

Exploring Sikhism

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■ Exploring Sikhism, Aspects of Sikh Identity,
■ Culture and Thought
■ by W. H. McLeod,
■ Oxford University Press, 200, Rs. 495.
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It was with some hesitation that I accepted to review this anthology of McLeod's essays on Sikh History and Thought, and after having read the book, I realise that I should not have undertaken this exercise, especially after going through the last chapter where he laments over all the unjustified criticism that has been levied against him. He calls it: *Cries of outrage: history versus tradition in the study of the Sikh community*. First of all, may I address myself to the very personal attacks. To accuse a scholar, who has devoted all his life to the study and research of Sikhism, with some hidden agenda or bad faith is really outrageous and must be condemned in the strongest possible terms. To even say that he has helped his academic colleagues or associates in one way or another to propagate his views is utter nonsense. Such accusations have no place in academic, intellectual milieu.

McLeod's first major study was his search for historicity in the *Janam Sakhis*, a task for which, as an empiricist historian of the Anglo-Saxon variety, he was not the most suitable person. The first and foremost task of any scientific enquiry is the correct identification of the object of study. While the *Janam Sakhis* are historically situated, they are not, in any sense of the empirical historical order, a historical document. Just like the New Testament or any other discursive composition of that order, it is full of miracles and mystical experiences. In the general historico-cultural context, it represents, above all, an ideological discourse constituted in the ongoing Indian dialectical confrontations. Even if one is not familiar with the modern theories of the constitution of new structural, conceptual wholes, one could refer to the centuries old Naya and Buddhist theories of ever new conceptual formations. It bothers McLeod that there are no factual details of how Guru Nanak

went from one place to another, by which means, in how many days. And, when McLeod, the "sceptical historian" that he calls himself, does not find any "facts", the "traditional historians" try to prove that they were there all over. It is like two blind men looking for something that they presume should be around the corner. The *Janam Sakhis* represent dialectical interactions with the prevalent ideologies, be they Hindu or Muslim or any one of their numerous varieties. They are also anthropological documents par excellence. Linguistically, they are our earliest documents of Panjabi prose. They are discursive formations within which are embedded the dialectics of perception and conception, of cosmological and anthropological order in a universe that is both real and surreal, both experiential and existential.

The second major object of study of McLeod's analysis is the writings of Guru Nanak. Here the situation is even worse. Again, as a trained historian of the Oriental School to look for historical influences, he is not able to follow the reconstitution and reconstruction of the ideological discourses. In order to prove or disprove a certain "influence", he is in search of the sources of the ideological elements without realising that in the dialectical interaction, in the constitution of the new conceptual discourse, the primitive or the so-called original elements enter into new combinations, and in the process, lose all earlier significance. A specific composition of the Guru is a resultant of a new structural whole and a new discursive formation. It is a new conceptual construct and must be understood as such. It is but natural that every thinker, every philosopher makes use of the given, the *langue* the idiom of his period, but in the constitution of the new conceptual construct there is a dialectical interaction between this given, this *langue*, and its

personal, existential realisation, the *parole*, resulting in a new *langage*. What is new is what Levi-Strauss calls, the *bricolage*, the new conceptual construct, the new discursive formation. If this process is not understood, there is nothing one can do. It is not the field of the empiricist historian, it is the domain of the history of ideas, of the *histoire des idées*.

The third object of study of the author is the history per se, and without doubt, he is one of the best scholars in the field. When it comes to the constitution and development of the civil society, the evolution and the progression of the *raihat maryada*, his researches are excellent. He is perfectly at home in this domain of historical facts and the gradual evolution and conflicts of the daily life of the society. Once the dialectics of cosmology and anthropology of the *Janam Sakhis* is excluded or the new conceptual constructs in the form of ideological and theological discourses of the Gurubani are set aside, McLeod's grasp of the events is highly commendable. The development of the Sikh Panth, the contributions of the Singh Sabha movement, Sikh fundamentalism and the Sikh identity are socio-historical issues, and McLeod as an empiricist historian, is best equipped to handle this material.

Lastly, with reference to all the three objects of study, in spite of my reservations, McLeod's contribution to Sikh studies is extremely important. As an outsider, as an objective historian, he initiated and instigated researches in some of the most sensitive domains, that an insider, a member of the community, probably could not have perceived. He will always be remembered as one of the most outstanding scholars of Sikhism.

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