

W.H. McLeod and Sikh Studies

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Professor W.H. McLeod, the most distinguished Western scholar of the past half a century, has expanded the scope of Sikh studies and brought a considerable volume of literature to the notice of scholars through his writings. His work has also provoked a protracted controversy in Sikh studies. The first section in this essay outlines his academic career with reference to his major works. The last section makes a general assessment of his work. The remaining seven sections present a critique of his treatment of the life and teachings of Guru Nanak, McLeod's interpretation of Sikh history, his approach to and understanding of Sikh literature (including publication of texts and translations), his treatment of caste and gender in the Sikh social order, his view of Sikh identity, his conception of history and its methodology, the character of his *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism*, and his introduction to popular Sikh art. This critique, it is hoped, may be helpful in the pursuit of Sikh studies.

I

Among the Western scholars of the past half a century Professor W.H. McLeod stands distinguished for his lifelong interest in Sikh studies, the volume of his publications, and his familiarity with a wide range of Sikh literature. His work has been uncritically accepted by the Western academia and categorically rejected by the Sikh intelligentsia as a motivated misrepresentation of the Sikh tradition. It is necessary, therefore, to form an academic assessment of his work.

A glance at Professor McLeod's academic career may be helpful in the first place. Born in New Zealand in 1932, Hew McLeod went to the University of Otago in Dunedin in 1951, received M.A. degree in History in 1955, and completed his theological course to be ordained in 1957. He came to the Punjab in 1958 to teach English at the Christian Boys Higher Secondary School in Kharar. Unsatisfied with his vocation, he thought of specializing in Sikh history and Sikhism for a professional career. The change in profession was facilitated by Western institutions and sustained by growing interest in Sikh studies in Great Britain and North America. He went to the School of Oriental and African Studies in 1963 and completed his doctoral thesis in 1965 on 'The Life and Doctrine of

Guru Nanak'. Its revised version was published by the Clarendon Press in 1968 as *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*.

Meanwhile, Dr. McLeod had started teaching History at Baring Union Christian College, Batala. He started research into Janamsakhis on Smuts Fellowship at Cambridge in 1969-70, which resulted eventually in the publication of two books in 1980: *the Early Sikh Tradition* by the Clarendon Press and *the B40 Janamsakhi by Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar*. The lectures he gave to the Faculty of Oriental Studies at Cambridge were included in *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*, published by the Oxford University Press, New Delhi, in 1975 (and by the Clarendon Press in 1976).

Professor McLeod had started teaching History at the University of Otago in 1971. A work of the 1970s, his *Chaupa Singh Rahit-Nama* was published in 1987. His *Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism* had appeared already in 1984. On a Commonwealth Fellowship at the University of Toronto in 1986, he prepared lectures for the American Council of Learned Societies and the University of Oxford. The two series were published in 1989 as *The Sikhs: History, Religion and Society*, and *Who is a Sikh? The Problem of Sikh Identity*.

Unfortunately, Professor McLeod suffered a stroke early in 1987. He was never the same again. He went to Toronto to give courses in Sikh history and Sikh religion in the fall of 1988 and for four more semesters. In 1990, the University of London awarded the degree of D.Lit. for his published work. He continued to publish for two decades more but largely on the basis of work done or published earlier. Much of his work catered to the growing need of Sikh studies in the Western societies where Sikhs were becoming conspicuously present. Significantly, he produced only one monographic study, *the Early Sikh Tradition*, as a companion volume to his doctoral thesis. The bulk of his work consists of lectures, essays, articles and translations.

The prestige of the Clarendon and the Oxford University Press assured a certain measure of circulation for Professor McLeod's works and established his reputation as a scholar. But the factor that boosted his image as the leading scholar of Sikhism was, ironically, a persistent criticism of his work by 'Sikh scholars', both amateur and professional. It began with his early publications and became more and more strident in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. He responded to this criticism in some of his articles. His autobiographical *Discovering the Sikhs* (2004) was meant to answer his critics and to explain the nature of his interest in the Sikhs, and his conception of history and its methodology.

Professor McLeod refers to himself as a historian of Sikhism and the Sikhs. Other themes get related to these primary concerns. He himself talks of various aspects of the Sikh past. His translations and textual sources are an integral part of his interest in Sikh history. By and large, his publications relate to religion, history, literature, society, identity and

art. Then there is his view of history and historical methodology. We may consider each of these areas one by one before making some general remarks.

II

McLeod's single most important work, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* (1968), is his major statement on Sikhism. He clarified or amplified his views later but never really modified his basic position on the life and teachings of Guru Nanak.

With the declared intention of applying rigorous historical methodology to the sources of Guru Nanak's life, McLeod turns to the *Adi Granth*, the first *Var* of Bhai Gurdas, the *Janamsakhis* and two versions of the eighteenth-century *Mahima Prakash*. Of all these sources, the *Janamsakhis* appeared to provide the most promising source. Analyzing all the *sakhis* one by one McLeod comes to the conclusion that we get only a broad outline of Guru Nanak's life, but hardly any reliable or factual detail.

McLeod sets out to reconstruct the life of Guru Nanak in terms of 'the concrete incidents' of his life. Even his compositions are analyzed by McLeod only for concrete events. In the process, he compartmentalizes the life of Guru Nanak, and this approach becomes counter productive. We know that Guru Nanak wrote a large volume of poetry in which he comments comprehensively on contemporary social order, polity and religion, revealing a deep interest in matters religious and ethical, and a rare kind of social awareness. The personal and secular aspects of his life can surely be interesting, but not as significant as the primary occupation of his life: the formation, exposition and propagation of his system of beliefs.

McLeod discusses the teachings of Guru Nanak in terms of the nature of God, the nature of unregenerate man, the divine self-expression, and the path to reach the goal. McLeod's training in theology has a direct bearing on his approach to Sikh religion: 'theology' remains almost an exclusive concern. Liberation through *nam-simran* is seen as the goal of life. This emphasis on *nam simran* ignores Guru Nanak's own preoccupation with ethical and social commitment. McLeod appears to assume that Guru Nanak's conception of liberation was the same as that of the *Vaishnava bhaktas* and the *Sants*. For Guru Nanak, however, ethical conduct is essential for liberation, and the *liberated-in-life* (*jivan-mukta*) remains active in social life not merely to pursue his own interests but also to promote the welfare of others. Concerned solely with theology, McLeod ignores the social and political dimensions of Guru Nanak's ideology.

McLeod argues that Guru Nanak regarded Hindu and Islamic beliefs as 'fundamentally wrong', and that the religion of Guru Nanak is not a

synthesis of Hindu and Islamic beliefs. We know indeed that Guru Nanak looks upon contemporary religion in terms of the Brahmanical, the ascetical and the Islamic tradition; all the three stand bracketed, and none of them is authoritative for Guru Nanak. However, McLeod goes on to argue that the pattern evolved by Guru Nanak was a reworking of the Sant synthesis. He does not tell us why he ignores Guru Nanak's explicit statements on divine sanction for his message. We do not have to believe in revelation in order to see that Guru Nanak claims complete originality for his faith.

Indeed, the idea of divine sanction for Guru Nanak's dispensation is expressed in his compositions even more forcefully than in the *Janamsakhis*. He is called by God to his court and given the robe of true adoration with the nectar of the true name. They who taste it attain peace. The minstrel spreads the message and utters the *bani* received from the Lord. 'I have spoken what you have made me speak'. 'Regard the *bani* of the true Guru as nothing but true; he is one with God'. The Vedas talk of virtue (*pun*) and vice (*pap*) and of heaven and hell; Guru Nanak's *gian* involves adoration of the greatness of the True One and the True Name. The Vedas talk in terms of trade; Guru Nanak's *gian* is received through God's grace. People talk of the four cosmic ages, each with its own way laid down in the Veda, and the Veda meant for Kaliyuga was the *Atharvana*. For Guru Nanak, however, liberation in Kaliyuga comes through appropriation of the Name, recognition of *hukam*, and living in accordance with the divine will. The cosmic context of this statement underscores the universal validity of the claim as well as the distinction of the way propagated by him.

In his dialogue with the *Siddhs*, Guru Nanak tells them that he belongs to the 'Gurmukh panth', he refers the praises of God as 'our capital', and the all pervading light of God as 'our support'. The Guru and the Sikhs, together, represent a new kind of association, called *sangat*, *Gur-sangat*, *Gursant-sabha*, *sant sabha*, *Sikh sabha*, or *sadh sabha*. The Name is recited in the *sat-sangat* and the True Guru gives the understanding that the Name alone is ordained by God. It is explicitly stated that there is only one door and only one path; the Guru alone is the ladder to the divine court. The praises of God in the *sant-sabha* become the best of acts in accordance with *Gurmat*. The *sevaks* of the Guru reflect on his *shabad* in *sat-sangat*, realize the divine presence within, and become the means of liberation for others. The Sikh of the Guru rises above all considerations of *varna* and *jati*. In the Guru's presence, as in the court of God, there is no consideration for caste or birth.

Guru Nanak's comments on certain customs suggest that the traditional songs for marriage were to be discarded in favor of the hymns of joy (*sohila*) on union with God; the traditional modes of lamentation were to be discarded in favor of singing of Guru Nanak's *Alahanian*. There was no room for traditional rites and rituals in the ideology of

Guru Nanak. His comments carry the implication that singing of his hymns relating to these rites and rituals are the alternative for his Sikhs. The old practices and institutions were not merely to be discarded but replaced by new ones which harmonize with his worldview.

These unexplored dimensions of Guru Nanak's compositions suggest a clear sense of distinction based on both ideology and praxis. Its counterpart is totally missing in the compositions of Kabir, Ravidas and Nam Dev who are seen by McLeod as the most important figures of the Sant Tradition. Even Kabir advocated renunciation and mendicancy, and he founded no institution. He did not assume the formal position of a guide and did not leave a successor. The Kabir-Panths came into existence much later, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Unlike Kabir, Guru Nanak installed Angad as the Guru in his lifetime to carry forward the egalitarian Gurmukh Panth on the highway of the Name, Gurbani, congregational worship, and community meal.

McLeod reiterates his position in *The Evolution of the Sikh Community* (1975): Guru Nanak stands firmly in the Sant tradition and he can be regarded as a Sant: the Sikh Panth originated with Guru Nanak but not his religious ideas. In reaction to criticism by other scholars McLeod hardened his stance in *The Sikhs* (1989): the 'fundamental doctrines' of the Sant tradition are 'faithfully reproduced' by Guru Nanak, and this goes against any claim to 'significant originality'. In a comprehensive statement in his *Sikhism* (1995), McLeod reinforces this view. There are two basic limitations in his approach: one, he takes into account only concepts (without much regard for their exact connotation or their contextual significance) and ignores practices altogether; and two, he concentrates on similarities and ignores all differences.

III

For McLeod's treatment of Sikh history we may turn to *The Evolution of the Sikh Community* and his *Sikhism*. His basic assumption is stated in *The Evolution of the Sikh Community* (1975): the Sikh Panth developed in direct response to 'the pressure of historical circumstances'. Understandably, therefore, he ignores its starting point in the time of Guru Nanak. The first significant development for him is the digging of a baoli at Goindval as a place of pilgrimage in the time of Guru Amar Das. Bonds other than those of religious belief were needed for a second generation of Sikhs. In addition to a new pilgrimage-centre, Guru Amar Das provided festival-days, distinctive rituals, and a collection of sacred writings. Assuming that Guru Nanak was a Sant and the Sants were opposed to institutionalization, McLeod states that Guru Nanak was opposed to all such practices. McLeod goes on to say that these 'innovations' re-introduced traditional 'Hindu customs'. It is not clear how a pilgrimage-centre, festival-days, distinctive rituals or collection of

sacred-writings become 'Hindu'. It must be added that McLeod does not even pose the question of the connotation of 'Hindu' in medieval India.

The second important development for McLeod is the increasing number of Jats among the Sikhs. He suggests on a hunch that their preponderance was presumably facilitated by the fact that Khatri commonly served as teachers of the Jats. He goes on to refer to Irfan Habib's idea that they had become agriculturists and they joined the egalitarian Sikh Panth to remove the social stigma of their pastoral background. McLeod adduces evidence of the *Dabistan-i Mazahib* for the influence of Jat masands among the Sikhs. His essential argument is that the Jats used to bear arms and their very presence within the Sikh community made it militant. Therefore, the growth of militancy within the Sikh Panth in the time of Guru Hargobind 'must be traced primarily to the impact of Jat cultural patterns'. McLeod refers also to 'economic problems which prompted a militant response'. He goes on to add that the prolonged residence of the Gurus in the Shivaliks created a situation in which elements of the hill culture penetrated the Jat culture of the plains and produced yet another stage in the evolution of the Panth. He sees this influence plainly in the works of Guru Gobind Singh and in the writings produced at his court in which there are frequent references to the mighty exploits of the Mother Goddess, notably in the *Chandi ki Var*. In any case, 'a new and powerful synthesis' of Shakti and Jat cultural patterns prepared the Panth for a decisive role in 'the chaotic circumstances of the eighteenth century'. McLeod thus gives the impression that his concern all along is to marshal circumstances (Jat preponderance, economic problems, and the hill culture) for his explanation of Sikh militancy which rules out any role of Sikh ideology.

However, McLeod's arguments are not based on credible or adequate evidence. Whether Jat or non-Jat, the agriculturists dominated the village community and they would not need Khatri or Brahmans, who were largely dependent on them, to lead them. Nor would they regard themselves socially inferior to any other group of people in the village. Even if they bore arms the sword was not their favorite weapon, and they were not seen as refractory by the Mughal authorities in the time of Akbar and Jahangir. The issue here is not merely of bearing arms but of purposeful organization. The evidence of the *Dabistan* on the strength of the Jat masands is not really relevant as it comes after Guru Hargobind had adopted martial measures. According to Irfan Habib, who talks of 'agrarian crisis' and 'peasant revolts' in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, the principle of cohesion for the Sikh revolt was provided by Sikh religious ideology. For his thesis of the Shakti cult, McLeod refers to Niharranjan Ray, but Ray does not talk of any synthesis and McLeod does not explain what it was. It may be pointed out that in the *Chandi ki Var* itself, Durga is created by God, just like Ram and Krishan, and in the *Dasam Granth* more space is given to the

Krishan Avtar, and even to the Ram Avtar, than to all the three versions related to Chandi or Durga put together. Why McLeod talks of Chandi alone is not clear. Probably what he had in mind was the appearance of the goddess in the eighteenth century Sikh literature. But neither McLeod nor any other scholar has studied the actual influence of the goddess, or of the Dasam Granth, on the Khalsa.

McLeod refers to his limited knowledge of the eighteenth century. Even today the social and cultural history of the Sikhs during the eighteenth century is not well known. He asserts nonetheless that traditions relating to the period of Guru Gobind Singh must be set aside: 'The slate must be wiped clean and must not be reinscribed until we have ascertained just what did take place during the eighteenth century'. He believes that at the end of the century there was 'a clearly defined Khalsa Panth' with well formulated religious doctrines, a coherent code of discipline, and a strong conviction that the Panth was born to rule, but this was not the position at the beginning. Therefore, he infers that the Khalsa tradition must have evolved largely in the course of the eighteenth century.

McLeod's assumption that the ideal of 'raj karega Khalsa' (the Khalsa shall rule) was not there in the early eighteenth century is belied by the occurrence of 'raj karega khalsa' couplet in a copy of the Tankhahnama made in 1718-19. The original was composed earlier, most probably in the time of Guru Gobind Singh himself. In any case McLeod's view of the late origin of 'raj karega khalsa' is untenable. Several other Rahitnamas too can be placed in the time of Guru Gobind Singh. According to McLeod, the question of Khalsa rahit was not finally settled until well into the eighteenth century. But the early Rahitnamas contain all the important items of rahit, including all the 5 Ks, though not as a formulation of panj-kakar.

McLeod finds in Sikh history 'a theory of religious unity contending with diversity of social elements', raising problems of cohesion for the Panth. These problems became rather acute in the absence of a successor after the death of Guru Gobind Singh. The first answer to the question of authority appeared to be the personal leadership of Banda but it proved to be a failure. After his death, an answer was provided by the doctrines of corporate and scriptural Guru (popularly called Guru-Panth and Guru-Granth). McLeod goes on to suggest that in the circumstances of the eighteenth century emphasis shifted from the authority of the sangat to that of the militant jatha, leading to the emergence of the authority of the Sarbat Khalsa. The doctrine of Guru-Panth was well suited to the needs of the Khalsa at this time. The gurmata or the collective resolution of the Sarbat Khalsa was its practical expression. The need passed when Ranjit Singh extinguished 'the misl system' and assumed the authority of the Panth. The theory of Guru-Panth quickly lapsed into disuse and its place was taken by the Guru-Granth for all religious questions.

In 1975, McLeod looked upon the Gursobha of Sainapat as a work of 1741. In his autobiography (2004), however, he has come round to the view that it was composed in 1711. He accepts its evidence on the vesting of Guruship in the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh himself. But Sainapat refers also to the vesting of Guruship in the Shabad-Bani (in the Granth). Therefore, McLeod's hypothesis that the doctrines of Guru-Panth and Guru-Granth became current due to the needs of the Khalsa in the course of the eighteenth century, and not because Guru Gobind Singh had declared that Guruship after him stood vested in the Panth and the Granth, is not valid. In Sikh literature of the eighteenth century both the doctrines are frequently mentioned from the first to the last decade. Nor is it valid to maintain that the doctrine of Guru-Granth developed later to replace the doctrine of Guru-Panth in the historical situation of the early nineteenth century.

McLeod's *Sikhism* (1997) is formally divided into three parts: History, Religion, and Society. The 'History' part consists of four chapters, each of about 8,000 to 10,000 words. The three and a half chapters cover the early nineteenth century in 70 pages. Only 12 pages are given to the rest of Sikh history. We may have a close look on the whole before offering any general comment.

In the first chapter, McLeod talks discursively of the Janamsakhi image of Guru Nanak and goes on to argue that the Nanak-Panth emerged as 'religious community'. The ideal of liberation through the Name attracted rural people to Kartarpur to participate in kirtan and langar. One among many panths, it was probably 'regarded as a Hindu panth'. Guru Angad kept up the dharamsal and the langar, and used the trader's script for recording the Guru's utterances. The script came to be known as Gurmukhi. The majority of the members of the Panth observed traditional practices, making only 'a personal response' to the message of spiritual liberation. Beyond this distinction and the presence of several castes in the Panth there would be nothing to separate them from 'the other Hindu villagers of the Punjab'. It does not occur to McLeod to use the evidence of the compositions of Guru Nanak and Guru Angad to see what they thought of themselves and their followers.

The second chapter covers the period of six Gurus, from Guru Amar Das to Guru Har Krishan. McLeod reiterates that changes started in the time of Guru Amar Das when a second generation of Sikhs had come up, and consolidation was needed. 'Innovations' were introduced through 'some traditional rituals of Hindu tradition'. The Panth had the same old constituency, with Khatri leadership and Jat numerical domination. The organization became more complex in the time of Guru Ram Das and Guru Arjan when the sacred pool was excavated in the newly founded Ramdaspur, masands were appointed, Harmandar was constructed, the Granth was compiled, and new towns were founded. The Panth continued to expand in the rural areas. Guru Arjan attracted Jahangir's

unfavourable notice and died in Mughal custody. According to McLeod, his death by torture or execution was not definitely established, yet he was regarded as a martyr. Here again, McLeod ignores the evidence of the Gurus themselves on the wrong assumption that their compositions were not relevant for the purpose.

McLeod goes into the question whether or not Guru Hargobind assumed the dual role which came to be categorized later as *miri-piri* (temporal and spiritual leadership). McLeod quotes the stanza of Bhai Gurdas in which Guru Hargobind's departure from the practices of his predecessors is depicted, and looks upon it as the genuine questioning on the part of Bhai Gurdas about the direction of the change. McLeod misses the point that Bhai Gurdas is actually talking of the Mina detractors of Guru Hargobind and not of the Sikhs in general. McLeod then refers to the evidence of the *Dabistan* to suggest that Guru Hargobind's 'battles' were skirmishes brought about by the growing number of unruly Jats in the Sikh Panth. With the growing frequency of these troubles, Guru Hargobind abandoned Amritsar for Kiratpur in the Shivalik hills. Jat loyalty to the Guru is explained in terms of personal loyalty to the leader rather than any commitment to ideology. Without saying so, McLeod denies the assumption of *miri-piri* by Guru Hargobind. But in the *Vars* of Bhai Gurdas, Guru Hargobind is 'the king of both the spiritual and the temporal realms' (*din duni da patshah*) and a great warrior.

With regard to Guru Har Rai and Guru Har Krishan, McLeod states that the Panth retired into obscurity during their time. The *masands* tended to reassert their independence. Aurangzeb thought of intervening in the matter of succession to Guruship. As yet there was no danger of armed conflict, though the Panth remained aware of the danger.

The third chapter relates to Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh. Nominated by Guru Har Krishan, Tegh Bahadur sustained his claim to Guruship despite opposition from Dhirmal, Ram Rai, and the Minas. He moved to Makhawal in the Shivaliks in 1665, undertook a lengthy tour as far as Assam, lived at Patna for one or two years, and returned to the Punjab. What happened now was not clear because the Persian and Sikh sources gave conflicting accounts. McLeod quotes the well-known passage from the *Bachittar Natak* on Guru Tegh Bahadur's death to show that there is no reference to the Brahmans of Kashmir in this passage. The connection is said to have been made by the later Sikh writers. McLeod's restricted interpretation of the passage carries the implication that the cause of Guru Tegh Bahadur's execution was not clear. He thinks that the effect of his death was clear enough: the Mughal administration came to be seen by the Sikhs as the greatest enemy of the Panth.

McLeod then talks of the early life of Guru Gobind Singh leading to the founding of the Khalsa which constituted 'the most important event

in Sikh history'. The character of the Sikh Panth changed now, with its interests extending beyond religion and the change becoming formalized. The reluctance of Brahmans and Khatri to join the Khalsa made the caste constituency even more strongly Jat. Keeping uncut hair and bearing arms corresponded to Jat patterns of behaviour. McLeod thinks that 'external symbols' of the Khalsa could not be reconciled with Guru Nanak's 'adamant insistence' that external features of any kind stood squarely in the way of liberation. Quoting Sainpat on the pronouncement of Guru Gobind Singh with regard to the vesting of Guruship in the Khalsa Panth and the Sikh scripture, McLeod goes on to add that the Dasam Granth shared with the Adi Granth 'the status of the eternal Guru' in the eighteenth century. Thus, the Khalsa had two scriptures.

The fourth chapter shows clearly that McLeod's primary interest was in Sikh religion and not in Sikh history. He states that the religion of the Sikhs was not 'fully developed' at the death of Guru Gobind Singh. There were two more critical periods: the eighteenth century, and the Singh Sabha Movement. The periods before and after this Movement were marked by political developments. The Punjab under Maharaja Ranjit Singh and Sikh history after the Sikh Gurdwaras Act of 1925 are given only a page each. McLeod looks upon these flanking periods from the limited angle of Sikh identity.

McLeod refers to the Sikh tradition with regard to the situation in which Banda came to the Punjab, and to the Mughal histories for his activities. In the nineteenth-century works of Ratan Singh Bhangu, Santokh Singh and Gian Singh, Banda is presented as setting up a panth of his own in opposition to the original Tat Khalsa. McLeod suggests that the origin of this view lay largely in the factional conflict between the Khalsa who acknowledged Mata Sundari's leadership and the followers of Banda. The apparent failure of Banda to take initiation fits into this situation. 'This conclusion amounts to little more than speculation, but it is inference of this kind which makes sense of what was happening to the Khalsa during the course of the eighteenth century.' In the light of contemporary evidence this argument is no more than idle speculation. Even if we leave out the *raj karega khalsa* ideal, the Amarnama refers to Banda's initiation and his commission. His hukamnama of 1710 has 'fateh darshan' and not 'Vaheguruji ka Khalsa' as the form of salutation, and it enjoins vegetarian diet. Moreover, the seal of this hukamnama refers to 'deg, tegh, fateh' as the gift of Guru Nanak.

Together with Banda's 'rebellion' the years of persecution formed a phase of critical importance. The traditions of the Khalsa were consolidated and the Rahit took a firmer shape. More than the actual events, the interpretation of what happened became the source of inspiration. Some historical figures of the first half of the eighteenth century were vividly remembered in the 'Sikh Tradition' 'as martyrs to the faith'. A defeat of the Khalsa in 1746 was remembered as Chhota

Ghallughara or 'Lesser Holocaust'. Sikh misls, which had arisen in this period as 'independent armies owing allegiance to their commanding sardar', evolved into 'more coherent forces' during the time of Ahmad Shah Abdali's invasions from 1747 to 1769. United on occasions for a particular purpose they constituted the Dal Khalsa (Army of the Khalsa). They met twice annually at the Akal Takht to act as Sarbat Khalsa. Both the Adi and the Dasam Granth lay open at their gatherings and their decision was called Gurmata. It greatly strengthened the doctrines of Guru-Granth and Guru-Panth. McLeod appears to put the cart of historical circumstance before the horse of ideological underpinnings.

The period of Ranjit Singh had 'relatively little of importance concerning the development of the Sikh religion'. The only significant exception was the appearance of the Nirankaris who were dismayed at the neglect of Guru Nanak's teachings, and of the Namdharis who were alarmed by a failure to live up to the hallowed principles of the Khalsa. It is interesting to note that McLeod talks of these movements in negative terms. His purpose is to emphasize that other Sikhs in general 'saw no need for concern'. Indeed, the Khalsa were 'still members of Hindu society' and inclined to imbibe Hindu influences. There were plenty of other Sikhs: the Sahajdharis, the Udasis, the Nirmalas, and several other 'varieties'. They were all equally well recognized as Sikhs even though the Khalsa were the most prominent. McLeod has thus come round to accept Harjot Oberoi's hypothesis of 'Sanatan' Sikhism.

In his brief reference to the Singh Sabha Movement McLeod presents it in terms of opposition between the 'Sanatan' Sikhs who were 'traditional' and conservative and the Tat Khalsa who were new and radical. The former were leaders of the Amritsar Singh Sabha and the latter, of the Lahore Singh Sabha. The latter ultimately won, first over the removal of Hindu icons from the Golden Temple, then in getting the Anand Marriage Act passed, and finally in taking over the management of the Gurdwaras. They stood for an identity distinct from that of the Hindus, the objective of Khalsa identity for all Sikhs, and obedience to the Khalsa Rahit. The Sikh Gurdwaras Act of 1925 did not introduce statutory Khalsa domination of the Panth. There was still some distance to travel. This was covered by the Shiromani Akali Dal and the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee as the two most important institutions of the Khalsa. In contemporary history the Khalsa has ruled Sikhism, with its authority becoming largely and increasingly unchallenged. 'The definition of the Panth is now very much in its keeping'.

While giving this historical outline, McLeod refers to his own earlier writings, some contemporary sources, and a few secondary works. Among the contemporary sources are the Adi Granth, the Janamsakhis, the Vars of Bhai Gurdas, the Dabistan-i Mazahib, the Bachittar Natak, the Gursobha, and the Rahitnama associated with Chaupa Singh. But the

use of these sources is highly selective. The significance of the evidence used is sometimes missed or misconstrued. There is only minimal or no use of the compositions of the Gurus in the *Adi Granth*. Their *hukamnamas* figure nowhere as a source. McLeod's general approach is largely marked by dichotomy of 'tradition' and 'history'. In the absence of factual information, there are theories, hypotheses, suppositions, and guesswork, but hardly any satisfactory explanation. The 'religious' and 'Hindu' character of the Sikh Panth, whatever it means, continues till the institution of the *Khalsa*. McLeod appears to be keen to clarify, to elaborate, and to reinforce the hypotheses adumbrated in *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*. He tends to generalize on the basis of inadequate evidence. Quite often, it is not his evidence that inform his hypotheses but his assumptions which mould his interpretation of evidence. Acceptance of Oberoi's hypothesis of 'Sanatan' Sikhism is a poor substitute for empirical evidence. History is neither McLeod's primary concern nor his forte.

IV

On Sikh literature, McLeod has a number of publications. His *Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism* (1984) contains extracts from the *Adi Granth*, the *Dasam Granth*, the works of Bhai Gurdas and Bhai Nand Lal, the *Janamsakhis*, the *Rahitnamas*, the *Gurbilas* literature of the eighteenth century, the later historical works, and the literature produced by the *Nirankaris*, the *Namdharis*, and the writers of the *Singh Sabha* movement. In his other works, he has paid more attention to the Sikh scriptures, the *Janamsakhis*, and the *Rahitnamas* than to any other form. Included in Sikh scriptures are the *Adi Granth*, the *Dasam Granth*, the works of Bhai Gurdas and Bhai Nand Lal. Generally, McLeod underlines the importance of this scriptural literature and gives descriptive accounts. About the *Adi Granth* and the *Dasam Granth*, however, he has raised a few issues.

In *The Evolution of the Sikh Community* (1975) McLeod refers to Sri Kartarpuri Bir de Darshan by Bhai Jodh Singh who had argued in favour of the authenticity of this manuscript. McLeod expresses his skepticism: if not Guru Arjan who wrote the crucial *Ramkali* hymn which describes the puberty rites conducted by Guru Arjan at the initiation of his son Hargobind? In his article on Sikh literature in the *Sikh Studies: Comparative Perspective on a Changing Tradition* (1979), McLeod reiterates that Bhai Jodh Singh's book 'leaves the principal problem unsolved'. Vehemently 'attacked' by Daljeet Singh in an essay on the authenticity of the *Kartarpuri Bir*, McLeod defends his position in *Studying the Sikhs: Issues for North America* (1993) by stating that he had merely raised questions. But these questions did carry the implication that the *Kartarpur Pothi* was not authentic. In his *Sikhism*

(1995), McLeod says that a careful analysis of the wording and content of the hymn conclusively demonstrated that it could not have been the work of Guru Arjan. In his *Autobiography* (2004), McLeod gives credit to his student Pashaura Singh for persuading him that his theory was wrong. Nevertheless, the general question of the nature of the Kartarpur text was still open for McLeod, for there were some considerable differences of opinion among Piar Singh, Pashaura Singh, Gurinder Singh Mann, and Balwant Singh Dhillon with regard to the origins and nature of the manuscript. It may be pointed out that Mann, Pashaura Singh and Dhillon have argued in favor of the authenticity of the Kartarpuri Pothi. Once that is settled, the other issues pale into insignificance.

McLeod's discussion of the Dasam Granth is very brief. He refers to it in *The Evolution of the Sikh Community* (1975) as the first 'supplementary' scripture, and suggests that its autobiographical and devotional compositions could well be the work of Guru Gobind Singh, and perhaps also the Chandi ki Var. The remainder was substantially, and probably entirely, the work of others who were present at his court. The Dasam Granth was a historical source of critical importance for McLeod as an expression of the impact of the Shakti culture of the hills upon the Jat culture of the plains. He knew that this aspect of Sikh history was yet to be studied. McLeod reiterates his view of the problems of authorship in the *Sikh Studies: Comparative Perspectives on a Changing Tradition* (1979), and suggests that Western scholars should concentrate on the compositions with the strongest claims to the tenth Guru's personal authorship (which too were yet to be studied in detail). Their close study was manageable and could prove to be a valuable contribution to our understanding of Sikh history.

In *The Sikhs* (1989), McLeod states that the Dasam Granth was regarded as 'the visibly present Guru' and given an equal status with the Adi Granth in the Gurdwaras of the Nihangs. In his article in *Studying the Sikhs* (1993), he asserts that in the late eighteenth century both the Adi Granth and the Dasam Granth were invoked, both were present at meetings of the Khalsa, and both received the same reverence. Criticized by Gurtej Singh for his observations on the Dasam Granth, McLeod insists in his *Sikhism* (1995) that the Dasam Granth was held equal to the Adi Granth in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He invokes the testimony of John Malcolm for the view that the Dasam Granth was regarded by the Khalsa as 'a part of the Guru Granth'. It seems that McLeod did not read Malcolm carefully, or he drew his own inference: nowhere in his work does John Malcolm state that the Dasam Granth, or even the Adi Granth, was the Guru. It may be added that McLeod is not the only scholar to have misread Malcolm to express the erroneous view that the pre-colonial Khalsa regarded the Dasam Granth as the Guru.

In his essay on the Janamsakhis in *The Evolution of the Sikh Community* (1975) McLeod talks of the nature, purpose and function of the Janamsakhis, and their value as sources for the later history of the Sikhs as well as their usefulness as sources for the life of Guru Nanak. The first two aspects are treated more elaborately by McLeod in his *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janam-sakhis* (1980); its third 'section' of five chapters relates to the purpose, function and value of the Janamsakhis, including their importance as historical sources for Sikh history and the history of the Punjab, and their importance in Punjabi literature. The core of the book, however, is formed by the second section of six chapters, covering more than two-thirds of the text. It relates to the origins and growth of the Janamsakhis, their constituents, forms, assembling and transmission as well as evolution of the sakhis, and sources used by the compilers.

As McLeod tells us in his autobiography, he expected the *Early Sikh Tradition* to provoke some discussion as a detailed study of the Janamsakhis. But 'not a leaf stirred'. The book 'sank like a stone'. This was a considerable disappointment for him because he regarded this book as his best. He does not tell us why it was the best but it is surely a scholarly work. It appears to have two serious limitations. First, McLeod knows that there are several 'traditions' of the Janamsakhis, reflecting the lines of division among the Sikhs, but he says virtually nothing about the relationship between a sectarian position and its Janamsakhi tradition. Second, McLeod underlines that the Janamsakhis embody the 'myth' of Guru Nanak as by far the most important aspect. But he has only a few paragraphs of a general nature on the 'myth' of Guru Nanak. Actually, there are several 'myths' of Guru Nanak in different Janamsakhi traditions and as many interpretations of his doctrines, ethics, attitudes and status. These interpretations overlap but they also differ. By ignoring these two most important aspects of the Janamsakhis, McLeod has produced a work of scholarship which remains unrelated to the Sikh faith and Sikh history. Scholarship appears to run in neutral gear.

An important reason for McLeod to select the B40 Janamsakhi for translation was its representative character in terms of content. Admittedly, it is a composite Janamsakhi. McLeod himself classifies different traditions of sakhis in the B40, but he treats it as a single whole. If we analyze the B40 Janamsakhi for the 'myths' of Guru Nanak, we find that the essential message of the sakhis of the Puratan tradition remains close to that of the bani of Guru Nanak. The sakhis of the Adi tradition move a little away, with undue emphasis on ascetical practices and miracles of Guru Nanak. The sakhis of the Miharban tradition extol Guru Nanak in a manner that extols Guru Angad even more: a successor is not only one with the founder but also a little ahead. In the sakhis of

the oral tradition, Guru Nanak uses his supranatural powers in the interest of people who, consequently, feel induced to accept his message of nam, dan, isnan and to establish dharamsals and langars. In the sakhis of the miscellaneous category Guru Nanak is a mentor of shaikhs and he is far above Kabir; celibacy is given an edge over householding.

In his earliest article on the Rahitnamas, first published in 1982 and included in *Exploring Sikhism* (2000), McLeod starts with the late nineteenth century listing nine works which constituted 'the rahit-nama literature. Though attributed largely to various members of Guru Gobind Singh's entourage, the texts of the Rahitnamas actually available appeared to McLeod to be nineteenth century products. The Prem Sumarag in the Lahore Public Library was a copy of 1874. No manuscript of the eighteenth century was known to McLeod. However, in his second article originally published in 1986, the Prem Sumarag is placed in the mid-nineteenth century on the argument of its author's knowledge of, and his nostalgia for, the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The Rahitnama associated with Chaupa Singh is placed in the eighteenth century, between 1740 and 1765.

The Chaupa Singh Rahit-Nama, actually published in 1987, contains the text and translation of two Rahitnamas: one associated with Chaupa Singh and the other with Bhai Nand Lal (known as Sakhi Rahit Patshahi 10). These are seen as the earliest Rahitnamas by McLeod. It is categorically stated that no extant Rahitnama could be safely traced to the time of Guru Gobind Singh. In the *Sikhs of the Khalsa: A History of the Khalsa Rahit* (2003), McLeod talks of the 'dramatic find' which 'compels us to revise our rahit-nama dates to an earlier period than had previously been thought possible'. This dramatic find is a copy of the Tankhahnama dated 1718-19 which we mentioned earlier. McLeod was still not inclined to place the original in the time of Guru Gobind Singh. Without giving any reason, he places it close to but after the Gursobha which he thought by now was composed in 1711. The Rahitnama associated with Prahlad Singh and the Sakhi Rahit are now placed in the 1730s, the Chaupa Singh text in the 1740s, the Rahitnama associated with Daya Singh towards the end of the century, and the Rahitnama of Desa Singh either in the late eighteenth or the early nineteenth century.

No single Rahitnama as a whole is analysed by McLeod. The evidence of the Rahitnamas on various issues or themes of Sikh history is sought to be put together. All these themes are related to the religious, social and political life of the Khalsa, and the Khalsa social order. But he makes no attempt to relate them to any major aspect of the life of the Khalsa. What is much more important, recent discussion of the Rahitnamas by a few scholars indicates that McLeod's dating and, therefore, his interpretation of the Rahitnamas is not satisfactory. The Khalsa Rahit did evolve, but largely on the lines laid down in the time of Guru Gobind Singh. McLeod expected some controversy after the

publication of his work, presumably on the assumption that the Sikhs generally attached a lot of importance to the *Rahitnamas* as semi-scriptural, but no controversy cropped up. The 'Sikh scholars' are more skeptical about the authenticity of the *Rahitnamas* than McLeod and they look upon these as historical documents.

McLeod has published a translation of the *Prem Sumarag* with a subtitle that declares it to be the testimony of a Sanatan Sikh. Closely linked with this perception is McLeod's assumption that it was not composed before the establishment of Sikh rule. However, there is no indication that its author is aware of any Sikh state in existence. In fact, the text makes a much better sense if it is placed before the establishment of Sikh rule under the leadership of Banda Bahadur. Gurinder Singh Mann has argued that it can be placed in the time of Guru Gobind Singh. The idea of *raj karega khalsa* becomes immediately relevant for a future Sikh state. In the *Prem Sumarag*, the Sikh state is yet to be established. Its politico-administrative framework is Mughal, and its ideology is Sikh. The whole work relates exclusively to the religious, social, economic, and political life of the 'Sant Khalsa' or the baptized Singhs of Guru Gobind Singh. McLeod seems to be wide off the mark in treating the *Prem Sumarag* as a 'Sanatan' document.

V

On the question of Sikh social order, McLeod takes up the issue of caste in *The Evolution of the Sikh Community* (1975). He quotes the Gurus for their denunciation of caste. He points out, however, that they arranged the marriage of their children in accordance with the traditional caste prescription. He suggests that they were opposed to vertical distinctions of caste but they were content to accept the horizontal linkages. He goes on to add that individuals from a number of castes joined the Sikh Panth to follow a new religious life but to continue with their former social practices. McLeod suggests three hierarchies among the Sikhs: (a) Khatri and Aroras in cities and Jats in the countryside, (b) Ramgarhias, and (c) Mazhabis and Ramdasias. Thus, according to McLeod, though many of the discriminatory aspects of caste were obliterated and there was a strong commitment to the ideal of equality, there was caste diversity with notions of status among the Sikhs.

In *Exploring Sikhism* (2000), McLeod refers to Ahluwalias and Ramgarhias as 'two Sikh castes' and equates them respectively with Kalals (vintners) and Tarkhans (carpenters) of the traditional social order. However, the name Ahluwalia was derived from a village and 'Ramgarhia' from an honorific. They included the Sikh rulers of the late eighteenth century and their descendants. The 'caste' background of others who adopted the label Ahluwalia or Ramgarhia is yet to be identified. McLeod treats them simply as 'Sikh Kalals' and 'Sikh

carpenters', but the Ahluwalias enjoyed a high status in the Punjab society; they were not placed below the Khatri. The corporate status of the Ramgarhia, on the other hand, remained essentially unchanged. McLeod concludes that the Sikh way of life offers a possibility of temporal success for individuals and in a diminished degree for castes. The whole discussion is conducted in terms of caste and social mobility, as it is done for the traditional Hindu society.

In 'The Sikh Concept of Caste' in his *Essays* (2007), McLeod refers to the views of Jagjit Singh on the abolition of caste, caste system and caste ideology, and comments that Jagjit Singh uses the term caste for varan (varna) and ignores jati. But Jagjit Singh does not ignore jati. McLeod gives several quotations from the *Adi Granth* to show that varan had no bearing on liberation. But this is equally true of jati. Both varan and jati were set aside. McLeod himself adds later that Guru Nanak did not see any relevance of jati or kul for liberation. This message was repeated by his successors. Bhai Gurdas too emphasized that the Sikhs constituted a single varan in which all the four varans had been joined. In the *Tankhahnama*, Guru Gobind Singh says, 'I shall merge the four barans into one'. McLeod goes on to say that the 'Sanatan' view had come to prevail among the Sikhs by the middle of the eighteenth century. But he cites no evidence for this. He simply states that in the Sanatan view 'Sikh society comprised the four traditional barans' and those who belonged to this society should never mingle with 'the Dalits'. Later on, the *Tat Khalsa* rejected the varan system. Having said all this, McLeod reiterates that the Sikh Gurus could see that the jati system 'held Indian society together' and they did not seek to destroy it. In support of this view, he refers again to the old pattern of matrimony accepted by them. He interprets Bhai Gurdas, the B40 *Janamsakhi*, and some of the *Rahitnamas* as accepting jati and recommending no social intercourse with Dalits. He repeats that there were urban and rural hierarchies among the Sikhs. He points out, however, that the Sikh notion of caste was generally different from the Hindu, 'partly as a result of the Sikh stand in favour of eliminating the baran differences'. In the *Gurdwara* there was no place for discrimination 'on the basis of purity and pollution'. Even if caste is widely practised in the Panth 'some Sikhs genuinely believe that caste observance has no place in the Sikh faith'. Yet, McLeod maintains that the Sikhs were not deviating from the path of the Gurus in accepting jati and gotra, but whether or not they deviated in terms of status ranking is 'another question'. It must be pointed out that if the notion of status comes from the varna and occupations are not prescriptive, it is not strictly legitimate to talk of hierarchy. On the whole, McLeod's conceptualization of the issue of caste is unclear, if not self-contradictory. A different kind of paradigm appears to be needed for conceptualizing the Sikh social order in which there is a strong emphasis on equality with no normative prescription for hereditary occupations.

In 'Sikhism and Gender' in his *Sikhism* (1995), McLeod refers to the ideal view of gender and the problem with this view. It ignored the hold of 'patriarchy in the Sikh Panth', which could be seen clearly in 'Jat attitudes to gender differences'. Indeed, McLeod underlines that the difference between 'Sikhism' on the one hand and 'Sikh society' on the other is nowhere more evident than in the question of gender. The Sikhs are not alone. 'Virtually every other human group keeps women in varying degrees of subordination, and patriarchy is far from dead in those societies which loudly proclaim the necessity of equal opportunity'. McLeod seems to be talking of modern times. In a brief statement on 'Gender and the Sikh Panth' in his *Essays* (1995), McLeod himself expresses the view that Sikh religion was favourably situated in comparison with the Western experience, certainly in theory and largely in practice. But, there was a clear contradiction between the ideal of equality and female-subordination on the ground. In view of the exceptional emphasis on the ideal of equality in the Sikh movement, McLeod's general statements are not very helpful in grappling with the subject.

An important feature of the Sikh Panth for McLeod is the tradition of martyrdom. In 'The Sikh struggle in the eighteenth century and its relevance for today', originally published in 1992 and included in *Exploring Sikhism* (2000), he outlines the 'myth' of the eighteenth century as a heroic age of Sikh history popularized by historians like Gopal Singh, Teja Singh and Ganda Singh and even the British historian J.D. Cunnigham. In his *Sikhism* (1995), McLeod discusses the Panth as 'a militant community' and comes to the conclusion that in general the Sikhs maintain 'a warrior spirit'. Elsewhere in this book, he says that 'the militant aspect' can be viewed from two perspectives: as heroism of the warrior Khalsa, and the closely related angle of martyrdom. These two perspectives are actually two ways of viewing the obligation 'to be supremely brave and undaunted, never to yield to an enemy under any circumstances'. It was a central theme of Sikh history for the Tat Khalsa during the Singh Sabha period and it has remained at the heart of 'orthodox Sikhism'. The martyr ideal as a source of inspiration carries the message: 'For justice and the Panth, all Sikhs should be prepared to undergo suffering, even to the point of martyrdom'. This message had never attained the force and coherence given to it by the Tat Khalsa.

McLeod goes on to state that *shahid*, the word for a 'martyr', was an Arabic word originally introduced into Punjabi to express an important feature of Muslim culture. 'This clearly was the derivation of the Sikh usage, although Punjabi folklore clearly played a significant part in its development'. The village bards (*dhadis*) sang of the courage and sacrifice of the Sikh martyrs. The deaths of Guru Arjan and Guru Tegh Bahadur were seen as much more than killings or executions. 'These two Gurus were martyrs and as martyrs they should always be proclaimed'.

The Sikh Ardas, Sikh museums, and popular Sikh art demonstrate 'the related themes of heroism and martyrdom'. On this view, Sikh ideology had no relevance for the Sikh tradition of martyrdom. The Tat Khalsa reconstructed the heroic tradition as the tradition of martyrdom. It must however be pointed out that a study of the pre-colonial Sikh literature clearly shows that martyrdom was seen as an integral part of the Sikh tradition much before the Tat Khalsa appeared on the scene.

VI

On the issue of Sikh identity, McLeod makes a major statement in *Who is a Sikh? The Problem of Sikh Identity* (1989). He does not explain why Sikh identity presents a 'problem'. But the opening chapter, which is actually meant to argue that a discussion of Sikh identity should start with the Sikhs of Guru Nanak and proceed historically, appears to provide the answer. An approach to Sikh identity must cover the entire span of Sikh history to answer the question 'Who is a Sikh?' In any case, this is what McLeod seeks to do.

For the early Sikh identity, McLeod takes into account the doctrines, institutions, rituals, the social character of the Sikh Panth, and the consciousness of a distinctive identity among the Sikhs. However, he sees a difference between Bhai Gurdas and the Janamsakhis, between the centre and the periphery, in terms of the degree of consciousness of identity. The evidence of the *Dabistan-i Mazahib* is not given due importance by McLeod. He ignores the compositions of Guru Nanak and his successors who leave no doubt about the unique position of the Sikh Panth in their own eyes: it was not only distinguished from the rest of the peoples of the world but it was also meant to redeem them all. Incidentally, this dimension of Gurbani has not been studied by many scholars.

Two chapters of *Who is a Sikh?* relate to the Khalsa in the eighteenth century. If we concentrate on the substance of McLeod's argument, ignoring the way in which it is developed, we find that he appreciates the change brought about by the institution of the Khalsa. The identity of the 'Singh' became much more pronounced than that of the 'Sikh'. Though McLeod does not mention it, the phrase *tisar panth* (third panth) made its appearance in the eighteenth century Sikh literature to underline the distinction of the Khalsa Panth from both Hindus and Muslims. He points out that, though the Khalsa identity was the predominant Sikh identity in the early nineteenth century, the non-Khalsa Sikhs remained present throughout. They are seen as *Sahajdharis*. All non-Singhs are placed in this category, making it residual. Like many other scholars, McLeod makes the *Sahajdharis* an all inclusive category of Sikhs who were not Singhs. Talking of the Khalsa and the non-Khalsa as two identities among the Sikhs, he looks upon them from outside. The criterion of

external appearance becomes all-important for him. Here, it may be pertinent to mention that though the Sahajdhari Sikhs of Chaupa Singh's Rahitnama were not Keshdhari or baptized Singhs, they were a part of the Khalsa sangat. They too believed in the ten personal Gurus and Guruship of the Granth and the Panth, and they followed some of the practices of the Singhs. Much of the rahit was common for Keshdharis and Sahajdharis. The splinter groups and the Udasis were not included among the Sahajdharis. It is necessary, therefore, to identify the Sahajdharis of the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century to find out whether or not they were conscious of their distinct identity.

According to McLeod, the Tat Khalsa in the late nineteenth century remained loyal to the inherited tradition when they began to shape systems in the light of ideals and modes of thinking acquired from Western education and literature. The Khalsa ideal became distinguished by a new consistency and a new clarity of definition. The earlier features which were not acceptable were either rejected or suitably modified. Quest for distinctive rituals was initiated, and attempts were made to produce acceptable statements of the rahit. 'An appropriate version of the Panth's history was formulated, a powerful stress was laid on the doctrine of Guru Granth, and Sikhs were exhorted to observe conventions which would proclaim their separate Khalsa identity'. Due to Sanatan opposition, it was only gradually that the Tat Khalsa views gained ascendancy amongst the intellectual leaders of the Panth. Eventually, they did secure dominance.

McLeod talks of three identities among the Sikhs: the Amritdhari, the Keshdhari and the Sahajdhari. Little distinction was drawn between the first two. They who retained their hair uncut and refrained from smoking were regarded as Sikhs of the Khalsa for all practical purposes. However, the idea that it was possible to be a Sikh without being a Khalsa had only negligible support among the Sikhs. The Sahajdharis were pushed to the periphery. McLeod sums up the distinctive identity of the Sikhs in terms of reverence for the ten Gurus, the practice of nam simran, veneration for the scripture, and acknowledgement of the sanctity of the Gurdwara. Other features were added from the legacy of Guru Gobind Singh: initiation into the Khalsa and observance of the rahit (including the Five Ks), belief in the end of personal Guruship at the death of Guru Gobind Singh, and vesting of the authority of the Guru in the Adi Granth and the corporate community. Those who declined to accept the basic requirements of the rahit could still be accepted as Sikhs but only on the understanding that they were failing to discharge customary duties. McLeod's search for uniformity in identity gives primacy to objectively defined features of identity.

We may add that in any given historical situation objective realities and subjective self-image are intermeshed in a consciousness of distinct identity in relation to others. As the product of these variables, identity

cannot be a static or 'fixed' entity. Nor can there be objective uniformity or 'homogeneity' among all the members of a community identified as different from others. Neither fluidity nor diversity necessarily invalidates distinctive identity. The objective realities of the Sikh Panth and the self-image of the Sikhs from the days of Guru Nanak to the present day have not remained the same, but the consciousness of distinction from the others around has remained constant. Until we come to the late nineteenth century, there was no debate about Hindu-Sikh identity. Due to the emergence of a new 'Hindu' consciousness in the late nineteenth century, an inclusive definition of 'Hindu' led to the assertion that the Sikhs were 'Hindu'. Implicit in this assertion was a political dimension. Bhai Kahn Singh could see this dimension and his own exposition of Sikh identity was meant to show the political implication of its distinctiveness. The Sikh 'Panth' was a political community, a 'qaum' like Hindus, and like Muslims. Bhai Kahn Singh did not have to invent the tisar panth. The term itself as pointed out earlier, had been in existence at least since the eighteenth century.

VII

McLeod has responded to the criticism of his work from time to time and finally in his autobiographical *Discovering the Sikhs* (2004). His responses reveal his own conception of history, his approach, and his methodology. In *Exploring Sikhism* (2000), McLeod underscores the immense contribution of the Singh Sabha movement to the dominant interpretation of Sikh history and religion. The concern of the Singh Sabha scholars for a rediscovery of the true message of the Guru 'bequeathed a range of understanding to generations within the Panth and beyond'. Max Arthur Macauliffe is one of the three most influential writers of the Singh Sabha. The other two are Bhai Vir Singh and Bhai Kahn Singh. The group of Sikhs with whom Macauliffe was closely associated, and the ideals he reflected in his writing, propounded an interpretation of the Sikh religion and community which has ever since steadily gained ground. 'Today it commands the allegiance of most Sikh scholars and implicit acceptance of most members of the Panth'. Most foreign observers also assume his view to be the correct one. We still dwell in the Singh Sabha period.

In the 'History and Tradition in the Study of Sikhism' included in his *Essays* (2007), McLeod states that the Tat Khalsa reformers adopted a traditional view of history, giving new interpretations in ways they believed to be necessary. He explains the criticism of his treatment of the Janamsakhis by the 'traditional' Sikh scholars and historians in terms of the difference in his own worldview, approach, and method from theirs. In the essay on 'Discord in the Sikh Panth', McLeod explains that the controversies were due to contest for primacy in the academic field. On

one side in this contest were the traditionalists and on the other side were the 'committed' historians like Pashaura Singh, Harjot Oberoi, and McLeod himself.

In the 'Cries of Outrage' in *Exploring Sikhism* (2000), McLeod makes an explicit distinction between the traditional and 'sceptical' historians. The former normally have 'the certainty of faith' and a 'closed mind'; the latter have 'the insecurity of doubt' and free 'intelligence'. The differences between the two schools are illustrated by McLeod with reference to the 'traditionalist' reaction to his treatment of the life of Guru Nanak, the development of the rahit of the Khalsa, and the Singh Sabha movement. The article ends with the statement that McLeod was trained to be a historian in the School of Oriental and African Studies and he tried to perform his work honestly as a historian of the Sikhs. In short, he developed into a sceptical historian, and this set him in competition with the traditional variety.

In his *Discovering the Sikhs* (2004), McLeod states that he regarded himself as a historian who attempted to follow the established procedures of historical research. He goes on to add that he was a Western historian, trained in Western methods of historical research and adhering to Western notions of historiography. Furthermore, his primary objective had been to communicate an understanding of the Sikh people and their religion to educated Western readers. Consequently, it was important for him to speak to them in their own mode of understanding. Indeed, it was necessary to tell Westerners what Sikhism apparently means in terms they can understand. McLeod emphasizes that Western understanding underlies all that he has ever written and 'no apology is offered for it'. It is interesting to find McLeod aligning himself with the 'orientalists' who interpreted Asian societies for the European in their own terms.

McLeod goes on to state that historical method confronts tradition, sometimes accepting it, sometimes doubting it, and all too frequently rejecting it. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the Western historian adopts a different attitude and pursues a different line of enquiry from the traditionalist historian. The attitude of the Western historian is 'firmly rooted in the Enlightenment'; it is imperative that all his conclusions are rational and based on sources which are sound. For McLeod, this position is 'light years away from the attitude that takes its stand firmly on revelation'. Thus, there is 'complete opposition' between the Western historian and the traditionalist historian. McLeod closes the statement on his position with the following words: 'My works stand as I have written them, and readers will need to decide whether they are acceptable or whether the comments of my critics make better sense'.

We may make a few observations on McLeod's view of history and historical methodology. He underlines that the interpretation of Sikh history and Sikhism by the leading writers of the Singh Sabha movement was based on 'tradition' and it has deeply influenced the work of later

historians, like Teja Singh, Ganda Singh, Khushwant Singh, Harbans Singh, Gopal Singh and Jagjit Singh. They are regarded as 'traditionalist' historians. Virtually, thus, the whole range of Sikh historical writing on the Sikhs before McLeod started writing, and much that was produced contemporaneously, becomes 'traditionalist'. This is a gross oversimplification, a caricature, of modern Sikh historical writing on the Sikhs.

Just as 'tradition' stands in opposition to 'history', so the 'traditionalist' stands in opposition to the 'sceptical' historian. By definition, the historian becomes 'sceptical'. McLeod traces this mode of historical thinking to the Enlightenment which demands rational explanation on the basis of empirical evidence. But several of the historians included by McLeod in the list of 'traditionalist' historians meet this basic methodological demand. Even Bhagat Lakshman Singh, who wrote a biography of Guru Gobind Singh nearly a century ago, met this demand. Evidently, McLeod expects something more from a 'sceptical' historian than merely a rational-empirical approach. He must analyse 'tradition' for acceptance or rejection. However, the advice of a Western historian, who has written on the philosophy of history too, appears to be sounder: a historian must ask of every statement 'what does it mean?' 'Tradition' is not merely to be accepted or rejected but meaningfully interpreted.

The equation of the 'historical method' with the 'Western' mode of thinking becomes a source of confusion. Like the 'scientific method', the 'historical method' was evolved in the West in recent centuries but it is not culturally rooted. Members of other societies can adopt the historical method. Teja Singh and Ganda Singh surely share this historical method with the Western historians. McLeod tends to equate the 'Western' mode of historical writing and thinking actually with his own approach: 'Tradition versus History'. Besides becoming more or less eristic, this approach restricts the scope of historical inquiry. McLeod has extended the scope of Sikh studies not because of his approach but in spite of his conception of the primary task of the 'sceptical' historian. All his questions do not spring from 'Tradition versus History'. There were larger concerns of the society in which he lived and worked.

Finally, 'Western' thinking informs us that the primary task of the historian is to make the best sense of all the available traces which have come down to us from the past, including 'tradition'. The scope of historical studies is expanded by asking more and more questions about more and more aspects of the life of a society, or a people.

VIII

Before some general remarks on McLeod's work, we may take notice of three more works: *The Sikhs of the Punjab* (1968), *Popular Sikh Art*

(1991), and *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism* (1995). The first has the distinction of being McLeod's first publication. An elementary account of the Sikhs in about 30 pages, it is interesting for the early expression of his ideas and assumptions. The roots of Guru Nanak's religion were 'embedded in Hindu tradition, and specifically in the Bhakti ('Devotional') school of Hindu tradition'. However, Guru Nanak imparted 'a new clarity and coherence' to this tradition. There is a reference to the 'pressure of subsequent history' but there is no 'Jat theory' of militarization yet. There is already the assumption that some aspects of the Khalsa discipline and ideal 'must have evolved during the course of the eighteenth century'. The doctrine of Guru-Panth is placed in the eighteenth century to be replaced later by the doctrine of Guru-Panth. As we have seen, McLeod remained stuck to these ideas for nearly four decades.

The *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism* was meant to provide ready information on themes of Sikh religion, history, culture and social arrangements primarily to 'outsiders'. In the 'Introduction', McLeod reiterates his familiar views on Sikh history and Sikh religion, underlining the fundamental opposition between 'tradition' and 'sceptical' history. It is not surprising that he projects his controversial views in the Dictionary. This is evident from the entries like 'Adi Granth Contents', 'Adi Granth Recensions', 'Dasam Granth', 'Eighteenth Century History', 'Five Ks', 'Guru Granth', 'Guru Panth', 'Hargobind: Changes of Policy', 'Hindu Origins', 'Identity', 'Janam-Sakhi', 'Janam-Sakhi Traditions', 'Kabir', 'Macauliffe', 'Nanak: Doctrine', 'Nank-Panth', 'Nath Tradition', 'Prem Sumarag', 'Rahit-Nama', 'Rahit-Nama Prahilad Singh', 'Raj Karega Khalsa', 'Sahaj-Dhari', 'Sanatan Sikhs', 'Sant Tradition', 'Shivalik Hills', and 'Sikhism: Separate Faith'. Then there are other entries which are not entirely accurate, like 'Ahluwalia', 'Anand Karaj', 'Anandpur', 'Art', 'Chaupa Singh Rahit-Nama', 'Massa Ranghar', and 'Sainapati'. We may agree with McLeod that 'History is constantly being rewritten and no interpretation is forever fixed' Much of what he says in the *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism* is out of date.

McLeod's *Popular Sikh Art* is a study of 'bazaar prints' purchased in 1965 from Amritsar. The principal sources for these prints were the illustrated Janamsakhis and the woodcut posters of the late nineteenth century. Some minor features of format and style were borrowed from Christian, European and Hindu art. The relative importance given to the Gurus came out clearly from these prints. McLeod tries to account for the ranking: Guru Nanak, Guru Gobind Singh, and Guru Ram Das, followed by others. Among the Sikh martyrs, Baba Dip Singh and the Sahibzadas are given the greatest importance. Maharaja Ranjit Singh is no longer a popular subject. McLeod describes the iconography of these popular prints in which importance is given to dress and weaponry, the halo, the Sikh and Khalsa symbols. 'Sikh history' is reflected in these prints.

However, before coming to the popular Sikh art, he talks of the emergence of Sikh art in the seventeenth century and its expressions in the time of Ranjit Singh and his successors, in the early British period and the first half of the twentieth century, largely on the basis of secondary works which no longer hold good in the light of recent research.

McLeod's statement on 'Sikh history' in the popular Sikh art is rather interesting. 'It is obviously vital that careful scholarship should be encouraged and that its tested findings should be respected. But this does not mean that tradition and folklore can be neglected, leaving the historian free to deal exclusively with the established facts and his or her interpretation of them. Both make essential contributions to our understanding of a contemporary society, both the knowledge of history as it actually occurred and the dominant perceptions of that history as it is believed to have occurred. The myths matter as much as facts'. McLeod recognizes 'the importance of understanding the tradition' because instinctive reactions are prompted by 'the traditional view' and not by 'the latest findings of academic historians'. If we are to understand the influence of historical perceptions on the history-conscious Sikh people 'it is Sikh tradition which must command our larger attention'. McLeod goes on to illustrate the 'history' in the popular prints with the help of traditional Sikh history, giving much of the space to the Gurus from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh. On the whole, his contribution to the history of Sikh art is rather negligible.

IX

McLeod was rightly indignant over un-informed criticism of his work, and much more so over attribution of extra-academic motives for his academic work. It was in this connection that he felt obliged to declare that he was not a Christian missionary but an agnostic or an atheist. The declaration is rather irrelevant for our purpose: there is no significant change in his worldview as a historian of the Sikhs and Sikhism. He shared secular outlook on life and thought with the majority of Western social scientists. The bearing of his 'theological course' on his work can be seen in his basic questions and his treatment of Guru Nanak's ideology. However, this is not the same thing as 'a missionary motive'. We do not have to invoke any extra-academic motives in order to see or explain McLeod's limitations as a historian.

In his approach to Guru Nanak, McLeod separates his life from his teachings, searches only for the concrete events of his life in his quest for 'the Nanak of history', ignoring the Guru's primary concerns. This approach can make only a minimal use of the most important form of evidence on his life, his own compositions. 'Liberation through nam-simran' is a narrow and constrictive interpretation of Guru Nanak's

teachings: it keeps out all ethical concerns and social commitment both before and after liberation. No attention is given to the self-image of Guru Nanak in which he projects a distinctive position for himself and his followers. In bracketing Guru Nanak with Kabir and, therefore, with the Sants, McLeod forgets their practices and differences and remembers only ideas (taken out of their contexts) and similarities. We may underline that a comparative study of religious phenomena must take into consideration both beliefs and practices, and both similarities and differences.

For the historical development of the Sikh Panth McLeod minimizes the crucial importance of the starting point. He ignores the compositions of Guru Nanak's successors which are actually the most important evidence on the growth of Sikh Panth in terms of its ideals, institutions, attitudes, and self-definition. This evidence runs counter to the primacy he gives to the pressure of historical environment. His hypotheses about the eighteenth century, arising out of his assumption of the pressure of historical circumstances, find no support in contemporary evidence. The political ideal of a state of the Khalsa (*raj karega khalsa*) became current before the establishment of sovereign Sikh rule even before the rise of Banda; the doctrines of Guru-Granth and Guru-Panth developed simultaneously after their enunciation by Guru Gobind Singh; the Khalsa *rahit* did evolve but essentially on the lines laid down in the time of Guru Gobind Singh. McLeod's misunderstanding about the dates of the *Gursobha* and the *Rahitnamas* could be partly responsible for his hasty hypotheses. But the fundamental cause appears to be his assumption that Sikh ideology had no bearing on Sikh history.

Sikh literature for McLeod is primarily a source for Sikh history. There is no indication that he has studied the *Adi Granth* as a whole. Important particularly in this connection are the compositions of Guru Nanak's successors. At the back of his emphasis on the textual study of the Sikh scripture was his doubt about the authenticity of the *Kartarpur Pothi*. The issue of authenticity having been settled, the other issues have little significance in terms of controversy. McLeod's view that the *Dasam Granth* was regarded as Guru, like the *Adi Granth*, has turned out to be erroneous; the nature and the extent of its influence on the life of the Khalsa is yet to be studied. McLeod's study of the *Janamsakhis* is based on a limited range of texts and manuscripts. He is aware of different *Janamsakhi* traditions but there is no appreciation of this difference in his approach. Ironically, the composite B40 *Janamsakhi* is selected for translation and treated as a single whole, which blurs the difference between the *sakhis* coming from different traditions. The bulk of his *Early Sikh Tradition* remains unrelated to Sikh history and Sikhism. The 'myth' of Guru Nanak, which each *Janamsakhi* tradition embodies, is not studied in detail or in comparative terms. The *Rahitnamas* are approached from the nineteenth century backwards, never to reach the time of Guru

Gobind Singh. Here, McLeod appears to have started with two basic assumptions: late origin of the Rahitnamas and a sure degree of interpolation in their texts. He modified the first, though only partially, but not the second. For the latter, it is necessary to study a large number of texts of each Rahitanama. The Rahitnamas embody norms of the religious, social and political life of the Khalsa (equated with Sikhs). However, McLeod's study of the Rahitnamas does not present a comprehensive statement on the life of the Khalsa even for the eighteenth century. Such a statement is likely to show that the 'Khalsa' way of life was not a rupture with the 'Sikh' way of life, but a kind of transformation.

McLeod has written only a few articles related to Sikh society or the Sikh social order. He emphasizes the importance of the idea of equality in the Sikh scriptures and the belief of the Sikhs. He underscores the continuation of the differences of caste and gender in Sikh history. New 'Sikh castes' like the Ahluwalia and the Ramgarhia emerge in due course. There is an hierarchy of castes too though it is not the same as in the traditional varna order. The 'Sanatan Sikhs' began to espouse varna order and untouchability. McLeod maintains that the Sikh Gurus had discarded the distinctions of varnas but kept the jati intact. He uses the paradigm of social mobility within the traditional varna order in terms of 'Sanskritization' (without using the term). However, whereas the guiding principle of social organization in the traditional varna order is inequality, the guiding principle of Sikh social organization is equality. Strictly speaking, if varna is discarded there can be no hierarchy, and if there is no prescriptive insistence on occupations there can be no jati. Sikh ethics are uniformly the same for all the Sikhs. A new paradigm, therefore, is needed for the study of the Sikh social order. We suggest that there was a tension between the conscious ideal of equality on the one hand and the tacit acceptance of the traditional institutions of the family and the monarchical state on the other. The traditional institutions impart resilience to the social background of the Sikhs. McLeod looks upon the heroic tradition as a part of the Sikh society, but he blurs the essential difference between a 'hero' and 'martyr' due to his assumption that Sikh ideology had no bearing on the Sikh tradition of martyrdom.

When McLeod talks of Sikh identity as a problem, he appears merely to advocate historical approach to Sikh identity which evolved in time. He recognizes the relevance of both subjective and objective elements for the formation of Sikh identity but tends to give crucial primacy to the latter. He treats the Sahajdharis as a residual category, which is a source of confusion. At the end of the nineteenth century a large number of non-Khalsa (non-Singh) Sikhs insisted that they were not 'Hindu'. Even more glaring was the case of the Nirankaris who did not adopt baptism of the double-edged sword and yet insisted that they were distinct from 'Hindus' and that they had nothing to do with Brahmans, their scriptures,

or their ritual practices. Like most other scholars, McLeod takes the 'Hindu' identity for granted as if it was not problematic. He does not even pose the question what the term Hindu stood for in the pre-colonial period. Consequently, the essential significance of Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha's *Ham Hindu Nahin* is missed. What is important for identity is not merely differences but consciousness of the kind of affinity with one set of people and differences from others. In this sense one can talk of Sikh identity from the days of Guru Nanak to the present day.

McLeod defines his position as a historian in a manner that aligns him with the 'orientalists', with a certain degree of inbuilt Eurocentricism. He identifies historical method with the 'Western' first and then with his own. His conception of 'history' is restrictive and somewhat counter productive. Contrary to the dictates of the 'Western' historical outlook and tradition, he is extremely reluctant to change or even to modify his interpretation in the light of new evidence, or the old evidence seen from a new perspective. In his later academic work he tends to accept Harjot Oberoi's dubious formulation of 'Sanatan Sikhism' with a disastrous effect on his basic understanding of the Prem Sumarag. His attitude, his approach and his method have often resulted in premature hypotheses. The best dimension of McLeod's work is that it has expanded the scope of Sikh studies and brought a considerable volume of Sikh literature to the notice of scholars.

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