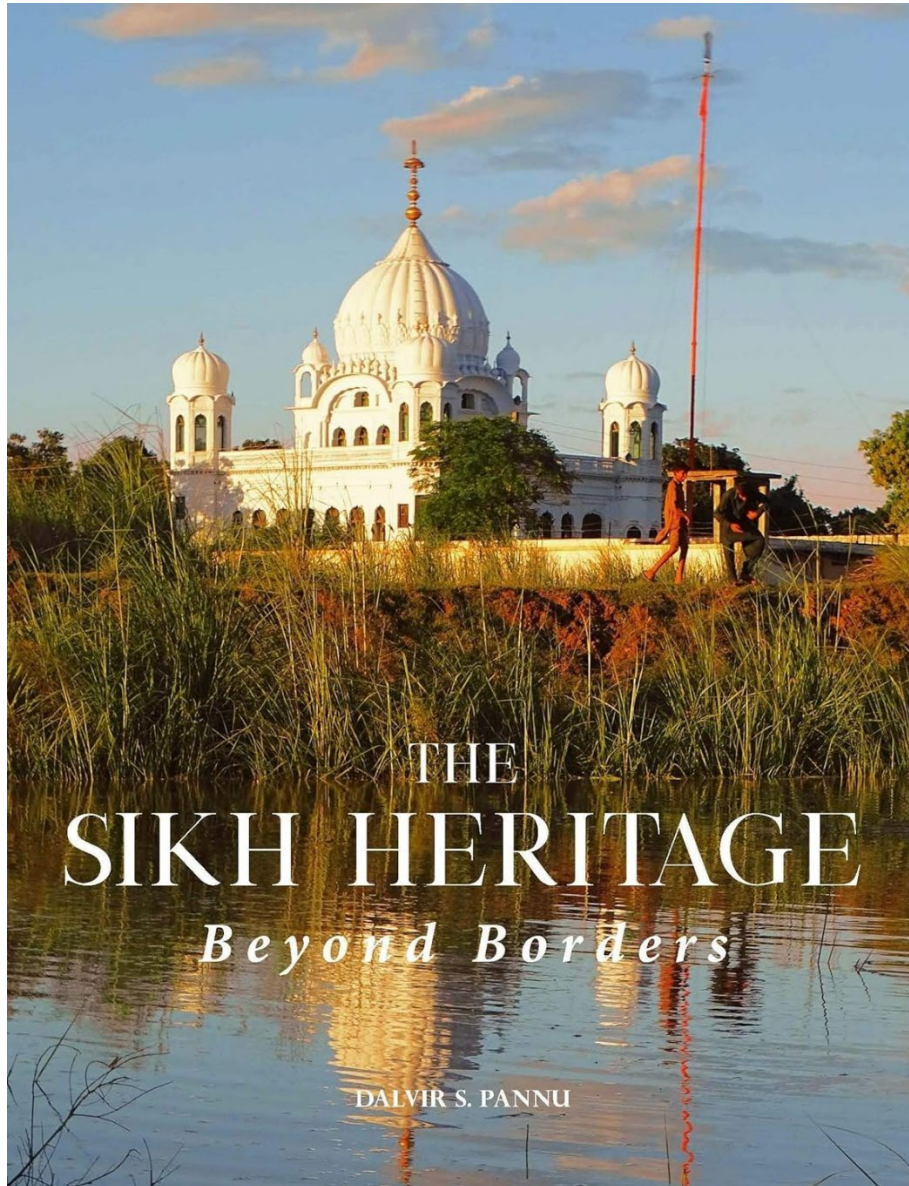


Book review: The Sikh Heritage: Beyond Borders by Dalvir S. Pannu

Review by: Adfer Rashid Shah, Aamir Habib, Shrishti Singh, and Zuberiya Nauman



The Sikh Heritage: Beyond Borders, 1800-1947

Author: Dalvir S. Pannu

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Dalvir S. Pannu's book, *The Sikh Heritage: Beyond Borders*, which took him eleven years to complete, sheds light on how Sikhs and their faith bore the brunt of the aftermath of the Partition. This book builds upon the foundational work of architecture specialists such as Samia Karamat, whose *Architecture of Sikh Shrines and Gurudwaras in Pakistan* provides a noteworthy contribution to the field, and Amardeep Singh, whose *Lost Heritage: The Sikh Legacy in Pakistan* and its subsequent volume, *The Quest Continues: Lost Heritage – The Sikh Legacy in Pakistan*, present a journey of discovering the ancestral roots and lost heritage. Pannu's work makes significant contribution to this existing body of literature by offering a fresh perspective and exploring the subject with a unique emphasis on the enduring impact of displacement and loss. As Pannu notes, the Partition was not just impactful for the Sikh community, but also devastating for Sikh pilgrimage sites, many of which are now just buildings, abandoned without any effort for caretaking. Even the renovation of Nānkāna Sāhib, the birthplace of Gurū Nānak, remained incomplete due to the events of the Partition. The author introduces the book by vividly describing the horrors of Partition. To capture its magnitude, he quotes from Leonard Mosley's book, *Last Days of the British Raj*:

India in 1947 was a bumper year for vultures. They had no need to look for rotting flesh for it was all around them, animal and human....600,000 dead; 14,000,000 driven from their homes; 100,000 young girls kidnapped by both sides, forcibly converted or sold on the auction block. (p. 12)

The book presents captivating visual imagery, showcasing the architectural splendour of Sikh heritage. Pannu takes readers on a virtual tour of gurdwārās (Sikh places of worship) through photographs, offering a pictorial description of 84 heritage sites, mostly gurdwārās associated with the first six Sikh Gurūs. Each site is dedicated an individual chapter, within which the author analyses its contemporary relevance.

Pannu's work effectively captures the multifaceted narratives surrounding the concept of Sikh syncretism, serving as an ethnographic account of religious heritage written from an insider's perspective. Through in-depth interviews with local community members, historians, and religious leaders, the author gains valuable insights into the historical, cultural, and contemporary significance of these sites. This mixed methods approach efficiently contextualises Sikh heritage within the broader socio-cultural landscape of the heritage sites, signifying how these sites have profoundly shaped the development of Sikh identity and communities.

While substantial academic work has centred on the impact of the 1947 Partition on Hindus and Muslims, Pannu's contribution is significant in highlighting its impact on the rich Sikh religious heritage. He attempts to provide a balanced perspective by acknowledging both the achievements and challenges of Sikh heritage. Notably, he avoids promoting any particular ideology, sect or agenda, focusing instead on the cultural and historical aspects of Sikh heritage, as exemplified in the chapter on Gurudwārā Janamasthān (p. 188). Pannu presents a thoughtful assessment of competing historical interpretations, including the Hindu perspective on 'Alā'-al-Dīn Khaljī's attack on Rājputanā and the Islamic perspective on a Bhatti Muslim granted land by Mubārak Shāh.

Despite its ambitious scope and comprehensive coverage, *The Sikh Heritage: Beyond Borders* has certain limitations. Pannu's work occasionally relies on legendary narratives as historical evidence. For instance, he presents the Janamsākhīs (hagiographies) account of Gurū Nānak's three-day immersion in a river at Sultānpūr Lodhī more as historical fact than as a likely mythological tale. He mentions the Udāsīs, which recount Gurū Nānak's travels across the world in four journeys between 1500 and 1524 CE. Similarly, he mentions the Sikh legend of Gurū Nānak's visit to Makkah (Holy city of Islam). The story adds that while resting, he stretched his feet towards the Ka'bah (most Holy worship place in Islam). Upon noticing this, people attempted to reposition Gurū Nānak's feet away from the sacred direction. However, the legend states that as they moved his feet, the Ka'bah itself mysteriously shifted, returning to a position directly in front of his feet.

The book also faces critiques regarding its scope and focus. Firstly, the work can be critiqued for its geographical scope, as it primarily focuses on the forgotten and abandoned architectural Sikh heritage of Pakistan, with limited attention paid to Sikh shrines and monuments in other regions. Secondly, there is a lack of discussion on contemporary architectural trends. Pannu does not explore the impact of the Partition on contemporary Sikh architectural styles, such as how Sikh communities rebuilt and created their cultural and religious spaces in new locations, influencing contemporary architectural styles. Thirdly, his work could benefit from a more extensive exploration of the roles played by Sikh women in the design, construction, and maintenance of Sikh monuments. Lastly, Pannu could have examined critical issues, such as the impact of British colonialism on Sikh architecture and the role of the state in preserving and managing Sikh sites. An interesting question for future research would be to investigate the efforts of Sikh politics in India and its connection with the diaspora, which could potentially pave the way for a dialogue with Pakistan on this shared cultural heritage.

Nevertheless, by highlighting the rich history, unique cultural features, and ongoing socio-political challenges faced by these sites, Pannu's work aligns with contemporary debates about cultural preservation and raises awareness about the importance of protecting and promoting Sikh heritage. Going back to the time of Gurū Nānak, the book delves into the cultural and artistic expressions of Sikhism, particularly in architecture and literature. The author's meticulous research allows readers to access a plethora of firsthand accounts, historical documents, and visual representations, fostering a comprehensive understanding of Sikh heritage. Pannu's coffee-table book is an important contribution to the study of religion especially Sikh religious architecture, art and culture and can be considered as an important contribution to social sciences, Sikh studies, Partition studies, and Sikh architecture and heritage.

Author Note

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Dr. Adfer R. Shah is a Delhi based sociologist and George Greenia Fellow currently working at Jamia Millia Islamia. Dr. Aamir Habib is Assistant Professor in the International Centre for Spiritual Studies at Islamic University of Science and Technology. Shrishti Singh and Zuberya Nauman hold master's degrees in Gender Studies from the Sarojini Naidu Centre for Women's Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia. Correspondence: adfer.syed@gmail.com.

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