

## **J.S. Grewal on Sikh History, Historiography and Recent Debates**

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With reference to the recent research of J.S. Grewal, the essay delineates the beginning of modern Sikh Studies in terms of Western enterprise before annexation; its development in terms mainly of Indian response in the early twentieth century; its maturity in terms of widened range in contemporary times; and complexity in terms of intense controversies emerging by the turn of the century. Virtually all the high points of the Sikh movement figure in these controversies some of which can be traced to Western writings under colonial rule. Grewal's considered views on each of these issues bring out his palpable differences with W.H. McLeod and Harjot Oberoi, among others. By emphasizing that there is no substitute for a rational and sympathetic interpretation of Sikh sources for a meaningful interpretation of the Sikh past, Grewal seeks to bridge the supposed divergence and growing gulf between the so-called 'critical' and 'traditional' historians. Refusal to enter into genuine debate or to take note of valid objections might result in loss of momentum and credibility for the field of Sikh Studies as a whole.

The tremendous growth of the discipline of history over the past half a century coincides with J.S. Grewal's multi-faceted contribution to historical research. By the time he joined the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, for Ph.D. in the late fifties, a serious rethinking had started about the nature, scope and method of history in the West. Yet, in the contemporary academic context in Britain, his decision to work on the British historical writing on medieval India was regarded as somewhat unconventional. By now, however, it is well recognized that the vitality and consistency of the discipline of history requires periodic stock taking or reflection by its own practitioners. As a form of history of ideas 'second-order-history' illumines historical reconstruction and interpretation.

After the publication in 1970 of his doctoral thesis on British historians of medieval India, which came to be regarded as a seminal work,<sup>1</sup> Grewal kept up his interest in the history of historical writing while branching out into several other areas of Sikh and Punjab history. In fact, his first research paper on 'J.D. Cunningham and his British Predecessors on the Sikhs' had been published in 1964. By the time he wrote on the 'State of Sikh Studies' in 1973, his monographs on *Guru Gobind Singh* (conjoint, 1967) and *Guru Nanak in History* (1969) had been published, along with an insightful collection of essays entitled, *From Guru Nanak to Maharaja Ranjit Singh* (1972). The deepening of Grewal's interest in Sikh history thus went hand in hand with reflections on its treatment by historians. *Guru Tegh Bahadur and the Persian*

*Chroniclers* (1976) preceded a detailed treatment of the historians of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1980, to be followed by two monographic studies of Ranjit Singh and his times (1981, 1982). In 1990, came out Grewal's 'veritable tour de force', *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, incorporating the latest research, widening and deepening his interest in Sikh history, and extending it to contemporary times.<sup>2</sup> A monograph on *Guru Nanak in Western Scholarship* was published in 1992, partly in response to the ongoing debate about his status and the nature of his message, to be taken up later in this essay. Two more monographs dealing with controversial issues followed. The tercentenary of the Khalsa in 1999 inspired focus on the historical and historiographical studies of the Khalsa.

All along, Grewal kept on analysing the Sikh and Persian sources and revising and elaborating his earlier understanding of Sikh history and its central issues, best exemplified by his influential collection of essays whose fourth revised and enlarged edition came out in 2007.<sup>3</sup> Since then, and among others, Grewal has produced the inter-related studies on the *Guru Granth Sahib* (2009); *The Sikhs: Ideology, Institutions and Identity* (2009); *History, Literature and Identity: Four Centuries of Sikh Tradition* (2011); *Recent Debates in Sikh Studies* (2011); and *Historical Writings on the Sikhs* (2012). His *Historical Studies in Punjabi Literature* (2011) can be regarded as an offshoot of interest in Sikh literature, beginning with an analysis of the *Prem Sumarag* in 1965. Evidently, empirical research, analysis of literature, and history of ideas enmeshed in these works have been mutually illuminating. This is true equally of Grewal's work specifically on regional and medieval Indian history.<sup>4</sup>

Taking note of his recent publications on Sikh history, the present essay begins with a discussion of Grewal's latest monograph dealing with historical, historiographical, methodological and interpretational issues of fundamental importance to the field of Sikh Studies.

### **Scope and Approach**

A substantial volume, the *Historical Writings on the Sikhs*, is divided into six parts, presented in terms of 'Western enterprise and Indian response', from the last quarter of the eighteenth to the beginning of the present century.<sup>5</sup> The first two parts take up works of the British, European and American writers who 'laid the foundations of modern Sikh studies in the broad framework of colonial, "orientalist", and evangelical concerns'. The next three parts include the works of the first three generations of the English educated Indian writers from diverse professional and regional backgrounds. They 'appropriated the Western legacy and tried to improve upon it' in the backdrop of socio-religious and political resurgence during the colonial period. The sixth and the last part of the book dealing with contemporary times exemplifies the widening scope and increasing complexity of historical studies on the Sikhs, which has also resulted in controversies among the Western and Indian scholars over several issues. Altogether, the works of over three scores of writers on the Sikh past

have been taken up in this book. With their diverse backgrounds, varied purposes, competing interpretations and differing emphases and nuances, they may be seen as cumulatively constituting, to use Grewal's words, 'our heritage as researchers in the area of Sikh studies' (Preface).

Broadly, three kinds of approaches seem to have been adopted in this book. The works of most of the writers in the first five parts have been analysed on the assumption that their historical thinking was embedded in their socio-political situations and world-views. Therefore, to determine their relative worth for illuminating the Sikh past, Grewal goes into the scope, thrust, sources, method and limitations in each case. The existential situation of a writer, his avowed purposes and underlying concerns and assumptions are considered relevant for understanding his prejudices, misconceptions and errors, which resulted in several stereotypes. Where possible, as in the case of Trumpp and Macauliffe on Sikhism and the Sikh scripture, a comparative analysis of their works is made to evaluate their relative worth. While analysing the writings of the Indian historians of the colonial period in the next three parts, their formulations are seen in relation to their ideological orientations to the changing socio-political context during the colonial period. In the post-colonial period, however, the widened scope of historical research necessitated a somewhat different approach. Grewal takes up fifteen monographic studies which in his view represent major new themes, sources and approaches and, together, mark a significant departure from the historical writing on the Sikhs before Independence. In the last chapter of the book, the controversies between the professional historians mostly located in the West and those writing as 'Sikh' scholars largely located in India have been approached in terms of the origin and escalation of controversies and the issues involved.

### **Western Enterprise**

Turning to the foundational texts in part one, the author traces the beginnings of interest in the Sikh past under the East India Company from 1784, and situates the analysis of each writing in the rapidly changing political context and purposes of the British until 1849, the year of annexation. On the maxim that knowledge was power, appraisals of the resources of the Sikhs as the potential political adversaries could have more meaning for the British if seen in relation to the Sikh past. Thus, an interest in Sikh history is evident in the writings of Charles Wilkins, Antoine-Louis Henri Polier, George Forster and James Browne which covered the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Their endeavour synchronized with the rise of the East India Company into political power in Bengal and that of the Sikhs in the Punjab. Establishment of British supremacy over Delhi in 1803, and over the cis-Satlej Sikh chiefs in 1809 resulted in John Malcolm's *Sketch of the Sikhs* which was published in book form in 1812. Henry Prinsep gave an assessment of Ranjit Singh's financial and military resources after the Governor General William Bentinck sought to contain Ranjit Singh's advance towards Sind in 1831. While Prinsep

considered the possibility of the Company annexing his territories after his death, the British writers of the 1840s - W.G. Osborne, W.L.M'Gregor, G.C. Smyth and H.H. Wilson - unequivocally supported an aggressive policy towards Ranjit Singh's state and successors.

The only discordant note in this expansionist stance was struck by J.D. Cunningham's *History of the Sikhs*. Its publication ironically coincided with annexation in 1849. Decried in the official circles for its criticism of the British authorities, Cunningham's work was eventually acclaimed as a 'classic'. It stands out, among other things, for his appreciation for Sikhism as a distinct faith, an innate sympathy for the Sikhs as a young nation, objective assessment of his British predecessors on the Sikhs, erudite interpretation of a vast range of Sikh sources and, above all, 'his sound judgement in selecting his facts with a strict regard to historical truth'.<sup>6</sup>

In part two of his book, Grewal discusses the British, European and American writers in the period under the crown. Interestingly, from 1865 to 1930 nearly a dozen British administrators and military officers wrote on the Sikh past mainly to justify annexation and British rule, trace the history of the loyal Sikh rulers and aristocracy, provide information about Sikh religion and customs to the recruiting and commanding officers of the army, and to harness the support of the Sikh people as collaborators. As may be expected *a priori*, the points of emphasis changed with the changing political context. However, these writers took no serious interest in the Sikh past, they had no appreciation for the Sikh tradition, and their general attitude towards the Sikhs remained unsympathetic. Moreover, with the exception of Lepel Griffin who collected information about the chiefs and families of note, all other writers depended on the published works, mostly by Malcolm and Trumpp, using these selectively to suit their purposes.

On the assumption that there was a link between the celebrated martial spirit of the Sikhs and their faith, the bureaucracy encouraged the study of their religion and scripture, first by Ernest Trumpp, a German missionary, and then by Max Arthur Macauliffe, a British civil servant, who wrote in direct reaction to Trumpp. Grewal compares the two writers, also taking note of N.G. Barrier's recent defence of Trumpp's work, and comes to the conclusion that the latter's work was essentially unsympathetic and extremely misleading. In Grewal's assessment, Trumpp's understanding was faulty, his translation was literal and flawed, and his interpretation of Sikhism amounted to 'misrepresentation' on several crucial points.<sup>7</sup> He was highly sceptical about the use of *Janamsakhis* for the historical life of Guru Nanak who was said to be greatly indebted to Hindu philosophy for all his important doctrines, and especially to Kabir for his theistic ideas. Trumpp maintained that Sikhism remained a Hindu sect.

By contrast, Macauliffe's approach towards Sikhism was sympathetic and his attitude towards Sikh orthodoxy was considerate. He evaluated the different Sikh sources and looked upon Sikhism 'as the most original dispensation' with 'many "moral and political" merits'.<sup>8</sup> His translation of the Sikh scripture and some other sources was closer to the original. Yet, Macauliffe too could not transcend his immediate context. He uncritically

accepted some post-eventum prophecies because these suited the colonial state and the loyalist Sikh scholarship. At places, he accommodated the orthodox Sikh view against his own judgment about the reliability of a particular source. On the whole, 'Macauliffe was acceptable to the Sikhs primarily because his translation was closer to the original, and his interpretation of the Sikh tradition was faithful to the sources he used'.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, by widening the scope of the early Sikh tradition, he provided the basis for the later writings on Sikhism. His translation and interpretation suggested to Dorothy Field in 1914 that 'Sikhism was a world religion "rather than a reformed sect of Hindus"'.<sup>10</sup>

Turning to the works of John Clarke Archer and C.H. Loehlin, two American missionaries, Grewal notices interesting similarities and differences between them. Archer's comparative study of the Sikhs in relation to other religions, and Loehlin's work on *The Sikhs and their Scriptures* were first published in 1946. In 1971, Loehlin published his study of the *Granth of Guru Gobind Singh and the Khalsa Brotherhood*. Together, the two writers bridged Western scholarship of the colonial and post-colonial periods. At the end of his analyses of their works, Grewal observes that while the two agreed that Sikhism emerged as a world religion, they differed in their conception of the nature of the Sikh faith in the beginning. Loehlin believed that Sikhism was a synthesis of Bhakti Hinduism and Sufi Islam, and that Guru Nanak was indebted to both Vaishnava Bhakti and Kabir. While they agreed on the development of the Sikh Panth as evolutionary, Archer laid emphasis on the martial activity of Guru Hargobind, and Loehlin focused on the tenth Guru as completing the process of militarization. Despite their broad agreement over the invocation of the Goddess by Guru Gobind Singh, personal Guruship ending after his death, Guruship vested in the *Granth Sahib*, and the need to determine the authenticity of the *Kartarpur Pothi*, there are differences of emphasis and detail between Archer and Loehlin. Loehlin regards the *Dasam Granth* as one of the 'two books of scripture'. As a whole he does not clarify any issue.

Grewal draws attention to some other views peculiar to the two writers. Archer was the first Western scholar to postulate a difference between the Nanak of history and Nanak of faith, and to suggest that the Khalsa *rahit* (code of conduct) as well as the doctrines of Guru Granth and Guru Panth came to be established gradually during the eighteenth century. Loehlin emphasized the gap between the ideal of equality and the ground realities by pointing to the caste restrictions for matrimony, and denial of equality to the lower castes in social relations and worship. It is possible to see the bearing of the missionary orientation of the two writers on these formulations which, significantly, were picked up later by W.H. McLeod. There was a palpable influence of Trumpp on Loehlin as well as McLeod.

### Indian Response

The next three parts take up the historical writing on the Sikhs by Indians from the 1890s to the 1950s, ending with an analysis of Teja Singh and Ganda Singh's well-known work, *A Short History of the Sikhs*.

In 1891, Syad Muhammad Latif published a substantial volume on the *History of the Punjab* since the earliest time to the present. Over half of its 650 pages are given to the history of the Sikhs as the immediate predecessors of the British. He used a large number of non-English sources, mainly Persian, and his treatment was essentially unsympathetic, justifying annexation and praising British rule. As an Extra Judicial Assistant Commissioner in the Punjab, Latif hoped for reward from the government, which he got in 1892. He wrote as a loyal Muslim and his work reflected the emerging communal consciousness in North India. For Sikh history, at any rate, it leaves a dead trail.

The other three writers in part three of the book happened to be educated Sikhs who belonged to the emergent professional middle class and whose scholarship was inspired by their faith and sympathy for the Sikh tradition. Sewaram Singh Thapar, a lawyer and later a District and Sessions Judge, published a monograph on the life and teaching of Guru Nanak in 1904. Bhagat Lakshman Singh, a professor and a journalist, wrote on the life of Guru Gobind Singh in 1909, and on the Sikh martyrs in 1919. Khazan Singh, an Extra Assistant Commissioner, produced 'the first comprehensive work on the history and religion of the Sikhs' in 1914. Responding to the writings of the Western writers, all three of them sought to correct the existing misrepresentations. They laid emphasis on the distinctiveness of the Sikh faith and Sikh identity. They were concerned with the correct understanding about the Sikh movement, doctrines and institutions. For example, Sewaram Singh underlined that 'Guru Nanak enunciated the basic principles for the guidance of his disciples'; Bhagat Lakshman Singh emphasized that 'Guru Gobind Singh's achievement was made possible by the work of the predecessors' or that martyrdom was 'an integral part of the Sikh tradition'; and Khazan Singh suggested that 'the "touchstone" for assaying any work on Sikhism was available in the *Adi Granth* and the *Vars* of Bhai Gurdas'.<sup>11</sup> In Grewal's assessment, the three writers had a good knowledge of the Sikh sources which they used critically and interpreted 'in human and rational terms'.<sup>12</sup> There were occasional errors of judgment or compromises in deference to tradition. As a whole, the three writers could be taken as the early representatives of modern 'Sikh' scholarship. Their concern for the Sikh past was related to their concern for the present and future of the Sikhs. Interestingly, writing in the backdrop of the Singh Sabha movement, 'they did not look upon Sikh identity as a basis of Sikh politics'.<sup>13</sup>

In part four, Grewal analyses the writings of the two well-known Bengali historians – Indubhusan Banerjee and Narendra Krishna Sinha – which were well-received as comprehensive scholarly studies and remained part of the university syllabi for four decades or so. First published in the 1930s, the

works of both the historians reflected the influence of the Freedom Struggle and its undercurrents during the twenties and the thirties.

In the course of his analysis of Banerjee's study of the *Evolution of the Khalsa* in two volumes, Grewal draws attention to its basic limitations arising partly from the author's conceptualization inspired by his environment, and partly from his inability to deconstruct Sikh sources. Assuming that Guru Nanak was a 'Vaishnava reformer', Banerjee failed to grasp 'the core of the message of the *Janamsakhis*' about 'the uniqueness of Guru Nanak's mission'.<sup>14</sup> For Banerjee, thus, there was 'nothing in the ideology of Guru Nanak' which could lead to 'transformation of Sikhism'. He tried to explain it 'in terms of "Muslim persecution", the ideological and institutional developments under the successors of Guru Nanak, and the innate traits of the Jats'.<sup>15</sup> These assumptions clouded Banerjee's judgment and he not only failed to appreciate the creative responses of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh, but also overlooked the ideological continuities between the first and the last Guru. Moreover, Banerjee wrote as a Hindu nationalist.<sup>16</sup> In short, the ideas that informed Banerjee's research 'induced him to force on his evidence an interpretation that it was not strong enough to support'.<sup>17</sup>

Inspired by J.D. Cunningham's work, and dedicating his *Rise of the Sikh Power* to him, Sinha subscribed to his formulation of 'theocratic confederate feudalism' for the eighteenth century Sikh polity. Drawing a parallel between the rise of the Sikhs and that of the Marathas, Sinha underlined 'the collective endeavour of a united people' who were led successfully by 'comparatively obscure men'. He appreciated their role in checking 'the Durrani menace'. In Grewal's words, 'for Sinha, the rise of Sikh power was a nationalist enterprise, both Indian and Hindu'.<sup>18</sup> By comparison, in his study of *Ranjit Singh*, Sinha was much less appreciative of his 'military monarchy' and of Ranjit Singh himself both as a person and as a ruler. He was credited nonetheless with saving the Punjab, Kashmir and the north-west for India from the Afghans. Sinha wished, however, that instead of 'yielding' to the British, Ranjit Singh had gone to war against them, irrespective of the consequences. While borrowing his formulations from modern European history, Sinha allowed his judgments to be influenced also by the contemporary political environment in India. Like Banerjee, Sinha's works too suffered from the limitations of conceptualization and sources.

The fifth part of the book deals with 'the native historians of the Punjab', beginning with Gokul Chand Narang's doctoral study. First published in 1912, and revised and enlarged several times till the 1960s, his *Transformation of Sikhism* remained consistent in its basic premise that Sikhism was a Hindu sect and that Sikh movement was a Hindu movement from the first to the tenth Guru. Banda Bahadur, however, taught the Hindus how to conquer and rule, thereby making Sikhism 'less sectarian and more nationalistic' in its character. Grewal suggests that Narang 'looked upon the Sikhs as prototypes of the Arya Samajists'.<sup>19</sup> Ironically, while he highlighted the 'life-and-death struggle' and political achievement of the Khalsa in the post-Banda period, for the history of the Sikhs under colonial rule, Narang dwelt on the theme of loyalty. Until after

the attainment of independence, 'Narang looked upon himself as a "missionary of Hindu-Sikh unity"'.<sup>20</sup> He had no sympathy for the Sikh struggle for what he calls 'Khalistan' and the Akali agitation for a Punjabi-speaking state. Like Indubhusan Banerjee, Narang 'tried to appropriate the Sikh past for Hindu nationalism'. While Narang's 'assumptions and approach' marred his interpretation even in the first edition of his work,<sup>21</sup> 'the later editions can be seen as "a journalistic exercise" or as "a piece of political writing rather than a writing of history"'.<sup>22</sup>

The next historian taken up is Hari Ram Gupta who can be seen as chronologically bridging the pre and post-Independence historical writing on the Sikhs. His most important work on Sikh history was his doctoral thesis published in 1939 as *History of the Sikhs from 1739 to 1768*. Its sequel came out in two volumes in 1944 as the history respectively of the cis and trans-Satlej Sikhs from 1769 to 1799. The first and the third volumes give a connected and on the whole meaningful account of the political activity of the trans-Satlej Sikhs who fought against the Mughals and Afghans and developed institutions and practices that contributed towards the ultimate triumph of the Sikhs and occupation of territories. The second volume on the politics and warfare of the cis-Satlej Sikhs, however, 'does not contribute to our understanding of the political process'. In Gupta's treatment, the Sikh chiefs of this tract emerged as selfish plunderers who subordinated collective interest to their individual interests, and who had no hesitation in accepting political subordination as vassals. Gupta referred to them as the Phulkian *misl*, 'though there is no evidence for treating the Phulkian chiefs as a single unit'. Moreover, Gupta failed 'to see that all the important Sikh chiefs were acting independently of others'. If they were virtually autonomous in the cis-Satlej tract, in the trans-Satlej area 'they were acting as monarchs and Ranjit Singh was a born monarch'.<sup>23</sup>

Gupta evinced admiration for the trans-Satlej Sikhs who repulsed the Afghan invasions and established sovereign rule in the Punjab. By turning the tide of 'foreign' aggression after 800 years and by securing the frontier region of 'our country', they performed a 'national duty'. In this 'equation of Muslims with foreigner', Gupta revealed an overlapping of 'Indian nationalism' with 'Hindu nationalism',<sup>24</sup> though he was far removed from Narang's unabashed 'Hinduized perspective positing Hindu-Muslim divide as a central aspect of Indian society'.<sup>25</sup> Gupta's sympathetic treatment brought out the 'intrinsic worth' of the Khalsa and 'their tenacity of purpose and resourcefulness'.

Using a number of Persian, English, Gurmukhi and Marathi sources, Gupta 'may be seen as interpreting eighteenth century Sikh history largely through his facts'. He was meticulous about persons, places and events, but stretched his 'contemporary evidence' to 'anything that came from the eighteenth century and even the early decades of the nineteenth century'. As a whole, his work can be seen as constituting 'a clear and substantial advance over Sinha in terms of factual detail and authenticity and in terms of political development phase by phase'. However, continues Grewal, Gupta's *History* 'does not



contribute anything serious' to the study of Sikh polity, while economic, social and cultural aspects are 'barely mentioned'.<sup>26</sup>

G.L. Chopra was the first historian of Ranjit Singh to get a doctorate from London which he published in 1928 as the *Punjab as a Sovereign State*. With its critical use of unpublished Persian and English sources available in London, extensive annotation, three maps, and seven appendices (six of which illumine the text), Chopra's work can be considered 'scholarly'. He systematically studied the creation and structure of Ranjit Singh's state and attributed its ultimate decline to some 'subtle and fundamental causes' beyond his control. Chopra disagreed with his British predecessors over the character and religious beliefs of Ranjit Singh, his court and civil administration. It was underlined that there was neither any religious discrimination nor any 'drain of wealth' under Ranjit Singh. He involved all religious communities of the Punjab in his enterprise, but it was a mistake on his part to allow the Dogras to acquire vast territory and influence. As Grewal puts it, 'an undercurrent of Punjabi nationalism' was evident in Chopra who assumed the existence of three well-marked religious communities in the Punjab.<sup>27</sup>

A 'strong Punjabi sentiment' is evident also in Sita Ram Kohli's work on Ranjit Singh and his successors. As the Keeper of Records at Lahore, he had access to a diverse range of sources in Persian, English, Urdu and Punjabi and even some artifacts which he used for his various publications on the early nineteenth century Punjab. Kohli was not inclined to treat any of the existing sources and recent studies as 'authorities' though he appreciated J.D. Cunningham's sympathetic approach. Kohli's comprehensive study of Ranjit Singh in Urdu (1933) and Punjabi (1953) dwells on his early life, political history, diplomatic relations, military organization, revenue and civil administration, and his idea of sovereignty. Ranjit Singh did not give importance to the symbols of royalty like the crown and the throne, but he could lay emphasis on his sovereign status through other means. In Kohli's view, his greatest service to the country was the unification of the Punjab which entailed peace and prosperity for a large part of the country.

Kohli studied the eventful decade after Ranjit Singh in a separate volume entitled, *Sunset of the Sikh Empire*, which was published posthumously. While meticulously presenting the fast-changing political scenario at Lahore and the political considerations of the British, Kohli narrated the sequence of events leading to the outbreak of the Anglo-Sikh War and what Grewal calls the 'deliberate subversion of a protected state' subsequently.<sup>28</sup> Despite Khushwant Singh's substantial editing of the last three chapters, the *Sunset* remained Kohli's work 'with great empathy for the Khalsa'.<sup>29</sup> His approach was marked by intellectual integrity, logical presentation and lucidity of style. He was 'a pioneer in bringing new sources to light'; he was 'also a pioneer in giving special attention to the army of Ranjit Singh, and his revenue administration'.<sup>30</sup>

The last work analysed by Grewal is *A Short History of the Sikhs* by Teja Singh and Ganda Singh, which represents 'a kind of transition from the colonial to contemporary Sikh studies'.<sup>31</sup> By then, a string of 'Sikh scholars' had produced encyclopaedic, textual, philological, linguistic, scriptural,

philosophical, grammatical and biographical studies in Punjabi and English.<sup>32</sup> Historical approach is evident in the works particularly of Teja Singh, Karam Singh, 'the historian', and Ganda Singh. Through his several publications on Sikhism, Sikh ideals and institutions, Teja Singh laid emphasis on Sikhism as 'an original system'. Representing the Singh Sabha concern for Sikh history, Karam Singh collected unpublished evidence about the period of Sikh rule in Punjabi, Persian and English. His articles on problems of Sikh history and monographs on Banda Singh and Raja Ala Singh presented 'rational interpretation of empirical evidence' in Punjabi, with an open-minded approach to the sources. 'Interest in biography, original source materials, and issues or themes of contemporary interest' was evident also in Ganda Singh's writings. Reflecting all these concerns and approaches during the transitional phase, *A Short History* can be regarded as 'its most important publication', which 'served as a good introduction to Sikh history for six decades'.<sup>33</sup>

Laying emphasis on 'scientific approach', Teja Singh and Ganda Singh claimed their history to be a just and impartial account from a secular viewpoint. They covered the period of Sikh history in three unequal phases: From 1469 to 1708, the ten Gurus laid its 'religious foundations'; from 1708 to 1716, Banda Singh laid its 'political foundations'; and the period from 1716 to 1765 was marked by 'persecution leading to power'. The authors underlined that Sikhism was founded as a new faith from the very beginning, and that Sikh ideology and institutions became the bases of the Sikh social order. The Sikh ideology for which they used the term 'character' (sum of ideas, attitudes, ethics and values) enabled the Sikhs to respond to the trying situations constructively. This empathetic and insightful study evinced familiarity with the sources from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, with a cautious use of Persian and English accounts and greater reliance on the contemporary Sikh sources, including the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

However, as Grewal points out, the authors did not always 'make a distinction between strictly "contemporary" and "near contemporary" evidence'. Moreover, there is no credible evidence for the ideas that Guru Gobind Singh agreed to perform *hom* for the Goddess (even if to disillusion the people); that it was Banda Singh who first thought of sovereign rule; that he abolished the *zamindari* system; that the *rakhi* system was different from the occupation of territories by the Sikhs later on; or that the concept of *misldari* was relevant for the period of Sikh rule which, incidentally, was not covered in *A Short History*.<sup>34</sup> Recent research has drawn attention towards these lacunae in the political history of the Sikhs as presented by Teja Singh and Ganda Singh. By now, in fact, the scope of Sikh history has widened sufficiently to cover social, cultural, economic and institutional aspects.

### **In Retrospect**

The contours of modern historical writing on the Sikhs took shape over the past century and a half. What was a bare outline at the end of the eighteenth century got filled up gradually by the time J.D. Cunningham published his

sympathetic yet scholarly *History of the Sikhs* in 1849. In the first half of the colonial period historical writings on the Sikhs moved either in neutral gear or consciously away from Cunningham, adding to stereotypes and misconceptions. A convergence of traditional Sikh scholarship (inspired by the Singh Sabha resurgence) with the Western scholarship (inspired by colonial necessity) resulted in Max Arthur Macauliffe's multi-volume work published in 1909, weaving tradition with narrative. It was intelligible alike to the Western and Indian readers, and its influence can be discerned in the later writings of the American missionaries. By then, and as a corrective to the generally unsympathetic Western writings, the first generation of the English educated 'Sikh' scholars came to the fore, using Sikh sources, laying emphasis on the distinctiveness of Sikhism, and expressing concern about the position of the Sikhs in contemporary times. The growth of modern education and the march of Indian nationalism, albeit under-towed by communalism, inspired a cross-section of Punjabi and Bengali scholars to study Sikh history from various standpoints. The traditional Sikh scholars also came forth with a diverse range of studies in Punjabi as noted by Grewal. A convergence of some of their concerns with those of modern scholars is evident in Teja Singh and Ganda Singh's *A Short History*.

While classifying the writers according to their background and period, Grewal rightly looks upon them as the products of their particular situations. Through his deconstruction of each work, capturing its nuances and intricacies, pointing out its fine points and inaccuracies, and unravelling its author's purposes, concerns and predilections, Grewal determines the degree of its reliability and comparative worth for Sikh history. His analysis exposes the prejudices and hollowness of the writings of the British administrators and military officers, particularly in the post-annexation period. Their relevance lay more in affording insights into the thinking and priorities of the colonialists in their own time. By and large, the works of only those writers – whether Western or Indian – turned out to be more lasting for those who used the sources critically while respecting the Sikh tradition. With the exception of Syad Muhammad Latif, Indian scholars attempted that, albeit with varying degree of success. All along, they were asking new questions, unearthing new sources, refining the earlier interpretations, and gaining maturity, respectability and readership in the process. According to Grewal:

What is common to the Indian historians is their conviction that their understanding and their interpretation of the Sikh past was more meaningful than that of the Western writers. Adopting Western methodology, they created 'modern' historical writing.

Looking back, it is possible to see that the works of J.D. Cunningham and some Indian scholars turned out to be important milestones in the historiography of the Sikhs, identifying and illumining the different periods of Sikh history. Some of these studies blazed trails and some came to be regarded

as classics for their sound treatment, empathetic understanding and lucidity of style. Some works have remained relevant for posterity only as the mirrors of their own time, and for the views of the authors; they have entered history in the sense of their contents and interpretations having been rejected or subsumed by the later research. Together, however, the works analysed in the book constitute the ‘heritage from the colonial period’, to be ‘reinforced, expanded and enriched after India’s Independence’.<sup>35</sup>

### **The Widening Range**

Since the 1960s an increasing number of professional historians have been producing monographs and anthologies on a diverse range of themes:

Religious and secular figures of Sikh history, Sikh thought and ethics, the Sikh movement under the Gurus, Sikh politics and polity of the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century, the Sikh scripture and various forms of Sikh literature, Sikh institutions, Sikh social order with reference to caste and gender, the Sikh tradition of martyrdom, Sikh identity, and historical writing on the Sikhs.<sup>36</sup>

In other words, besides reinforcing the study of early Sikh tradition, its politicization and Sikh polity, three distinct areas of study have been added to the emerging field of Sikh Studies: the Sikh experience of the colonial period, Sikh politics in post-Independence times, and the Sikh diaspora. This growing interest is reflected also in the publication of a number of general histories of the Sikhs by both amateur and professional historians over this period. Given the constraints of space, Grewal introduces the widening range of systematic interest in the Sikh past through fifteen ‘representative’ monographs for the four major periods of Sikh history. His criteria for selection are academic importance and representation of ‘a period, an area, a form, or a theme’ in the framework of Indian history. Thus, an emerging new area such as the Sikh diaspora, or a few works on Sikh art, literature and coins have not been included. The publications connected with the controversies in Sikh Studies have also been excluded from discussion at this stage.

The early Sikh movement is represented by three complementary monographs: *Guru Gobind Singh* by J.S. Grewal and S.S. Bal (1967), *Guru Nanak in History* by J.S. Grewal (1969), and *the Sikh Gurus and the Sikh Society* by Nihar Ranjan Ray (1970). While the first two focus on the writings of the Gurus to understand their status and creative responses in their specific contexts, the third work interprets the message of the Sikh Gurus, laying emphasis on its distinctiveness in religious and social terms. The period of Sikh rule is represented by two studies – one on Sikh polity by Bhagat Singh and the other on polity and agrarian structure, somewhat misleadingly called the *Agrarian System of the Sikhs*, by Indu Banga. Interestingly, published in the same year, that is 1978, the two works treat the subject from diametrically

opposite standpoints, one tracing the polity to Guru Nanak, and the other studying continuity and change in the politico-administrative organization of the Sikhs with reference to the Mughal system and Sikh ideology. The historiography of the colonial period is represented by six works, three of which study the movements for socio-religious reform – *The Kuka Movement* by Fauja Singh (1965), *The Sikhs and Their Literature* by N.G. Barrier (1970), and *The Nirankari Sikhs* by John C.B. Webster (1981), each bringing out the characteristics of the particular movement, and Barrier's work also discussing the literature of the Singh Sabha movement. Social change among the Sikhs in terms especially of the caste and class is discussed in *The Transformation of the Sikh Society* by Ethne K. Marengo (1976). The altered equation between the Sikhs and the colonial state over the reform of the Gurdwaras and its wide ranging political significance is studied as *The Akali Movement* by Mohinder Singh (1978), while the sixth monograph by K.L. Tuteja focuses on *Sikh Politics* of the third and the fourth decade from the nationalist angle (1984). The contemporary period continues to be dominated by politics, albeit of different kinds, which is represented by two sets of writings. For the movement for the Punjabi-speaking state two studies are chosen: Baldev Raj Nayar's *Minority Politics* (1966) and Ajit Singh Sarhadi's *Punjabi Suba* (1970); interestingly, one is literally by an 'outsider' and the other is virtually by an 'insider'. The manner of creating the Punjabi-speaking state led to fresh problems resulting in an upsurge of militancy which has been studied by Harnik Deol as *Religion and Nationalism* (2000) and by Jugdep S. Chima as *The Sikh Separatist Insurgency* (2010). These two works by political scientists trace the background of Sikh ethno-nationalism, and the political, economic and technological factors contributing towards its escalation as well as its different stages till the early 1990s. Although Grewal has his reservations about the conceptualization and approach of some of the 'representative' studies discussed here, as a whole they are seen as representing a distinct advance over the historiography of the early twentieth century.

This advance was facilitated, among other things, by the publication of research tools like the general and classified bibliographies, catalogues of unpublished sources, calendars of archival records, and the texts and translations of the Gurmukhi and Persian sources. The Punjab Languages Department created in the 1950s, and the state universities founded at Patiala and Amritsar in the 1960s, especially helped in promoting research in Sikh and Punjab history through their publications and academic and research programs. Sikh history came to form a substantial segment of the postgraduate courses in Punjab history. Incidentally, this is how Grewal was introduced to the sources and problems of Sikh history at Chandigarh. The centenaries of important events associated with the Sikh Gurus and the Sikh past became the occasions for fresh research and publications. It may be relevant to mention that the above-mentioned studies of Guru Gobind Singh and Guru Nanak by Grewal were produced in connection with their birth centenaries. The interest in Sikh history was generated also by the growing presence of the Sikh diaspora in the West and the setting up of Chairs of Sikh and Punjab Studies in some

universities. The outbreak of militancy too appears to have drawn attention towards the Sikhs and their history. Significantly, two-thirds of the 'representative' works are by the professional historians from India, mainly Punjab, and one-third is by the scholars located in the West (half of them being of Punjabi origin). All the general histories noticed in this study are by the Punjabis, including one by Grewal himself. Apparently, what began as the 'Indian response to Western enterprise' has by now been overtaken by the Indian initiative. In the ultimate analysis, however, the widening range of Sikh Studies was not unrelated to the widening scope of history as a discipline, which became noticeable since the 1960s also in the case of Indian and Punjab history.<sup>37</sup>

### **Recent Controversies and Debates in Sikh Studies**

As noted earlier, the last chapter of the book is given to an overview of what Grewal calls 'recent controversies' which originated with the publication of W.H. McLeod's *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* (1968), and got escalated with the publication of his *Evolution of the Sikh Community* (1975). The controversy involving professional historians and 'Sikh' scholars for and against McLeod's position became 'intense and bitter' with the deepening of political crisis in the Punjab in the 1980s and the growing interest in the Punjab and Sikh Studies in North America since the 1970s. Feeling concerned about the hardening of grooves and its adverse effect on the growing field of Sikh Studies, Grewal decided to examine the issues involved so that the possibility of a dialogue could be created. By the time he published his *Perspectives on Sikh Identity* (1997), question marks had been put on nearly all the high points in the history of the Sikh movement. Another monograph by him followed as the *Contesting Interpretations of the Sikh Tradition* (1998).

Over a score of scholars came to be involved in these controversies. McLeod and Harjot Oberoi reinforced each other's position on the early and later history of the Sikh movement. Pashaura Singh, Louis Fenech and Doris Jakobsh more or less supported McLeod's assumptions in their doctoral studies. If a number of Western scholars sympathized with their position, a much larger number of 'Sikh' scholars questioned their assumptions, formulations and methods, even imputing motives.<sup>38</sup> Reacting strongly to their invective, McLeod declared in his *Autobiography* (2004) that he was following the established methods of historical research and writing *only* for the 'educated Western readers', and that he had to offer 'no apology' for it.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, publication of some doctoral studies produced in North America added some more issues to these controversies. In the words of Grewal:

One side presents it in terms of Enlightenment *versus* religious faith, or 'critical historians' *versus* 'traditional historians'; the other side presents it in terms of deliberate misrepresentation of the Sikh tradition, lack of empathy and linguistic competence, and use of inappropriate methodology. There is

little mutual appreciation. Consequently, what we hear largely are two sets of assertions.

Obviously, 'the two world-views' stood 'in complete opposition to each other'. Grewal's concern has been with their 'bearing' on 'historical writing', which alone in his view is 'relevant for debate'.<sup>40</sup>

McLeod has been at the center of this controversy. While the Western scholars by and large tried to perpetuate, substantiate or defend his position, the 'Sikh' scholars and their sympathizers directed their critique primarily against him, and secondarily against Oberoi, followed at some distance by Pashaura Singh and others. Some of the reviewers of Grewal's earlier publications on the controversies had commented that he unfairly defended McLeod, or that there was no real debate, or that the author had not given his own views.<sup>41</sup> Grewal confronted each issue by evaluating the respective positions at length and then giving his own 'assessment' in no uncertain terms in his *Recent Debates* (2011). This work is as much a reflection of his usual objectivity, lucidity and thoroughness, as it is a trenchant affirmation of his own position *vis-à-vis* McLeod.

While emphasizing the need for a dialogue in his 'Introductory' statement, Grewal says in the *Recent Debates* that he had not realized that howsoever 'slight', there were differences between him and McLeod on nearly every important issue from the very beginning.<sup>42</sup> To be sure, he read and reread McLeod's entire work, absorbing the detail, noting the modifications in his successive publications, and capturing the nuances in his argument and unravelling the underlying assumptions. By then, Grewal himself had freshly analysed and interpreted a large number of Sikh and non-Sikh sources.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, his 'assessment' in *Recent Debates* clarifies the issues, amplifies the respective positions, and modifies his earlier understanding. Given the constraints of space, this essay briefly elucidates his particular position on each of the major issues under debate rather than the arguments for and against.<sup>44</sup>

Essentially, and in opposition to McLeod, Grewal maintains that Guru Nanak consciously offered 'a new dispensation', which was distinct from contemporary religious traditions in both 'ideology and praxis'. Placing him in the Sant tradition therefore is not only historically untenable, it tantamount to a denial of his express statements and acts for which there is ample credible evidence.<sup>45</sup>

Responding to McLeod's rejection of the *Janamsakhis* as projecting the 'myth' of Guru Nanak and therefore of no use to his biography, and suggesting 'a positive approach', Grewal maintains that let alone the 'probabilities', 'even in terms of certainties we know more about Guru Nanak than about any other religious figure of the medieval period'.<sup>46</sup> The evidence of the *Janamsakhi* combined with the compositions of Guru Nanak, and other information about the period could tell us more about his life. Furthermore, 'the "myth" of Guru Nanak is in fact an interpretation of his life and mission and, therefore, the core of a *Janamsakhi*'.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, 'the "myths" of Guru Nanak in different

*Janamsakhi* traditions are as many interpretations of his doctrines, ethics, attitudes and status'.<sup>48</sup>

McLeod's explanation of the development of the Sikh Panth in terms of evolution and gradual weaning away from 'Hindu' tradition does not take into account the replacement of Brahmanical institutions with new ones like the Gurdwara, the *Granth* and Guruship. Moreover, the distinctive Sikh 'rituals' can be traced to Guru Nanak himself.<sup>49</sup> McLeod's attribution of politicization and militarization to 'the pressure of external circumstances', like the Shakti cult of the hills blending with the Jat culture of the plains, ignores the pontificate of Guru Arjan and initiative of Guru Hargobind. Grewal underlines Guru Arjan's use of the concept of *helemi raj* 'for the entire dispensation of Guru Nanak and his successors'. Thus, rather than being a state within a state, Sikh Panth came to represent 'a parallel dispensation with no territorial limits'.<sup>50</sup>

Critiquing the position of McLeod and Oberoi over the distinctiveness of the early Sikh identity, particularly Guru Nanak being represented as a 'Hindu' in certain situations, Grewal maintains that 'the connotation of "Hindu" in the seventeenth century was not the same as in the twentieth'. The *Janamsakhi* evidence has therefore to be interpreted as Guru Nanak's 'denial' that he was a 'Muslim'. The *Janamsakhis* project the Panth of Guru Nanak 'as different also from the Panths of the Vaishnavas, Sanyasis and the Yogis (which are now regarded as Hindu)'.<sup>51</sup> McLeod and Oberoi refer to the Sikh sources 'without studying' their 'evidence' in detail.<sup>52</sup> A careful study of the *Vars* of Bhai Gurdas and the compositions of the Gurus in the *Guru Granth Sahib* brings out the 'Sikh self-image' which has not been taken note of by any other scholar. Grewal emphasizes that the successor Gurus and the people closely associated with them 'thought of the path of Guru Nanak as totally new'. Even an outside observer of the seventeenth century, the author of the *Dabistan-i Mazahib*, 'underscores the distinctive character of Sikh doctrines and practices in relation to the three great religious traditions of the seventeenth-century India: the Islamic, the ascetical and the Brahmanical'.<sup>53</sup>

Grewal finds serious flaws in McLeod's hypothesis about the Khalsa *rahit* and the doctrines of Guru Granth and Guru Panth. Grewal notices 'a profound continuity with the pre-Khalsa tradition' in the *rahit* about the religious life of the Khalsa as spelt out by the *Rahitnamas* of the eighteenth century. There is contemporary evidence also about 'the most important' positive changes introduced by Guru Gobind Singh in the wake of the institution of the Khalsa – the baptism of the double-edged sword, the unshorn hair, the epithet Singh, the bearing of arms, and the duty to fight for establishing Khalsa Raj. Even the most emphatic negative injunction against the use of tobacco figures in the contemporary sources. The basic items of the 5Ks, that is *kesh*, *kirpan* and *kachh*, find mention in the sources of the time of Guru Gobind Singh. The remaining two – *kangha* and *kara* – even in McLeod's view, can go with *kesh* and the arms. 'What is *new* is the formula of 5Ks [emphasis added] and *not* the substantive items'. Grewal finds McLeod's suggestion that these symbols came from the Jat culture as 'equally off the mark'. What is particularly



questionable here is the assertion of ‘sanctity attached to the *kesh*’ by the Jats for which again there is no evidence. Moreover, ‘the *kachh* can never be associated with them’; ‘the *kirpan* had no fascination for them and there is no evidence of its use by the Jats’.<sup>54</sup>

Grewal questions the validity of McLeod’s hypothesis that the doctrines of Guru Panth (Panth is the Guru) and Guru Granth (Granth is the Guru) arose gradually out of the need for cohesion during the eighteenth century, and not as a result of the Guru’s own explicit injunction. The evidence of Guru Gobind Singh’s court poet, Sainapat, whose *Sri Gur Sobha* is now placed in the first decade of the eighteenth century, expressly counters McLeod’s hypotheses on this point.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, ‘neither was the doctrine of Guru Granth preceded by the doctrine of Guru Panth nor was the doctrine of Guru Panth completely dropped in the early nineteenth century’.<sup>56</sup>

While underlining the distinctiveness of the Khalsa identity and its dominance during the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Grewal clarifies some ‘misconceptions’ held by McLeod and Oberoi. Grewal suggests that the term ‘Khalsa’ was in use for those Sikhs who were directly linked with the Guru before the institution of the Khalsa. During the eighteenth century, therefore, ‘the former Khalsa was looked upon as consisting of *keshdhari* Singhs and *sahajdhari* Sikhs’, and ‘both were regarded as members of the Panth’. It is emphasized that ‘neither the “Nanak-Panthis” nor the Udasis can be regarded as Sahajdharis who were closely aligned with the Singhs’. Furthermore, the Persian writers generally used the term ‘Nanak-Panthis’ ‘for all the followers of Guru Nanak and his successors’. Since the Persian writers were not interested in any differences within the Panth, this ‘blanket term’ served their purpose even during the eighteenth century for referring actually to the ‘Singhs’. Through a process of elimination thus, Grewal shows that ‘Oberoi’s Sahajdharis are virtually ‘Udasis’.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, Oberoi builds his hypothesis of ‘Sanatan-Sikhism’ having replaced the Khalsa identity in the early nineteenth century, mainly on the basis of an Udasi text, combined with the selective use of the works of Koer Singh and Bhai Santokh Singh, and some Nirmala writings of the latter half of the nineteenth century. Taking note of the major works of Sikh literature, chronicles of the period, and the works of Malcolm and Cunningham, ‘seen in their totality’, Grewal concludes that:

By far the most important identity of the Sikhs was that of the Khalsa Singhs. Even the Sahajdhari movements of the early nineteenth century [the Nirankaris and the early Namdharis] were anti-Brahmanical and supportive of a distinct Sikh identity.<sup>58</sup>

Grewal finds consciousness of a distinctive Khalsa identity not only continuing into the colonial period and revitalized by the Singh Sabha movement, particularly the radical reformers called the Tat-Khalsa. One of its leading exponents, Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha, published his *Ham Hindu Nahin* in 1898,

dwelling on the ideological foundations of the Khalsa identity and equating the Sikh Panth with the Sikh *qaum* (nation), thereby projecting the Sikhs as a political community. In due course, it came to be regarded as a classic statement of Sikh identity. As the basis of Sikh politics of constitutional, agitational and militant variety in the twentieth century, identity became 'a sensitive issue' for the Sikhs as well as non-Sikhs. Therefore, even when it is easy to recognize the distinct socio-cultural identity of the Sikhs from the sixteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century as 'an academic issue', it no longer remains 'academic' towards the end of the twentieth century. Depending upon their values and assumptions, scholars tend to look upon the question of Sikh identity differently, most often to utter disregard of empirical evidence. Thus, Oberoi's hypothesis of Sanatan-Sikhism hammers 'rupture' from the past, overlooking the ideological and historical continuities, highlighting differences and deviations, and looking upon Nabha's writing as a polemical pamphlet. By comparison, McLeod may appear to be closer to the ground realities, but he too downplays the strength of the Khalsa tradition and its bearing on consciousness of identity and political outlook. In the final analysis, clarifies Grewal, what was new to the Singh Sabha phase was 'rational argument for a distinctive Sikh identity with its political implications, and not Sikh identity itself'.<sup>59</sup> In his view, a better understanding of the movement requires a serious study of the Singh Sabha interpretation of the earlier Sikh literature along with the literature produced by its leaders.

It may be relevant to point out that in his recent monograph on Sikh literature from Guru Nanak to Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha, Grewal arrives at the conclusion that there was unambiguous evidence of a consciousness of distinctive Sikh identity and its acknowledgment by the non-Sikh observers from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century:

This study indicates that the consciousness of identity among the Sikhs was a product of their religious beliefs and institutions, their social order, and their political role. Present even in the literature of the earlier period, this consciousness crystallized in the eighteenth century as the *tisar panth* [the Third Panth]. It may only be added that the author of the seventeenth century *Dabistan-i Mazahib*, who was a Parsi, the author of the eighteenth century *Jangnama*, who was a Muslim, and the author of the nineteenth century *Char Bagh*, who was a Punjabi Hindu, looked upon the Sikhs in the pre-colonial period as distinct from both Hindus and Muslims.<sup>60</sup>

Grewal sees the Sikh conception of martyrdom as integral to Sikh tradition. In the works of Oberoi, McLeod and Fenech the concept of martyrdom is presented as a kind of 'invention'.<sup>61</sup> They look upon it as a product of the Tat-Khalsa view of Sikh history, turning the Sikh heroic figures of the eighteenth century into 'martyrs'. Finding this assertion based on an unwarranted use of a few Sikh sources of the pre-colonial period, Grewal examines the entire range

of Sikh literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the *Adi Granth* itself he notices several inter-related dimensions that have a bearing on the 'ideal of sacrificing one's life to uphold the tradition promulgated by Guru Nanak'.<sup>62</sup> Guru Arjan's compositions, as elaborated upon in the *Vars* of Bhai Gurdas, point to a conscious decision to court martyrdom to reinforce this tradition. Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom upheld the ideal of freedom of conscience. After the institution of the Khalsa, 'the *pahul*, the *kesh* and martyrdom' not only went together but also served as 'the markers of Sikh identity', says Grewal.<sup>63</sup> He concludes, thus:

In Sikh literature of the pre-colonial centuries, on the whole, martyrdom remains an essential feature of the Sikh tradition. The Sikh who died fighting valiantly for the cause of the Panth was greatly admired, but the martyrs regarded as the most venerable were not warriors. The ultimate source of martyrdom was not the heroic tradition of the Punjab but Sikh ideology. As evident from the sources, the Sikh tradition of martyrdom developed historically in response to the changing environment.<sup>64</sup>

Addressing the issues of authenticity of the *Kartarpur Pothi*, the process of its compilation, and its relationship with the *Guru Granth Sahib*, Grewal examines the views of McLeod who gave a spurt to textual studies by expressing doubts about the authenticity of the *Kartarpur Pothi*. In the course of analysing the works of different textual scholars, Grewal finds the two recent studies by Gurinder Singh Mann as 'the most satisfactory on the whole'.<sup>65</sup> Mann is able to use larger evidence and analyse the *Kartarpur Pothi* minutely to settle the issue in favour of its authenticity. He also provides a historical view of the processes that led to the compilation of the *Damdami Bir* before the end of the seventeenth century, and how it became the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

As regards the status of the *Dasam Granth*, Grewal finds 'no empirical basis' for the view made current by McLeod and Oberoi that it 'had come to be regarded as the Guru before the advent of colonial rule'.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, neither was the *Dasam Granth* compiled by Guru Gobind Singh nor were his writings 'meant to be part of the Sikh canon'.<sup>67</sup> There is no clarity about the stage at which the genuine works of Guru Gobind Singh were incorporated into the corpus later called the *Dasam Granth*. Therefore, a serious study of its history, contents and influence is needed. Interestingly, Grewal convincingly places the much discussed Goddess squarely in the context of Sikh ideology:

There is hardly any doubt that Durga figures in the *Dasam Granth*, like Ram and Krishan, as God's creation and not as the Supreme Deity. Her role is similar to that of Ram and Krishan: to fight with great courage and prowess in support of

good against evil. Her parity with the male figures in this context is beyond any doubt.<sup>68</sup>

On the issues of equality and caste, Grewal expresses a nuanced difference from McLeod who recognizes the egalitarian ideal of the Gurus, but underlines the persistence of caste in the day-to-day life of the Sikhs, especially in commensality, connubium and notions of status. The starting point for his discussion is the Caste System. Grewal calls for 'a new paradigm' for a historical study of equality and caste in the Sikh social order. 'A distinction can be made between the pre-Khalsa Sikhs and the Khalsa Singhs', which requires 'a thorough analysis of the entire range of Sikh literature and other contemporary evidence'.<sup>69</sup> Working out of the underlying principles and ethos were different in the pre and post Khalsa period. Application of the principle of equality would be different again in the period of Sikh rule. It is important nonetheless to recognize that, 'Sikh ideology introduced equalities in the religious, social and political spheres of the Sikh Panth and that the Sikh Panth was more egalitarian than the traditional social order'. With the change in the structure of opportunity, there is clear evidence of upward mobility, and extension of commensality from the Brahman to the clean Shudras of the traditional order. At the same time, concedes Grewal, traditional institutions and practices related to marriage were taken for granted; differences of wealth were accepted as God given; and inequalities existed side by side with new equalities. It must, however, be emphasized that 'Sikh ideology does not support any notions of hierarchy based on birth or occupation'.<sup>70</sup> It allowed for reduction of inequalities and creation of new possibilities in different situations.

On the issue of equality and gender too Grewal's approach is different from that of McLeod who emphasizes empirical continuities to make the general point that the idea of equality did not make women equal to men in society, especially in public life. Holding the stick from the other end, Grewal looks for affirmation of the principle and creation of situations conducive for reduction of gender inequalities. He concedes that by creating spiritual space for women within the institution of family, and by using metaphors from conjugality, Guru Nanak sustained the inegalitarian patriarchal framework. At the same time, explicit appreciation of woman and the ideal of householder, combined with insistence on monogamy and mutual fidelity, probably mitigated the rigors of male domination. Express equality in the religious sphere enabled Sikh women to participate in congregational worship and community meal. The doctrine of Guru Granth enabled them to read, understand and even expound the scripture. As a corollary, and as evident from the *Chaupa Singh Rahitnama*, additional space was created for women outside the family and in the life of the local community.

Grewal cites several striking features of the *Rahitnama* called the *Prem Sumarag* which he places early in the eighteenth century.<sup>71</sup> There are common injunctions for both man and woman in the *rahit* and religious beliefs and practices; there are broadly similar rites of passage for them; the woman is

entitled to baptism and is an equal member of the Khalsa Panth; she can inherit property in certain situations; and she can remarry as a childless widow. While in this conception of 'an ideal Sikh social order', the woman is 'not exactly at par with the man', the degree of equality visualized between the Khalsa men and Khalsa women 'makes them almost equal'. In the final analysis, suggests Grewal, 'gender in Sikhism is conceptualised as a balance between the norm of equality and the demands of a patriarchal family'.<sup>72</sup> 'A thorough research' grappling with the tension between the two remains a desideratum.<sup>73</sup>

Responding to the methodological issues thrown up by this debate, Grewal finds himself in agreement with Mcleod and Oberoi over the 'working' principles of historical method. But he has reservations about their 'application' on several points, arising often from '*a priori* assumptions', together with 'selective' use of sources. He underlines, therefore, that 'methodology by itself does not ensure veracity or validity'.<sup>74</sup> At the same time, he agrees with them about the widened scope of history to legitimately include the study of religious movements. Grewal maintains that as a 'motivating force' religious ideology becomes relevant for the historian when 'it finds expression in words and actions, and words and actions are the subject matter of history'. History would become poorer if it neglected 'ideas, assumptions and sentiments or "mentalities"'.<sup>75</sup> Evidently, there is a broad similarity of concerns between historians and the 'Sikh' scholars.

At any rate, what Grewal seems to stand for is an open-minded approach to sources, not allowing theory, or ideology, or any other *a priori* assumption to cloud one's judgment. He prefers to analyse a source in totality before using it in any significant way. His general approach is characterized by rigorous application of historical method, combined with empathetic understanding and sympathetic ear for tradition not countered by reason. Understandably, the *Recent Debates* is dedicated 'to all those scholars who aspire to become liberal historians of the Sikh tradition'.

Concluding the discussion with reference to the essential similarity of the methodology used by the two groups, Grewal says:

A good deal of importance is given to methodology both by the academia and the intelligentsia involved in the controversies. No one has denied the importance of empirical evidence, or the need of verification of generalizations. Therefore, the distinction between the 'critical historians' and 'a traditional historian' is a difference of degree but not of kind.<sup>76</sup>

It is necessary to recognize that there is no substitute for historical method for studying a young religious movement with a large corpus of sources left by the founder himself, his accredited successors and their followers as well as the dissenters, detractors and other contemporary observers. This realization could perhaps bridge the supposed divergence between the 'insiders' and 'outsiders', or 'believers and 'non-believers, or 'critical' and 'traditional' historians, or, for

that matter, between 'Indian' and 'Western' academics. Grewal rightly emphasizes that, 'the historical method in itself is not culturally rooted'. It is 'Western simply because it was initially developed in the West'.<sup>77</sup> As J.D. Cunningham's 'classic' work shows one does not have to be a Sikh or an Indian, or even a professional scholar to produce an academically sound and widely acceptable study of Sikh history.

### In Conclusion

The magisterial stock taking by Grewal shows that neither theory nor environment, nor can too much of scepticism or good will illumine the Sikh past. For a worthwhile study there seems to be no substitute for a rational and sympathetic interpretation of the Sikh sources. Grewal's own work exemplifies the possibility of bridging the best in professional and 'Sikh' scholarship. As a whole, inputs from different social sciences and humanities have enriched the field of Sikh Studies and made it methodologically sophisticated and academically respectable so as to acquire autonomy of its own. It would be a pity if further growth of Sikh Studies as a branch of knowledge with historical discipline at its center is marred by the refusal to enter into genuine debate, or to take note of valid objections about content, interpretation and method. Indifference on the part of some and keenness to demolish on the part of others might result in loss of momentum and credibility gained over the past half a century.

### Notes

1. J.S. Grewal, *Muslim Rule in India: The Assessments of British Historians* (Oxford: OUP, 1970).
2. *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, The New Cambridge History of India series (Cambridge: CUP, 1990; Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1991; Delhi: Foundation Books, 1994; rev. edn. 1998; recent rep. 2011).
3. Between 2007 and 1972 when this collection was first published there was nearly cent per cent increase in its volume, though some essays have been taken out in the light of fresh thinking. See note 43 for full reference.
4. For a list of Grewal's work from 1964 to 2009, see Indu Banga and Karamjit K. Malhotra, *Making of the Historian J.S. Grewal* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2009), pp. 66-77.
5. J.S. Grewal, *Historical Writings on the Sikhs (1784-2011): Western Enterprise and Indian Response* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2012), (cited hereafter as *Historical Writings*).
6. *Ibid.*, p.113.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 203-5.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 213-14.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 225.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 221, 226, n.29.
11. Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 276-77, 285-86.

12. Ibid., p. 268.
13. Ibid., p. 292.
14. Ibid., p. 323.
15. Ibid., p. 300.
16. For a discussion, Indu Banga, 'In the Service of Hindu Nationalism: Banerjee's *Evolution*', in *The Khalsa: Sikh and Non-Sikhs Perspectives*, ed. J.S. Grewal (New Delhi: Manohar, 2004), pp. 187-200.
17. Grewal, *Historical Writings*, p. 323.
18. Ibid., p. 332.
19. Ibid., p. 359.
20. Ibid., pp. 360, 362.
21. K.L. Tuteja, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 365.
22. Fauja Singh, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 363.
23. Ibid., p. 397.
24. Ibid., p. 396.
25. K.L. Tuteja, 'Interpreting Sikh History: A Study of Gokul Chand Narang's *Transformation of Sikhism*', in *Historical Diversities: Society, Politics and Culture*, ed. K.L. Tuteja and Sunita Pathania (New Delhi: Manohar, 2008), p. 425.
26. Grewal, *Historical Writings*, p. 398.
27. Ibid., p. 417.
28. Ibid., pp. 439-41.
29. Ibid., p.12.
30. Ibid., p.442. See also Fauja Singh, 'Sita Ram Kohli', *Historians and Historiography of the Punjab*, ed. Fauja Singh (New Delhi: Oriental Publishers, 1978), pp. 336-37.
31. Grewal, *Historical Writings*, p. 444.
32. These scholars are: Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha, Bhai Jodh Singh, Sir Jogendra Singh, G.B. Singh, Giani Sher Singh, Narain Singh, Sahib Singh, Teja Singh, Karam Singh and Ganda Singh. Ibid., pp.445-46.
33. Ibid., pp. 445-46, 467.
34. Ibid., pp. 467-68. Elsewhere, Grewal points out that Teja Singh and Ganda Singh 'look upon Guru Gobind Singh as the creator of a nation and yet they are reluctant to ascribe any political purposes directly to him'. 'Study of Sikhism, Sikh History and Sikh Literature', in *Approaches to History: Essays in Indian Historiography*, ed. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (Delhi: Primus Books/ Indian Council of Historical Research, 2011), p. 289.
35. Grewal, *Historical Writings*, p. 12.
36. Ibid., p. 473.
37. For a discussion, Indu Banga and J.S. Grewal, 'The Study of Regional History', in *Different Types of History, History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization*, vol. XIV, pt 4, ed. Bharati Ray (Delhi: Pearson Education/ Centre for Studies in Civilizations, 2009). pp. 199-228.
38. The Western scholars articulating their support for McLeod include, among others, Mark Juergensmeyer, N.G. Barrier, John Stratton Hawley,

Milton Israel and J.T.O' Connell. The attack on McLeod was initiated by Daljeet Singh who was joined by other 'Sikh' scholars, including 'Justice' Gurdev Singh, Jasbir Singh Mann, Kharak Singh, Trilochan Singh, Balwant Singh Dhillon, G.S. Dhillon and Gurtej Singh.

39. Hew McLeod, *Discovering the Sikhs: Autobiography of a Historian* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004), p.130.

40. *Historical Writings*, p. 498.

41. J.S. Grewal, *Recent Debates in Sikh Studies: An Assessment* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2011), (cited hereafter as *Recent Debates*), Preface.

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

43. The following publications appearing in the past decade contain substantial discussion of sources by Grewal: *History, Literature and Identity: Four Centuries of Sikh Tradition* (New Delhi: OUP,2011); *Guru Granth Sahib: Doctrine, Social Content, History, Structure and Status* (Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 2009); *The Sikhs: Ideology, Institutions and Identity* (New Delhi: OUP ,2009); *Sikh ideology, Polity and Social Order: From Guru Nanak to Maharaja Ranjit Singh* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2007, 4<sup>th</sup> edn.); *The Khalsa: Sikh and Non-Sikh Perspectives*, ed. (New Delhi: Manohar, 2004); and *Sikh History From Persian Sources*, ed. with Irfan Habib (New Delhi: Tulika, 2001).

44. For detail, the reader may refer to Grewal's *Recent Debates* and *Historical Writings*.

45. *Recent Debates*, pp. 67-71.

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

47. *Historical Writings*, p. 499.

48. *Recent Debates*, p. 52.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

53. *Ibid.*, pp. 101,116.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

55. J.S. Grewal, 'Praising the Khalsa: Sainapat's *Gursobha*', in *The Khalsa: Sikh and Non-Sikh Perspectives*, pp.35-45. See also Gurinder Singh Mann, 'Sources for the Study of Guru Gobind Singh's Life and Times', *Journal of Punjab Studies*, vol. 15, nos. 1-2 (Spring-Fall, 2008), pp. 252-53.

56. *Recent Debates*, pp. 97-98.

57. *Ibid.*, pp. 124-25.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 186.

60. *History, Literature and Identity: Four Centuries of Sikh Tradition*, p. 306.

61. *Historical Writings*, p. 503.

62. *Recent Debates*, pp. 197-98. These dimensions are: 'the hardness of the path, its demand for sacrifice, the conception of liberation, the idea of selfless service, active detachment born of social commitment, and the willingness to accept God's will and to act in accordance with it'.



63. *Ibid.*, p. 203.
64. *Ibid.*, pp. 213-14.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 240.
66. *Historical Writings*, p. 504.
67. *Recent Debates*, p. 256.
68. *Ibid.*, p. 261.
69. *Historical Writings*, p. 502.
70. *Recent Debates*, p.147. See also J.S. Grewal, 'Caste and the Sikh Social Order', in *The Sikhs*, pp.189-205.
71. After carefully considering McLeod's view that the *Prem Sumarag* is a later work presenting, 'the testimony of a Sanatan Sikh', Grewal comes to the opposite conclusion. See 'The *Prem Sumarag*: A Sant Khalsa Vision of the Sikh Panth', in *The Sikhs*, pp.158-85. It may be added that Grewal has revised his earlier understanding about the dating of the *Prem Sumarag*. Cf. W.H. McLeod, *The Prem Sumarag: The Testimony of a Sanatan Sikh* (New Delhi: OUP, 2006).
72. *Recent Debates*, p. 158.
73. *Historical Writings*, p. 503. This view takes note of the existing works on gender in Sikhism, including that by Doris Jakobsh who has attempted 'to interpret the evidence in a socially meaningful way'. *Recent Debates*, p. 147-51. For a discussion, see J.S. Grewal, 'Sikhism and Gender', in *The Sikhs*, pp. 206-25.
74. *Recent Debates*, p. 296-97
75. *Ibid.*, p. 287.
76. *Historical Writings*, p. 505.
77. *Recent Debates*, p. 297.

