Book Review
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Sikhs in Latin America: Travels Among the Sikh Diaspora
By Swarn Singh Kahlon
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Pages: 361; Price: Rs. 1075/- (Hard Bound)

This is a trail-blazing work in the anthropology and the sociological struggle of the Sikh diaspora in distant continent of South America.

Among the many fascinating parables relating to Guru Nanak Devji's travels [Udasi= odyssey?] one is about the hospitable devotees of a village who were “cursed” by the Guru-Prophet: ‘May you scatter away!’ The enigma was soon resolved when Guru Nanak explained that ‘dispersal’ of the generous and honest people could benefit humanity at large, while the inhospitable should better stay put!

Sikhs have – eversince – emigrated to every continent. The author of this extraordinary ‘travologue’ – a chemical engineer by profession and top executive in the multinational ICI – has been “globetrotting” (to use his own phrase) since 1970’s - more often as chief of India’s export organizations and chambers of commerce, as well as official delegations as a Management Consultant.

The author calls himself “a corporate executive”, who found the experience of meeting Sikh migrants – ‘very enriching’. The book is, however, the outcome of a determined, dedicated and meticulously planned tour of Latin American countries, from Mexico, Panama and Cuba, to the Southern tip of Argentina - with the sole object of tracing immigrant Sikh families and study and analyse their social, cultural and religious status – away from ‘Des Punjab’.

Only a passionate scholar with abundant resources and rare courage could have accomplished such an arduous and expensive mission. Those who have even a nodding acquaintance of the fragile economy and fractured politics of some of these countries – in the most daunting part of the world – can fathom the author’s
monumental courage, as well as contribution to the Sikh culture, lore and legend.

Some of the accounts/interviews are revelatory. Stories of semi-literate — but lion-hearted-Sikhs going into virtually unknown territory to settle down, earn a living, becoming useful citizens learning Spanish language, often marrying Latino women who knew nothing of Sikhism — makes incredible reading — and compels admiration for these sons of the glorious Guru Gobind Singh ji.

The narrative is brisk, witty and picturesque. For those interested in the Sikh sociology, ethnicity and the spirit of enterprise, this is a revelatory labour of love. From a scholastic angle, the pioneering study is a pleasant surprise - in as much as it traces the patterns of Indian migration in its geographical context. Besides the Sikhs, it also takes note of migrants from Gujarat, Eastern UP and Bihar. Pockets of Gujarati migrants are noticeable in the Pacific Islands and throughout Americas. No wonder 'motels' in USA are better known as "Patels". Even more striking is the table on “Global Sikh Population” — derived from Wikipedia!

Specific chapters have been devoted to Sikhs in Argentina – with extraordinary case studies and remarkable photographs. Naturally, manya pioneering migrant finds mention the narrative. This characteristic indeed portrays the author as an exemplary chronicler deserving of high honours by the Academia! One random example: Navjot Singh Sandhu who went to Argentine in December 1991 — on a tourist visa!

Sadly, few — if any — families remained Keshdhari. No wonder the Spanish media described them as "Hindoo cowboys". It is equally remarkable that the tragic events climaxing in the 1984 — and the consequential President's Rule in the Punjab hastened migration. It was indeed an escape from prolonged persecution of the younger Sikhs — now virtually a forgotten chapter of History of the Sikhs. Bolivia or Brazil, Cuba or Panama — the pattern is uniformly nostalgic and identifiable. So is the Gurdwara that every group of migrants established at the earliest opportunity!

The more than hundred black-and-white pictures dramatically enhance the author's narrative. Many of these have a breathtaking quality of the core of Sikhism: The magnificent Gurdwaras and langar in Panama; where the Indian Embassy displays "workers with turbans." Sample:

"Post-retirement, as Sq. Ldr. Koreena's father settled down in Calcutta (Hazra Road) where his parents had moved after Independence, from Sind."

How peripatetic can you be! Altogether, a gripping chronicle of the Sikh diaspora — by a truly dedicated writer who preferred to hang up his golfshoes to explore the Sikh diaspora.

- Saran Singh