



# Sikh Research Journal

**Vol. 8 No. 2**

This article is from \*Sikh Research Journal\*, the online peer-reviewed journal of Sikh and Punjabi Studies

Sikh Research Journal \*Vol. 8 No. 2 Published: Winter 2024.

ISSN 2771-3520

<http://sikhresearchjournal.org>

<http://sikhfoundation.org>

## **‘The Home Beyond Home’: Dr. Balbinder S. Bhogal in conversation with Dr. Sunny Dhillon**

### **Abstract**

This piece is a lightly edited transcript of an interview with Dr. Bhogal conducted by Sunny in late 2022 in Nottingham, UK. Key themes that emerge concern the untranslatable aspects of ‘religion’ (Derrida, 2002), finding a spiritual home, negotiating the dialectic between bodily wisdom and linguistic expression, as well as how to possibly lead a life of integrity in the face of myriad challenges.

**Keywords:** *Decolonization; Embodied Cognition; Middle Way; Pluriversal; Translation*

### **Introduction**

In the summer of 2022, while conducting a literature search on 'Spinoza and Sikhi,' I (Sunny) discovered the work of Dr. Balbinder Singh Bhogal at Hofstra University, New York. His integration of Continental Philosophy with Sikhi-related issues resonated with ideas that had been simmering in my consciousness, but for which I previously lacked the knowledge and vocabulary to articulate. I was hooked. I listened to an interview between Dr. Bhogal and PJ Wehry, a Christian podcaster who explores contemporary philosophical and theological issues. It was entitled ‘An Introduction to Sikhi’, but it was Dr. Bhogal’s candid discussion of his personal journey into academia that stirred up many emotions in me. I wanted to hear more narratives about fellow members of the Sikh-Punjabi diaspora who had entered into academia in novel ways.

This desire led to a research project from September 2022 to February 2023, titled ‘Sikh Panjabi Scholars in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences’. Literature searches revealed a significant gap in research regarding the experiences of this demographic in Higher Education (HE) across English speaking countries. As a ‘model minority’, Sikhs are often professionally invisible. There has been substantial research into the lived experiences of other Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) groups in these regions, such as Muslims within different sectors (Tariq & Syed, 2017). However, the specific experiences of the Sikh-Punjabi community were not available beyond anecdotal accounts.

Whilst the Punjab region spans India and Pakistan, encompassing many different religious traditions, most Sikhs identify as Punjabi.<sup>11</sup> Bhopal (2004) qualifies ethnicity as an individual’s self-identification with a group. The ‘Punjabi’ identity is distinguished by unique cultural and linguistic traditions, which often overlap and intersect with a ‘Sikh’ sense of self. According to the British Sikh report (2020), 40% of respondents reported identifying *primarily* as Punjabi. Despite their economic prosperity in the UK, the Sikh-Punjabi demographic remains a

---

<sup>11</sup> For example, I identify as Punjabi more than Sikh, and do not practice any religion.

minority within a minority in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. As such, I deemed their/our stories worthy of exploration.

I secured research assistance through the Lincolnshire Open Research and Innovation Centre (LORIC), where a colleague conducted data analysis to help contextualize my project's findings from a UK perspective. A key finding is that as of 2020, there were approximately 440,000 academics working in the UK, of which only 1,220, or 0.3%, identified as Sikh. This percentage is the lowest of any religious group, approximately 30 less than the next lowest group (academics who identify as Jewish). In summary, my colleague found that British Sikhs are underrepresented in higher education, both as staff and students, specifically in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. In contrast, they have a far greater level of representation in fields like Business, Engineering and Medicine. Overall, Sikhs are among the lowest participating religious groups in UK higher education and are the least represented in postgraduate research, with over 50% fewer participants than the next lowest group (355 Sikhs compared to 780 who identify as Jewish). A comparison of similar data with the US, Canada and Australia would be particularly valuable.

Interviews for the project were conducted online from September 2022 to February 2023. The primary methodology employed was narrative inquiry (Todd, 2018) through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), with the aim of having free flowing discussions to explore how a shared heritage, influenced by a cultural fund of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005), affected the participants' professional choices and identity formations. The sole exception to the online interviews was the interview (below) with Dr. Balbinder S. Bhogal. As mentioned earlier, his interview with PJ Wehry was a core inspiration for the research. Although Dr. Bhogal resides in New York, and I am in Lincolnshire, UK, as fate would have it, he was the only participant I met in person. As such, the interview is lengthier than the others, with a tone and depth of inquiry that reflects its unique nature.

This project marked my first formal foray into empirical research as my education and prior research had all been in theoretical inquiry. Venturing outside my comfort zone, I acknowledge my limitations as an interviewer, which may be evident to readers. Nonetheless, I hope that the conversation makes for fascinating reading and encourages readers to consult more interviews from the research project.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> The project is open access and can be read at the following: <https://bit.ly/sikh-panjabi-scholars>. If there are any issues concerning access, please contact me at [sunny.dhillon@bishopg.ac.uk](mailto:sunny.dhillon@bishopg.ac.uk).

## The Interview

**Sunny Dhillon (SD):** Who is Balbinder Singh Bhogal?

**Balbinder Singh Bhogal (BSB):** It's interesting because I introduce myself in a classroom by saying, "My name is 'Balbinder Singh Bhogal', or 'Balvinder Singh Phogal'" and I ask the students if they notice a difference. They often squirm and think, "why's he being awkward? Why can't he just introduce himself like anybody else?" Then I have to repeat it, because it's a strange question to them; that I am Balbinder or Balvinder. "Does anybody hear a difference?" I get them to finally say "it sounds different, it's phonetic." Then I ask, "what does it signify?" They respond, "well, maybe your culture, your origin," and eventually they get it; that Balvinder is not of this context. What is *this* context? American English or British English. Then I say that Balbinder is a translation of Balvinder, and that I have to exist in a different format. And so, with every translation there's loss, but there's also gain. So, what does that mean then, for knowledge? And so, I invite students to join me on the journey of trying to answer the question: who is Balvinder Singh Phogal. Does it matter? Can I leave one? Can I translate one into a whole different context? Can I reinvent myself from the beginning? I've been trying to answer that question from the start. Maybe I can? I tried! I tried to be white. Growing up in England I tried to be white, and to fit in. I wanted nothing to do with my own background. I'd lost my father at an early age, of three. That meant I had to find a home beyond my parental home. Saying 'parental home,' and interpreting that from an adult perspective, is a misunderstanding, because you have to see it from the perspective of a three-year-old. For a three-year-old, losing your home is becoming homeless. And losing your father figure is losing the support system that allows you to become a psychologically healthy being, which is like saying losing 'God', or an ultimate meaning, or structure, which leads to pathological coping mechanisms. That's the clue of what was hidden inside me as an internal, conversational conflict that I couldn't touch consciously. I didn't know it was there until much, much later in life.

That trauma of losing my father, and temporarily losing my mother, who was in a new country having moved from Africa into England, and went temporarily 'insane' and was put into an institution... So, at the age of three and wondering what the hell was happening, but not having the vocabulary, the maturity, the understanding of what life is, to be able to comprehend what was going on. I could only unconsciously make coping strategies. And the coping strategies were only for immediate purposes. But I don't know any of this, right? I just think "I'm a normal kid, everybody has ups and downs". I don't even know what 'normal' is! We're being normalized, being socialized, but not in Africa anymore. Not even in the Punjab where my parents came from. So, there are themes of immigration, migration, exile and loss as what underpinned this journey. So, when you ask who is 'Balbinder Singh Bhogal' or 'Balvinder Singh Phogal', I already have multiple answers. I've realized that that's an advantage, not a disadvantage. Earlier I thought it was a disadvantage. I thought I had to choose between one and another.

It was in this context that I chose to be British rather than Sikh. So, my Sikhi was being led by a Britishness, because I thought that you had to choose, and that you have to be part of your context. In other words, I fell for what I now consider to be the illusion that you can find a home in bricks and mortar, in language, in race, in gender, in religion, in culture, whatever we want to call it; that there's some kind of linguistic, racial, home that you can find. I thought, "fine, I just have to choose one." So, I unconsciously chose to be 'white', cut my hair, took my turban off, and I rebelled. So back then, I had seen the idea of being multiple within as a disadvantage, that it was a state of confusion and tension that is always negative, only to realize later that there isn't a true home, in language, in race, in culture, in land, in territory. Once I'd realized that, then I realized that home is being settled within. And you can be settled within in Africa, in India, in America, in Britain, wherever you are, it doesn't matter. So not knowing how to exactly name myself, and to discover that who I am was a project that started when I was three... I didn't realize until much, much later, why it was that I left engineering and shifted to religion and philosophy. But the reason was because there was an inner question about "who is Balbinder Singh Bhogal?"

**SD:** In terms of that home being about feeling settled within, regardless of the geographical and wider socio-political context, that's *nice* [BSB laughs], but material conditions *do* matter, right?

**BSB:** Yes, material conditions seriously matter.

**SD:** And so, in terms of that dialectic, that relationship you have with your conditions in juxtaposition with the ideal you articulated, how do you manage that? Or does that dialectic manage you?

**BSB:** It's a very difficult question, and one that I'm still struggling with. Maybe we need to explore a bit more what 'beyond home' actually means. I've talked before about two streams of data. There's a data flow, the sensory data flow, we're in the world, we have sensors, and we mediate the world through our senses. That provides constantly changing data. Our bodies are updating according to our sensory environment, what we eat and so on. That's one stream of data. Let's just call that the affective; we're constantly affected by outside influences in our environment. But then, we're human beings that have memory and language, and an *invented* world through language. So, the affective is pre-lingual. Then you have the cognitive, or if we use Kristeva's language, you have the semiotic, then you also have the symbolic; in effect, language through which we can interpret that data, that constant flow of sensory stimulation.<sup>13</sup> We can interpret that, and we *have* to, and we're taught how to: read this

---

<sup>13</sup> See Bhogal (2011, pp. 61–63; 2012, pp. 4–18; 2021, pp. 192–195) where I elaborate the semiotic register as the sensorium of animal instincts, as well as the intuitions of the saintly or mystic

as a cultural norm, this as what your job means, this as what you should be, this as what a son is, this as a daughter, and so on. So, we're actually conditioned as though norms are truths, while hiding the fact that they're just interpretations (led by familial and cultural forces).

So, my interpretations started to creek, because of the migrations, because my sensory data was now largely English. My public world was about British culture. Sikhi was totally sidelined to the domestic and private realm. It would only become visible in the public realm through racism; it was never positive in the public sphere. It was only vaguely positive within the private sphere, even though there were problems there as well. I started to question the interpretive dimensions that were normalized. It's hard to become aware of one's own conditioning. The dialectic between finding a home beyond that conditioned home, not another conditioned home, not "oh now I'm American," or "now I'm British," but finding the home beyond here... It doesn't have to be a religious home. It can be that, but not in a markedly 'religious' sense. I think we've got a completely distorted notion of what religion is, in effect, the Enlightenment secular notion of religion. I'm talking about 'religion' in a sense that *aids* critical thinking, rather than one that displaces it, ultimately with the notion of faith, although that *is* part of it.<sup>14</sup>

So, the project of finding a home, not the home beyond home, finding just the material home was the project of survival; how to survive just to make ends meet, be practical, learn English, which evaded me, as I couldn't get into university because I'd failed English four times. I had to get it for a job at Rolls Royce. They required Maths and English O Levels,<sup>15</sup> and I kept failing English. That was my transition from Punjabi into English. The English eventually displaced my Punjabi to such an extent that – and a three-year-old's Punjabi isn't that deep – English took over because I had to survive. So, my mother tongue Punjabi becomes alien; the while alien English is internalized as my mother tongue. That's really important, because your mother tongue is largely cognitive and semantic; it's interpretive, but the body holds the resonances of the affective realm. Once I would hear *kirtan* (chanting), it could be a trigger back to the 'original' mother tongue, or a notion of her before her. So more about that later, because I think that's an important point that needs to be developed, but the mother, the notion of the dialectic and the tension, to find a home that can be named, is quite easy, relatively speaking, you just learn the language (eventually!) and you settle down and normalize. You know, when in Rome. You learn how the culture behaves, and you can become part of it; it's visible, it's tangible, and you can grab hold of it. There are some idioms, some things that are strange, but they can become familiar, because they can be named, measured, seen, understood. That's a very toolbox, clunky notion of language. I

---

consciousness. Both of which are suppressed by the conversion to modern human-egoic language of reason alone — the symbolic register.

<sup>14</sup> See Bhogal (2010, pp. 140–145) where religion is delineated as the specter of the secular West as well as a temporal marker of development that invents history (Hegel).

<sup>15</sup> Qualifications necessary to graduate from high school in the UK.

know language is much deeper than that. But because it can be named, we can convince ourselves that we've arrived in a home that we've invented.

Why does the dialectic continue from my understanding? The tension continues because we have to exist in both; the home beyond home can only exist through a language, in a place, in a geography, in a time. It has to exist. But we can never partake of it to such an extent that it loses its sense of homelessness or namelessness. That's the key point that becomes the religious narrative. So, I often start my class talking about this question of 'who is Balbinder Singh Bhogal?', or 'what's the difference between Balbinder and Balvinder?', that the difference is never resolved. If it were to be resolved, then you get a simplification, you get idol worship, you start to worship a particular language, a particular ethnicity, a particular culture, religion, place. I didn't realize that before. I thought you could make a shift. I thought home was familiar; that home should feel homely and comfortable. Not realizing that, actually, home as such an invention never exists. Every home that you have has its own problems, turbulence and strife, even when it's familiar. The notion of becoming familiar is largely manufactured, and we still have the necessity to find the home beyond home. The project isn't to leave the world into some kind of homelessness, literally, or even metaphorically. Let's say the project is to find homelessness *in* home. Like finding death-in-life (*jivan-mukta*) which is true living, where false living is in opposition and fear of death.

The theme of exile might be able to explain this a little better, which is also to do with migration and loss. Let's just take the biblical narrative, the Garden of Eden. They are expelled because they eat of the forbidden fruit of knowledge; the tree of good and evil, that's very symbolic. That's like a shift into language, from body into mind, of knowledge, judgment, right and wrong, good and evil, which is an exile from your body. Because now you're going to order your body to do 'this'. That theme of exile, of paradise being lost is about a paradise that's located in your body, and it's still there. It is an *affective* mode of communication, but we've stopped listening to it because we're being socialized by a particular need to survive. Once you have become settled, and you're beyond survival, and you can make choices, then certain things start to rise, like "Why would I do this? Why would I choose that? I don't need to do it, because there's no necessity, because I've got all the things that make my life comfortable. I'm beyond survival." I think midlife crises suddenly ask: "Where's your true home? Who are you really? What is your journey about?" I was set on exile right from the beginning, at three, exiled from a familiar home because my father was gone. And then I had to find my father. So, my coping strategy was to simply be a good boy. Because that's why dad's gone. He's angry. I had to be neat, tidy and successful, right? Then dad, God, will come back, right?

I became successful in the world, you could say. I managed to get a PhD and get a job. But at what cost? At the cost of my family, not seeing them as much as I perhaps would have liked, as much as they would have liked, certainly. Because I was always at work. I was always trying to

get my dad back — the being that was All to me. I was always trying to find God, the Father. So, the shift to the later awareness of exile, that I was actually *in* exile, that I was running, running away, trying to find him running... I didn't know that until much later in life, in my 30s. But there's no illusion, from my perspective now, to think "oh, I've got to leave America and go back to England because that's my home, or I've got to leave England, go back to Africa because that's where I was born. That's my real home." Or go back to the Punjab. I have no illusion that I could find a place in the world where I would not be at home. Because I've travelled so much. I've emigrated so much: Africa, England, Punjab, America, Canada. Having no place that is my one fixed home doesn't mean I'm perpetually lost; it means that I'm becoming more attuned in my interpretation of what life is really about: the impermanent, inadvertent, fortuitous, and tragic stitched into the gift of life. I have to make whatever home I have filled reflect the wisdom that comes from being homeless. Now, I don't want to sound trite and superficial. When I use the word 'homeless', I don't mean that as literal; I want to talk about the homelessness of the mind, and how the mind gets settled in a home too easily, too comfortably and gets addicted to certain neural pathways, and how being a stranger to that is a positive. I'm not saying everybody should become homeless, literally. I'm talking about not being fooled by linguistic, racial or geographical agendas.

I think this is not a religious or a philosophical question. It's an existential question we all have to face. Ludwig Wittgenstein says, 'Philosophy is a hammer against the bewitchment of my intelligence by means of language'. Philosophy is a tool to undo the bewitchment that language traps us in, that which language forces us to miss. It helps us to see things, but because of its labelling, it also starts to fix [reify] things. There's a misperception that if something hasn't been labelled, that we have to label it. This is answering your question about the tension, the dialectic. But we mustn't be fooled and make an idol of our language, of our labels. We have to be open to the unfamiliar, to strangers. And I think that's the earth speaking. How the earth, the body, keeps shattering our mental interpretations of what's going on. It keeps shattering us.<sup>16</sup> So whilst we have to listen to the external voice of culture, society, family, friends, peers, scholars, and educators, we don't have to listen singularly to those. I think there's a big mistake in just assuming that our language is sufficient.

There's *another* language, and that's the language of the body. That's our second task. We have to listen to that. Otherwise, I would have never have changed from engineering to philosophy, religion, if I didn't listen to that inner voice. My body kept the memory of my pain alive. And that pain forced me to address itself: "You're in pain. You're causing a lot of pain because of that, and they don't want to be hurt anymore, and you shouldn't be hurting yourself anymore." There's some kind of task that is necessary for you to do to heal yourself so that you're not

---

<sup>16</sup> See Bhogal, B. S. (2017). *What Mind does my Body Yearn?* [https://www.academia.edu/35495428/What\\_Mind\\_does\\_your\\_Body\\_Yearn](https://www.academia.edu/35495428/What_Mind_does_your_Body_Yearn)



abusing others and abusing yourself anymore'. That inner task, I think, doesn't get serious until much later in life for many people. And the task of hearing that inner voice is not easy, because the inner voice can be so easily colonized by language.

I constantly go back to the point about going to the *gurdwara*. This one point, I think, is important about discipline and religion, and just the rigmarole of it, which I was heavily critical of. That's why I left the turban thinking 'nobody knows what it means', and 'you're just going through the motions', 'it's empty ritual'. Guru Nanak criticizes empty rituals, with all the *janamsakhis* (biographies of Guru Nanak) and the verses in the Guru Granth Sahib itself. Once I started to learn them in my PhD, I was so critical against Sikhs, super critical. There was so much to criticize. One thing I totally missed, even with empty ritual, even with the 'mindless' repetition of the *kirtan*, the hymns, the *paath* (scripture), the prayers and the liturgy, is that there's an *affective* force of at play. The only thing that reminded me of the importance of that is once I'd been in exile, I cut my hair, I left, and I wouldn't feel at home in the deep sense. Sometimes I'd go to the *gurdwara*, and as soon as I'd enter, the *kirtan* would be playing, and I'd be in tears. What the hell is that about? It's not because I understood what they were saying. It was simply the musicality of it. The rhythm of the music; it spoke to me *very* deeply. That said to me "wait a minute, my critique of the Sikhs is too extreme." It needed to be adjusted to account for what I didn't have the language for at the time. But there was the vocabulary, the vocabulary of *affect*, and how that was something of a home. I felt like I was coming home when I'd go to the *gurdwara*, which is something I didn't expect. I wanted the intellectual, philosophical, home. But I never felt it there. Nobody, when they talked about Sikhi ever made me feel "oh, that's great." I just thought "this is Protestant Christianity. It's a mimesis of Protestant Christianity: monotheism, morality, modernity, rationalism, scientific dogma" (Bhogal 2010; 2014; 2015).

When I did the research, I found that's not what Sikhi says. So, I never felt at home with the philosophical exegesis and explanation. But without anybody saying anything, just going to the *gurdwara*, having the *langar* [free kitchen], and hearing the music in particular, my body would respond. You know, how you hear an old song and suddenly it takes you back to the environment and the memories? That's what was happening. There was an affective recollection of that which became alive when I returned to the *gurdwara*. Then I started to realize that there's a resonance that I needed to listen to. What is it about that feeling of coming home? Initially I thought "oh, it means to become a Sikh, take *amritshakh* (nectar)." But that wasn't what it meant. Coming home didn't mean coming home to a religion, coming home to Sikhi, at least for me. Coming home meant inner healing. I had to heal inner conflict and tension. It just so happens that if I was born in another tradition that had that musicality, I would have felt that that was the home. So that's not the real home. At the end of the day, culture is actually arbitrary, which is quite a disturbing reflection. But I think there's a level of maturity there. We still have to pitch our tent on the earth. Heidegger makes that distinction between world and earth, and how we have to keep trying to locate our thinking in our own bodies and *live* it, not just think it. We still have to do that. But we cannot make an idol of the language, the land, the culture.

**SD:** Going back to the distinction of how language can be used, at one end, like the logical positivists, naming things or trying to understand the world as it 'is', then post-structuralism at the other, that nothing is fixed, where does Sikhi, as a hermeneutical, sense making exercise, fit along that spectrum? There's *shabad guru*, where the word is deified, and the hermeneutical practice is different, right? At this stage of your journey, does Sikhi satisfy you as a hermeneutical exercise?

**BSB:** It's a great question. Because we have a similar understanding of the world and how to make sense of it, with critical theory, the Frankfurt School and Continental Philosophy, I find a brilliant vocabulary to be able to understand *gurbani*. You've hit the nail on the head there in terms of the point I was trying to make, and you're allowing me to now refine it. So, how is Sikhi sufficient enough to get me to the depot, to the 'real' home, given my critique of religion, and critique of the philosophical interpretive move that we have to make. Let me be clear I am critical of the process of religionization that created Sikh-ism, not *Gur-Sikh* Dharma (Bhogal, 2010; 2018).

I would say that, out of all the traditions, if I had to choose, Sikhi would be the one. It's not just because I was born a Sikh. That's really important because of the affective dimension, and my body carries the memory of the rhythms, the music, and so I have a sense of coming home there. But the home that we're talking about, I've already stated, is beyond language, beyond religion, beyond tradition, it's existential. And it's existential beyond survival. It's something that's to do with what in the Sikh tradition is the transition from *manmukh* (ego-centric) to *gurmukh* (liberated from ego), or in the Christian tradition 'to be born again'. There's a death that has to happen before you physically die. One needs to undergo a mental death and there has to be a decentering of the ego. So, in terms of that transition, whatever the preparatory ground is, is arbitrary. The important thing is to make the second transition. If we simplify and say there are two transitions in subjectivity: the first transition in subjectivity is from the affective body into the cognitive mind of culture, from nature to culture, from the semiotic to the symbolic, that's the first transition that everybody makes. That's very common. Everybody transitions into language, and then they make their home in their minds, in their language, but that's not the true home. According to religion, there's a second transition that needs to occur. But that transition is only achieved by a few. That's quite rare. Because that goes against culture, mind, tradition, the norm, family and so on. Sikhi is interesting because... I think we forget this about religions; religions are *ultra* radical. They're not just radical, they're ultra radical because they ask for the supreme sacrifice, and that's the sacrifice of the world, the mind; the world that is projected by the mind, the world that is projected by culture, the world that is projected and couched in language. Sikhi is asking for *shabad guru*. So *shabad guru*, the word as guru shows that language is like a sea, it has depth. If we look at the surface of language, at its most objective form, naming objects, classification, that's one side of language; the most gross side of language.

But then language has layers to it. Until you reach musicality, or poetry, or nonsense poetry of the gaggling of a baby, the rhythm of the heartbeat, and how just a single sound can speak to you. My brother learned the guitar and said, “I just played one note for about an hour and a half one day, because that note spoke me *so* much.” You can’t explain that. ‘Language’ as word can also exist at that level. So, there’s a depth to language that goes from an object that is named, to something that doesn’t exist in our naming. Chairs and tables exist in different languages, where they’re named differently. But then you go deeper until you get to the musicality of language. And then somehow, at some undetermined point, you get to *basically* the nondual nameless – which actually lies beyond the dualities of the mind, like gross and subtle, surface and depth – as language is the whole sea from surface to depth. You can use whichever tradition you like; you can use a non-religious tradition. You can use sports. Whatever it is, *this* is the structure of the universe. This is the structure of the existential conditions of life. We didn’t invent this; this is how it is. We realize whether through a religious tradition or not, any activity, if you follow it deeply enough, you get to the deeper layers of the musicality of language — its poetic affective pull on us until we get to the nameless, and that moment can reveal to you your true home. But that moment has to be expressed. Experience has to be expressed. And so, the dialectic continues. (‘Depth’ and ‘deeper layers’ might be misleading – the Word is the whole sea, what I really mean is depth of engagement, a deeper dwelling in the Heideggerian sense).

I think Sikhi is the most conscious tradition because it’s late, on the cusp of modernity, Martin Luther is Guru Nanak’s contemporary. In some sense, the Protestant Reformation is akin to what’s happening with Sikhi. It’s so conscious that ‘religion’ becomes an arbitrary vocabulary. We forget this. We’ve theologized it. It’s (Sikhi) not a ‘theology’. It’s not a monotheism. And we’ve used an outdated mode, a basically Christian mode of religious nomenclature to interpret it. In doing that, we’ve done an untold violence to the immense subtlety and complexity of *gurbani*, which has a secular and *atheistic* vocabulary in it. It uses *nibhaan* (liberation). I teach Buddhism at university and say, ‘the Buddha says, “there are loads of gods, countless gods, 31 dimensions of existence, countless gods, but there isn’t *one* god”’, which is wonderful, right? For me, this is wonderful. It’s not wonderful for the Abrahamic traditions, which want to make a claim that the Absolute Truth is that there is one God, and the Sikhs fell into this in the colonial conversion to modernity (see Bhogal 2015). But we have a much more subtle and refined point, which doesn’t reject this, but it puts it into the context of those Buddhists who say, there is no *one* God. So now you’ve got two traditions, let’s say, you’ve got the family of religious traditions that say, ‘there is one God and this is the Absolute Truth’. Then you’ve got the Buddhist and allied traditions that say, “there is no one God, but there are gods.” So now you’ve got a clear contradiction. How do you handle that? *This* is the starting point of Sikhi. Sikhi starts with aporia in the fact that everybody was opposed, because of idolization through language, whether scientific or religious, and mainly because at the time there were religious vocabularies that emerged from a field of opposed traditions, whether Buddhist or Hindu, ascetic or householder, religious or political. If it were today, Guru Nanak might see our use of science in

terms of idol worship. He'd be saying "look what you're doing! Your science should sing of the Nameless majesty of the universe, and not be reduced into named worlds of limited control. There is no mastery over life here. Be like Einstein, like how it was for those scientists for whom it was wondrous, and opened the universe up as something that was nameless". Darwin talked about an infinite intelligence in operation. He was astounded by that inherent intelligence in nature, that outstripped our thinking manyfold.

So, Sikhi isn't a religion, I argue, in the way that we think religion operates — (Sikhism is a noun tied to theory, whereas *GurSikhi* is a verb tied to praxis). Nor is it a science in the way that we think science operates. I would go so far as saying it is a true scientific religion. Not in a crass way like some say: "There's science in Islam. There's science in the Vedas. There's science in Sikhi." As though it were through naming and objectification that leads to Truth. Sikhi was the opposite move. It was the expression of the complexity of what we have, and that we can never get the full picture because language, or the Truth, has to go from the named to the nameless. That's where I find a great resonance with *gurbani*. If it was a 2,000 years old tradition, I would have come to some kind of limitation. But even if you look at those traditions that are millennia old, they balance themselves out. They realize that they've missed some things out. In the commentarial traditions, you've got Sufism, you've got Kabbala, you've got mystical dimensions that start to address the overreach; that which I like to call the idealization born of naming, and how language can calcify polarized positions or atrophy into cancerous mutations through language. Meister Eckhart says, "take me to the God beyond God." That's exactly the point. And so, Sikhi, I would say, is just returning to what we've actually always known, but through a pluriversal lens that emerges from the unresolved tensions and judgments *across* polarized traditions. We can't name the complexity of what we experience, of what we see outside or internally. And Sikhi is constantly returning to that, making humility foundational. It's got as much food for thought for the atheist as it has for the religious person, and that was a surprise to me. I thought, "oh, this is wonderful!" I didn't want to approach it as a monotheistic religion where you just bow down. I wanted to pursue it as an astute, apposite perspective on a complex and conflicted world that can be for anybody and everybody. It just so happens that Sikhi worked out that way for me, and doubly, that it was starting to resonate as the home beyond home.

**SD:** Fantastic. Going back to the importance of socio-political context, Punjab was fertile soil (pun intended) for the emergent Sikh tradition. Geographically, it's obviously at the intersection of South Asia, the Middle East, and all these different traditions you've mentioned: Sufism, Buddhism, especially in its migration towards China and further on. What importance do you place in Punjab in terms of Sikhi? And what connotations does Punjab have for you today?

**BSB:** It's a profound, difficult and deep question, and I'm still thinking about it. I think my understanding now (in 2022) is different to earlier understandings. When I first went to India – I

wasn't born there; I was born in Tanzania, Mwanza, but I was raised and grew up in England – it was a foreign place to me, and I was perceived as a foreigner. So, I thought Punjab *was* my home until I traveled there. I was fed up of being constricted by British racism and I wanted to find my true home. That's when I tried to think that you could name a true home, you could go to a true home, and then you could feel at home. But that's a really profound question: where is it that you feel at home? Not in a superficial sense, because even at home, people can be very alienated. Where do you feel is your true home? Initially, Punjab was that; it was my true home. As soon as I got there, everybody pointed out to me that I was a stranger, I was a foreigner, and who I took as my kith and kin, weren't so. I went visiting *mandhirs* and *gurdwaras*. At one place I'd left my shoes outside and entered this holy place with reverence. You know, "I'm home!" So, I'm doing all this bowing, wanting to feel home and become Indian, right? I then come outside of the temple and my slippers had been stolen! This is the nitty gritty, the imminent, the phenomenal existence, not the noumenal existence I was after. The phenomenal existence is quirky and strange. Even in the most sacred places there can be sin committed. I had the orientalist images of India as exotic, mystical, spiritual. I had to learn that Punjab is like any other place, and worse, because it *shouldn't* be like that, because it's 'mine'.

I realized that Punjab can be romanticized in a form of indigeneity that I actually started to grow a critical lens on. To reduce *gursikhi*, or Sikh *dharam* (religion), to Punjabiness, *Punjabiyyat*, is a mistake. But, to assume *Punjabiyyat* isn't a part of Sikhi is also a mistake – it's one of the many important strands within it. *Punjabiyyat*, the importance of the geography, as you mentioned, as the entry point into India, the intersection of many confluences of beautiful ideas and cultures first occurred in Punjab. The Buddhist universities are there in Taxila. That richness that enters the soil births Sikhi. I don't think it's an accident that Sikhi grew there. I think it's got the material conditions of history, of invasions and cultural exchange that allowed for this flowering to happen, perhaps *only* in Punjab, I don't know. But I want to take the importance of the material, give it its true weight. But to misunderstand Punjab as only sacred is also a mistake. You can't reduce Sikhi to that, because the gurus traveled constantly beyond Punjab. And the reason why they traveled beyond was *precisely* because people made the indigenous context their notion of *true* home. We all need homes, but in the deep sense that we're talking about, it's not often the case. You could still be alienated, you can still be exiled, we're all in exile. It's not just that Adam and Eve were exiled from paradise. That's the starting point of humanity, the human condition, all human beings begin in exile. They leave the mothership, they're born, and they're exiled from the mother's body. That's a metaphor for the earth, for land, for language, for culture, and then they have to learn anew. They can be nurtured into a particular language, but the true home of where they came from doesn't have a name. It doesn't have a geography and it doesn't have a particular language: *gurshabad*, the Word, is within all languages but is also beyond them all (as *anhad-shabad*). It's beyond space and time. We have to find it *in* space and time without making the mistake of assuming that once we find it, that we've found *it*, and tell other people about a *particular* place, a *particular* language. *Shabad* cannot be reduced to any

one language. That's why there's no conversion in Sikhi. That's why I like it. It's actually way ahead. I don't mean to say this in a self-applauding way, but it's just the context and time in which it occurred – it has the benefit of hindsight.

There's a beautiful *jamamsakhi* where Guru Nanak's traveling towards Sultanpur, Multan (in present day Pakistan, a stronghold of Sufis), and he comes to a village, and the 'saints' or *pirs* get earshot about his arrival. When Guru Nanak arrives, he's met by a messenger who informs him the 'saints' of the village are coming, and as they approach, they've got a copper bowl filled to the brim with milk, which they present to him. Guru Nanak immediately understands what this is about: the copper bowl is symbolic of the village, milk is symbolic of the purity that the saints manifest, the purity that others should have. And so, the copper bowl filled to the brim with milk signifies that there's no room in the village for him or any additional 'saints'. How does Guru Nanak respond? He could have just spilled the milk and said, "You're hypocrites. You're only interested in money." He could have just knocked it down. Or he could have thanked them and said, "well, you know, I'm the pure one." He doesn't do any of these. What he does instead is he gets a jasmine flower, which is foreign to that place, and he places it afloat without spilling a drop of milk. In other words, there is always room for the truth. His and Sikhi's arrival do not displace traditions or saints but add the fragrance of truth that all can forget. The Sufis recognize their error and come to meet Guru Nanak. We think our language or tradition can completely and fully name the Truth. It is not just that we should always be open to the fragrance of Truth via our traditions and languages, but also learn to discern it beyond our traditions and languages, for the Truth is a livingness, a lovingness, perpetually singing like time in all places. Sikhi isn't *the* Truth; Sikhi is its fragrance. And the fragrance can occur in any space and time. And that's how the nameless, symbolically, and analogically, can exist in the named. By acts like that. The saints get it straight away, and immediately recognize their limitations if not hubris. They realize, 'OK, this one's a real saint. He's not just a charlatan like us', and they bow down to him. So that kind of skillful means, if we use Buddhist vocabulary, is how the nameless can enter the named. It's basically efficacious actions and deeds.

The Guru Granth Sahib is about actions and deeds like that. How do we treat the stranger, the alien, the ostracized, the neglected, those outside of our vocabulary, outside of our geographic home? How do we give them a home? It's not by giving them the truth in a linguistic form of a cosmography, or tradition. Unlike Vedic culture that has a cosmography and says, 'this is a truth', or unlike Buddhism that has its own cosmography, or Abrahamic traditions, the Sikhs had already tired of this and said... The gurus would never say this, but I say this: "You've idolized your own vocabulary, and not realized that there isn't one version. You can't have a true culture as opposed to a false culture. Cultures aren't that kind of thing. Languages aren't that kind of thing." Each language can express the beauty of the diversity of life. That's why Nanak says be a Muslim but be a true Muslim. He doesn't say "follow me." That would be the idealization of his notion. He says, "find the name in your tradition, find the truth, be a true person." We could

summarize that by the Guru Granth Sahib, page 62. It says: “What is higher than truth? Truth is high. But what is higher than truth is the question, and it’s truthful living.” And here we get that shift to process philosophy, immanence, constantly updating our viewpoint, because it’s livingness that’s important, not naming. Livingness requires naming, there’s a dialectical tension again, but it has to be done with humility. Guru Nanak says, “those who say they know the Truth, know them as the greatest fools.” Paradoxically, contemporary science hasn’t got that humility. Science, in principle, is humble because it’s open to the greatest critique. So, you could say that science has an advantage over religious institutions that don’t get the critique strong enough. But even science has its problems of idolatry, as though ‘this’ is the only way to know. So, Guru Nanak says all epistemologies are limited, and we only get to know that when they’re brought together.<sup>17</sup> Nobody can fill a bowl full of milk and say ‘this is the Truth’. It’s not possible. The fragrance of truth can still arise. It’s so subtle. We can easily miss what’s really important because we’ve got all this wealth of treasures of tradition, of knowledge, of learning, of commentaries. But if we don’t listen to what the commentaries are *actually* saying... This is what Guru Nanak’s saying: “listen to your traditions, subtly, deep, and in your traditions, you will discover that you’ve already got the answers to many things; there’s a resource there.” But that can be easily missed. Sikhi never intended to set itself up as a rival tradition. It was so conscious about that, right from the very beginning, that it was inclusive of the other’s voice as part of its own at the very beginning. But it also realized that no one else is saying this, and its ‘thirdness’ beyond every duality, the middle way between polarized traditions, itself needed to become a tradition — the *tisar panth*, beyond the ‘competitive memories’ of Hindu and Muslim traditions, a tradition of traditions with a ‘multidirectional memory’ (Bhokal, 2013).

Just imagine, if you’re falling in love with somebody, the feeling of singing often displaces mere talk; we are dancing on the inside even when we walk and talk to them, as opposed to singing. The singing goes straight to the heart. That connected feeling is precious. In a way, when in love, we live musically, we are touched, moved. This peak of experience — where singing can bridge divides — is the core of Sikhi — (the Guru Granth Sahib is after all a scripture of more than 5000 hymns). Imagine then, calling the non-Sikh to sing those very hymns. What is most precious to Sikhs is that they allow the other to sing. This seems to suggest that what is most sacred to Sikhs is not the songs themselves but the resonance they bring across multiple peoples, places and grammars. Hence, the Sikhs allow a Muslim Rababi tradition to develop within and as an expression of an inclusive vision of their own tradition. It’s such a beautiful example of the teachings of the Gurus that it birthed and inspired this Muslim singing tradition. This was not an afterthought but originates from inception: we see by its musicality it would bring the song out of you. But then you get, say, a Muslim to sing, to aid you in that singing. It’s a really beautiful

---

<sup>17</sup> See forthcoming papers: Bhokal, B.S., ‘The Forbidden Turn: Contacting the Ontological Flooding of The Word as World’ (edited by Brianne Donaldson), and Bhokal, B.S., ‘Gur-Sikhi Beyond Indigeneity and Liberal Pluralism: Aporia and the Pluriversal’ (edited by Brian Black and Laurie Patton).

move that you get the most subtle heart being expressed by the foreigner — the Rababis that were eventually lost because of partition — but right from the beginning, Guru Nanak would have his Muslim companion and musician Mardana singing together with others, which, I think is a touching and beautiful move. To get access to what's most meaningful is to live and act musically. These songs are then not owned, but collectively shared across communities. That, right at the beginning of Sikhi is a critique of language, culture, place, geography. In short, all forms of identity politics — *na ko hindu, na ko musalman* (there is no Hindu, no Muslim). And the way to get access to what's most meaningful is to sing. That gets to the heart for most people, right?

Sikhs allow a Rababi tradition to develop. It's such a beautiful example of the teachings of the gurus. So Sikhi is, in a very beautiful way, a redevelopment, an extension, a beautiful evolution of the Buddhist Middle Way refracted through Sufi, Sahajiya, Nath and Bhakti traditions. This is so beautiful, so non-Vedic. Not a dry syncretistic philosophy to be pitched against others, but a new collective harmonic to give voice to those unable to sing — to inspire and uplift a heterogeneous people into a new resonance, a true assembly (*sat-sangat*). You could argue that the Vedic culture lost this, if it had it in the first place, perhaps in select. The Vedic culture did have this in various Upanishads, but they lost it when Brahminism became a structure of power, hierarchy, naming, ordering and owning. So, it's not so much the theology that we Sikhs get from India, from Brahmanism, or Vaishnavism. It's the Buddhist dialectical critique of language itself away from divine languages (Sanskrit, Arabic) and embracing the vernaculars. The Buddhist Middle Way is reinvented by Guru Nanak by saying any metaphysics is fine if underpinned by humility, the mark of the Unnamable. We have a critique of metaphysics important to Post-structural and Continental Philosophy, but I think Guru Nanak reminds us earlier on that metaphysics is deeply problematic if you start to idolize. You can't just say *difference, difference*. You've got to be constructive. I know it's a bit of a crass critique of deconstruction to talk about construction. I don't mean this in a simplistic way. In a way Guru Nanak was open to multiple metaphysics, multiple cosmologies. That's a new idea. That's a cosmopolitanism where a multidirectional memory is forged. That's a new definition of the human that challenges Enlightenment, European man's competitive and exclusive memory. We've hitherto assumed that the highest bar of civilization and liberalism is the French Revolution, the American Revolution, European Enlightenment. We've underestimated Guru Nanak and that whole tradition immensely. We're doing it an immense disservice by preferring Western models, as somehow universal levels of achievement of civilization. It's that we [Sikhs] have a vision of the future of what it means to be a human being beyond yours, because yours [Western Europeans], finally, and ultimately, always rests on the division; the division between friend and enemy (as Carl Schmitt notes in the public and social space analysis). Whereas Guru Nanak says, "so long as you think that there is an enemy, and there is a friend, so long will your mind not come to rest."<sup>18</sup> And so we're never at rest, we never can find our home — because we

---

<sup>18</sup> "*Jabb dhaarai koyu bairee meet; tabb lagu nihachal naahee cheet*" (GGS, p. 278).



don't make That One our home. What Guru Nanak was saying is that there is a home that is beyond the realm of friend and enemy, it is the friend-friend (*sajan-miit*).<sup>19</sup> If your home is always defined "well, here's the friend, this is our home, the enemy is beyond this," then that's not the true home. There is a home beyond friend and enemy. That's a new definition of human being, a redefinition of sovereignty along lines of a friend-friend model. There's so much there in terms of a new middle way. I think it's the vocabulary of the pluriversal that starts to speak to a new sovereignty, and what the Sikh tradition actually brings into play. That tradition got totally devastated by partition, by the 1980s and the fight for our rights and how we were treated as terrorists, and absolutely brutalized and traumatized for generations. The genocide that happened with the Delhi pogroms, and all of the operations that the Indian government undertook actually pushed some of us towards a critical reading of religion, as though religion is what we were. But that was a false coat, a false colonial-Christian straitjacket.

**SD:** So, Sikhi, in the manner you articulate, is a very modern socio-political response, that combines both the mystical and material, as a middle way to negotiate different tensions? So, for you as a contemporary professor at a neoliberal institution in the United States, having such a rich fund of epistemic, along with experiential, prelinguistic knowledge as well... you're paid a wage to work to develop these ideas, but at the same time are up against a lot of the tensions and the problems that will be antithetical to your ideals. How do you then negotiate this space, being who you are?

**BSB:** The short answer is through failure. It's almost impossible not to be complicit in systems of violence, oppression, exploitation. We live in a neoliberal capitalist state that basically rapes the 'Third World' to feed the 'First World' and create new markets. Neoliberal capitalism is ripe for critique in terms of the devastating increasing gap between rich and poor, and growing impoverishment everywhere. You've even got Americans experiencing conditions that used to only exist in the colonies. Capital has no truck with going anywhere it needs to in order to expand its profit. It's not that I'm necessarily against capital, though. It's just that to answer your question, I'm complicit in these various structures. If Sikhi isn't an otherworldly mysticism, as we both recognize, that it's more of a worldly mysticism, political mysticism, then we have to negotiate these conditions, and ensure that our deeds are not only attuned to self-awakening, but also attuned to liberating others from oppression.

I have a platform upon which I can set an agenda, in which the principles that Sikhi operates by can at least get some kind of voice. So how does that happen in practice? Well, meet the stranger. Face injustice with the stranger. Listen to the narrative that's opposing yours and engage with others. But then Sikhi in the academy is constructed as a 'religion.' So, for me to be

---

<sup>19</sup> "*Ik sajan sabh sajanaa ik vairee sabhi vaadi*" (GGS, p. 957): "When I take the One as Friend, then I look upon all as my friends; but when I take the One as enemy, then conflicts with all ensue."

true to the principles of what I've now found out, I have to break disciplinary boundaries, and explore Sikhi from the lens of sociology, psychology, psychotherapy, anthropology, and realize that the theme of the pluriversal is important in terms of having an interdisciplinary, multiple vocabulary.

One of the things Guru Nanak realized was that you can't speak the Truth, yet you can't not try. So, like the Dao De Ching, "the name that can be named is not the name; the *dao* that can be followed is not the *dao*." The Guru Granth Sahib begins with that right from the *mool mantar* (essential teaching): "*soche soch na hoye je soche lakh vaar*;"<sup>20</sup> no matter how many times you try to gain ritual purity, or to think the Truth, you can't get clean, or it can't be thought – the *way* can't be thought. But then there are 1,430 pages that follow, there's a necessity to still try, but 'under erasure'; in effect, with all humility! But the way you try now is not naive. You can name the truth and own a cosmography, and then tell everybody else about it as though it is the only true one, but that sidesteps the complexity of diverse cosmographies. These 1,430 pages, in this context is of the pluriversal, is unlike the universal top down; the pluriversal is bottom up. And that means the pluralization of centers of authority. So, the Mexicans, the Japanese, they're centers of authority with their diverse narratives. They're naturally creative, they have their own cultural expressions, and they have perspectives that are rich and valuable. So, Guru Nanak began with a higher, more human, more sophisticated, more cosmopolitan, more modern decolonial notion of the pluriversal, as opposed to an outdated mode of the universal, which is always one language, one culture dominating others and getting them to convert to believe that.

Now you could say science is some kind of universal language. And that's a slightly separate debate we could get into. But his [Nanak's] beginning was awareness of *many*, and that being natural and good. In other words, a friend: friend — friend. That's a very different model from friend — enemy. If you're beginning with friend — enemy, then you say: 'well, we've got the truth, and they haven't'. And then there's conversion. But if your beginning is friend — friend, then you say, 'well, your vocabulary is as beautiful as ours'! In other words, you could that Sikhi isn't a vocabulary; Sikhi is the space in which vocabularies can actually live with each other. It's a vision of inter-relational harmony, cosmologically, philosophically, ethically. And that's why *langar* (free kitchen) is open, and the Harmandir Sahib has the four doors... it's inherently there from its inception, not as an afterthought like in Christianity, showing how you embrace other traditions. *From its inception*, it's aware of the other as necessary, as essential for my being. "I can only be because of you and your difference." This is what the baby forgets; the baby can only 'be' because of the mother. The other, the alien, the essential, which wasn't alien in the beginning, right, because in the mother's womb, that's symbolic of being united there with God, that's not alien. When we're born, only then the mother becomes alien, other.<sup>21</sup> And then we think, "well, you know, religion is alien. How do we come back?" Because we're coming

---

<sup>20</sup> GGS, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> See GGS, pp. 74–75.

back to it as named, not as the nameless. That's the issue there. And so, that exile of coming back to the mother is an experience that is existential. This is why Sikhi is so close to Buddhism; Buddhism returns to an existential conditionality of old age, disease and death. Then there's Nirvana, and Nirvana is open to *all* beings. Because all beings are open to suffering in old age, disease and death. It's the same move that Guru Nanak makes. We're all beings that suffer, and there is this second transition in subjectivity from *manmukh* to *gurmukh*, from lay person to *arhat* to or *bodhisattva*. There's a transition that needs to happen. But that home doesn't have a vocabulary. And it doesn't exclude any vocabulary. That's a bit Guru Nanak adds; he adds a pluriversal awareness of *ek* –, *anekh*: one – and many. Literally: One – and *not* one. *Ek, anekh*; one – all.

In other words, that's why Sikhi isn't monotheistic; it's a living of oneness that is open to atheism. It can *use* monotheism, it *has* theism: Hari, Ram, Allah, Khudha. It has the theistic vocabulary, but it also has Sunn, Samadh, Shiv Shakti, Tantric, and Nibhaan, Buddhist, non-theistic vocabulary. So, Sikhi is the space in which a *true* cosmopolitanism — I hate that term, it should be something else — a true *pluriversalism*, can occur. It's the space in which the gurus demonstrate: “don't convert to what we say. Find the truth in your own traditions. You can become a Sikh if you want. The doors are open. But all the truth that you need to discover is in you. Don't convert to what we say.”

Whether you know about Sikhi or not, you can still discover that. It's about paying attention. So, there are no sophisticated and arcane or esoteric mantras or rituals. What do the Sikhs say? ‘*Suniaie, maniaie, man keetha bhao*’: listen, then if you hear the truth, and you think “OK, I should really do this,” then obey, accept, and then do ‘it’ through loving devotion. That's available to everybody. Compassion? Anybody can be kind. This is what it says constantly: “Let *mercy* be your mosque, *faith* your prayer-mat, and *honest living* your Koran.”<sup>22</sup> “Make compassion and loving kindness your way.” It keeps going to values shared, the universals, in all the traditions. So, there's no point in having all the paraphernalia of a tradition if you forget the basics of the virtues — “without virtue there is no devotion.”<sup>23</sup> And it keeps returning to that. Sikhi is based on universal, pluriversal human ‘inter-species’ values, but they're not humanistic. Because humanism is defined as a critique of religion from a secular rationality, which is an exclusionary and hierarchical system. Sikhi pointed out trans-humanistic values beyond ownership by a particular epistemological formation or group, whether it's science or religion. The gurus are sort of saying: “You Brahmins or Yogis can't monopolize the truth – even an ant can teach you how to live; it's not only dependent upon your arcane, esoteric rituals – for it involves an unwritable order and intelligence (*hukam*) that all beings are subject to. It's open to the householder not just the ascetic, and all species live under this intelligence, attuned or not.”

<sup>22</sup> “*mihar masiit sidak musalaa hak halaal kuraan*” (GGS, p. 140).

<sup>23</sup> “*vinu guna kite bhagati na hoi*” (GGS, p. 4).

But there *is* a second transition (for those not attuned), a need for transformation, and you need to enact some discipline to get there.

**SD:** The critique of certain ritualized traditions brings to mind Krishnamurti's idea that 'truth is a pathless land'. But there's a paradox, isn't there? Whilst the path isn't linear or clear in a toolbox manner, there are still inklings or traces when the 'truth' speaks to you? There are inclinations to be certain ways, but these are not because of ordained disciplines.

**BSB:** One thing that connects the two, the paradox, in my perspective, is on the one hand no religious tradition is without discipline; all of them have discipline, but none can claim complete ability to predict every part of the 'way', because truth is a pathless land. It takes a circuitous route, and it happens in moments you least expect etc. But what connects Krishnamurti's 'truth is the pathless land' to those who have a path is discipline. What I'm trying to say is that discipline shouldn't be simply reduced to a path. So how do I connect 'truth is a pathless land' to a path? I think Guru Nanak provides that. He says discipline has to be reinvented. You can't just say, "I know I have issues, but I'm never going to look at myself." You have to pay attention. You have to make an effort. But what is the effort? Discipline is being reinvented. Not in the old ways of "I'm part of a badge wearing club." Or saying now "I believe Jesus died on the cross for all human sins and now I've just got to go to church." No, it's not just a matter of a cognitive belief. It's a matter of embodied living, carrying the cross. Even then 'it's' not guaranteed. This is Krishnamurti's point: truth is a pathless land. Nobody can own that path that will tell you *the* way because you have to live, walk that path yourself — no one can do it for you. However, that path will never ever appear if you don't make an effort; each individual walks a unique path, saying no two paths are the same is another way to approach this pathless path, which has no fixed destination.

At some unexpected moment along your effort, it will burst through, but it will burst through violently. I say to my students, 'when you first take a drag of a cigarette, you cough. Your body basically says to you, "stop, this is poisonous. Do not do this, but you continue because you have a cognitive idea of being cool, or whatever, right? But your body is constantly speaking. Now you can ignore that body's voice only for so long, or to such an extent that you get addicted to the cigarettes, and then your body starts to yearn them, your body starts to tremble when you don't have them. Because you've forced your body to gain that habituation. It's only after rehab, some disciplined deconditioning, before the true voice of the body may begin to arise again.'" So, we've sullied even the body's voice by our mental fixations and delusions over time. That's a deep issue. I don't think you can fully extinguish the body's voice. It can always return. Like a plant that can be brought back to life, as dead as it may seem. It's the nature of existence itself. Nature wants to blossom. Your body wants to blossom into full awakening, but we keep stopping it. So, the discipline is listening to that blossoming, that attempt to blossom. Guru Nanak defines God as that: "*sahib mera nit naava sadha sadha daataro*: my master is forever fresh, ever new,

may I never forget him, the Giver forever and ever.”<sup>24</sup> So that ever freshness, ever newness, is not a metaphysics, but it can't ignore metaphysics in its expression. We have to say what's happening to us, however poorly.

So, the pathlessness, like my own journey, is just about moments of life. Meetings. And in those meetings, you suddenly get a shock, an insight. For example, I wouldn't have ended up in university if I hadn't met four particular men. These four really important men. Randomly, all of them. One of them was even a stranger that hardly knew me! I didn't know that I could make the transition from doing the equations of maths and engineering to writing essays. I hadn't done that before. I'd failed my English four times, and this guy says, “of course you can. You can do it.” Nobody had said that in such a nonchalant way. He was like, “why are you even doubting?” He was that confident in me, he could say it that flippantly. He didn't say “you can do it if you try hard and put your mind to it.” He simply said, “of course you can!” The way he said it suddenly lit a fire in me. What is that? That's not religion. What are those moments where just a simple sentence can speak to you so deeply? This is what Guru Nanak calls '*sunie*' [listen]. Your parents tell you to listen. That's the first lesson: 'you're not listening' they say repeatedly. That's the spiritual lesson. It's just listening, nothing more. It's not a sacred listening or mystical listening or esoteric listening, where you have to be in a lotus position, chant 'Om' and be so quiet that you hear the rhythm of the universe in your mind! It's nothing like that at all. It's existential and practical. For example, listening to your partner shouting at you, because you haven't heard what they've been saying for the past ten years! And then suddenly you get it and think “oh, OK – sorry for being so pig-headed about this!”

Truth is a pathless land because it's always there. It's always speaking, through your garbage collector, professor, enemy. It's always speaking to us. Nature is always speaking to us. Life is always speaking. That's *gur shabad*. *Sat guru*: the true guru is not a named person. It's not a particular language. It's life speaking back to us through all languages, deeds, and events. The fundamental root, like in Buddhism, is actions: being alive to life as it unfolds without reacting but responding. Your deeds set the tone of that voice. Garbage in, garbage out, right?

The way you're acting in the world is what conditions the tone of that voice. The voice will always speak, your body will always speak, and it's these spontaneous interactions that affect you profoundly. How do we explain this? It's the coming together of certain sensitivities. So, I think that's what connects the truth is a pathless land, to truth *is* a path.<sup>25</sup> Guru Nanak's was a middle way. The reinvention of the middle way was to be open to the truth in whatever form it comes. In fact, becoming open to the truth in every form. For example, Guru Arjan's being burned alive on a hot plate and saying, “how sweet is thy will.” This is why you can't pick and

---

<sup>24</sup> “sahib meraa niit navaa sadaa sadaa daataar” (GGS, p. 660)

<sup>25</sup> Another vocabulary that can be used to express this is the contrast between a 'silence of obedience' versus a 'silence of expectation' (Bhogal, 2007).

choose the voice that's going to resonate deeply within you: "I want it to occur through my loving partner or through a friend." No. It might be the person that challenges you the most.

It's not that it's all random, and merely a strange hotchpotch of events that make no sense, though. Many of us who have our basic needs met might still say, 'my life has been so painful, full of so much suffering. But I wouldn't change it'. Why they say they wouldn't change it is maybe because the lessons that they learned through the suffering were valuable — rather than the suffering itself — which would have not been learned any other way, in terms of a mature interpretation of what life is. I think there's something about the futility of short cuts. Somebody asked me: 'how can you have a theory of action, as well as the theory of grace'? It's a matter of direction. Because when we're acting, we think we're making all the choices. On the one hand, Guru Nanak says 'you reap what you sow'. Whereas on the other hand, he says 'the greatest delusion is to believe that you're making a difference', when in actuality it's all grace. You have this in Islam, Christianity, in the dialectic between grace and works. You have it in the Guru Granth Sahib. There is a really important reason why we have it in these multiple traditions, which is the resonance, the pluriversal that Guru Nanak returns to. The reason why we have both 'you reap what you sow' and then actually 'you don't do anything because God does everything' is a matter of direction, a matter of time. Because when you're looking forward: 'should I do this or that', you think it's your decisions, your actions that are so important, that make all the difference. You just have to look back ten years, in that direction, and you start to realize 'if I hadn't met this person, I wouldn't even have been able to think about how to choose this way or that way. And if I hadn't had this kind of experience...'. You start to see the broader, not just individual, context. You start to see family relations, feuds, flowers, lightning, summer, sunsets, chance meetings, terrible mistakes and forgiveness, an endless list of happenings, all these sorts of things come into view. *Forward*, it's the actions of the self. *Backwards*, it's the grace of the Other.

How do we ever make a decision, anyway? Making decisions is a sort of mercurial process. I think that one of the downsides of Kant's 'dare to think' (*sapere aude*) (Kant, 1996, p. 17), to become 'modern', and basically critical of religion, to consider it as somehow childish... One of the problems of moving religion away from the public sphere into the private sphere, and the rise of the individual, is precisely that it only looks forward, with the self as sole actor. It forgets the grace, the blessings of others. 'How did I even get here'? Once all of *those* kinds of thoughts start to come into play, then you realize that thinking is just the tip of the iceberg, of an affective process of relations and data flows.

**SD:** There is a thread running through that response which leads me nicely to my next provocation! Knowing that your actions, attunement, and values will inform your relationships, where do you think you're at in terms of your wider relationships with family? Do you feel like you've figured out how to negotiate these dances?

**BSB:** Whilst it might make a lot of sense to me, from the outside, my mother probably often thought ‘what the hell? You’re an idiot! Are you going to keep a turban or not? Which is it? Make a decision’! Often the perspective from family members was that I was confused. Their mode of assessing what Sikhi is, I would argue, was perhaps largely due to the Singh Sabha reform period and the creation of *Sikhism*, as a mimesis of Protestant Christianity. Therefore, religion is a certain kind of thing, that you have to make a decision about, and do this and that. That’s not entirely fair on them [family]. They have deeper perceptions, of course. Perhaps most of us are in a perpetual state of confusion and tension, out of place and trying to just live and get on. It’s not an easy thing to do. So, you could say that all this knowledge that I have, of Sikhi, the sophisticated nature of it, and all the relationships mean nothing if I’m not able to manifest it, live it and walk these truths. That’s a tall order for any of us to do. I’m like your average Joe Bloggs, in this regard! I have my family issues and misunderstandings.

But one thing I hope is that my family members do appreciate that I’m open to different expressions. I’m open to different ways of being. My sons are both clean shaven, and I never fixed a notion of religion on them. I left it on them to find and discover for themselves – that could be a grave error. You could say I’m living my principles there. Others might say I’m not because I’ve misunderstood what Sikhi is, that it’s structured and foundational, and that you have to build it, and later a sophistication may come, but without that initial discipline of struggle it’s going to be hard to enact that later. I have a certain amount of resonance and agreement with that as well. But it’s too late in the day to enforce those basics, because they’re adults now. So maybe I should have been more forceful and directive, but I have a marriage that is non-traditional. It wasn’t a Sikh marriage. My partner isn’t a Sikh, and so to simply impose my views, and ignore her religious and Christian Quaker context... that’s a difficult one.

I’ve tried to focus on the values, and the virtues, which are often modelled rather than named everywhere. As long as those are being cultivated, to be a good person, generally, I think that’s a solid foundation. I don’t think it’s sufficient for the second transition in subjectivity, though. Foundations are important, but there has to be a discipline to transmute, to do the work of systematically committed listening. That sounds ridiculous, I know. What I mean to say is paying more attention to life around you, how it happens and having the discipline to listen. So that’s why you don’t take intoxicants, for example. When you’re intoxicated, you can’t listen. So do those things that allow you to be present. It’s tough but work hard and sleep well. Making an honest living is very important. Have integrity in your life, it’s very important. Because nothing clouds the mind more than a lack of integrity and a guilty conscience.

How do you get free of a guilty conscience? By living a clean, hard-working life and listening to the structures of what is. What’s required to be able to just listen is already in the lifeworld. That’s what Guru Nanak was talking about. The disciplined life in which listening can occur and

listening to the divine in the other person. It's not a cliché. It's about how God, the divine, can be so different to you, because it's in a different being, a different form, and so that voice is different. Guru Nanak, Guru Angad, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das, Guru Arjan, Guru Tegh Bahadur, those six gurus are *so* different. They're different vehicles, different vocabularies. Guru Gobind Singh with his Dasam Granth and the liturgies are from a very different voice. When you say 'the God in others', we don't know what the God is in others. That's the fragrance, the unnamable, and the unnamable always appears in the world with *intense* creativity and radicalism. Jesus upsets Jews. He's a Jew and upsets them to such an extent that Christianity is born. But he's a Jew, reinventing Judaism. And this constantly happens. The Buddha is a Hindu. So, it's really radical. The second transition, awakening, the decentering of the ego such that a new language is spoken, or that language is experienced from a different perspective than the ego — ego no longer colonizes language — when that occurs, when language starts to enter when the ego isn't the center, that's called Revelation. *That's* what listening is.

Let me just start again. I say to my students "take the phrase 'I love you'. I think to be more accurate it should be: 'I can't love you'. That's a statement. 'I can't love you'". And I ask them, "why?" Because they mostly think that's what life's all about: a loving partner, 'I want to love somebody', 'I love you', and I'm saying, 'I can't love you'. In fact, I would say that *I* cannot love. The ego cannot love. The ego is self-listening, self-interested, self-centered. The ego is pleasure over pain if you like; it's always going to maximize that. That's a form of non-listening. *Listening* is when the ego disappears. A child has that. The way they are absorbed by something is not because they're ego driven, but because the ego is not there. They are fully absorbed, paying full attention, because their psychic structure hasn't formed that ego center yet. Adults find it hard to listen because they always listen from the (false) center of the ego.

Loving somebody is the greatest way to realize that the center of the ego is BS, full of BS. Just try and love somebody. Because love can only arise when the ego dissolves. A loving relation then arises. So '*I cannot love*' also means '*I cannot listen*'. This is the wisdom of the East, that listening can only arise when the 'I' subsides. *Chitta vritthi nirodha* [quieten the fluctuations of conscious thoughts] is how the Patanjali's Yoga Sutra begins, which is opposite to Descartes, who says 'I think therefore I am'., and grounds the European, egoic, sense of self; ego as the moment of greatest truth, even though he has God operating in the background. But with *Chitta vritthi nirodha*, true knowledge begins when thoughts subside, or when thoughts are no longer the center, but feeling is. Sikhs don't practice that kind of yogic meditation in the literal sense, but the tradition of meditation, *dhyaan*, is there. We need to recover *dhyaan*, *chang* in Chinese, *zen* in Japanese, *seon* in Korean, there's a whole South and East Asian tradition where subjectivity is recognized as the problem, and needs to be disciplined, transformed. Why reduce subjectivity to the I? Consciousness is greater than the I. And if you start to listen beyond that I, that's *real* listening. That's what *kirtan* is. Mainly it's an affective revolution. Again, it's about moving away from the mental structure to the feeling structure, which is much more vast. The



mental structure is semiotic language. Feeling is language+! It's the affective realm of musicality. So, when you ask, 'how do others perceive me?', hopefully they can see that I'm open to different expressions of being religious, or being a good person. But I think some of them are perhaps confused as I'm not a 'typical' Sikh, and, because these kinds of conversations don't happen generally – life's too busy and people have to make decisions! ... It's a very tall order to be a being of integrity, and I think most of us, most of the time, fail at that. I can't say that simply because I know these ideas that there's some kind of dramatic difference in my life, to the extent that I'm some sort of role model beyond all others. I might be a hypocrite for all I know, right?

**SD:** Thank you so much for your time, Balbinder.

### **Authors**

**Dr. Balbinder S. Bhogal** ([balbinder.bhogal@hofstra.edu](mailto:balbinder.bhogal@hofstra.edu)) is the Sardarni Kuljit Kaur Bindra Chair in Sikh Studies at Hofstra University, New York. Dr. Bhogal was previously associate professor in South Asian religions and cultures, Division of Humanities, Faculty of Arts at York University in Toronto. He received his PhD from London University, School of Oriental and African Studies, 2001, and his BA (hons) from Lancaster University. He has served as a professor in departments of religion, philosophy and humanities in universities in England, the United States and Canada. Dr. Bhogal's interests include South Asian religions and cultures, specializing in Sikh Studies, particularly the philosophy and critical interpretation of the Guru Granth Sahib; the relationship and interaction between Indian philosophy and Western/Continental philosophy; and the study of mysticism, orientalist and decolonial discourses.

**Dr. Sunny Dhillon** ([sunny.dhillon@bishopg.ac.uk](mailto:sunny.dhillon@bishopg.ac.uk)) is a Senior Lecturer in Education Studies at Bishop Grosseteste University (BGU), Lincoln, UK. Sunny conducted his doctoral research through the Philosophy department at Cardiff University, focusing upon the concept of Utopia. Sunny's research interests include Critical Theory (The Frankfurt School), Nietzsche, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Utopia, and Philosophy of Education.

### **Acknowledgements**

As part of the Sikh Panjabi Scholars in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences project, I sincerely thank the participants listed below for their generosity of time and sharing, and for putting their trust in me. In order of surname, thank you to:

Dr. Priya Atwal (Community History Fellow, University of Oxford)

Prof. Parminder K. Bhachu (Professor of Anthropology, Clark University)

Dr. Balbinder S. Bhogal (Sardarni Kuljit Kaur Bindra Chair in Sikh Studies, Hofstra University)

Prof. Gurminder K. Bhogal (Catherine Mills Davis Professor of Music, Wellesley College)

Prof. Jaswinder K. Dhillon (Professor of Education, University of Worcester)

Prof. Virinder S. Kalra (Professor of Sociology, University of Warwick)

Dr. prabhdeep s. kehal (Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Wisconsin-Madison)

Prof. Gurnam Singh (Assoc. Prof. of Sociology (Hon.), University of Warwick. Visiting Fellow, Race and Education, University of the Arts, London. Visiting Prof. of Social Work, University of Chester).

Dr. Jasjit Singh (Associate Professor in the School of Philosophy, Religion and the History of Science, University of Leeds).

Sukhraj Singh (Sikh Archivist, Independent Scholar based in Denmark)

Dr. Opinderjit K. Takhar (Associate Professor of Sikh Studies, University of Wolverhampton)

Prof. Pippa Virdee (Reader in Modern South Asian History, De Montfort University)

## References

- Bhogal, B. S. (2007, April 21). *How to Hear God's Multiple Voices: silence of obedience and expectation* [Conference session]. Amaltas Hall, Habitat World, Delhi, India.
- Bhogal, B. S. (2010). Decolonizations: Cleaving Gestures that Refuse the Alien Call for Identity Politics. *Religions of South Asia*, 4(2), 135–164. <https://doi.org/10.1558/rosa.v4i2.135>
- Bhogal, B. S. (2011). Monopolizing Violence before and after 1984: Governmental Law and the People's Passion. *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory*, (7)1, 57–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448727.2011.561611>
- Bhogal, B. S. (2012). The Animal Sublime: Rethinking the Sikh Mystical Body. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 80(4), 856–908. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfs035>
- Bhogal, B. S. (2013, April 5-7). *To be or not to be Violent: Colonial Modernity, Memory and Gur-Sikhi* [Conference session]. The 38th Spalding Symposium on Indian Religions on Peacebuilding, Conflict & Non-Violence in Indian Religions, Merton College, University of Oxford.
- Bhogal, B. S. (2014). Postcolonial and Postmodern Perspectives on Sikhism. In P. Singh & L. Fenech (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook in Sikh Studies* (pp.282–297). Oxford University Press.
- Bhogal, B. S. (2015). The Facts of Colonial Modernity & the Story of Sikhism. *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory*, 11(1–2), 243–265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448727.2015.1038120>
- Bhogal, B. S (2017) *What Mind does your Body Yearn?* [https://www.academia.edu/35495428/What\\_Mind\\_does\\_your\\_Body\\_Yearn](https://www.academia.edu/35495428/What_Mind_does_your_Body_Yearn)
- Bhogal, B. S. (2018). Gur-Sikh Dharam. In P. Bilimoria (Ed.), *History of Indian Philosophy* (pp. 487–495). Routledge.
- Bhogal, B. S. (2021). Undressing Political Theology for an Animal-Saint Redress. In C. Crockett & C. Keller (Eds.), *Political Theology on Edge: Ruptures of Justice and Belief in the Anthropocene* (pp. 183–213). Fordham University Press.

- Bhopal, R. (2004). Glossary of terms relating to ethnicity and race: for reflection and debate. *J Epidemiol Community Health*, 58(6), 441–445. <https://doi.org/10.1136/jech.2003.013466>.
- British Sikh Report. (2020). *An Insight into the British Sikh Community*. <https://britishsikhreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/British-Sikh-Report-2020.pdf>
- Derrida, J. (2002). *Acts of religion* (G. Anidjar, Ed. & Trans.). Routledge.
- Gonzalez, N., Moll, L.C., & Amanti, C. (Eds.). (2005). *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Kant, I. (1996). *Practical Philosophy. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (M. J. Gregor, Ed. & Trans.). Cambridge University Press.
- Tariq, M. & Syed, J. (2017). Intersectionality at Work: South Asian Muslim Women’s Experiences of Employment and Leadership in the United Kingdom. *Sex Roles*, 77, 510-522. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0741-3>
- Todd, S. (2018). Foreword, *Irish Educational Studies*, 37(2), 149–151, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2018.1475148>.