
This is a book which has been awaited with eager anticipation. In it Harjot Oberoi examines the difference between the Sikh community before and after the Singh Sabha period. More precisely he examines the three decades between 1880 and 1909, concentrating on the controversy which divided the conservative Sanatan Sikhs from the radical Tat Khalsa (the two rival groups within the Singh Sabha). The result is a superb book, one which successfully challenges the accepted historiography of this most important of all periods for the Sikhs. This need to be emphasized. It makes the book very significant indeed.

Oberoi’s case may be summarized as follows. During the eighteenth century the Khalsa established itself as the dominant mode of the Sikh faith, but other modes were allowed to coexist and a variety of Sikh practices were tolerated. In particular, there was no difficulty in accepted Sahajdhari Sikhs who cut their hair. When the Sikh Sabha was first founded in Amritsar in 1873 it was under the influence of Sanatan Sikhs. The Sanatan Sikhs viewed their faith in traditional terms, seeing in it the capacity for different practices and not wanting any severance with contemporary society. Sanatan leadership was, however, challenged by the other Singh Sabha group, the Tat Khalsa (“Pure Khalsa”), and eventually the Tat Khalsa was completely successful. As a result the Khalsa mode became virtually the only one that was regarded as truly Sikh. This mode was extensively redefined by the Tat Khalsa and an array of extensively revised practices introduced. Around the turn of the century educated Sikhs came to see themselves as a community which was separate from all other communities and uniform in the practices which it observed. Gradually this philosophy has penetrated all opinions, both Sikh and non-Sikh alike, with the result that most people now accept the Khalsa Sikh as the only true Sikh.

This thesis Oberoi handles extremely competently on the basis of his doctoral thesis. He deals in detail with the condition of the Sikh community prior
to the Singh Sabha movement, showing that the imagined decline during the early British period is an interpretation based upon later perceptions of what constituted the faith. Popular religion is also closely examined, with fascinating analyses of such traditions as those concerning Sakhi Sarvar and Gugga Pir. The nature of the original Singh Sabha, as a very conservative organization with a very traditional view of the Sikh faith is clearly brought out. This was, as already noted, an organization strongly dominated by Sanatan Sikhs. It gave rise in 1879 to the foundation of another Singh Sabha in Lahore, a group of men who were much more radical in their thinking and who came to constitute the Tat Khalsa. These were men who had been influenced by the British presence in the Punjab and sought, through a uniform and homogenous religion, to buttress their own position in Punjabi society.

As a result a new range of rituals was introduced, the Khalsa form was strongly stressed, and Sikh history was reinterpreted. New Singh Sabhas, which were organised in different parts of the Punjab and elsewhere, became satellites of either Amritsar or Lahore, depending on whether they were Sanatan or Tat Khalsa in their sympathies. The two groups were brought together by the foundation of the Chief Khalsa Diwan in 1902 and in organisational terms the movement was thereafter distinctly conservative in the line it followed. In terms of the impact on the Panth [Sikh community], however, the influence was strongly that of the Tat Khalsa with its distinctive view of the ideal Sikh as definitely a Khalsa Sikh.

To some extent the book does tend occasionally to give the impression of exaggeration. Were the Sanatan Sikhs, for example, quite so ready to accept their contemporary situation? Are the changes introduced by the Tat Khalsa underplayed in terms of their social value? Does the author not somewhat overdo the uniform and disciplined nature of the Tat Khalsa endeavours? Were they quite as united as he seems to suggest? And what about the factional disputes which are acknowledged in passing, yet have no important conclusions drawn from them? Surely they must have a part to play in the situation which emerged.

In a sense most, if not all, of these criticisms can be answered. It can certainly be claimed that by reading an element of exaggeration into certain parts of the book I am finding something which is not meant to be there. The Sanatan Sikhs were perturbed about certain features of the faith, and the Tat Khalsa were not always united by any means. Many readers, though, will sense this hint of over-simplification in some places, and although it is not the author’s intention it is still there. It is, however, only a slight blemish. On the whole the thesis is very well argued and for one reader at least it carried complete conviction. The Construction of Religious Boundaries is a very impressive book.