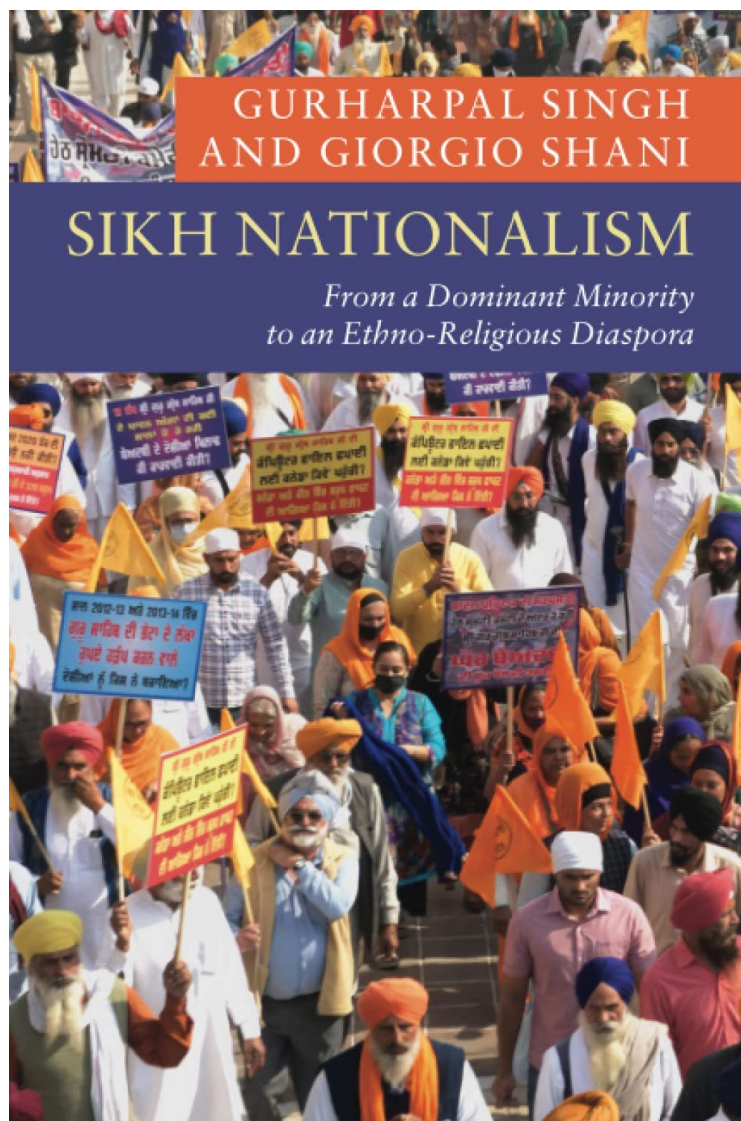


Book review: Sikh Nationalism: From a Dominant Minority to an Ethno-Religious Diaspora by
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Sikh Nationalism: From a Dominant Minority to an Ethno-Religious Diaspora

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The question of identity and nationalism occupies a historically significant position in India. While Hindu nationalism has been widely studied, especially within the context of the 19th- and 20th-century colonial period, there remains a dearth of detailed historical scholarship on Sikh nationalism. In *Sikh Nationalism: From a Dominant Minority to an Ethno-Religious Diaspora*, Gurharpal Singh and Giorgio Shani provide an extensive historical analysis of the development of Sikh identity and nationalism. The central argument of the book challenges simplistic tropes that rely solely on religion as a marker of Sikh identity. Although religion remains one of the significant aspects, the authors advocate an integrated approach to understanding Sikh identity, emphasizing the roles of minority religious identity, diaspora, and nationalism in shaping the modern Sikh identity. The authors employ Anthony D. Smith's (2001) ethno-symbolic approach to understand the "cultural roots" of Sikh nationalism through the concept of "ethnie." This approach moves away from locating nationalism only as an elite phenomenon or solely as a result of colonialism, instead concerning itself with people's self-identification with "historical symbols of ethnies." This Sikh ethnie according to the authors, lies at the heart of Sikh identity and nationalism, representing what they call a Sikh "*qaum*" (nation). However, the authors argue that this ethnie is not an essentialist identity; instead, they historicize the Sikh ethnie. They contend that a strong communal consciousness is also not enough to construct an identity. This is where the importance of a territory, namely Punjab, becomes essential for Sikh nationalism. The authors thus weave together the complex web of interconnected events and contexts to illustrate the construction of a non-essentialist Sikh identity.

The first three chapters sketch a historical trajectory of the Sikh identity and its transformation. The chapters begin with tracing three popular narratives of Sikh identity and nationalism: religion, nation with a territorial homeland, and the minority status of Sikhs. The authors emphasize the ethno-symbolic approach of A.D. Smith (2001) to explain how the primordial idea of an "ethnie" merges with a religious sect, giving rise to a cultural religious community possessing a territorial homeland and a vibrant diaspora. The authors analyze the transformation of Sikhism from a reformer sect to the institutionalized Sikh Panth and the rise of a militant Khalsa identity in the 18th century through a political revolution. They argue that the influence of colonial modernity led to a political transformation of the religion into an idea of a nation, further consolidating the Sikh militant and martial identities. The chapters follow the trajectory of the rise of modern Sikh nationalism and the formation of a separate reformed Sikh identity based on Tat Khalsa ideology of the Singh Sabha movement amidst growing Hindu and Muslim majoritarianism. The next part of the book, chapters four and five, discusses the history of Partition and its impact on Sikh nationalism. The compromise Sikh nationalism had to undergo led to an uneasy accommodation in the Indian state. The authors explore this tense relationship between the Indian state and Sikh nationalism through their study of Operation Bluestar and the Khalistan movement and militancy. Contrary to perspectives that blame the militancy for its failure, the authors argue that Sikh militant nationalism cannot be understood in isolation from the larger context of the state's hegemonic control and its role in managing ethnic conflict in Punjab.

The final sections of the book explore contemporary developments through Hindutva politics, globalization, and diaspora. The authors note Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's (RSS) attempt to depict Sikhs as part of militant Hinduism by the creation of Rashtriya Sikh Sangat and the Sangh Parivar's Ghar Vapsi campaign of 2014, as attempts to assimilate and Hinduize the Sikh identity. Interestingly, the authors note how the

militant characteristics of Sikh nationalism, particularly the hyper-masculinity of Khalsa identity, were recognized and promoted by the colonial regime, which was reflected in their mass recruitment into the Indian army (p. 48-49). The book further points towards the appropriation of this militancy by both the colonizers and Hindutva politics. The concluding chapter delves into the role of the diaspora and globalization, arguing for the emergence of a deterritorialized Sikh nationalism and a global Sikh qaum in a 'post-sovereignty era' (Shani, 2014). The authors identify an inherent tension within the contemporary Sikh agenda, between a politics of recognition and the politics of a homeland, between transnational aspirations on one hand and a firm hold on territorial nationalism on the other. This tension is further accentuated by the fading away of multiculturalism post 9/11. Yet as multiculturalism recedes, globalization has opened avenues, through television, radio, social media, websites, and more, to mobilize a community based on religion and ethnicity. This has facilitated a deterritorialized nationalism and the formation of a global Sikh qaum. Through an imagined homeland and the rise of diaspora politics, a new form of long-distance nationalism has emerged allowing individuals across territories to connect with a place they see as their 'homeland'.

Although the book provides a rich, detailed, and comprehensive historical account of Sikh nationalism and identity, it predominantly represents a masculine perspective of militancy and conflict. There are limited references to women's roles within Sikh nationalism. Women are mentioned primarily in the context of 18th-century codes of conduct restricting them with certain regulations, celebrating women for their moral strength, or instances of violence perpetrated against them during the Partition. In fact, the authors acknowledge that "Sikh nationalist narrative centred on the militarism of the Khalsa and marginalised the voice of women" (p. 40). Furthermore, while the book raises an interesting contradiction between deterritorialized nationalism and the concept of a global qaum, I question whether there can ever be a deterritorialized nationalism when a territorial homeland is the basis for this nationalism? Though unoccupied and imagined, this homeland remains materially and territorially connected to a community. Therefore, a "global" qaum is deeply rooted in a localized place. This 'deterritoriality' represents, in my view, a contradiction within Sikh nationalism and identity because it necessitates the requirement of a territory to imagine itself. At a time when we are witnessing Israel's violence on Palestine, the idea of ethnic nationalism based on a territorial homeland becomes a daunting and contested reality that needs further critical reflection.

Nonetheless, the strength of the book lies in its ability to provide a contextual historical understanding of nationalism rather than an essentialist one. The authors illuminate Sikh nationalism through its history of the political, cultural, social and economic events that have shaped it. *Sikh Nationalism: From a Dominant Minority to and Ethno-Religious Diaspora* will be significant for scholars invested in topics of nationalism, territoriality, diaspora, identity politics and conflict studies. It is also relevant to the fields of sociology, history, cultural studies, and the broader social sciences.

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