Misconstruction of Religious Boundaries

Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition

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Harjot Singh Oberoi got his Ph. D from the Australian National University under the tutelage of his associate supervisor William Hewat McLeod, who got his Ph. D. from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, UK for a Joke. (See or ask for Abstract/Critique of McLeod's Sikh Literature works)

Note: In this document Italicized excerpts and comments are from H. S. Oberoi's thesis, and un-italicized text is mine)

Misnomers

Harjot Oberoi's title of his published doctoral thesis **'Construction of Religious Boundaries'** Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the **Sikh Tradition** is itself a misnomer because this thesis is a pack of **'Misconstruction of Religious Boundaries'** and a concoction of cult followings, occult rituals, thaumaturgical rites, superstitions, traditions, social customs and cultural festivities pertaining to the multi-cultural and multi-religious societies at large of India and Punjab during eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Despite his apparent awareness, that in the contemporary diverse societal multitude, the tiny budding Sikh minority's credulous peasant element was susceptible to the intrinsically invasive overwhelming Hindu and Muslim majorities' socio-cultural and religious idiosyncrasies, anomalies and normative practices, Harjot Oberoi unscrupulously concocts his thesis on culture, Identity and diversity in Sikh tradition. In his own words,

'The territories in which the Sikhs lived, the language they spoke, the agrarian festivals in which they participated, the ritual personnel they patronized and the symbolic universe of their rites of passage-all these were shared by numerous other communities in Punjab.' (Page 48)

'By their very nature melas (festivals, carnivals) as a motley (mixed) assemblage of people from different neighbourhoods, villages and regions diluted the codes of class, caste and religious differences. In these an individual could not stand apart, he had to blend into the crowd.' Pages 189, 190

'The (Sakhi Sarvar) *shrines catered not only to the spiritual needs of a Muslim population, but provided cures to invalids from different denominations---.'* Page 156

'This book has endeavoured to rethink the whole concept of religious communities as applied to Indian society.' P 418

Sanatan Sikhs

Sanskrit word Sanatan means original, perpetual, etc. The motley clique, that Harjot Singh terms Sanatan Sikhs were anything, but Sikhs, Sanatan or otherwise, except Bhais: Buddah Ji, Gurdas and Nand Lal. They were, for the most part, cultist sectarian guru-pretenders, Idolatrous Mahants (High priest), priests or mythology-oriented literati, who were more akin to Hindus than Sikhs. Ironically, they acquired ascendancy in Sikh hierarchy in mid-eighteenth century when the Sikh Panth (Nation) was engaged in the struggle for survival against Muslim Jihad and imperialism, soon after Guru-period. Ever since they have strived covertly to contaminate Sikhism and its traditions with cultism, avatarism, occultism, asceticism, mythology, witchcraft, wizardry, etc. Excerpts from Oberoi's book,

'Sardar Gulab Singh, in a public lecture at the Guru ka Bagh in Amritsar, announced 'Sikh faith is the true Sanatan religion. The four Vedas (Hindu scriptures) are also the religious books of the Sikhs.' (Page 102)

'Avatar Singh Vahiria, the most articulate exponent of Sanatan thinking later in the century, counted Guru Nanak among a long line of Avatars, Ram and Krishna.' Page 103

'*Guru Nanak was one such avatar, born to save people from the perils of ignorance and reveal once again the Sanatan faith that had been lost in an age of darkness-or so the Sanatan Sikhs believed.'* Page 103

'*In return they* (Nirmalas) *would receive instructions special instruction in meditation, Yoga and study of the Adi Granth, the Vedas, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Puranans and Sastras.'* Page 124

'Sanatan Sikhism was primarily a 'priestly' religion. P. 137

'*My argument is that the Sanatanists recognized the existence of several traditions within the Sikh Panth and accepted multiple sources of* (theological) *authority. This view of the world made it possible for Sikh tradition both, to accommodate conflicting beliefs of folk* (lore) *Sikhism and to coexist with diverse elements from popular culture.'* Pages 254, 255

An Enchanted Universe: Sikh Participation in Popular Religion

The cult following, occult rituals, thaumaturgical rites, quackery and calendrical celebrations that Harjot Oberoi dubs as popular religion and sardonically attributes if to Sikh tradition have always been practiced by the gullible fringe-elements of all the civilizations, religions, cultures, societies and communities. He himself writes,

'Lewis, who has studied this phenomena, shows that spirit-possession continues to be a wide spread strategy to alleviate the condition among women in much of South and South East Asia, Hong Kong, Japan, North Africa and Middle East.' Page 159

'*Popular belief in witchcraft in Punjab never evolved into a major institution as it did at certain periods of African or European history.'* Page 171

Oberoi obfuscates Sikh Creed

He, not only obfuscates the textual consistency and originality of the sole authentic Sikh scriptures of Guru Granth, but also obliquely conflates it with the Sikh and non-Sikh anonymous/pseudonymous authors' burlesque literature, Dasam Granth, Gurbilas, Sakhis, etc that are replete with avatarism, cultism, occultism, mythology, witchcraft and wizardry.

'*Religious texts like the Adi are so amorphous that those in favour of the status quo, reformists and insurrectionists, could all with ease quote from chapter and verse in favour of their cause.'* Page 22

'*While propagandists of modern Sikhism see in collation of the Adi Granth* (Original Sikh Scriptural Anthology) *in 1603-4 under Guru Arjan a powerful public declaration of the separation of the Sikh Panth (Nation) from other religious traditions, historically it is difficult to admit such an interpretation.* Page 54

'*While the Adi Granth is the most voluminous and structured of the early-seventeenth- century devotional anthologies-features that can be explained by the institutional successes of the Sikh movement and its resources- it was certainly neither the first, nor the last such collection.'* Page 54

'In this context the history of the Fatehpur manuscript, virtually unknown in Sikh studies, is most instructive. This anthology of devotional poetry was compiled in Rajisthan twenty-one years before the Adi Granth. Although the bulk of it is made up of compositions by the saint-poet Surdas it also contains the works of thirty-five other poets, including such well-known names as Kabir, Namdev, Ravidas, Parmanand, and Kanha. (Footnote: The following description is based on Gopal Narayan Bahura, Surdas Ka Pada: The Fatehpur Manuscript of 1639 (1582 AD).*'* Page 54.

'Instead of relying on magic and witchcraft as prophylactic (occult rites and charms) *or for attaining worldly goals, the text* (Sau Sakhi) *says, the same ends can be attained by relying on Sikh sacred writings. Particularly efficacious* (effective) *are readings from Guru Nanak's famous composition the Japji; each of its stanzas, or the whole, is said to possess certain powers ranging from curing a fever to obtaining success in enterprises. The magical powers of readings can be greatly enhanced if they were combined with a ritual called hom, in which offerings were made to a fire.'* Page 192

'In early Sikh tradition God was almost exclusively conceived in Masculine terms (Akäl Purkh, Kartä Purkh) and metaphors (devotee as a bride yearning for God the bridegroom) The Goddess myths in the Dasam Granth transpose the early tradition and add new maternal dimension to Sikh understandings of the Ultimate Reality. As an anthology of such myths the Dasam Granth performed its symbolic role rather well. Koer Singh, in his Gurbiläs Pätshähi 10, written in the early nineteenth century, recommends that his readers pay the same attention to Puranic literature as they would to the Adi Granth.' Pages 97, 99

Noteworthy, Harjot Oberoi's doctoral UBC student, Doris Jakobsh's plagiary of the first sentence in the above paragraph, she transcribes on page 11 in her thesis **'Relocating Gender in Sikh History',** *'the 'Ultimate' in Sikh Scripture was most often conceived in masculine terms, as Akal Purkh, Karta Purkh.'*

'The author of Gurbilas Chhevin Patshahi portrays Guru Hargobind as the twenty-fourth reincarnation of Vishnu; this of course has the ring of the composition Chaubis Avavtar in the Dasam Granth.' Page 102

'Despite the problems in dating these texts exactly, and the considerable variation in their doctrinal content, collectively they do express a fundamental urge among Khalsa Sikhs to create separate identity. In the Gurbilas Chhevin Patshahi, a text written some times in early nineteenth century, the author instructs Sikhs to visit only Sikh shrines and read Sikh scriptures to overcome the exigencies of life.

Adi Granth, not exclusive focus of Sikh Religiosity

'Finally the Adi Granth had not become the exclusive focus of Sikh religiosity. It shared status as a sacred text with the Dasam Granth, an anthology associated with the last Sikh guru, Gobind Singh. Although the Sikh tradition was considerably purged of its fluidity by the new imaginative categories and religious practices of Khalsa Sikhs, there still was ample room within it for ambiguity, inversion and conflicting interpretations.' Pages 90-91

'Sanatan Sikhs following older Khalsa conventions held the Adi Granth and Dasam Granth, the two devotional texts, at par.

Harjot Harps on Nondescript Sikh Identity

'Early Sikh tradition did not show much concern for establishing distinct Sikh religious boundaries. These religious diversity within the Sikh Panth made it possible for its adherents to belong to any of the following traditions; Udasi, Nirmala, Nanak Panthi, Khalsa, Sahajdhari, Kuka, Nirankari and Sarvaria.' Page 24

'In this sense the history of Sikh traditions is radically different from, say, early Christianity, which from the very beginning had a dominant concern with demarcating believers and non-believers: within less than a century of its formation, had begun to excommunicate those within the church who transgressed its systemized beliefs. Such modes of exclusion, of publicizing the boundaries of belief and practice were quite alien to early Sikh tradition.' Page 48

What, we ask Harjot Singh Oberoi, is his concept of enduring Sikh identity' and what are the definitive identities of the other major world religions' flocks, except the Christians, who excommunicated transgressors?

Obviously, he is not aware that the Christian zealots burned at the stakes the Christian dissidents and non-Christians, who didn't fit into their esoteric Christian identity or practiced what he defines as popular religion; witchcraft, sorcery, occult rituals, thaumaturgy, etc. He is also not very conversant with Sikhism's unique theology and novel religiosity, that transcend all dogmatic creedal, social and cultural boundaries, a novelty vouched by the Sikh scriptural anthology, co-authored by the Sikh Gurus; and Hindu and Muslim holy sages. Essentially Sikhism is an all-inclusive faith with a universal theological message.

"There is something strangely modern about these (Sikh) scriptures and this puzzled me. Perhaps this sense of unity is source of power that I find in these volumes. They speak to people of any religion or of none. They speak for* (to?) *the human heart and the searching mind." Pearl S. Buck

'Guru-Granth' Principle put into service as Substitute

'For a social historian it is unimportant whether or not Gobind Singh formally declared the Adi Granth a guru. If history is a social process, then what is crucial for our purpose is that, an older principle of Guru Granth or scriptural guru was successfully put into service by Khalsa Sikhs in the eighteenth century. In the absence of any clear leadership within Sikh ranks, the doctrine of Guru Granth served as substitute for the line of Sikh gurus by providing much needed cohesion to a Panth faced with political turmoil and serious internal dissensions.' Page 70

Guru-Panth doctrine; handy

'The highly complex doctrine of Guru Granth took root in unison with a more simple concept, that of Guru Panth. This principle too had emerged in the time of early Sikh gurus. With a numerical and geographical expansion of Sikh movement, it became increasingly difficult for its members to establish direct physical contact with the guru. A way was found in the belief that guru was present wherever the Sikh Sangat or congregation assembled.' Page 70

'When in 1708, at the death of Gobind Singh, there was no one to succeed him as Guru, the Panth turned into his collective successor. This was to be an abiding belief of the Khalsa Sikhs, one that came in handy when waging battles for collective survival and political sovereignty over the course of the eighteenth century.' Page 71

Khalsa, Singh Sabha portrayed as Zealots

'The increasing political power of the Khalsa allowed it to begin ***recasting Sikh society after its own image****. During the course of the eighteenth century tens of thousands of Sikhs took to Khalsa identity. The dramatic story of the political power of Khalsa Sikhs begins to unfold in the early eighteenth century with Banda Bahadur (1670-1716), a prominent disciple of Gobind Singh from his last days in central India. Under Banda Bahadur a* ***bloody offence*** *was launched to uproot the Mughal state in Punjab.'* Page 71

'When the Sikh intelligentsia of the last quarter of the nineteenth century launched its project of ***recasting Sikh tradition*** *into a uniform and supralocal* (transcendental) *religion, Sikh participation in popular religion was a major target. Its prevalence was disturbing reminder to this new intelligentsia of their brethren who persisted within a universe replete with miracle saints, cult practices, spirit possession, magic-all the elements that once made*

Max Weber speak of an 'enchanted' universe in which modern rationality had not taken hold'.' Page 141

'The ideologues (impractical idealists) *of the Singh Sabha, in order to* ***enforce their new version of Sikhism****, also wanted to demonstrate that prior to their intervention Sikhism was weak and ill-equipped to cope with the future. In the reasoning of Singh Sabha intellectuals, they rescued the community from the dark ages and created the golden epoch without which Sikh tradition was doomed. Unfortunately, historians have tended to take the British discourse, seconded by the Sabha's literature, at face value, a neat little model that posits* (presumes) *a decline in Sikh fortunes and then shows an ascendancy called the Sikh renaissance.'* Page 214, 215

'*But in colonial Punjab, during the second half of the nineteenth century there emerged a* ***restless new elite*** *that cut across kin lines, neighbourhood networks and even caste affiliations.'* Page 265

'The martyrs' blood provided Tat Khalsa with unlimited potential to recast the ***façade*** *of Sikhism in a form very desirable in the nineteenth century.'* Page 332

Sikh Historiography; Principle of Silence and Negation

'In the Sikh case, historical texts are virtually silent about religious diversity, sectarian conflicts, nature worship, witchcraft, sorcery, spirits, magical healing, omens, wizards, miracle saint, goddesses, ancestral spirits, festival, exorcism, astrology, divination, and village deities. When, occasionally, some of these are mentioned in historical texts, they serve to dress up an argument about how Sikhism was rapidly relapsing into Hinduism in the nineteenth century, how its adherents deviated from the 'true' articles of faith and subscribe to 'superstitious' and 'primitive' beliefs.' Ultimately, this argument in official Sikh historiography goes on to establish that Sikhs were delivered from the bondage of un-Sikh beliefs by the intervention of the late nineteenth-century Singh Sabha movement. Scholars who favour such interpretation are backing ***what I call the principle of negation****. They are of the view that Singh Sabha reformers were in line with traditional Sikh doctrines when they opposed a large terrain of Sikh beliefs and practices in the nineteenth century.'* Pages 30-31

Self-Contradictions

'The most notable features of Popular religion in mid-century Punjab, as discussed in chapter 3, were: a repertoire of ubiquitous (omnipresent) *saints, pervasive beliefs concerning benign and malevolent spirits, witchcraft, divine intercession, the ability of saint long dead to work miracles, the heeding of omens and the boons that were believed to result from making pilgrimage to the shrines of a saint. It hardly comes as a surprise that one of the first cultural conventions to come under fire from Sikh reformers was the wide spread practice of worshipping popular saints like Sakhi Sarvar and Guga Pir.* Page 307

'Third, by the time of 1911 census the Singh Sabha movement had been actively campaigning for over three decades to wean Sikhs away from worship of Pirs like Sakhi Sarvar. This exercise was highly successful, and by the turn of the century entire Sikh villages, which had earlier worshiped Sarvar and taken part in the ritual cycle associated with that Pir stopped doing so.' Page 148

*'In the summer of 1896 Giani Thakar Singh, widely respected in the Majha belt for his piety and learning, prevailed upon the entire Sikh population of village Sarli (*Sarhali?) *in Amritsar district to renounce their age-old veneration of Pir Sakhi Sarvar. In a large public gathering, these former followers of Sikh Sarvar were administered the Pahul and undertook to strictly adhere to the Khalsa code of conduct.'* Page 310, 311

Singh Sabha Reformers Castigated

'Ditt Singh's ire (anger) *at worship of Sakhi Sarvar by the people of Punjab in general, and Sikhs in particular, was based on four main reasons. First, undertaking a pilgrimage to the Pir's shrine at Nagah led to the intermixing of different religions and castes, resulting in the violation of social codes, which proscribed such intermixture. Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus, Jats, Brahmans and Chamars all ate together freely during the period of pilgrimage and addressed each other as brothers. (It is ironic that Ditt Singh, an untouchable himself, took to censuring intercaste commensality* (eating together)*).'* Page 308

'The ***philippic*** (tirade) *against Sarvar had a far-reaching impact on Sikh consciousness. Its most dramatic manifestation is the case of Dani, a Jat lady who, according to popular legend, was cured of barrenness as a result of Sarvar's blessings. Ironically, in the late nineteenth century, when descendents of a son born to through Sarvar's intercession read Ditt Singh's invective (abuse) against the Pir, it had such an profound impact on them that they renounced allegiance to the family saint.'* Page 309

'Ditt Singh's barbed (stinging) *text was widely used by Tat Khalsa publicists, who read from it to Sikh assemblies and apparently succeeded in convincing their audience of the futility of Sikhs following a Muslim Pir.'* Page 309

'Similar critiques were offered against Gugga Pir and other popular saints visited by large crowds, particularly to heal illness or seek boons. The authoritative discourse represented the worship of saints as a sign of credulity, superstition, sacrilege and above all un-Sikh behaviour.' Page 309

'As well as undisguised ***hostility*** *towards veneration of Pirs, the Khalsa code entailed a* ***hostile polemic*** (confutation) *against all forms of popular worship. Village gods, local shrines, ancestral spirits, holy nature-spots, and devis like the smallpox goddess Sitla were all ridiculed and proclaimed to be powerless. The new elite* (Singh Sabha Reformers) *exhibited no keenness to understand why many Sikhs residing in rural tracts embraced these alternative forms of worship. Possibly the gap between elite and popular thinking had widened to such an extent that the question of understanding the rationale behind peasant religion did not arise. As far as elite was concerned, no multiple religious loyalties were henceforth to be permitted.'* Pages 310

Harjot Singh Oberoi's oblique appreciation of the detractors, he calls Sanatan Sikhs: guru-pretenders, holy quacks, occult Pirs, charlatan intellectuals, idolatrous Mahants, priests, etc. that led the credulous Sikh element astray; and deprecation of the protectors of authentic Sikh religiosity and history, stalwart Sikh reformers whom he derides as ideologues, radicals, orthodox, authoritative, etc. who endeavoured to wean the gullible Sikhs from the former mélange and thwart coercive proselytizing overtures of the coercive Christian missionaries, radical Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj zealots is typical of W. H. McLeod affiliated academic fraternity cadre that has monopolized the Sikh Study chairs at the Western Universities.