. The first prejudice is that against the modern ages. Many scholars, following the Orientalist perspective, have been more interested in the classical texts of Indian Philosophy rather than medieval devotional traditions. Since the Sikh tradition is barely 500 years old and relatively modern, it has been completely ignored in Indian Studies. The other prejudice that faces Sikh Studies in Indian literature is the prejudice against regionalism. Sikhism is not only relatively modern, but it is also almost exclusively Punjabi. In his arguments, Juergensmeyer made the case for the utility of Sikhism for the studies of religion, particularly

textual studies, mythology, social studies and political thought (Juergensmeyer 1979: 13-23). Since then the study of the Sikh tradition and culture has received some cautious scholarly attention. The mistaken notion that Sikhism offers a synthesis of Hindu and Muslim ideals has been completely abandoned in most recent scholarly works.

Recent statistic on global populations reveals that there are 2.2 billion Christians of various denominations, comprising 31.5% of global population, and 1.6 billion Muslim devotees of various sorts, covering 23.2% of the total population in the world. Then there are about 1 billion Hindus, making 15% of global population, and about 400 million Buddhists of different categories, embracing 7.1% of population in the world. The unaffiliated global population is about 16.3% while 5.9% are folk religionists. It is, however, instructive to note that there are more Sikhs in the world than there are Jews. There are about 25 million Sikhs in the world. By contrast, Jewish population is around 15 million that makes about 0.2 per cent of world's roughly seven billion people. About forty percent (six million) Jews live in the United States, forty percent live in Israel, ten percent live in Europe (1.5 million), and ten percent live elsewhere (Hahn Tapper 2015). It is, however, extraordinary that Jews have played such significant roles in shaping human development. For instance, when we look at the number of Sikh scholars or non-Sikhs working in the field of Sikh Studies, and compare it with those in Jewish

Studies, we become uncomfortably aware that Sikhs receive nothing like the attention which they deserve. How do we explain this wide gap between the two comparable minority communities? To answer this question we must acknowledge some interesting facts. First, Jews are highly urbanized and they have an extensive interest in things cultural. Second, they have a recent past which includes the Holocaust and the creation of the first Jewish-majority modern nation-state in history, the state of Israel. But then the Sikhs have a recent past which includes the Partition of India and the genocide of 1984, neither of which has aroused worldwide interest on anything like the scale of the Jewish events. The difference lies chiefly in who constitutes the Sikh Panth. Notably, the overwhelming majority of the Sikhs live off the land in the Punjab, pursuing objectives which do not rate scholarly research very high (McLeod 2004: 30).

Most instructively, in American higher education, some estimate the proportion of Jewish students in the top twenty schools, including those in the Ivy Leagues, to be as high as twenty-five percent. Similarly, the proportion of Jewish faculty in American colleges and universities has been estimated thirty-three percent in 2013. In terms of representation in the United States government Jews accounted for six percent of the House of Representatives and twelve percent of the Senate in 2010. As of 2013, three of the nine justices of the Supreme Court are Jews. Jews appear in far greater numbers than in the overall population. They have

access to the hallways of power. The President of the United States meets regularly with Jewish leadership. Most instructively, from World War II onward, Jews have steadily achieved more power than ever before in terms of both self-determination and cultural capital (Hahn Tapper 2015). They have empowered their community through education. Almost all the major universities in the United States have endowed chairs or centers of Judaic studies.

Let us now turn to the Sikh situation. In the last two decades there has been a steady growth of scholarly literature on Sikhism. The increasing scholarly attention that Sikhs and Sikhism are beginning to receive is a new phenomenon in the academy. Indeed, Sikh Studies is no longer ‘the forgotten tradition’ of the late seventies and is becoming increasingly recognized in undergraduate programs, as well as being the benefactor of a growing number of endowed Chairs in universities across North America. As a matter of fact, there are now eight endowed Chairs in Sikh Studies established in North America with the active financial support of the Sikh community. In addition, there are a growing number of scholars in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Europe whose teaching and research interests are related in some way to Sikh Studies. It is pertinent to note here that my chapters on the Sikh Tradition are now included in the latest editions of the following textbooks: (1) *World Religions: Eastern Traditions* (Oxford University Press, 4th edition 2014) edited by Willard G.

Oxtoby and Roy C. Amore; (2) *A Concise Introduction to World Religions* (Oxford University Press, 3rd edition 2015) edited by Willard G. Oxtoby and Alan F. Segal; (3) *The Religions of Canadians* (University of Toronto Press, 2012) edited by Jamie S. Scott; and (4) *South Asian Religions: Practicing Tradition Today* (Routledge 2012) edited by Karen Pechilis and Selva J. Raj. For me it is an honor to be invited for these contributions. These textbooks are widely used in Western universities and colleges for undergraduate education (Singh 2014: 630-31).

In the beginning of twenty-first century, therefore, ‘Sikh Studies’ has emerged as a distinct area of scholarship in some of the North American universities. The new Chairs of ‘Sikh Studies’ have been part of different university departments such as ‘Religious Studies’ and ‘Philosophy’ (University of California campuses at Riverside and Santa Barbara, and Hofstra University at Long Island, New York), ‘Asian Languages and Cultures’ (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor and University of British Columbia, Vancouver), ‘Economics’ (University of California, Santa Cruz), ‘Music’ (Hofstra University) and ‘Ethnic Studies’ (California State University, East Bay). They have generally been funded by wealthy Sikhs in the diaspora. These Chairs initially focused on issues of Sikh religion, ideology and history. However, over the years, they have also begun to explore more contentious and contemporary issues of Sikh identity, culture and social relations. This expansion of the sub-discipline beyond the study

of text and ideology, also points towards a growing confidence of the scholars, the institutionalization of Sikh Studies and acceptance of Sikhs as an important religious community at the global level (Singh 2014: 631).

In many ways the Sikh community has been very supportive of academic inquires – though, at times, they have voiced outright criticism. Our hope for the conference held at the University of California, Riverside, in 2013 was to provide a forum that focused on how academic discussions and those arising in the community at large could complement one another, rather than being at odds. This was the largest conference in which all the eight Sikh Studies Chair-holders participated for the first time. We were also fortunate to have UCR's Interim Chancellor Dr. Jane Close Conoley speak at the reception in the evening. This conference differed from the first two by opening its doors to the Sikh community to engage with the scholars in the field of Sikh studies not simply as audience members, but also participating members of the conference panels. In particular, our Sikh critics were invited and some of them even presented papers in the panels. We have moved away from the stage of confrontation in pursuit of a win-win strategy that will help usher in a new era of cooperation and understanding. Let us hope this new spirit prevails.



Figure 1: Participants in the 3rd Sikh Studies Conference on “Dialogues with(in) Sikh Studies: Texts, Practices and Performances” held at UC Riverside, on May 10-12, 2013.

Let me now turn to an important publication in the growing field of Sikh Studies. This is *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2014) that appeared last year. This is the first major comprehensive survey of the Sikh tradition which does not delimit its study to a single genre. It initiates new researchers into the growing field of Sikh Studies. It uses an innovative structure integrating various ways of expressing Sikh-ness (*Sikhi*) from a range of disciplines. It questions key critical terms, challenges established frames of reference, and offers alternative 'readings' of Sikh ways of knowing and being. It

combines the scholarship of three generations of academics in the field from all over the world. The handbook is divided into eight thematic sections that explore different 'expressions' of Sikhism. Historical, literary, ideological, institutional, and artistic expressions are considered in turn, followed by discussion of Sikhs in the Diaspora, and of caste and gender in the Panth. Each section begins with an essay by a prominent scholar in the field, providing an overview of the topic. Further essays provide detail and further treat the fluid, multi-vocal nature of both the Sikh past and the present. The handbook concludes with a section considering future directions in Sikh Studies.

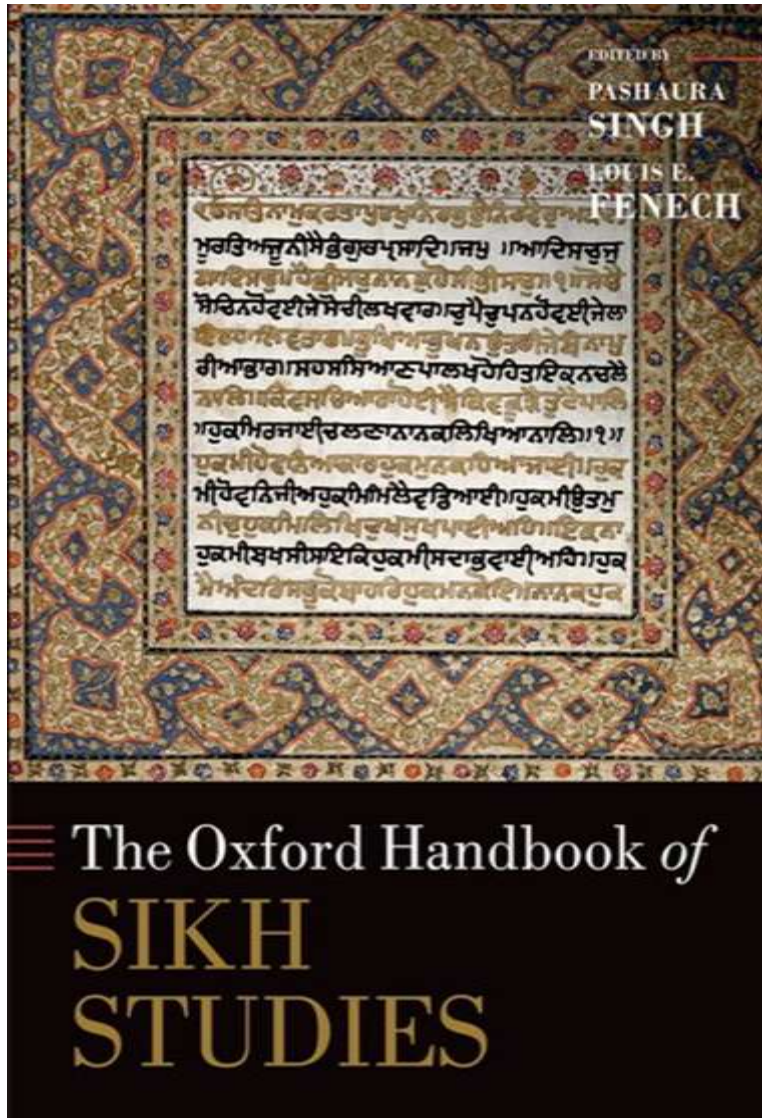


Figure 2: The jacket cover of *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies* (2014).

Sikhism has had and continues to have a seemingly unending number of dominant, institutional, regional, national, and local expressions of faith in constant dynamic relationship with one another, continually influencing each other and defining and redefining what it has meant and continues to mean to be a Sikh in different places around the globe. There is thus an urgent need to focus on the

theme of ‘expressing Sikh-ness’ (*sikhi*) by integrating text with practice, an inclusive tactic which allows the multiplicity of Sikh voices throughout the Sikh World today and throughout Sikhism’s history to be heard without privileging any singular one. Such an approach allows us to view the extraordinary diversity of the Sikh tradition by looking not just at Sikh texts but also at Sikh practices. Most importantly, this approach involves a careful observation of actual Sikh practices not only in South Asian homeland but also in Sikh communities beyond Punjab around the globe (Singh 2014: 641-42).

Thus there is an urgent need to make a paradigm shift from the dominant Singh Sabha interpretation of the Sikh tradition to a more inclusive approach, from a positivist and objectivist historical perspective to a more reflexive and interactive scholarship based upon interdisciplinary approach. Through this shift alone we will be able to avoid the trap of ‘essentialism’ and re-imagine the colorful diversity of the Sikh tradition in the twenty-first century at the global level. Most interestingly, the Internet has further exposed this diversity of Sikh life in its global context. No single group can afford to monopolize the debate on any single issue. Surfing through different Sikh websites and discussion groups one can easily realize that there is a need to look at Sikhism from a global perspective. There are multiple ways to approach Sikh topics in various academic disciplines. We must explore new ways of knowing the past and complement historical data with ethnographic

study that can illuminate the lived experience of the Sikh community (Singh 2014:642). When we talk about what the future holds for the global Sikh community, there is only one thing that *is* certain: There are always going to be multiple understandings of Sikhs, Sikh traditions, and Sikh identities. This has always been the case in the past, this is very true in the present, and it will remain so in the future. Once this fact is incorporated into the Sikh community's dominant truth, its future will begin to arrive.

I must end my lecture with a cautionary note that despite the economic success of the Sikhs in North America, they have largely experienced social isolation, an experience which springs from a pervasive ignorance about Sikhs and Sikh traditions in this part of the world. Through my academic work I have been trying to erode that ignorance in my own small way. Our Guru, the *Guru Granth Sahib*, teaches us that Sikh education cultivates the spirit of altruism. Sikhs can contribute positively to sustainable security in today's globalizing world by their enthusiastic acceptance of extraordinary diversity of faith and practice. In the pluralistic and multicultural societies of the postmodern world, where stress is being placed upon liberty, diversity, tolerance, security, and equality of race and gender, Sikh ideals are thoroughly in place in the developing values of the global society. To this day, Sikhs conclude their morning and evening prayers with the words: "Through the divine Name, Nanak, we remain in high spirits (*charhdi*

kala); and in thy will, O True Sovereign, may peace and prosperity come to one and all.”

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