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Sikh Philosophy as a Philosophy-of-Practice

Kirloskar-Steinbach, Monika; Long, Jeffery D.

published in

Philosophy East and West
2024

DOI (link to publisher)

[10.1353/pew.2024.a925198](https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2024.a925198)

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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citation for published version (APA)

Kirloskar-Steinbach, M., & Long, J. D. (2024). Sikh Philosophy as a Philosophy-of-Practice. *Philosophy East and West*, 74(2), 348-353. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2024.a925198>

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Philosophy East and West, Volume 74, Number 2, April 2024, pp.
348-353 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2024.a925198>

Philosophy East and West



A Quarterly of
Comparative Philosophy
Volume 74 - Number 2

University of Hawai'i Press

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Sikh Philosophy as a Philosophy-of-Practice



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Some recent publications on Indian philosophy argue that the colonial narrative about the philosophical traditions from the subcontinent was erroneous. It wrongly suggested that the erstwhile Brahmanic thought embodied by the *darśanas* was an exhaustive representation of philosophical activity on the subcontinent and that this activity came to a grinding halt with the onset of European modernity. In an attempt at rectifying this story, one path proposed by philosopher Vrinda Dalmiya (Dalmiya 2016, p. 125) is to cognize and fix the “epistemophilic excesses” in the field, that is, the obsessive compulsion in conventional academic philosophy to engage in theory for theory’s sake. In the study of Indian philosophy, this malady manifests as the practice of channeling philosophical analysis solely through a darśanic framing. This monofocal lens, however, is unable to reflect either the diversity of practices on the ground or values like intellectual freedom that drive some such practices.

Arvind-Pal Mandair’s *Sikh Philosophy: Exploring Gurmata Concepts in a Decolonizing World* (Bloomsbury, 2022), discussed here in this forum, speaks to these concerns and offers a possible way forward. *Sikh Philosophy* advocates a liminal perspective from which to engage with the set of philosophical practices that emanated on the subcontinent around the figure of Guru Nanak (1469–1539) and the teachings of the Sikh gurus (*gurmata*). In the first part of my response, I will bring into this conversation Mandair’s philosophical orientation to ask whether and how he would contribute to that debate. In the second part, I will project the *haumai*—one concept doing much of the work in *Sikh Philosophy*—as one viable path that may be able to contribute to the correction of the epistemophilia currently afflicting a judicious study of world-philosophical traditions.

In my limited understanding, Mandair’s rendition of the *haumai* may serve as one component that could be implemented fruitfully in broadening the perspective on Indian philosophy. Mandair observes that a postcolonial sensibility demands a philosophical orientation that does not continue its proprietary attitude toward philosophical positions. I share his view. Instead of parading these positions as possessions that embellish one’s academic finesse, they should be considered as ways of navigating life adequately. In doing so, however, the making of such navigational routes may profit from a deliberate reflection on them from different standpoints.

Halting Exclusivist Historiographical Trends in Philosophy

Two recent handbooks on Indian philosophy reflect the growing awareness that changes in the field's self-understanding are imperative, should imperialist and colonial historiographies that affect this understanding be upturned. Jonardon Ganeri's editorial introduction to the *Oxford Handbook of Indian Philosophy*—"Why Indian Philosophy? Why Now?"—argues that students of Indian philosophy should overcome the routinized fixation on the classical *darśanas*. In developing their accounts, they should factor in the "regionality, vernaculars, subaltern communities, [and] eccentrics" through which "scholarly networks, nodes of philosophical activity, transnational encounters, and contexts of philosophical invention" arose on the subcontinent (Ganeri 2017, p. 2). This broader approach would, in his view, not only be viable in halting the elitist and exclusivist historiography that was the default mode in the recent colonial past. In addition, it would be better equipped to grasp the richness of practices on the ground.

Accordingly, his *Handbook* departs from the handbook genre on one core point: instead of delivering a supposedly comprehensive study of positions that would be indispensable to the reader to understand the intricacies of the field marked out as Indian philosophy, this *Handbook* chooses to narrate one multi-perspectival story about practices on the subcontinent that were philosophically motivated and are worthy of study today. It suggests through this move that there are other such possible stories that can be narrated. Relatedly, Purushottama Bilimoria and Amy Rayner's *History of Indian Philosophy* strives as well to make a case to go beyond the darśanic mold. It includes a variety of philosophical positions located on its peripheries. For example, Sikh philosophy, which notably is not included in the Ganeri volume, is incorporated here as a tradition that engaged darśanic practices. Balbinder Singh Bhogal, the author of the entry "Gur-Sikh *dharam*," painstakingly seeks to understand *sikhi* as a *dharam* and not as a philosophy, so as to be able to recover modes of lived praxis that were suppressed under imperialism and colonialism (Bhogal 2018, p. 488).

Although Mandair's discussion of *dharam* seems to differ in his *Sikh Philosophy* (see p. 75), I would like to pose a more general question: Would he be inclined to contribute to the debate on diversifying Indian philosophy? And, if so, how? Would he see his project as a methodological contribution to diversifying philosophical practices in Indian philosophy? Let me briefly elucidate my reason for this (perhaps unconventional) proposal.

Mandair uses the liminal status of Sikh philosophy as being located between cultures, languages, and religions to tease out a postcolonial sensibility characterized by multiple belongings. Considering that this sensibility could orient philosophical work, one may characterize it as being diasporic. It would accordingly be informed by the liminal position of being

an outsider and insider within a tradition simultaneously. Being an outsider-insider would mean that one works with—and on—a philosophical tradition to which one feels a certain sense of belonging. Feeling sufficiently immersed in it, one could perceive oneself as being able to navigate its topography relatively adequately. Note though, that such an affiliation need not be based primarily on the contingent factor of birth. When analyzing a tradition philosophically, one may not necessarily feel obliged to deliver an account that would adhere to its conventional communal understandings. To put it differently, the liminal position of being diasporic would allow one to critique philosophical practices associated with that tradition, using immanent concepts that would be comprehensible to those who perceive themselves to be the tradition's insiders. Would Mandair agree with my reading? And if so, would he concur that the diasporic orientation he develops for Sikh philosophy could possibly serve as a methodological tool in diversifying current practices around Indian philosophy?

Let me now briefly outline how *haumai* in my reading could substantiate that diasporic orientation.

A World-Philosophical Conversation about Haumai

In tracing the onto-ethical standpoint of *sikhī*, Mandair places the *gurmukh* and the *manmukh* modes on two ends of a scale. While the former is a sense of personhood that has to be developed, and is thus to come, the *manmukh* is the sense of being a person here and now. *Sikh Philosophy* sketches the transitioning route from the *manmukh* to the *gurmukh*. However, before embarking on this journey, one would have engaged *haumai*. To cite Mandair, "*Haumai* is consciousness contracted by a human mind as it comes into contact with the material world through any social nexus, specifically through the mediation of language" (p. 125). Mandair's analysis does not explicitly dwell on the transitioning mode. However, some of the phrases he uses to clarify *haumai* suggest this mode. For example, he says that the consciousness of *haumai* is "coextensive and entangled with materiality" and that *haumai* is a process of gradual ego-loss (pp. 112, 83). While the *gurmukh* approach is no longer entangled with materiality, its counterpart, the *manmukh*, has in Mandair's rendition yet to embark on a deliberate attempt at effectuating ego-loss.

Recall that in the *manmukh* state of being in the world, conscious states are solely directed toward what is considered to be the outer world. One experiences oneself as being external to these objects and tends to locate the latter, and oneself, in an empty, serial time. One does not perceive the entanglement with materiality to be a "disease," an affliction, that has to be cured. Consequently, one does not work toward its diagnosis or cure. The *gurmukh* mode, on the other hand, incorporates transpersonal individuation. Those who inhabit it are not invested in continuing the binary between the

self and the world. Rather, they experience a continuity between themselves and the world. They, as the author notes, effortlessly straddle cosmic time (*akāl*) and worldly time (*kāl*) simultaneously. The transitioning mode, it seems to me, is placed squarely between these two extremes, between the “egocentric individuality” (p. 138) of the former and its clear negation in the latter. (This is not to rule out that, as the persons who inhabit this mode move toward the *gurmukh*, their thoughts may, in the long run, become part of the *gurmukh-vichār*.)

When setting out on the journey from the mode of the here and now to that of transpersonal individuation, the first step would be to engage with one’s condition of being, the *haumai*. In one such diagnosis, one would ascertain that one currently finds oneself between the titillations of a *sukh* life, a life of easy-fix gratifications, and a strong, bounded sense of an I (*āhankār*). One gains the insight, too, that the remedy, the *dāru*, is pain itself. Furthermore, this pain cannot be administered as a *dawāii* by an external *vaid*, but would have to be self-administered:

dukh daru,
sukh rog bhaia
ja sukh taam na hoi. (p. 171)

In short, the fixation on *sukh* (pleasure) would have to be shifted by regarding *dukh* (pain) as the medication (*dawāii*).

The *gurmukh’s* *dukh* is useful in implementing this self-prescription. It can serve as a guide to become attentive of, and to sustain, the experience of *biraha*, the separation from the beloved divine, and also to accept that the choice made to transition toward the *gurmukh* may have ramifications for an ethical life that is typically governed by conventional morality. This could hold for the ties through which this morality is experienced (e.g., cisgender relationships) but also for what it means to be in the world as a member of a specific community (e.g., *punjabiya*). Starting out on the journey toward a *gurmukh* promises to compromise these ties and perhaps reduce the chances of attaining the *sukh* that they can potentially offer. And yet it seems that this is the path that those who consciously adopt it seek to tread.

Note though, that as the Mandair reading will have it, one should not immediately begin to emulate the *gurmukh’s* destruction of the *haumai* condition (individuation) upon transitioning. If my reading is plausible, the emptying of the self in the transitioning mode has to be gradual. In fact, one should retain a certain sense of individuation in *kāl*, not *akāl*, to track one’s journey. This individuation would allow those who inhabit the transitioning mode for keeping track of all those incidents in which the *Panch Chor*—the five “thieves,” namely *kām* (craving), *krōdh* (anger), *lōbh* (covetousness), *mōh* (attachment), and *ahankār* (pride)—got the better of themselves and others in which this was not the case. Especially, the track record of the

latter could motivate one to continue to follow the path of the *gurmukh*. The record would document all those cases in which one did not give in to the temptations strewn across the way but in fact overcame them. In short: the *gurmukh's* straddling of *akāl* and *kāl* simultaneously, their overcoming the opposed principle of the *haumai*, et cetera can only serve as a long term goal, not an immediate one.

To move forward in the conversation, I would request that Mandair shed more light on how one should interpret statements like “But according to *gurmat* one might still be a *manmukh* (self-centered individual), whereas the aim in *sikhī* is to achieve the state of *gurmukh* consciousness—one who has experienced self-realization or oneness by shattering his or her ego” (p. 183). Can one in the transitioning mode determine for oneself the exact point at which transitioning ends and a more focused path toward the *gurmukh* begins? Or is this point molded by the *hukam*? Does it set the time-window after which that more focused path should begin? Moreover, if one were to circle back to the initial discussion, would one support the view that the transitioning mode is diasporic along the lines sketched earlier? And if so, if it were to be implemented as a methodological tool to cure the obsessive compulsion with darśanic theory, would it work only in the phase of transition between the *manmukh* and *gurmukh*?

Mandair writes in the epilogue: “The challenge for Sikh philosophy is to rediscover its internal multiplicity, to learn to be comfortable with its own difference in the manner of self-differentiation, to redefine its own identity in terms of its innately pluralist ethos, and then channel this same ethos into building relations with all expressions of difference: different peoples, genders, ethnicities, thought systems, religions, spiritualities, political systems, to mention a few” (p. 209). This quote states unequivocally, in my reading, that those who inhabit the transitioning mode are willing to distance themselves from conventional perceptions of group identity, while being immersed in communal practices, and that it would be possible to inject the ethos embodied by Sikh philosophy to diversify conventional identities, including disciplinary ones that once engaged Sikh philosophy on what was once their common home-ground.

To recap, in this brief response, I have taken up Arvind-Pal Mandair’s invitation to join in the making and remaking of Sikh concepts, asking whether and how he would contribute to current changes in demarcating the field of Indian philosophy and whether his *Sikh Philosophy* could be understood as a methodological tool in this work.

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An Appreciation of Arvind Mandair's *Sikh Philosophy: Exploring Gurmat Concepts in a Decolonizing World*



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"Sikhism," the Colonial Project, and Modernity¹

I do not use this adjective lightly, but in his brilliant volume *Sikh Philosophy: Exploring Gurmat Concepts in a Decolonizing World* (Bloomsbury, 2022) Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair goes a considerable distance toward liberating *sikhī*—known more widely in the academic world as *Sikhism*—from the conceptual constraints that have kept it from engaging with and informing global issues. In so doing, he does a service not only to the Sikh community and to *sikhī* itself, but to the world, for there is indeed much in Sikh thought from which the wider human community can benefit. By liberating *sikhī* from the constraining concept of religion, Mandair facilitates a process by which persons of any background can engage with *gurmat* ideas—that is, ideas drawn from the system of thought based upon the teachings of the Gurus of the Sikh tradition—and learn from their wisdom.

Mandair skillfully deconstructs the concept of religion, building upon earlier work in which he demonstrates the colonial functionalities of this concept.² When, through colonial knowledge-production processes, *sikhī* came to be conceived as a religion, Sikh thought was relegated to the realm of theology. This was a relegation, not an elevation, because under the dominant paradigm of modernity, theology is seen as a discourse that is relevant only to a specific religious community. It is thus perceived as lacking the universality