

Introduction

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In the course of the past decade, remarkable changes have taken place in the way the world views the Sikhs and in the way Sikhs view the world. Many of these changes have been generated by the swirl of violent events that have so fundamentally changed life in the Punjab, the prosperous northwestern state of India that is home territory to Sikhs. These include the rise of a newly militant Sikh religion; demands for an independent or semiautonomous Sikh state; the invasion of the Golden Temple, Sikhism's central shrine, by troops of the Indian government; the assassination of Indira Gandhi in response; the massacre of thousands of Sikhs in Delhi in counterresponse; and a continuing cycle of killings in the Punjab itself. These events make the papers and create a context within which the many Sikhs who have emigrated overseas must explain themselves to their non-Sikh neighbors—and themselves. Not only that, they reflect the activities of some of those same overseas Sikhs. The idea of an autonomous Sikh state, a “homeland” that came to be called Khalistan, received persistent support abroad; and when Khalistan was publicly proposed at a major Sikh educational conference held in the Punjab in 1981, it was a Sikh citizen of United States who did the speaking.

Such matters highlight the fact that not all Sikhs around the globe still think that their home community, the Sikhs of the Punjab, belong within the borders of India. Whether this is the majority or the minority opinion, it is founded on a perception of Sikh religion and culture that is very widely shared—the conviction that Sikhism is an independent religious tradition. Ten years ago it was common for introductory textbooks in world religion to dispense

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with Sikhism by means of a paragraph inserted in the section on Hinduism. No longer. Political events of the last decade have made it plain that such an approach is seriously askew. And if that is true when the Sikhs are studied from the point of view of their religion, it is no less true when they are studied for their history, their literature, or their identity as an ethnic community abroad.

The aim of this book is to open up the major issues involved in pursuing Sikh studies in the context of higher education in North America. The first four chapters take a field-by-field approach to the problem. The next three address issues of overall educational structure and specific pedagogical needs. The final chapter is bibliographic in nature; it presents a review of literature in the field.

Mark Juergensmeyer begins by describing difficulties and opportunities that face students and teachers of Sikhism in the context of the field of religious studies. He distinguishes four aspects of Sikh studies—studies of the historical origins of the tradition, its major texts, its beliefs and practices, and the sense of communal identity it has spawned, especially abroad—and suggests how these interact with major currents shaping the academic study of religion in Western universities. He goes on to separate out the major ways Sikhism has been treated in textbooks on world religion, and he explains why there are such disparities and outright omissions.

N. Gerald Barrier continues by addressing significant issues posed by the study of Sikh history. He describes two major approaches, one emanating primarily from academic institutions in the Punjab and the other more at home in Western universities. The one stresses the organic integrity of the Sikh historical experience; the other is more interested in its intersection with forces and events that were not intrinsically Sikh. Barrier goes on to isolate several themes that recur persistently at various points in Sikh history and show how, in addition, each historical period demands the consideration of a set of issues uniquely appropriate to itself.

W. H. McLeod takes as his subject the study of Sikh literature. He highlights the issue of canonicity by describing the spectrum of texts that extends from the clearly scriptural *Adi Granth* all the way across to such influential but extracanonical documents as the hagiographical *janam-sakhi* and *gurbilas* literature. Questions relating to the textual status of these various documents figure prominently in McLeod's discussion, and he shows how, in the current political environment, the attitude one takes to such questions is apt to put one in serious conflict with scholars and/or believers who take a different approach.

In the fourth and final chapter dealing with a field of study as it relates to the Sikhs, Arthur W. Helweg discusses Sikhs under the rubric of ethnic or migration studies—the study of Sikhs living elsewhere than in the Indian subcontinent. Like Barrier, he devotes considerable attention to the major historical phases that need to be distinguished by anyone approaching his subject, but the time span he considers is only one century, as compared with Barrier's five, and the geographical spread is much larger. In relating the study of the Sikh diaspora to studies of other replanted communities, Helweg stresses the point that a bilateral approach will not do. One cannot merely understand a migrating community in relation to the society in the midst of which it settles. One must also take into account the sending community—in this case, Sikhs living in the Punjab—and understand the importance of ever more intense interactions between the Punjabi Sikhs and those who have settled elsewhere.

With the fifth chapter, written by Gurinder Singh Mann, the book comes to a major turning point. In the first four chapters, all written by scholars outside the Sikh tradition, much attention is given to demands placed upon the study of the Sikhs by the Western academic tradition. Mann takes up the other side of things: the educational heritage that has been built up over the centuries within the Sikh tradition itself. Yet in the course of doing so, he shows that this is a tradition which has been in lively dialogue with Western modes of study for a full century, ever since the British succeeded in making a colony of the Punjab. In fact, Mann uses the experience of the so-called Singh Sabha period in Sikh history (1873–1920), when Sikhs first systematically confronted Western notions of education, as a base from which to think about the prospects for Sikh studies in North American universities today. He brings directly to the fore the often thorny question of what should be the relation between North American universities teaching about Sikhism and the Sikh communities that exist in the populace at large.

This question also plays a great role in the chapter that follows, where Joseph T. O'Connell charts the historical course of programs in Sikh studies at Canadian and American universities. O'Connell repeatedly draws attention to the financial and ideological force that has been exerted upon these programs by Sikh foundations and local Sikh communities, and he concludes by describing a current movement among some Sikhs who would shield the Sikh tradition from the critical scrutiny it is apt to receive in North American universities. O'Connell suggests ways in which such concerns can

appropriately be met. For him, as for Juergensmeyer, McLeod, and Mann, the tension between scholarship and religious experience is not just one that confronts Sikhs; every religious tradition must deal with this problem. Moreover, one feels this element of strain not just in relations between Sikhs and outside observers, but within the Sikh community itself. This is undeniably rough terrain, both for the critical student and for the staunch believer, but Sikhs are not alone in having to confront it.

The marked tensions between academics and believers that have affected the field of Sikh studies in recent years—and sometimes made it difficult for one side of a single person to live with the other—create a concern that surfaces in almost every chapter of the book. Although the field of Sikh studies is very much intact, and in India well established, such tensions have on occasion made the last decade a troubled period for Sikh studies in North America. At the same time, however, they have undoubtedly helped make it a formative period, too.

How these tensions will play themselves out in the 1990s remains to be seen, but a second theme that unites the chapters in this book is an exploration of one important context where such conflicts are sure to arise: the college classroom. Contributors to the first half of the book explain issues that will face teachers approaching the Sikh tradition from each of four vantage points—religion, history, sacred literature, and ethnic or migration studies. In several cases these authors also suggest how their own aspect of Sikh studies might fit into courses covering a wider range than the Sikhs, and they explain what resources are available to teachers of such courses.

In the seventh chapter, Gurinder Singh Mann goes a step farther by describing an actual course on Sikhism that he has taught for three years in the combined religion departments at Barnard College and Columbia University. He explains what decisions he faced in structuring his course and points out issues that emerged as central. As a way of guiding our perception of the logic of the course, he draws out the themes and tensions that he believes have given a coherent, overall shape to the development of Sikh history and religion. Mann's course on Sikhism is not the only course on Sikhism that has been offered at universities in North America, but it is one of only a handful, and it provides readers with at least one paradigm against which to react. Gerald Barrier's detailed description of issues he faced in a course that also had a chronological format provides some counterpoint.

The book concludes with a bank of materials that we hope will be of use as reference tools for teachers who wish to approach Sikh subjects but do not consider themselves experts in the field. There is a glossary of Punjabi terms used at various points throughout the book, and a select bibliography of works in English about the Sikhs. The bibliography is organized by topic—many corresponding to those suggested in Mark Juergensmeyer's essay—so that readers can review the literature according to its major divisions. Additional help in understanding major contours in Sikh studies as expressed in published books is provided by J. S. Grewal, who is widely acknowledged to be one of the preeminent figures in the field. His historical review of major works published in English since the middle of the nineteenth century is the final chapter in this book.

Studying the Sikhs began as a conference held at Columbia University in the spring of 1989. The event was cosponsored by Columbia's Southern Asian Institute and by the Sikh Cultural Society of Richmond Hill, Queens, and represented the sort of happy cooperation for which several contributors to this book so fervently hope. The editors are grateful to both sponsoring organizations for their confidence and, we hope, foresight and to Kristie Contardi, who has so meticulously helped us in typing the text of the manuscript. We also acknowledge the kindness of the University Seminars program at Columbia for assistance in preparing the manuscript for publication. The ideas presented here have benefitted from discussions in the University Seminar on Tradition and Change in South and Southeast Asia. Finally, we wish to express our thanks to one another for a mutually enlightening, if sometimes dogged, experience in bringing these essays to the light of print.