

**Review Article:**  
**Brill's Encyclopedia of Sikhism. Volume I:**  
**History, Literature, Society, Beyond Punjab**

John C.B. Webster

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**Knut A. Jacobsen, Gurinder Singh Mann, Kristina Myrvold, and Eleanor Nesbitt, eds. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017).**

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Apart from a monograph on the Nirankari Sikhs,<sup>1</sup> I have confined my research to examinations of how other scholars have studied Sikhism at various points over the past almost fifty year.<sup>2</sup> My initial interest in this endeavor grew out of a desire to explore the tension in the writing of Sikh history between the pull of religious orthodoxy and popular religiosity on the one hand and the demands of modern, critical historical scholarship on the other. In the 1970s when those early assessments were being made, W.H. McLeod's *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* (1968), a careful critical study of the traditions concerning Guru Nanak's life, had made the tension plain for all to see. As became immediately apparent from the responses it evoked, the pull of religious orthodoxy and popular sentiment was stronger, even among scholars, than was that of modern historical scholarship. This was due in part, as was pointed out at the time, to the fact that scholars in India had not

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<sup>1</sup> John C.B. Webster, *The Nirankari Sikhs* (Delhi: Macmillan, 1979 and second edition; Delhi: Manohar 2018).

<sup>2</sup> John C.B. Webster, "Modern Historical Scholarship and Sikh Religious Tradition: Some Exploratory Remarks," in J.S. Grewal, ed., *Studies in Local and Regional History* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak University, 1974), 109-137; "Sikh Studies in the Punjab," in Mark Juergensmeyer and N. Gerald Barrier, eds., *Sikh Studies: Comparative Perspectives on a Changing Tradition* (Berkeley: Graduate Theological Union, 1979), 25-32; "The Dalit Sikhs: A History?" in Tony Ballantyne, ed., *Textures of the Sikh Past: New Historical Perspectives* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 132-154.

been properly trained in religious studies.<sup>3</sup> The strength of that pull was subsequently reflected in the multi-volume encyclopedia of Sikhism launched by Punjabi University at that time under the general editorship of Professor Harbans Singh.

In this new encyclopedia that tension has been dealt with in a way that appears to represent a clear victory for modern critical scholarship. However, the academy also has its own inner tensions, whether in historical or religious studies, and there are hints in this volume of those tensions affecting the study of Sikhism.<sup>4</sup> At the risk of over-simplifying a debate that by now has become highly nuanced, in this particular case it is the tension between theory-driven research and source-driven research. It can be argued that this tension is merely the latest incarnation of the older one. The sources contain the tradition to be remembered and these serve the interests of a conservative view of normative Sikhism. Theory provides a basis for critiquing the remembered interpretations of the tradition as well as of those sources on which that tradition is based. This possibility of a newly styled but basically similar religious orthodoxy still holding sway thus cannot be ruled out in advance.

This volume, the first of a two-volume work, is divided into seven sections on history, sacred literature, historical literature, society, social diversity, religious diversity, and Sikhism "Beyond Punjab." Six hundred and thirteen double-columned pages in small print are devoted to a total of only 78 articles, thus giving each author ample opportunity to make contribution of substance to the encyclopedia as a whole. Only a sample of these essays can be discussed in any detail here. None is more important for the volume as a whole than Gurinder Singh Mann's opening essay on "Baba Nanak and the Founding of the Sikh Panth" (pp. 3-17), one of the lengthiest in the entire volume.

Back in 1968-69 Guru Nanak's 500<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary was celebrated with lots of publications, two of which, based as they were upon modern critical historical scholarship, stand out. W.H. McLeod in *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* focused upon "the man Guru Nanak"

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<sup>3</sup> Taran Singh, *The Department of Sri Guru Granth Sahib Studies: Retrospect and Prospect* quoted in John C.B. Webster, "Sikh Studies in the Punjab," p. 29. Dr. Taran Singh was at that time head of that Department at Punjabi University in Patiala.

<sup>4</sup> The most obvious of these comes out on page 125.

by examining critically the traditions concerning his life, by systematizing his teachings, and by fusing “the glimpses provided by the traditional biographies with the personality emerging from the teaching.”<sup>5</sup> J.S. Grewal, in *Guru Nanak in History*, took a very different approach to his subject. “A study of Guru Nanak’s work in terms of his response to his *milieu* is likely to be more fruitful than a discussion of his teachings in terms of ‘parallels’ and ‘influences.’ This approach may bring out the distinctive quality of Guru Nanak’s message in the context of his times as well as the originality of his response.”<sup>6</sup> Mann’s focus, as the title of his essay indicates, is upon Guru Nanak as the founder of the Sikh *panth* and so, while tapping into the work of McLeod and Grewal as needed, is a somewhat different one.

After briefly characterizing the literature on Guru Nanak since 1968 and pointing out some of the issues that literature has raised, Mann sets forth his own approach. “Given the new information at our disposal, it will be more useful for us to construct a fresh narrative of Baba Nanak’s life, understand the core of his beliefs (*jot*), and examine the methods (*jugati*) which he employed to complete his mission (*kar*) and ensure its survival in the years following his death” (p. 4). He divides his essay into sections: sources, the formative years before Kartarpur, the founding of Kartarpur, assembling a *panth*, and stabilizing the legacy. The sources Mann relies upon most are what later came to be called the Puratan Janam-sakhi, the earliest of the three *janam-sakhlis* and the one with the best pedigree, as well as Guru Nanak’s own contributions to the Guru Granth. He also makes some use of artifacts as well as contemporary non-Sikh sources for context. However, it is the use he makes of those sources in his construction of Guru Nanak’s founding of the Sikh *panth* that is especially worthy of attention in this analysis.<sup>7</sup>

Mann begins by citing two biographical passages in which Guru Nanak described personal experiences which Mann calls epiphanies. One was the command to announce the divine wisdom which led Nanak to leave home and set out on his journeys. The second was the suffering caused by Babur’s invasion of the Punjab which led Nanak not only to

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<sup>5</sup> W.H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* (Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1968) p. vii.

<sup>6</sup> J.S. Grewal, *Guru Nanak in History* (Chandigarh: Panjab University, 1969), p. xi.

<sup>7</sup> He provides further source analysis in his article, “Sakhis about the Founder”, pp. 173-82.

end his travels but also to settle down in Kartarpur and found the *panth* there. Mann then backs up and traces the course of Nanak's life,<sup>8</sup> as set forth in the Puratan Janam-sakhi up to the point where Nanak established permanent residence in Kartarpur. He concludes this section by stating "All these experiences led directly to the sense of calling that impelled him [Nanak] to found a new community—a new order that would work toward creating a world that would be different from the one responsible for the senseless carnage he had observed" (p. 10).

What kind of *panth* or new order did Guru Nanak create at Kartarpur and have replicated elsewhere? The *panth* had its own distinctive rite of initiation as well as a community life centered on corporate worship and a common meal (*langar*). Its ethical code for "bearers of truth" involved being in practice "fully cognizant of the divine presence", keeping one's body properly bathed, and nourishing the values of compassion, duty, contentment, humility, dignity, hard work, service, seeking only one's rightful share, and helping the needy (p. 14). Before he died, Guru Nanak handed over "the volume of his utterances," which implied the passing on the guruship to his appointed successor, thus assuring the orderly continuance of the *panth* he had established.

This construction of Guru Nanak and the founding of the Sikh *panth* is based on source-driven research. Where the sources themselves do not provide the direct evidence necessary to answer the questions guiding his inquiry, Mann resorts not to theory but to intuitive inferences from indirect evidence to fill the gaps. He is very honest with the reader about this in his frequent use of the language of plausibility rather than of fact: e.g., "it seems", "it is not unreasonable to imagine," "we can surmise", "it is likely", "it seems fair to assume", "would have", "should have", etc. The picture of Guru Nanak's *panth* that emerges from his construction is that of an alternative community seeking a more truthful way of living within the structures of early sixteenth century Punjab, rather than of an activist community bent on transforming those structures by means other than by simply increasing the size of the *panth*.

Next come two contrasting articles that bring the history of the Sikh *panth* up to the death of Guru Gobind Singh. First Pashaura Singh traces

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<sup>8</sup> In the course of doing so he establishes Guru Nanak's birth date as April 15, 1469 and criticizes the Sikh leadership for celebrating it in the autumn.

in very lucid fashion, guru by guru, internal developments within the *panth* under the next four gurus. His emphasis is upon institutional developments but also includes behavioral changes as well. Then J.S. Grewal lays particular emphasis upon the external threats to the very existence of the *panth* from a now hostile Mughal government, as well as to internal divisions within the *panth* during the times of the sixth through the tenth guru which resulted in the institution of the Khalsa as a political community. The main theological development during this entire foundational period of Sikh history concerned the formation and then the gradually elevated status of the Sikh scriptures as the Guru Granth. Six other articles on Banda Bahadur and the rise of Sikh power, early Sikh *darbars*, Maharajah Ranjit Singh and his times, the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Partition, and "in the Modern World" complete the historical section bring Sikh history up to the present.

The section on sacred literature contains six articles. Four of these deal with the Guru Granth, two of which are on its digitalization. The first article (pp. 129-37), also by Gurinder Singh Mann, discusses the Guru Granth as the scripture of the Sikhs. It describes, first, the history of the text from the beginning to its canonization, and then its authority as well as its place in scripture studies. How it has actually functioned as guru for the *panth*, how it has been exegeted, interpreted, applied, and by whom in the changing circumstances of community life is to be discussed in the next volume. The next article, by Jasjit Singh, discusses the ceremonial treatment of the Guru Granth. The section concludes with two articles by Pashaura Singh, one on Bhagat Bani and the other on Bhatts.

In the former article (pp.151-63) he takes on the traditional view that "the *bhagat bani* was included in the Sikh scriptures on the basis of complete doctrinal identity with the teachings of the Sikh gurus" (p. 152). He cites considerable documentary evidence to show that Guru Amar Das was the one who included this *bani* and did so in accordance with "the doctrine of the universal *bani* that appears perpetually in all ages in the works of the works of the *bhagats*" (p. 153). He also shows that Guru Arjan later deleted some of this *bani* that Guru Amar Das had included. However, the main body of the article is devoted to showing how Guru Nanak disagreed theologically with Baba Farid on the one hand, and Guru Arjan disagreed with Kabir over the active world-affirming vs. passive world-denying life on the other. Pashaura Singh concludes that what we find in the Guru Granth is not theological

uniformity but some inter-faith dialogue which served to define the boundaries of Sikh faith and life more clearly.

The section on historical literature is confined to relatively early literature either from or about the period of the ten Sikh gurus. It contains six articles on the *sakhis* about the founder, the *Rahit* literature, the *Zafarnama*, *Sri Gur Sabha*, as well as the *Bansavalinama* and *Mahima Prakas*. It is surprising that neither in this section nor in the previous one was there an article devoted to the *Dasam Granth* of Guru Gobind Singh; instead it, or parts of it, are discussed in other articles.

Of all the articles in this section Naindeep Singh Chann's on *Rahit* Literature (pp.183-91) is the most revealing of the tension described earlier. He defines *rahit* not as "code of conduct" but as "custom" before surveying the early *rahit* literature prior to the *rahitnamas* of Guru Gobind Singh's time that refer only to the *Khalsa*. The controversy concerns the dating of the *rahitnamas*. Chann attacks the "theories" (unspecified) of W.H. McLeod which led him to date them later than Guru Gobind Singh's time, and argues instead that there is ample documentary evidence in the Anandpur Sahib archives for dating them within Guru Gobind Singh's lifetime. Since the *rahitnamas* contain prescriptive as well as descriptive statements, this earlier dating would give them greater authority in shaping Sikh custom than would a later dating. The inconsistencies between the *rahitnamas* are not dealt with but suggest that custom varied and was not yet fixed when they were written.

The opening article of the Society section is a very useful overview by Eleanor Nesbitt entitled, "Contemporary Sikh Society" (pp. 219-25). Nesbitt takes a global view of Sikhism and, while she presupposes some knowledge of Sikhism, I would recommend this as the first article that a general reader seeking to get oriented should read before turning to the more specialized articles in the rest of the encyclopedia. Her article is followed by others on caste, gender, and the "Transnational Family."

J.S. Grewal begins his article on "Caste from a Historical Perspective" just as he did in *Guru Nanak in History*, with sections on caste in Punjabi society in Guru Nanak's time and his response to it. Grewal then turns for further information on the subject to the *Vars* of Bhai Gurdas Bhalla, then to the *Prem Sumarag*, and finally to two writers of the *Khalsa Raj*. He concludes by reviewing some of the historiography on the subject to show how some theories of caste have been applied to the early history of Sikhism and then draws his own

conclusions. Grewal's article ends with the early nineteenth century and Surinder Singh Jodka takes up the story from there into the present. Jodka rejects at the outset the theory of a single uniform, religiously sanctioned caste system prevailing throughout India. Instead he sees caste as a product of religious philosophies, regional contexts and particular histories. After elaborating on each of these with reference to Sikhism in the Punjab, he concludes with a section on caste in contemporary rural Punjab.

Doris Jacobsh's article on "Gender" (pp. 243-55) does begin with a theoretical statement that guides her inquiry. "Religions and religious actors construct, legitimize and maintain social identities, including gender. A gendered analysis of the Sikh tradition then examines attitudes and practices that have led to inequalities based on perceived and socially constructed understandings of difference between men and women" (p. 243). While gender theory sets her research agenda in terms of what to look for and look at, she bases her conclusions on a combination of textual and field research evidence. She sees Sikhism as highly gendered and patriarchal from the outset and, despite pressures for gender equality from Sikh reformers that came to be enshrined in the *Rahit Maryada*, it remains so today. Most efforts to press for further change, she points out, come from diaspora Sikhs and not those in the Punjab.

The next section, "Social Diversity", is organized around caste. The six articles are on the Jatts, Khatri and Aroras, Ramgarhias, Dalits, Sikligars, and Bhatras. Irfan Habib's short article on the Jatts focuses on their origins as a pastoral community and transformation into an agricultural community. He surmises that it was the practice of equality within the Sikh *panth* that drew them into Sikhism in such large numbers. Hardip Singh Syan's article on the Khatri and Aroras concentrates on their origins, similarities, and role in Sikh history from the time of the Sikh gurus (all of whom were Khatri) onward. He notes that the many mercantile themes and metaphors found in the Guru Granth were used with them in mind. The Ramgarhia community is actually made up of three artisan jatis. Seva Singh Kalsi and Eleanor Nesbitt trace their history not only inside India but in East Africa, the United Kingdom, and North America as well. Himadri Banerjee's article on the Sikligars traces their history from before their entry into Sikhism, while Eleanor Nesbitt's focuses on the Bhatras in the United Kingdom rather than in India.

The most complex of these articles is Ronki Ram's on the Dalits (pp.283-89). The Punjab has a larger proportion of Dalits in its population than does any other state in India. The two largest Dalit jatis are the Chamars and Chuhras. The latter predominate in the districts along the Pakistan border and the former in the districts to the east of them. Ronki Ram begins his analysis with the reality of caste hierarchy among Sikhs, caste oppression, and caste humiliation in rural Punjab. He then deals with the Dalits by caste because their cases vary. The Mazhabi Sikhs and Ranghreta Sikhs (both Chuhra by caste) have stayed within Sikhism. The Chamar case is quite different. Ravidasis have revolted because of caste oppression and declare themselves to be neither Sikhs nor Hindus, whereas the Ramdasias have remained within Sikhism, as have the Rai and Sansi Sikhs. Ronki Ram devotes a section to job diversification and social mobility among Dalit Sikhs before concluding with a section on exclusion, religion and identity, the most notable feature of which is the high proportion, already noted in several field studies, of separate Dalit gurdwaras in the villages of the Punjab.

The section on religious diversity begins with articles on Farid, Kabir and Ravidas in the Guru Granth. In his contributions to the Guru Granth Ravidas is very open about his Chamar caste identity and so are other contributors in referring to him, thus affirming the view that divine liberation is open to all regardless of caste. The articles that immediately follow dealing with early diversity, Chhota Mel, and the Nihangs trace diversity within Sikhism back to the period of the ten gurus. The Nirankaris, Namdharis, Sants of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and Radhasoamis originated in the nineteenth century. Nanaksar, Guru Nanak Nishkam Sevak Jatha, Sachkhand Nanak Dham, and Sikh Dharm in the western hemisphere represent twentieth century developments, not all of which originated in the Punjab. I was surprised to find the Radhasoamis included as they do not claim to be Sikhs and are only tangentially related to Sikhism, as Mark Juergensmeyer indicates in a meticulous analysis of the issue.<sup>9</sup>

The final and longest section has 32 articles on Sikhism "Beyond Punjab." It opens with an article on "Sikh Migration," which sets the stage for most of what follows, and ends with another on "Globalization of the Panth." In between are articles on India, eight other Asian

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<sup>9</sup> For distinction between Sant Nirankaris and Nirankaris (p. 392-3, p. 612-13), see pp. 356.



countries, seventeen European countries, two in North America and none in Africa. In the opening article (pp. 413-29), Shinder Singh Thandi points out some of the “push factors” and “pull factors” affecting Sikh migration before going on to describe five phases of Sikh migration, each with its own internal dynamics and preferred destinations. In the closing article Mark Juergensmeyer describes globalization as more than just the global dispersion of the Sikhs. It also includes interaction, especially with the culture and politics of the host country, as well as transformation in religious beliefs and practices. Most of the articles in between follow the migration format and focus on the internal social, religious and institutional life of the migrant Sikh communities.

However, what to me was most interesting in this section were references to interaction and to transformation. Canada illustrates many of the problems which diaspora Sikhs have faced. There they had to contend not only with prejudicial immigration laws and denial of voting rights, but also with issues affecting their religious life and identity. In Vancouver Sikhs used tables and chairs in the *langar* of their gurdwara. This practice was challenged by some local Sikhs and referred to the Jathedar of the Akal Takhat in Amritsar, who forbade the practice. However the practice was continued anyway and was upheld by the Canadian courts. The right of Sikh boys to wear a *kirpan* in school was challenged and upheld, as was the right of Sikhs to wear turbans when serving in uniform, when riding bicycles or motorcycles, or when participating in athletic events. In Russia Sikhs have had to keep a low profile because of pervasive prejudice against non-Slavic immigrants and the Orthodox Church's view that Sikhism is an “untypical religion.” In Portugal and the United States Sikhs have been confused with Muslims and have had to bear the brunt of anti-Muslim feelings, especially after September 11, 2001. A common theme in many of these articles is the second-generation immigrants, especially the youths, loss of interest in Sikhism. In Singapore this was described as an inner struggle to accommodate to a cosmopolitan culture on the one hand and not lose their Sikh identity on the other.

In conclusion, this encyclopedia is an excellent indicator of how far Sikh studies has progressed since the 1970s. The increased range of topics dealt with, especially concerning the Sikh diaspora, is perhaps the most obvious development. More significantly, in analyzing the foundational period of the ten Sikh gurus, with the creation of the Sikh *panth* and its sacred scripture, the tension between the claims of faith and

of scholarship is less obvious here than it was in the 1970s. The more blatant concessions to popular religiosity are conspicuous by their absence. Research on the period is source rather than theory driven and the tension now seems more centered on technical matters of dating source materials and assessing the reliability of the evidence they provide. What emerges in this volume is a sense of solid scholarship which treats its subject sympathetically without idealizing it. There is in this volume an openness to diversity and to internal conflicts, whether of theology, practice, caste, gender, or generation. I would certainly recommend it as a reliable and valuable resource.