SIKH PHILOSOPHY
Exploring gurmat Concepts in a Decolonizing World

ARVIND-PAL SINGH MANDAIR
Sikh Philosophy
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Sikh Philosophy

Exploring gurmat Concepts in a Decolonizing World

Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair
For Preet
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The introductions we include in the World Philosophies series take a single thinker, theme or text and provide a close reading of them. What defines the series is that these are likely to be people or traditions that you have not yet encountered in your study of philosophy. By choosing to include them you broaden your understanding of ideas about the self, knowledge and the world around us. Each book presents unexplored pathways into the study of world philosophies. Instead of privileging a single philosophical approach as the basis of comparison, each book accommodates the many different dimensions of cross-cultural philosophizing. While the choice of terms used by the individual volumes may indeed carry a local inflection, they encourage critical thinking about philosophical plurality. Each book strikes a balance between locality and globality.

Arvind-Pal S. Mandair’s *Sikh Philosophy: Exploring gurmat Concepts in a Decolonizing World* offers readers a rich and multi-layered exposition of concepts, practices and arguments that are central to *gurmat*, the Sikh pathways of thought and practice. Foregrounding their fluid orientation towards self and world, the book carefully works out *gurmat’s* intricate intertwining of the human and other-than-human realms. Building upon this orientation, the volume boldly reads Sikh philosophy as an ‘assemblage’, as a mediation between worlds in which the mediation itself is reconfigured in the process. Similar to a postcolonial diasporic way of being in the world, this fluid *thinking-between* has the potential to enable one to make meaning of changing and new contexts.

Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach
Preface and acknowledgements

Although this book has been long in the making, it was written in a relatively short space of time, much of it composed in 2020 during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. My interest in Sikh philosophy goes back more than three decades. In fact the first humanities paper I wrote, after switching career from the natural sciences, was a somewhat confused attempt to understand Sikh sovereignty in terms of its philosophical concepts. The paper was presented at a conference I co-organized at the University of Warwick in 1991, titled ‘Sikh Identity in Transition’ and privately published in a community magazine (1991). However, during a period of retraining in philosophy, postcolonial theory and Sikh studies in the early 1990s, I soon realized that this early essay had inadvertently inherited a tendency in modern Sikh literature to frame the key concepts of *gurmat* within ethno-nationalist schemas of identity. As I began to dig into the archives, it soon became obvious that the initial formulations of these schemas could be traced back to the intellectual encounters between Sikh elites and Western writers during the colonial period.

The problem with nationalized schemas such as these was that they corresponded neither to the complexities of my subjectivity as a diasporic, postcolonial second-generation Sikh Briton nor indeed to the broad ethos of the teachings of the Sikh Gurus as found primarily in its central scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib. These identitarian schemas had been re-*imagined* by writers in the colonial period partly as a response to the emerging political monotheism of Hindu nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Like many others I had uncritically inherited it, which was partly a consequence of the reactionary politics of the 1980s. What I eventually realized was that any Sikh philosophy, to be worthy of this title, (i) needs to remain true to the source of its primary inspiration (*gurbānī*), (ii) needs to be deeply attentive to the sociopolitical realm without becoming subservient to the varieties of nationalist tribalisms that afflict the planet today, (iii) needs to be able to speak to the existential and cultural milieu in which it was being received, which is to say that it needs to speak to the lived experiences of people like myself whose lives were situated between encounters between different cultural contexts (Sikh/Punjabi/Indian/British/American/European).

It was precisely the sense of a diasporicity characterized by a process of constantly translating between cultures, which guided the development of my critical thinking through successive MA and PhD dissertations titled
Thinking-Between Cultures: Receiving the Guru Granth Sahib (1994) and Thinking-Between Cultures: Metaphysics and Cultural Translation (1999). These were partly attempts to rethink my own subjectivity, and partly scholarly forays into the intellectual mindset of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Sikh elites as they negotiated imperial encounters between Indian and European cultures. The latter project preoccupied me for longer than I had anticipated. While it enabled me to take a necessary detour into the terrain of colonial history and the study of religion-making and secularism in the Sikh and South Asian context, it also took me away from my primary interest in cross-cultural philosophy.

This particular monograph – Sikh Philosophy: Exploring gurmat Concepts in a Decolonizing World – builds off these earlier detours and forms part of a trilogy of books that help resituate my research closer to the intersection of the study of world philosophies, decolonization and spiritualities. While this book focuses on surveying, bringing together and explaining connections between key Sikh concepts, a second book Geophilosophical Encounters resurrects the earlier ‘Thinking-Between’ project by placing Sikh thought within the ambit of intercultural philosophizing. A third book War Machines, currently underway, investigates the question of sovereignty beyond the constraints imposed by schemas of nationalism, thus taking me back to the 1991 essay that kicked off this entire endeavour. All three of these book projects are experimental in nature. Their collective aim is to demonstrate the possibility of building epistemically empowering frameworks for the study of Sikh concepts (gurmat). Empowerment, as I understand it, is an effect of decolonial thinking which extracts Sikh philosophical concepts from their ‘original’ historico-material contexts, enabling them to adapt to and intervene in new and different cultural, social and political contexts without losing what is essentially creative or spiritually uplifting about them.

The major portion of this book was written during a period of sabbatical leave during winter 2020 generously provided by the University of Michigan’s College of Literature Arts and the Science. I want to thank Professor Susan Juster for supporting my application to LSA and for her support from 2018 to 2020 during her time as Chair of Asian Languages and Cultures. Thanks also to Markus Nornes, Reggie Jackson, Nancy Florida and Mrinalini Sinha for their enthusiastic support of my work.

Early versions of Chapters 3 and 4 in this book were originally composed for a lecture series I delivered at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies. I want to express my gratitude to SOAS’s Department of
Religions, particularly Cosimo Zene and Sian Hawthorne for inviting me to deliver the Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion in 2009.

I want to thank the series editor Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach and the regional editor James Madaio for inviting me to contribute to Bloomsbury Introductions to World Philosophies.

My thanks to George Yancy whose interview with me on ‘Sikhism & Death’ provided some groundwork for Chapter 5. I also want to acknowledge colleagues, graduate students and friends who have been supportive of my work in recent years: Richard E. King, David Liu, Puninder Singh, Harjeet S. Grewal, Anneeth K. Hundle, Nirinjan Khalsa-Baker, Jasdev Singh Rai, Guriqbal Sahota, Pashaura Singh, Navdeep S. Mandair, Christopher Shackle, Pal Ahluwalia, Gurharpal Singh, Giorgio Shani, Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, Raji Singh Soni, Michael Nijhawan, Tavleen Kaur, Jasleen Singh, Pinderjeet Gill, Conner Vanderbeek, Sukhwinder Singh Obhi, Michael Hawley, Nathaniel Eli Gallant, T. Sher Singh, Manoher Singh, Randeep Hothi, Dav Panesar, Virinder Kalra, Tej Purewal, Anne Murphy, Franchesca Cassio, Surinder Singh Matharu, Bhai Baldeep Singh and members of the Naad Pargaas group especially Jagdish Singh, Amaninder Singh, Navjot Kaur and Amandeep Singh Khalsa. Alex Prosi provided much needed help with the diagrams. My local Sikh community in Michigan has always been supportive, and I offer my gratitude to the Sikh Studies Association of Michigan and Mata Tripta Gurdwara in Plymouth (MI) for allowing me to share some of the ideas presented in this book in the form of outreach lectures. As always, Aman-vir and Sukhmani in their very different ways remind me why it was necessary to write this book in the first place. Preet’s patience and unflagging support have helped to keep me going even when things seemed to go awry. I dedicate this book to her. For their unstinting ardâs in support of my academic work, I pay tribute to my mother Parkash Kaur, to my father-in-law Col. Baldev Singh Hundal and to the memory of those who left this world too soon, my father S. Karnail Singh Mandair and mother-in-law Mrs. Gurdev Kaur. Parts of Chapter 7 have appeared in Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed (2013). My thanks also to Dr. Parvinder Khanuja for permission to use an image from the Khanuja Family Collection (p. 6).
Introduction

This book is a contribution to the study of world philosophies, a branch of philosophy that examines the concepts, practices, arguments and world views of different cultures and traditions, more specifically in this case the set of tradition(s) that are called Sikh. At first glance Sikh philosophy could well pass as a legitimate subfield of comparative philosophy or one of many different world philosophies. From this perspective, Sikh philosophy would be no different from Islamic, Chinese, Hindu, Jewish, Christian or African philosophies insofar as it points to the philosophical aspect of an ethnic or religious formation. One could say that ‘Sikh philosophy’ indicates an originally ethno-religious cultural formation with a capacity for philosophical investigation. Accordingly one finds a number of books and pamphlets dealing with topics like ‘Philosophy of Sikhism’, ‘Teachings of the Sikh Gurus’, ‘Philosophy of Guru Nanak’, Sikh Doctrine and Ideology, almost all of which assume that the term ‘Sikh philosophy’ refers to an indigenous system of thought, a set of specifically Sikh ideas, doctrines and practices which can be traced back to the original intentions and life practices authorized by its founders, the ten Sikh Gurus and especially the first Sikh Guru, Nanak.

However, some pause for thought is necessary here. First, as I explain in greater detail in Chapter 1, ‘Sikh philosophy’ is in fact a composite term which first emerges in the context of colonial-period encounters and interactions between categories and concepts of Sikh and Western thought, specifically in relation to the translation of an axial term in the Sikh lexicon: gurmat (the logic or teaching of the Guru). From this perspective it may be more helpful to think of Sikh philosophy as an ‘assemblage’ rather than an autochthonic thought-form. In this sense, secondly, unlike ‘Buddhist philosophy’, ‘Hindu philosophy’ or ‘Islamic philosophy’, ‘Sikh philosophy’ has not achieved the same level of recognizability within the modern knowledge system. One reason for this might be that Sikhism is obviously much younger than the Buddhist, Islamic and Hindu traditions, whose philosophies (i) derive from long-established indigenous traditions, (ii) are able to draw on the work of iconic exegetes and (iii) have indigenous categories (darśana and śāstra in the Hindu context or dhamma/dharma in Buddhist context) that resonate with the Western category of ‘philosophy’.

Yet the Sikh lexicon has similar categories such as dharam, which broadly refers to ontology, and the term gurmat which refers to the instruction,
knowledge or teaching imparted by the Guru and broadly corresponds to what is generally understood by epistemology. In this way the meanings of *gurmat* and *dharam* converge in what might simply be called 'Sikh philosophy.' In this regard there is a relatively voluminous Sikh literature categorizable as broadly philosophical in nature, although thus far it has mainly been restricted to the work of scholars based in the Indian academy. So the question still stands: Why is 'Sikh philosophy' not generally recognized as a knowledge system in its own right, one that is capable of contributing to global thought?

A pertinent answer to this question has to do with the legacies of imperial encounter and the modern knowledge system which reconfigured Sikh categories and concepts through the lenses of religion and theology rather than philosophy. In other words, within the European knowledge system Sikhism was configured primarily as a religious tradition rooted in Punjabi culture with its own beliefs, doctrines and practices, but with no discernible philosophical system by means of which it might be able to participate in the streams of global thought. This in turn affected the ways Sikhs see themselves and how others (especially Western scholars) have seen Sikhs and the conceptual categories of their life-world. To understand how this happened and to establish a useful point of departure for the study of Sikh philosophy, it will be helpful to begin by providing some historical, spiritual and cultural contextualization pertinent to the emergence of Sikh philosophy as an intellectual formation.

**Sikhism, Sikhī and Guru Nanak**

The origins of Sikhism can be traced to the Punjab region of North India (lit. land of the five rivers) five centuries ago. However, the term ‘Sikhism’ is a Western word coined not by Sikhs but by Europeans, specifically the British, in the nineteenth century. In this sense it is like the words Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism which also are not indigenous to the Indic lexicons. Sikhs themselves use the term *sikhī* which, like the word Sikh, is derived from the Punjabi verb *sikhnā*: to learn. Unlike Sikhism, the word *sikhī* does not denote an object or thing. Rather, it has a temporal connotation and refers to a path of experiential learning integral to one’s life. This of course raises an important question about the very legitimacy of the term ‘Sikh-ism’ and why it even continues to be used, a point which will be discussed in detail later.

Sikhs are those who choose to undertake a path of self-perfection under the guidance of a spiritual master called Guru (to be distinguished from the lower case ‘guru’ which is traditionally used in India to refer to any respected teacher). Historically, for Sikhs the Guru (upper case) refers to a succession
of ten spiritual masters, each of whom played a role in evolving the path of sikhī and a teaching or philosophy known as gurmat. But the term ‘Guru’, as the Sikhs use it, has wider meanings that include the Word of the Gurus as embodied in Sikh scripture (śabda-guru as Guru Granth Sahib), the teaching or philosophy of the Gurus (gurmat) or the source of inspiration that underpins all of these (the satguru). The community as a whole is known as the Panth (also derived from the Sanskrit pth meaning path).

The founding figure behind the entire Sikh movement was Guru Nanak whose teachings and life experience became the inspiration and model for the nine Gurus who followed him. The Sikh Gurus passed on their teachings to the community that grew around them, in the form of several thousand exquisitely beautiful poems and hymns enshrined in the two key scriptural texts of the Sikh Panth: the Adi Granth and Dasam Granth, both recognized masterpieces of Indian devotional literature. The Adi Granth is so important in Sikh tradition that it occupies centre stage in the physical layout of all gurdwaras (lit. the Guru’s Door or Sikh temples) and in ceremonies of worship. It possesses a unique status marked by its honorific title of Guru Granth Sahib. Because of its remarkable influence, and sheer centrality to Sikh practice, devotion, conceptuality, as the single most important textual resource for any Sikh philosophy, and as the repository of sovereign authority, a few words about the development and structural content of the Guru Granth are warranted.¹

Guru Granth Sahib

Without real parallel in other Indian traditions the importance of the Guru Granth Sahib to the Sikh way of life is most obviously manifested in the central place given to the Sikh scripture in the physical layout of a gurdwara. For this reason, Sikhism is sometimes described as a ‘religion of the Book’. But it is in no sense a book containing the sort of laws and rules characteristic of the Semitic scriptures. Rather, the Guru Granth Sahib serves as a hymnal, as the focus of private and communal devotion and as a reference text for philosophical contemplation or spiritual counsel in times of difficulty, and in a way that makes it arguably unique among other scriptures, the Guru Granth Sahib also mediates political-spiritual authority. In this sense it is not mere scripture but the embodiment of the principle of sovereignty itself. If sovereignty can be defined as the ‘power to authorize’, then this principle was instituted practically and conceptually by Guru Nanak and passed on to his successor Gurus as part of the process of transmitting authority from one Guru to another. Central to this transmission of authority was the tangible presence of a personal living Guru and the intangible presence of the śabda
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(Word) of gurbāṇī (the Guru’s utterance) and the consolidation of the latter into a physical text compiled by the fifth Guru, Arjan, and sealed by the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh. During the period of the living Gurus (1469–1708), and in a way that is unique to the Sikh context, sovereignty was diametrically mediated between the person of the Guru and the non-personal form of text as śabda. This dialectic of the personal and non-personal came to a close with the tenth Guru. As I explain more carefully in Chapter 2 (‘Experience’), the question of tangible and intangible sovereignty becomes a cornerstone of any possible Sikh philosophy. Indeed, Sikh philosophy can be seen as an expression of the sovereign impulse to mediate form and formlessness, visible and invisible, known and unknown, material and immaterial.

If the status of the Guru Granth Sahib as the primary scripture of the Sikhs is a special one, this is due in no small way to (i) the character of its contents which can be regarded as a repository of all major Sikh concepts (hence its centrality to Sikh philosophy), and (ii) its organization, which in its modern form dates from after the introduction of the printing press into nineteenth-century Punjab and has a standard format of 1,430 pages printed in the Gurumukhi script with the text printed in continuous lines, with breaks only for major new sections.2

Structurally the Guru Granth Sahib is composed of three main sections of unequal length. The first is a relatively brief opening section consisting of hymns used for liturgical practices. This section contains works that a devout Sikh will recite or sing each day: the Japji by Guru Nanak which is prescribed for recitation in the early morning hours and the hymns by the Gurus prescribed for the evening prayers (Rahiras) and the night prayer (Sohilla). The somewhat longer final section (1353–1430) contains collections of shorter verses by the Gurus and others, along with poems of praise in honour of the Gurus composed by their court poets, the Bhatts.3

The main body of the scripture (14–1353) is a vast collection of hymns. As illustrated in Figure 1 its primary arrangement is by means of the rāga or musical measure in which they are to be performed. Within the primary category of the thirty-one main rāgas which are distinguished as separate headings (equivalent to what might be considered ‘chapters’ in a typical book), the hymns of the Gurus are next organized by their poetic form, beginning with the shortest, which may occupy only a few lines of text, and gradually progressing to much longer compositions, which may each take up several pages. It is within these categories that authorship is finally distinguished beginning with the hymns of Guru Nanak, followed by those of other Gurus in chronological order. Since all the Gurus used the poetic signature ‘Nanak’, their compositions are distinguished by the code word ‘Mohala’, abbreviated as M, so that the hymns of Guru Nanak himself are labelled as M1, those of
the second and third Guru as M2 and M3 respectively and so on. After the hymns of the Gurus, most rāgas then conclude with shorter groups of hymns by non-Sikh poets of the pre-Guru period, such as Kabir, Namdev, Ravidas and Farid. These authors are generically known as bhagats.4

In total, the Guru Granth Sahib contains some 6,000 separate compositions. Of the Sikh Gurus whose works are included in the Sikh scriptures, Guru Nanak has 974 compositions, Guru Angad 62, Guru Amar Das 907, Guru Ramdas 679, Guru Arjan 2,218 and Guru Tegh Bahadur 116. Of the bhagats, Kabir has the greatest number, 541, although many of these are very short verses. In the formation of the Adi Granth as a whole, the key figure is the fifth Guru, Arjan, by far the largest contributor.5 Indeed the organizational structure of the Guru Granth Sahib as a collection stands as testimony to his skill as its chief redactor.

As mentioned earlier the Guru Granth’s main body of text (1,340 pages) is arranged not according to concept or narrative but according to musical measures known as rāgas. A rāga (along with the tāla or rhythm) is a traditional melodic type in Hindustani music, consisting of a theme that expresses an aspect of spiritual feeling and sets forth a tonal system on which variations are improvised within a prescribed framework of typical progressions, melodic formulas and rhythmic patterns (tālas). The Sikh Gurus were well versed in contemporary styles of Indian music. For example, popular portraits of Guru Nanak depict his constant companion Mardana as a trained musician specializing in the stringed instrument called rabāb (Figure 2).

**Figure 1** Structural organization of hymns in the Guru Granth Sahib.
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Guru Nanak and his successors wished their hymns to be sung to rāgas that evoked the emotional intensity being experienced and the performance style to be compatible with the meaning of the hymn.

Far from being supplementary to the text, the role of the rāga and tāla is central to its organization, since according to Indian aesthetic theory, each musical rāga in combination with tāla evokes a mood or expression that has its own distinctive flavour (rasa), which may vary across a spectrum ranging from adoration and rejoicing to desolation and entreaty. To render the rāga correctly in performance (kirtan) is to correctly express one mood or set of emotions and not another. In order to reproduce a certain mood, traditions of Sikh musicology, variously known as gurbāṇī kirtan or gurmat sangeet, stress the performance rules and melodic material as the best way of maintaining the individual properties of the rāga and of allowing the finer aspect of the hymn to emerge.⁶

Each hymn is therefore set to a predefined rāga, and when it is sung, the nature and feelings associated with the rāga affect the lyrical interpretation of the text. Sikh music thus has some limitations placed on it so that the aesthetic-spiritual aspect of the performance can be maintained. In performance, therefore, the purpose of setting the Guru’s words to a rāga and tāla is to make an impression on the conscious aspect of the listener’s mind in such a way that it can be cajoled into dialogue with its unconscious aspect, the heart or soul. When these two different aspects of the mind speak to each other, it is said to be attuned with its divine ground. The Gurus aimed

Figure 2  Guru Nanak and Mardana [Khanuja Family Collection].
to convey experience through feelings and moods which make up an aspect of consciousness irreducible to rationalization. And it is always important to remember the significance of this lyrical dimension when approaching the record of the Gurus’ teaching contained within the text of their hymns as they appear, silently, on the printed page.7

All the compositions of the Gurus are in poetic verse. At the most general level their verse can be defined by common characteristics, shared with most medieval Indian poetry. It is composed of short units, with the end of each line marked by strong rhyme, and with longer lines generally being broken by a marked caesura. Since there is no grammatical run-off from line to line, each self-contained syntactic unit has to be quite short, thus favouring a typically condensed and direct style of expression which relies on such devices as parallelism and varied repetition for its cumulative effects. The verse of the Sikh Gurus is not strictly bound by the exact metrical rules of Hindi poetics, and individual lines or half-lines are often expanded by a word or phrase which is additional to the strict metrical count. This feature is particularly common in the case of the author’s signature (chhāp), which is a standard mark of closure in all Indian poetic genres. As mentioned earlier, all the Gurus (except Guru Gobind Singh) use the signature ‘Nanak’, typically as a vocative self-address in the sense of ‘O Nanak’, or more explicitly spelt out as ‘Nanak says’.8

Evolution of the Sikh community and polity

No account of Sikhism is ever complete without acknowledging the transition of the Panth from the path of disciplined devotion in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to the path of the warrior-saint in the seventeenth century. This transition is normally attributed to two complementary developments. On the one hand, the martyrdoms of the fifth and ninth Gurus, from which point onwards spiritual devotion and militant resistance against all manner of oppression went hand in hand. On the other hand, we see the adaptation, especially by the sixth and tenth Gurus, of Nanak’s philosophy of oneness to rapidly changing sociopolitical circumstances at the time prompted by the wars of succession in the Mughal court and the growing intolerance towards minority formations from the Islamic state. The sixth Guru, Hargobind, developed the concept of miri-piri, or the oneness of spiritual and political life, and of sovereign violence (inherited from Guru Nanak’s philosophy) with the aim of resisting injustice and oppression of the state by violent means where absolutely necessary. The tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, introduced radical new measures (including a new form of initiation,
discipline and external form, as well as bequeathing ultimate authority to the scripture) which combined to give the early Sikh community its sense of distinctness from others.

The spirit of political resistance inculcated by the Sikh Gurus inevitably brought the evolving community into conflict with the Mughal Empire. As a result, Khalsa Sikhs were hunted almost to the point of extinction in the early decades of the eighteenth century. Yet they not only survived but, by the early nineteenth century, had risen to establish a sizeable sovereign kingdom that extended from Afghanistan to Delhi. The Sikh kingdom lasted less than half a century until the arrival of the British. Following two bitterly fought wars the Sikh kingdom was annexed by the British who absorbed the Sikhs into the British Empire.

The Sikhs had lost their sovereign kingdom, but far from languishing under colonial rule their encounter with modernity and their interaction with the British proved to be advantageous, enabling a reconstruction of the community’s cultural framework through the agency of a lay reformist movement called the Singh Sabha.

Religion-making versus the philosophical: Colonial influences

Most contemporary accounts present Sikhism as a neat package that includes (i) a distinct theology or doctrine whose core consists of an ethico-political monotheism, (ii) a distinct set of beliefs and practices, (iii) a historical founding figure (Nanak), (iv) historical places of worship and pilgrimage (gurdwaras), (v) a community with well-defined boundaries (the Khalsa) and (vi) a distinctly Sikh world view. As noted earlier, this neat repackaging of an internally fluid path (sikhi) into a seemingly fixed and immutable entity (Sikhism as a ‘religion’ among the other religions of the world) that can be reproduced seamlessly in world-religions textbooks, film documentaries and whenever Sikhism is googled on the internet, has certain advantages. For one thing it enables Sikhs and Sikhism to be easily identifiable, although the mechanism of this identification depends on the creation of a superficial relation to Christianity as the essential type for ‘religion’ in general, and for other ‘religions’ of the world. Once it is packaged as a ‘religion’ or an essentially ‘religious’ community, Sikhs and Sikhism are made familiar to our modern sensibilities. They no longer appear to be perplexing, particularly to outsiders, for the simple reason that everyone is more or less familiar with what religion is.
At a certain level, this kind of representation is by no means unhelpful, especially if all one requires are quick and uncomplicated answers to the questions ‘What is Sikhism?’ or ‘Who is a Sikh?’ But when a deeper and more nuanced understanding of Sikh concepts is required – or how such concepts can be applied to rapidly changing circumstances – such representations reveal severe limitations. For example, it characterizes Sikhs and Sikhism as defined objects with a truth-value that corresponds unproblematically to the contemporary lived experience of the community. The apparent truth-value of such definitions renders them difficult to contest and be redefined within the Sikh community, partly because Sikhs themselves have internalized them as truth statements that appear to correspond to their present social form. As seeming truth statements, they elide the fact that ‘Sikhism’ is not an indigenous term but a colonial construct. The indigenous terms *sikhī*, *gursikhī*, *gurmat* or *dharam* are extensively used by Sikhs who speak Punjabi. But in English or other European languages, it is Sikh-*ism* that takes precedence thereby forcing the identification with the category ‘religion’.

There is now a great deal of evidence to show that this process of ‘religion-making’ helped to solidify *sikhī* from a relatively fluid orientation towards self and world, into the rigid objectifying world view that we know as Sikhism. Although the solidification of *sikhī* had already begun during the period of the early Gurus, the colonial period greatly accelerated the concretizing process through the lens of nationalized schemas. The transformation from pre-colonial to nationalized forms was mediated through intercultural mimesis between Sikh and European scholars, a process that disguised itself as natural translation. Native elite scholars internalized the epistemic categories of the ruling global knowledge system, specifically the categories of religion and the secular, and applied them to their own texts, thought systems and communities. By doing so colonial elites subtly recast Sikh tradition as a sui generis religion by channelling it through the modern state’s intellectual apparatus. The end result was Sikhism – an entity with a much reduced capacity for making connections to the wider world, to other societies and traditions of thought.

As was the case with other colonial elites, Sikhs began to define themselves as a ‘nation’ and a ‘world religion’¹⁰ separate from but parallel to the rise of the Indian state and global political Hinduism. In an earlier monograph *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality and the Politics of Translation*,¹¹ I investigated these processes in some detail. Among its conclusions was that the physical and psychic machinery of colonialism constrained access of Sikh concepts to global arenas of thought. As described later in the chapter, the ability of Sikhs to connect to the world in new and creative ways was disempowered by a colonial machinery, which interpreted
and translated Sikh concepts, categories and teachings through the lens of theology. Once theology had become the primary regime of cultural translation, Sikh thinking was inevitably tethered to the social and political project of religious identification which was required primarily to facilitate governance of cultural differences or heterogeneity that characterized the indigenous populations. By doing so it effectively locked Sikh activity within the confines of identity politics.

In an intellectually productive period stretching from the late 1880s to the early 1930s in colonial Punjab, Sikh elites and European Orientalists brought some of the central concepts of Sikh thought and practice into encounter with modern Western thought in contexts not too dissimilar to those existing today. As a result of these encounters, Sikh reformists belonging to the Singh Sabha movement pushed key terms such as *gurmat* (teaching/logic/practice of the Guru) to the forefront of interpretive activity with the aim of delineating clearer boundaries between Sikh and non-Sikh life-worlds. In ways that are only now being recognized, *gurmat* became a conceptual pivot around which reformists framed two overlapping but broadly distinguishable strands of activity, *religious* and *philosophical*.

These two strands can be seen as distinct, though overlapping, expressions of Sikh desire and interpretive capacity, giving rise over a period of fifty years or so, to two different bodies of knowledge. The better-known strand can be traced to the translation of *gurmat* as ‘religion’ and corresponds closely to the social formation with a well-defined code of social and personal conduct (*Sikh rahitmaryada*) represented in the public sphere as ‘Sikhism’, the ‘Sikh Religion’ or ‘Sikhism as World Religion’. The lesser-known strand resulting from the translation of *gurmat* as ‘the Guru’s philosophy or logic’ gave rise to a relatively specialized body of knowledge simply known as ‘Sikh philosophy’ or *Sikh chintan*, which deals with processes of thought vis-à-vis key concepts and how they relate the individual self to the world. Although reformist scholars saw no essential conflict between the religious and philosophical framings of *gurmat*, partly for the sake of convenience and partly because the second strand (*gurmat* as ‘Sikh philosophy’) is central to this book, I treat them separately.

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**gurmat as ‘Sikh religion’ or ‘Sikh theology’**

In the religious strand *gurmat* became a conceptual vehicle for developing the notion of Sikhism as a world religion. It focused on purifying the domain of ritual practice from what were deemed to be non-Sikh practices and by the mid-twentieth century resulted in the formulation of an official Sikh code of
conduct championed by a Sikh political party. Ultimately, the representation of gurmat as specifically religious or theological made it easier to capture a broader array of Sikh concepts within the echo chamber of religious identity, an arena of representation engineered and administered by the legal machinery of the modern secular state.

As noted earlier, perhaps the simplest example of the imperial legacy of capture and disempowerment is the term ‘Sikhism’ – itself a product of colonial encounter – as it is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED). While indigenous terms corresponding to the -ism – sikhī, gurmat, gursikhī, Sikh dharam – are used by Sikhs on a daily basis, it is the Anglophone category Sikhism which takes precedence, thereby forcing an identification with the category ‘religion’. By defining ‘Sikhism’ as the beliefs and practices of Sikhs, or as an Indian monotheistic religion founded in fifteenth-century India, the OED turns the Sikh aspect into a cliché – a religious type (monotheism), an ethnic type tied to a geographical location (Punjabi/North India) and a historical type (medieval India).

The epistemic narrowing created by the cliché is now increasingly recognized and challenged not only by scholars but, surprisingly, by younger generations of Sikhs working in the public sphere in India and the diaspora. For many, their resistance has taken the form of preference for the term sikhī as opposed to Sikhism. As scholars in the field of critical religion studies have noted, the ‘-ism’ in the formation Sikhism represents less a signifier of a certain truth-value than the indication that their users have settled into a comfortable position within the Anglophone consciousness, and through that into the seemingly natural and neutral language of common sense. What has become increasingly clear to scholars and contemporary generations of Sikh practitioners alike is that what we understand today as ‘religion’ is not a ‘stand-alone category’. As Timothy Fitzgerald reminds us, ‘historically and conceptually the idea of religion as a universal essence manifesting in specific religions, that emerged (in English at least) in the late seventeenth century, did not become powerfully institutionalized until the American and French revolutions and their respective problematics of a new world order’ (Fitzgerald: 5). In other words, religion as a category is a relatively modern invention that emerged in parallel to the rise of the secular European state and its imperializing project. The purpose of creating the modern category ‘religion’ was to help authorize and naturalize secular rationality as the dominant form of modern consciousness, and as the essential language of conventional thinking or ‘common sense’. It is precisely this common sense which persuades us of the apparent naturalness of oppositions such as religion versus politics, or materiality versus ideality to give two well-known examples. As with the OED entries on ‘Sikhism’, we
tend not to question the framework behind such common-sense definitions because we feel that our everyday language naturally reflects a rationality that any normal person would assent to.\textsuperscript{16}

\textit{gurmat} as ‘Sikh philosophy’

The translation of \textit{gurmat} as ‘Sikh philosophy’ has not been as widely disseminated as ‘Sikh Religion’ even though there is a considerable body of literature corresponding to the former and the fact that an early form of Sikh philosophy can be traced back to early Sikh tradition in the sixteenth century. However, it is probably correct to say that the modern discourse of ‘Sikh philosophy’ emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries primarily as a way of presenting a distinctly Sikh world view and ethics in response to the more voluminous literature by competing discourses such as Hindu Philosophy, Islamic Philosophy and Christian Philosophy. As a discourse its main purpose was to convey the basic concepts and teachings of the founder of Sikh tradition, Guru Nanak, whose compositions formed the basis of the thought-praxis that Sikhs refer to as \textit{gurmat}.

From this perspective it is possible to discern an implicit Sikh philosophy at work going back to the primary source texts of Sikh tradition, the Guru Granth Sahib being the obvious example where the essentials of \textit{gurmat} as a form of thought-practice is expounded by the Sikh Gurus themselves. This in turn gave rise to commentarial traditions beginning with the writings of Bhai Gurdas (a close associate of the fourth, fifth and sixth Gurus and someone who was privy to their thought process), followed by more formalized schools of exegetical commentary regarded today as streams of thought-practice (\textit{prnālī}). These commentarial traditions have an implicit, if not explicit, philosophical orientation and culminate in the Singh Sabha \textit{prnālī} whose writers were strongly influenced by colonial education and European modes of thought.

Despite the fact that Singh Sabha thinkers narrowed the interpretative frameworks for understanding Sikh concepts by tethering them to the modernist religio-secular frame, they nevertheless kept the door open to philosophical thinking vis-à-vis the discursive spheres variously referred to as ‘Sikh \textit{chintan}’ (thought or philosophy), \textit{gurbānī vichār} (reflection on the Gurus’ ‘revealed’ utterances) or simply \textit{gurmat vichār} (lit. reflection on the Guru’s logic). As noted earlier, this discursive sphere corresponds to the second strand of scholarly activity by colonial elites which equated \textit{gurmat} with philosophy. It is this act of \textit{equating} the two discourses – the Indic \textit{gurmat} with the European ‘philosophy’ – that justifies designating Sikh
philosophy as an ‘assemblage’. I will say more about this in Chapter 1. For now let us simply note that once it is interpreted as philosophical, gurmat includes within its ambit such activities as chintan (thought), viākhiā (commentary), vichār (reflection), kathā (oral exegesis) all of which refer to the processes of reflective thought aiming to connect Sikh concepts to the outside world.

Since the early twentieth century these reflective processes have been gradually synthesized into a scholarly and intellectual discourse going by the name ‘Sikh philosophy’ composed in English and modern Punjabi idioms. Yet despite accumulating a sizeable body of literature over the past century, ‘Sikh philosophy’ has remained largely ignored by modern scholarship which has, by and large, relegated it to the realm of ideology or doctrine. A detailed analysis of this marginalization is beyond the scope of this chapter and is discussed elsewhere.

Due in part to the secularist logic in which modern Sikh studies has been framed, the designation of Sikh philosophy as mere ideology or doctrine is stated in terms that position the primary sources of Sikh literature as essentially devotional or pietistic in nature, and therefore unsuited to the task of philosophical speculation and the broader project of comparative thinking.

However, there is a relatively straightforward rebuttal to this argument, which might go something like this. The source literature may indeed be devotional-poetic-aesthetic in nature. But it has its own form of logic and gives rise to a distinctive mode of thinking which may not be analytic or critical in the way that conventional eurocentric philosophy stipulates. Nevertheless it is thinking, albeit a thinking and logic that operates according to different rules and from a standpoint that is antithetical to conventional modern critique. Moreover, there exists a vast body of secondary literature that has grown up around it, and this secondary literature expounds and explicates the teachings of the Sikh Gurus through modes of reasoning that happen to be current in any social context. Furthermore, there are well-established and vibrant living traditions of oral exegesis (often referred to as gurmāt vichār or gurbāṇī viākhiā) that also expound its core teachings, again, using modes of reasoning corresponding to the social milieus in which they emerged.

While these commentarial traditions (prnālis) are not doing ‘philosophy’ in the eurocentric sense of the term, it would not be incorrect to suggest that these exegetical traditions are also performing a certain kind of conceptualization, putting into play a thinking based on a devotional logic that helps ordinary Sikhs to reflect on the Gurus’ teachings in the context of everyday life. Perhaps the best example is Giani Sant Singh Maskin who was perhaps the leading kathā vāchic (oral exegete) of his time. Trained in the Nirmalā tradition, Maskin delivered thousands of lectures elaborating