
NEWS & VIEWS

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RELIGION

Sikh Journal Spreads the Word

From 15th century comes “a universally acceptable Philosophy” for 21st century: editor

Of all the magazines and journals devoted to the Sikh religion, only one, in the view of professor Devinder Singh Chahal, subjects itself to the full rigorous standards of a modern scholarly journal.

It is neither published in Amritsar, site of the religion's famed Golden Temple, nor elsewhere in the Punjab, nor in New Delhi, London or New York.

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HARVEY SHEPHERD

Rather, It is put together in the modest house Chahal and his wife occupy on a residential street just off Curé Labelle Blvd. in the Chomedey district of Laval.

Chahal, 68-year-old editor-in-chief of the journal said in an interview that he hopes it will play a role in restoring a spirit

of research, freedom of expression, discussion and intellectual discernment to the Sikh religion.

As originally expounded by its 15th-century founder, Guru Nanak, Sikhism “is the youngest most scientific and most logical of the religions of the world” Chahal said.

In his view, that's the kind of religion the 21st-century world needs - but not always the kind of Sikhism it gets.

Although based In Laval, Understanding Sikhism: The Research Journal has an editorial board of 25 members, of which five live in four Canadian provinces, one in Malaysia, 10 in India, two in England and seven in the United State. Many are on university faculties, most but not all are Sikhs.

The journal reflects the approach Chahal has been developing since his boyhood in the Punjab, when he

began to notice what seemed to him discrepancies between the religion as it was preached and practised, and what the Sikh scriptures actually say.

According to Chahal, the philosophy expounded in the 15th century by Guru Nanak, was much the same in spirit as that of the Italian Renaissance, which was flourishing at the same time, or that of the 13th-century English Franciscan and scientist, Roger Bacon, who endured persecution because of his commitment to the truth.

But historical developments and some widely revered - in Chahal's view highly misleading - writings dating from the 18th and 19th centuries have, he said, distorted the Sikh faith.

Chahal's own life has been devoted to both science and religion.

His academic credentials are mainly in microbiology. After doctoral studies at two U.S. universities, he established a new department of microbiology at the Punjab Agricultural University then was a visiting scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology before immigrating to Canada in 1975.

In Canada, he taught at the University of Waterloo then the Institut Armand Frappier, a Laval affiliate of the Université du Québec. He retired from the institute in 1996, but is still involved in applied science, particularly the production of useful products from biological wastes - a field in which he holds five patents.

A company in the Punjab, with support from the Punjabi and Indian governments, is setting up a pilot project in one process he developed. It will seek to convert rice straw, a waste from rice cultivation that is now burned, causing toxic air pollution in the Punjab, into cellulose useable in fabrics, paper, adhesives and sugar products.

Chahal finds the account of the evolution of the Earth and the view of human consciousness found in the Sikh holy book, the Aad Guru Granth Sahib, to be remarkably prescient in the light of later scientific discoveries. In Chahal's view, Guru Nanak had a view of multiculturalism remarkably like the one Canada espoused centuries later.

Chahal writes that Guru Nanak preached the oneness of God and the sameness of all peoples, truthful living, altruism, tolerance, politeness and humility.

amrit is probably valuable for many who receive it. He himself follows the tradition of not cutting his hair or beard, although he rolls his beard up neatly and keeps it in place with a net, a practice disapproved of by highly traditionalist Sikhs.

"Some young people tell me I am not a Sikh. I tell them, well, I follow the Nanakian philosophy"

Pious rituals to which he takes exception include having the holy book read straight through in

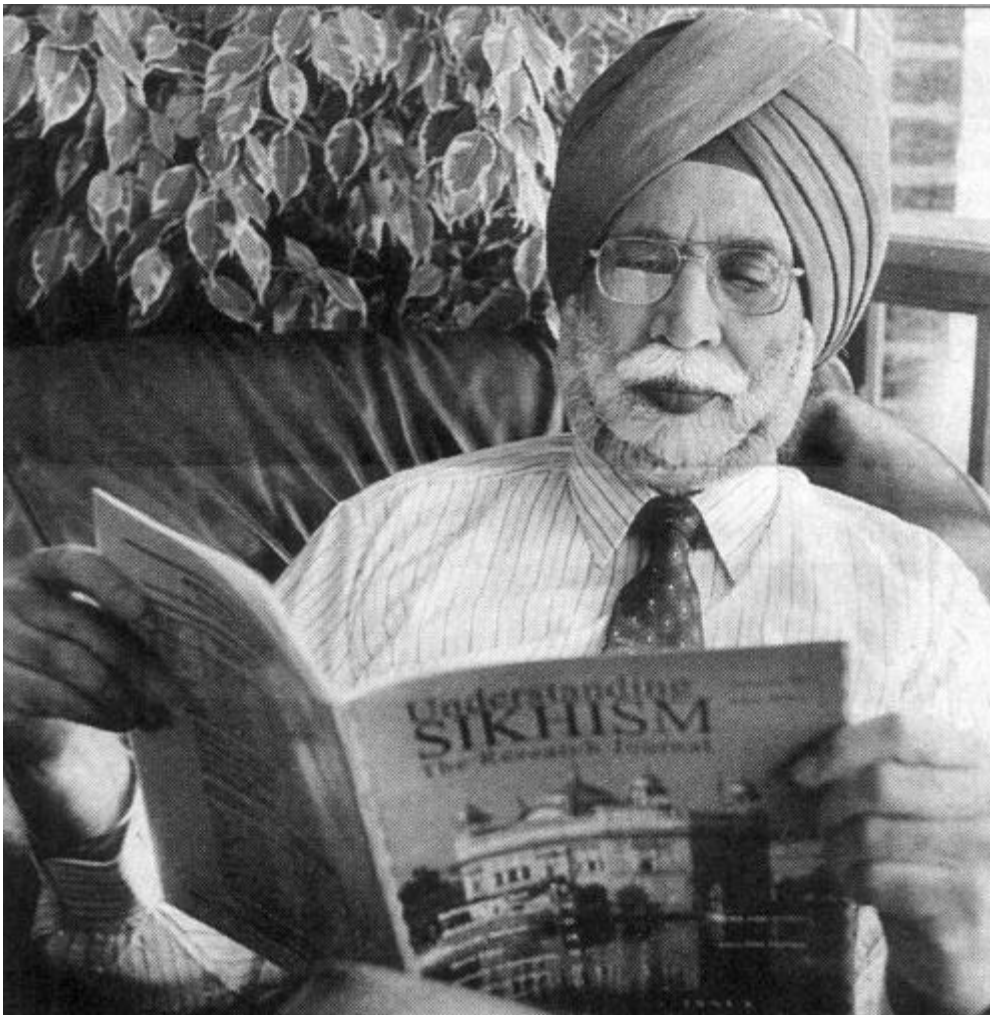


PHOTO: MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER, Gazette, Montreal

Devinder Singh Chahal reading the Sikh Journal he started: "Some young people tell me I am not a Sikh, I tell them, well, I follow the Nanakian philosophy."

Chahal believes mythologizing and ritualism have distorted the message, blurring the distinction between Sikhism and other religions.

He himself has never received amrit, an initiatory baptism that some Sikhs regard as essential if anyone is going to call himself a Sikh.

But his objection to ritual goes only so far. He thinks

gurdwaras (Sikh temples) on ceremonial occasions. It takes about 48 hours to chant the whole book, which is written in poetry; public recitations are usually accompanied by a harmonium and drums.

"This is a ritual.

"It is against the philosophy of Guru Nanak. What is needed is to make an objective study of what is written

there and practice it. When you read it and don't practice it, that becomes a ritual.”

Astrology and the scrupulous insistence that Sikhs must avoid eating meat killed in accordance with Muslim dietary law are among other institutions that Chahal and other contributors have challenged in the pages of the journal.

He thinks gurdwaras don't allow nearly enough opportunity for study and discussion of the Aad Guru Granth Sahib, as distinguished from mere recitation of it.

He's been & to encourage study and discussion of the book in Montreal gurdwaras. He has helped to develop educational and discussion programs at the Gurdwara Sahib Quebec in the Pointe St. Charles district of Montreal. And although the leaders of Montreal's oldest gurdwara, which has just opened its new \$5.5-million temple in LaSalle, tend to be quite traditional in their

outlook, he and they are working to develop some study programs there, he said.

He hopes that some day programs like this will reach out to the broader community.

In his view Guru Nanak "created a universally acceptable philosophy." "Unfortunately, the Sikhs have confined it to themselves."

That's too bad in Chahal's opinion, because the philosophy articulated by Guru Nanak and the nine successor gurus could help bring together science and religion, heal enmities based on regionalism, religion and economic differences and "bring peace on this tiny planet, the Earth.

Information about Understanding Sikhism is available by calling (450) 681-1254 or on the Web site at <http://www.dsUPER.net/~dchahal>

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This report was distributed by the Canadian Press throughout Canada and it appeared in various Dailies in major cities of Canada in their Saturday Issues at later dates.

NOTE: PROF CHAHAL RECEIVED MANY CALLS AND LETTERS FROM SIKHS AND NON-SIKHS FROM VARIOUS PARTS OF CANADA, WHO READ THIS REPORT.
