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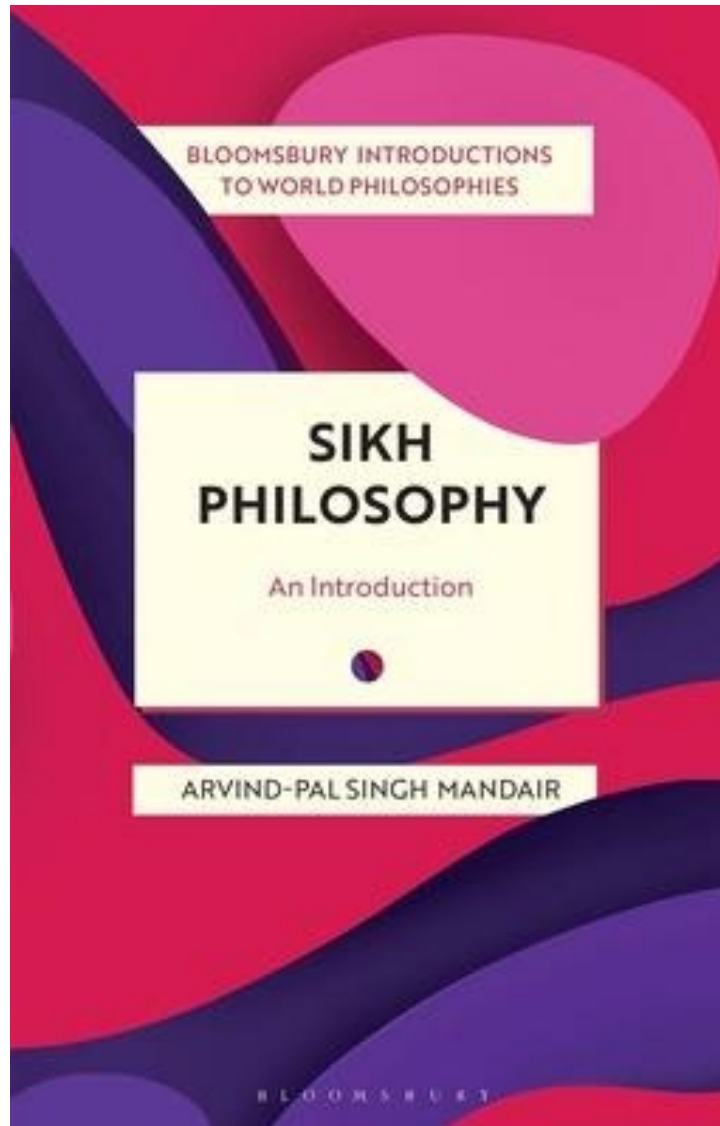
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Book Review: “Sikh Philosophy: Exploring gurnat Concepts in a Decolonizing World”

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Sikh Philosophy: Exploring gurnat Concepts in a Decolonizing World

Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair,

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Though there has been significant study of Sikhism in contemporary Western academia, the prospects for engaging with Sikhism from a philosophical perspective have largely been ignored. The limited literature that is explicitly about Sikh philosophy has almost exclusively been written by scholars in Punjab, whose writing has largely been ignored by Western audiences even when written in English. Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair's "Sikh Philosophy: Exploring *gurmat* Concepts in a Decolonizing World" seeks to intervene by providing, as the book's description says, "the first rigorous engagement in the West with Sikh philosophy." In writing about Sikh philosophy for a Western audience, Mandair has undertaken an important and valuable project.

The book consists of seven main chapters plus an introduction and epilogue. Mandair begins in Chapter 1 with a historical analysis of what he sees as the development of Sikh philosophy through encounters between indigenous Sikh thought and Western modernity. The framework developed in Chapter 1 provides a lens through which Mandair explores the meaning of a variety of central concepts in the rest of the book. The remaining chapters apply Mandair's framework to the topics of experience (Chapter 2), epistemology (Chapter 3), consciousness (Chapter 4), death, rebirth, and transmigration (Chapter 5), self-realization (Chapter 6), and bioethics (Chapter 7).

In terms of distinctively philosophical content, Mandair's analysis throughout the book is largely piecemeal. But these various discussions are unified by the historical lens through which he interprets the development of Sikh philosophy. One of Mandair's primary accomplishments is the mounting of a critique of the highly Christianized interpretations of central *gurmat* concepts promulgated by Western scholars such as Ernest Trumpp and W. H. McLeod. As Mandair rightly notes, figures like Trumpp and McLeod significantly distorted *gurmat* concepts by superimposing thinly secularized versions of Christian conceptual schemes onto them. For example, one such distortion comes in the form of understanding the higher power in Sikh thought on the model of the Abrahamic God.

This critique serves one of Mandair's central goals in the book, which is to provide a decolonized analysis of the central concepts of Sikh philosophy, in contrast to prior work that he sees as suffused with Western modernist and Christian thought. Though he makes several new and important points in mounting his critique, it is worth noting that Mandair is not the first to critique Western scholars' Christianized interpretations of Sikhism. Related critiques have been propounded (for example, in the work of Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh) that Mandair does not acknowledge.

However, Mandair does synthesize in novel and valuable ways a large amount of secondary literature on *gurmat* that is largely unfamiliar to Western audiences. Indeed, Western audiences might be completely unaware that there was such a thriving literature of Sikh thought, including extensive commentary on *gurbāni* (the verses of Sikh scripture), during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. Mandair's explication of the various *prnālian* (systems of thought) within Sikh

philosophy during that time, is of great relevance to anyone interested in exploring the historical unfolding of Sikh thought between the codification of *gurbāni* and the present. Given his prior work on the subject, it is not surprising that Mandair's historical analysis of the emergence of Sikh philosophy in Chapter 1 is interesting and informative.

Though much of Mandair's historical analysis is illuminating, one of the central claims of Chapter 1 merits further scrutiny. Mandair claims that Sikh philosophy is an 'assemblage.' He borrows this term from the French postmodernists Deleuze and Guattari, "from whom it signifies processes that associate 'multiple and heterogenous elements' in ways that give rise to new experiences, new meanings, and new possibilities" (21). For Mandair, Sikh philosophy is an assemblage because it developed from its "pre-philosophical roots" into a "field in its own right" through encounters with Western modernity (21).

I do not dispute Mandair's claim that the emergence of Sikh philosophy as a distinct field of study recognizable to Western academia, during and after the colonial period, was strongly influenced by encounters with Western modernity. But I think his further claims that Sikh philosophy should be understood as an association of the heterogenous elements of indigenous Sikh thought and modern Western thought, and that *gurbāni* itself is merely "pre-philosophical," are problematic. Mandair's framing plays into the colonialist assumption that a truly philosophical mode of thought is somehow uniquely Western and that it was only through the influence of Western thought that Sikh thought became truly philosophical.

Given Mandair's emphasis on decolonization, it is safe to assume that Mandair does not intend to endorse or imply these colonialist assumptions. But then why suggest that *gurbāni* itself, which precedes any encounter with Western modernity, is merely pre-philosophical? As I see it, philosophy is a mode of investigation that uses non-empirical methods such as analysis and introspection to posit fundamental truths about the nature of things. Thus, *gurbāni* seems straightforwardly philosophical in its own right, not pre-philosophical. Consider for comparison, that if the central texts of other non-Western traditions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, or Confucianism, were referred to as merely pre-philosophical, this would strike us as a regression to Eurocentric and Orientalist conceptions of what counts as truly philosophical. I suggest, then, that it is a mistake to classify pre-Western Sikh thought, and thereby *gurbāni* itself, as pre-philosophical rather than philosophical.

The above critique ties into another problem with Mandair's attempt at a decolonized analysis of *gurmāt* concepts. Though his analysis does decolonize these concepts in one way, by scrubbing them of modernist and especially Christian influences, it seems to recolonize them in other ways. Throughout the book, Mandair's analysis is replete with terms of art from Continental philosophy, which is at least as Western an intellectual tradition as modernism. For example, one of Mandair's central claims is that *gurmāt* concepts should be understood as embodying a 'non-

oppositional logic' – roughly, a logic that is capable of countenancing and synthesizing contradictions. This notion, which has its roots in Hegel (though Mandair does not explain this), is now primarily employed within Western postmodernist thought. To give another example, Mandair frequently (and without explanation) relies on the distinction between immanence and transcendence, another piece of terminology deeply wedded to the conceptual schemes of Continental philosophy.

Looking at Mandair's discussion of non-oppositional logic on page 56 illustrates this point more concretely. He argues that *gurmat* concepts employ a non-oppositional logic to synthesize existence and non-existence. He further claims that this has not been appreciated because the law of non-contradiction, which holds that there cannot be true contradictions, is a construction of Western thought that was superimposed on Sikh thought through "Enlightenment Christian frameworks" (56). Strikingly, in posing this criticism of the law of non-contradiction and endorsing a framework of "non-oppositional synthesis," Mandair cites the secondary literature on Derrida, another prominent French postmodernist. It is unclear why we should think of the postmodernism of Derrida (or Deleuze and Guattari) as any more apt for a decolonized understanding of Sikh philosophy than any other Western system.

The point here is not to criticize the tools or conceptual schemes of Continental philosophy. Rather, it is to suggest that Mandair superimposes particular strands of Western thought onto Sikh philosophy much in the same way he criticizes Western scholars for having done with modernism. It is difficult to see how a decolonized analysis can succeed if it largely replaces the conceptual schemes of Western modernism with those of Western postmodernism. At the very least, it seems to me that Mandair owes the reader an explanation of why the Western conceptual schemes he uses to frame his analysis are not just as distorting as the ones he critiques.

Thus, there seems to be a deep tension between Mandair's critical genealogy of the influence of modern European thought on Sikh philosophy and his regular appeals to the conceptual schemes and authority figures of Continental philosophy, especially postmodernism. In fact, the book comes across at times as most focused on championing postmodernism over modernism, at the expense of the project of decolonizing Sikh philosophy. This tension, in my view, is the book's deepest flaw, for it threatens to undermine Mandair's overall approach to understanding *gurmat* concepts.

Of course, any work of interpretation and philosophical analysis must proceed using some kind of conceptual scheme, and some set of analytical tools, which will out of necessity be tied to the time and place in which they were developed. But Mandair's heavy use of shibboleths of insular and Eurocentric schools of thought, without explanation, strikes me as neither necessary nor warranted. Not only does it detract from the project of decolonization, but it also threatens to render much of his analysis inaccessible to any audience not deeply steeped in those traditions.

In sum, though Mandair's book does make some valuable contributions when it comes to presenting Sikh philosophy to a Western audience, there are two major points it fails to recognize, which renders its analysis fundamentally flawed. The first is that the authors of *gurbāni* were philosophers in their own right and developed an original philosophical system of *gurmat*. The fact that this philosophical system did not rely on Western thought, either modern or postmodern, does not render it pre-philosophical. The second is that, while Western conceptual schemes and analytical tools can ultimately be quite helpful in developing a rigorous reconstruction of Sikh philosophy, a truly decolonized analysis must not fall into the trap of subjugating *gurmat* concepts to *any* Western tradition, whether modernist or postmodernist.