

Any Practice That Excludes Others is Destructive to the Global Community

Kamla K. Kapur is the author of 'The Singing Guru: Legends and Adventures of Guru Nanak, the First Sikh.' It is about Mardana, a Muslim, who was the rabab player for Guru Nanak. Kapur, paints a picture of his as just the average human at first, filled with a blinding ego nurtured by ignorance, filled with desire and lust but ultimately with a greatness wherein he comes to the path of surrender and liberation. It is a work that makes easy reading on the surface and yet requires mulling over. Stories from tradition are retold in an approachable manner without losing the spiritual import of it, while her imagination captures other truths.

Kapur was raised in India in a military family that was also abidingly Sikh. She later received her graduate degree from Kent State University in Ohio. She has taught at various colleges including in San Diego. She is the author of several plays, poems and books. She makes her home with her artist husband Payson Stevens in Himachal Pradesh and California.

Q: What is the one main thought that Sikhism draws from Islamic and Hindu thought?

A: The roots are the same, especially in the mystical traditions of all religions. Guru Nanak knows, without a doubt, that we are all children of the One Beloved Being, around whom religions spring but who transcends religion, gender and duality.

Sikhism is very eclectic in its core and draws from the best in all traditions. It makes no distinction between Sufi saints like Kabir and Baba Farid, and Hindu saints like Ravidas, Namdev and Jaidev, whose compositions are a part of the Sikh holy book, the Granth Sahib. The commonality between them is adoration of the non-dual God, a universality of vision in which all of humanity is one, the faith that there is only one race on this planet, the human race.

Q: In your various works, you have explored the Hindu god Ganesha, Rumi and now Guru Nanak. What stands out in each to have influenced you?

A: The core messages in all mystical traditions are the same. I summarize how I have been influenced by all these traditions by citing the section headings from the Rumi book, and saying a few words about each: Surrender to God's will, Embrace suffering, Pray, Be content, Trust spiritual masters, Tame your ego, Be humble, Befriend death.

Surrendering to God's Will translates as: whatever moment, state, or circumstance you are in is part of the Design. Accepting it, no matter how frustrating and difficult it may be, gives us the capacity to not only endure but benefit from it; embracing suffering makes sense not only because suffering is inevitable but because suffering, accepted and welcomed, bestows enormous gifts to consciousness; praying elicits our highest selves and focuses our energies around that which we pray for, granting more success than all our ego striving can achieve; being content is essential for peace and joy, states necessary for a good, fulfilling life; trusting spiritual masters gives us that sight and insight without which we stumble blindly through our lives; taming our egos gifts us the fruits of our earth by liberating us from the tiny boxes of our small lives; being humble gives us that wonder and awe without which life is a grind, and helps us connect to everything in the universe of which we are a part; befriending death give us more and more of life. As Guru Nanak says, "remaining alive in death brings bliss and liberation."

Q: What do you think is the biggest misconception that the west has of eastern philosophies and religions?

A: What is misunderstood about Indian spirituality is what is misunderstood about nearly all religious practices. The primary misunderstanding that humankind is prone to is to take things too literally. In the case of Hinduism, for example, both Indian and Westerners tend to think it is about ritual, about pilgrimages, about a hundred thousand gods. In all religions there is some sensual representation of the Godhood because people, creatures of the senses, need solid representations of it. They need tangibles, statues, books, symbols and signs. They need prophets to worship. They tend to forget that these are all what Joseph Campbell, the mythologist, calls the "masks of God," not God himself or herself. This forgetting has, and continues to have, very serious consequences in the world. People kill and die for it.

But specifically, a lot of people in the west think that yoga equals Indian spirituality. Though yoga is definitely one of India's gifts to mankind – I myself swear by it; no matter how I'm feeling, it makes me feel better – it is certainly not all of Indian spirituality. Also, Americans who tend towards Hindu practices and rituals need to understand that any practice can have too narrow a focus. Any practice that excludes or sets itself apart from others is destructive to the emerging global community that the Internet has set into motion. It is high time that this worldwide community, which all the Gurus and Bhagats of the Granth Sahib foresaw in their vision, becomes our conscious goal.

Q: How much research into historical setting did you have to do? Is writing about Sikhism that much easier as its young and chronicled?

A: The specific chapters (in the later part of the book) in The Singing Guru that depict 'historic' settings draw from my childhood experiences in my mother's village in the Punjab. I found no book that delineated historic setting and I just presumed that life in the villages have continued, until recently, pretty much the same as they did centuries ago.

The fact that Sikhism is young and chronicled did not make my task any easier. There is actually a paucity of actual biographical material about both Guru Nanak and Mardana, the two main characters in the book. Even the stories in Max Arthur Macauliffe's The Sikh Religion: Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors, my main source, are sketchy and skeletal. It is impossible to separate fact from fiction, legend and myth. These legends have sprung up no doubt because fiction, a product of the imagination's power to recreate that which is lost forever, satisfies the human need to have a glimpse of the life of someone who elicits our curiosity, interest and passion. I had to rely mainly on Guru Nanak's shabads and my own imagination to fill in the gaps.

Q: How do you feel about the controversy that recently surrounded the enactment of Guru Nanak onscreen? You mention his curly hair in your book? Where is that from?

A: I went to see the movie in Chandigarh but was told upon arrival that it was banned because no human can act Guru Nanak. I am told the person of Guru Nanak is computer generated in the movie to circumvent this objection. I can understand the piety of this position but do not condone it. Guru Nanak depicted himself in an entirely human light in his shabads. In fact, if he weren't also human, his importance would be much diminished. He is the living — if one can use this word, and one can, given his enduring, even growing relevance — example of the necessary arc of the human evolution from creature to god. The divine and the human — that is the spectrum that we span.

I think that a minority of Sikhs, in their efforts to 'protect' Sikhism, have put it in a very small



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box and then deplore the fact that Sikhism is 'declining.' Even some very staunch Sikhs I know are upset by the prescriptive nature of Sikhism as those in power mandate it. There are plenty of visual depictions of the gurus in painting but nobody has objected to that. It is this narrowness of perspective of this political minority that has shackled Sikhism. They are tearing the very fabric of the Granth Sahib. If someone had made a movie about Kabir or Ravidas, would they have objected so vehemently? Probably not, because their allegiance is mainly to those gurus who they perceive as being 'Sikh.' But our long-sighted Sikh Gurus, vast and universal in their vision, uncontainable in the small vessels we are accustomed to putting them in, have included in our Holy Text saints and bhagats from all walks of life.

I think it is these prescriptions that have kept Sikhs from being the artists they can be. You can't make art in a box. Freedom is the primary condition to art. Guru Nanak himself saw all of life as the drama of the Arch Artist, the Creator.

Sikhism is so vast and enduring for all time, so rich and magnificent a religion that it needs no protection. It will spread and grow the freer it is because freedom is at its very heart. We have inherited what I think is one of the world's most resonant religions, highly relevant in today's fragment world. We need to follow the example of Guru Nanak himself, a free spirit, advait, or non-dual in his vision, uniting the sacred and the holy, God and art.

The curly hair: All the men and women from my mother's side, Bedis, descendants of Guru Nanak, had curly hair. It was just a whimsical description. 'Curly hair' is more specific and imagistic than just 'hair.'

Q: You have reconstructed the Janmasakhi tradition. How watchful did you have to be to not upset those who adhere to a traditional construct?

A: Being too watchful is the bane of art. When you are writing you have to let the material rather than your ego or preconceived ideas dictate its needs and directions. This is not to say I am unaware that some Sikhs, like upholders of any other religion, can be quite possessive of their own canons and do not brook disagreement or other interpretations. Of course there is some fear writing when you are writing something very anchored to tradition, but a writer must have freedom if he or she is to write with sincerity. I have taken the liberty to invent characters, bend, stretch, add, subtract as I have done with my other two books. The Gurus themselves have taught us to be fearless.

Q: How would you describe the role of music for the seeker? Is there a difference in approach to it in the main faiths of the world?

Music is central to Sikhism. It is what I like best about it. Sikh kirtan is a marriage of sense and sound: the highest sense, and the best of sounds, the Indian classical tradition of raags. The shabads in the Granth Sahib are written to be sung with raagas. Though it is sung in many ways, some quite Bollywoodish and folksy, it is best, in my preference, when it follows the classical strain. Music, both listening to it and singing it, is a direct conduit to the Divine. Most mystical traditions give it a very central place. Though Islam forbids it, Sufism embraces it. Though kirtan is sung in Hindu temples, it finds its highest expression in vocal Indian classical music; Christianity, which has its hymns, finds its heartiest and most joyful expression in Gospel music. The role of music for the seeker cannot be overestimated. I would hazard the guess that from the very beginning of consciousness, Humanity's search for the Divine went hand in hand with joyful outbursts in song.