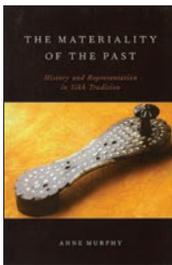


India



Anne Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past: History and Representation in Sikh Traditions*

Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. xiii + 309 pages. Hardcover, \$99.00/ £60.00; paperback, \$34.95/£22.50; ISBN 978-0-19-991627-6 (hardback); 978-0-19-991629-0 (paperback).

SEEKING TO DESCRIBE the historical process whereby the Sikh community has produced itself through representations of the past, Anne Murphy explores the nature of representations of objects and historical sites, as well as texts, from 1708 (the year of the death of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and final human guru of Sikhism) to 1925 (the year that an official managing body for Sikh gurdwaras, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak committee, was recognized).

Murphy describes material objects (for example, relics of the Sikh gurus and other revered Sikh figures) and sites (places associated with events in the gurus' lives) as “technologies of memory and authority” (16) that “bridge the gap between past and present,” thereby constituting the Sikh community (45). Murphy is particularly concerned with considering why historical objects and historical sites function in different ways over time in Sikh constructions of the past. The introductory chapter notes that after 1925, a new representation of Sikh territory became dominant, with the logic of representation shared between site and object, and their place in the construction of Sikh history, breaking down.

The second chapter, “Sikh Materialities,” describes how objects and sites make the past material and allow it to be experienced in the present, ranging from historical objects and various items associated with the gurus (such as weapons and clothing), to gurdwaras that have particular historical connections with the gurus. Murphy draws upon the work of scholars who have explored relic practices in other

traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism (DAVIS 1997; SCHOPEN 1998). She argues that objects must be understood as not simply religious, but as having strong associations with power and sovereignty, particularly when the objects were gifts from one of the gurus. This chapter also highlights the Five Ks (the five articles of faith worn by all baptized Sikhs) as indicative of the materiality of Sikh subject formation.

The third chapter, “Writing the Community: Literary Sources from the Eighteenth Century,” addresses Sainapati’s *Gur Sobha*, Chaupa Singh’s *Rabitnama*, Kesar Singh Chibber’s *Bansavalinama* and other eighteenth-century Sikh texts that function as makers of memory, or articulate an “authorizing relationship” with the guru, or specify behavior that functions as remembrance of the guru and therefore constitutes the community.

In the fourth chapter, “Into the Nineteenth Century: History and Sovereignty,” Murphy charts changes in how Sikhs remembered the past in light of sweeping changes as the Punjab struggled through political instability, with Sikh leaders later gaining power, and then the British annexation of the Punjab in 1849. She uses several texts to highlight these transformations: Santokh Singh’s *Sri Gur Pratap Suraj Granth*, Rattan Singh Bhangu’s *Pracin Panth Parkash*, and Bhai Vir Singh’s 1898 novel *Sundari*. Murphy argues (following OBEROI 1994) that *Suraj Granth* represents a “Sanatan” Sikh perspective (that is, a hybrid form of Sikhism with fluid boundaries) and that Bhangu’s work is “Khalsa-centric.” Bhai Vir Singh’s novel provides insight into how the imagination of the Sikh past began to shift with the growing influence of the British in the Punjab. Each may be situated on a continuum of approaches to narrativizing a particular construction of Sikhism as a community.

In the second section of the book, Murphy argues that material changes in the relationship of history to the landscape begin to appear as a result of the administrative structures of the colonial state, particularly with respect to property and the logic of land ownership. These changes meant that objects and sites would begin to function differently in colonial India. Chapter 5, “A History of Possession,” outlines a new sense of territoriality in which there is a “colonial symbolic logic of sovereignty in relation to the gift” (184) that differs from pre-colonial land grant practices, with religious sites now conceived as property to be administered by bodies such as committees. Chapters 6 (“Colonial Governance and Gurdwara Reform”) and 7 (“Territory and the Definition of Being Sikh”) examine the Gurdwara Reform Movement, and debates about how past understandings of who “owned” religious sites (individuals, or corporate bodies such as the Sikh community) inform colonial notions of ownership and control of Sikh sacred sites. Murphy charts a “new Sikh territorialism with shifting relations to sovereignty and competing notions of the representation of the past in relation to the ideas of community and ownership” (221). As the British Raj increasingly situated sovereignty within property, objects began to have less importance, defined as private property, while sacred sites were “owned” by communities. The process of establishing community ownership importantly involved creating definitions of who precisely could be said to be a Sikh.

Finally, the concluding chapter, “Community, Territory, and the Afterlife of the Object” highlights the new emphasis on territoriality in more recent times, with the past expressed in relation to land. Murphy notes that a “museological mode” has now been created around sites and objects, and briefly hints at how post-1925 representations of the past have shifted yet again in a broader transnational context.

The field of Sikh studies in recent years has had a strong focus on textual analysis, and indeed has been racked by deeply contentious debates about Sikh textual history and interpretation. In this context, Murphy’s attention to the role of materiality is a helpful addition to our understanding of Sikh historiography. Murphy considers what she terms “textual representations” with reference to materiality as part of a “single conceptual field” (12). While she does address the role of the *Guru Granth Sahib* (as well as texts associated with the gurus such as *hukamnāme*) as not simply a text but as a “physical manifestation of the Word of the Guru” (64), she does not fully articulate the relationship between texts and some of the other objects she analyzes, such as relics associated with the gurus. Given the fact that so much of the book addresses textual representations of the past, it would have been helpful to provide a more nuanced conceptualization of texts in reference to materiality, and the history of practices surrounding Sikh objects and sites itself is a topic of great interest that could have received greater attention. Nonetheless, this is an important contribution to Sikh studies, and should encourage scholars to undertake further studies to broaden our understanding of how the material—and not just the “text”—contribute to constructions of the Sikh community in the past and present.

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