


Introduction to Special Issue: Exploring Sikh Traditions and Heritage

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It was quite an exciting moment when the Religions Editorial Office reached out to me to be a guest editor of a Special Issue (SI) on a broad theme of “Exploring Sikh Traditions and Heritage” for the celebrated Open Access Online Journal, *Religions*. In the specific “Call for Proposals” (CFP), we invited scholars to explore Sikh traditions and heritage through interdisciplinary approaches, resulting from academic inquiries into Sikh texts, as well as the practices that surround them and their performance. We encouraged a diverse range of theoretical and methodological approaches, including the disciplines of religious studies, historical studies, textual studies, ethno-musicology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, ethnography, political science, South Asian studies, art and material culture, and ritual and performance studies. After a rigorous process of peer-review of about a dozen submissions only seven articles made the cut for publication in this Special Issue (https://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/special_issues/Sikh, accessed on 25 June 2021). The main purpose behind the idea of this Special Issue was to enhance the field of Sikh studies and to contribute to the production of novel research. It was also meant to usefully supplement or relate to existing literature in the field. Thus, we invited both younger scholars following fresh approaches and established scholars who have already made significant contributions to the study of Sikh traditions and heritage. It is heartening to know that MDPI has decided to produce a Special Issue reprint in the book format, thereby promoting both the Special Issue and the book via social media and conferences, and improving the visibility of the Sikh tradition.

Most instructively, the early twenty-first century continues to be a very exciting time for the field of Sikh studies. Within the last two decades, scholars have begun to question prevailing approaches to the study of Sikhism in both the west and India itself to the point that this least examined, and perhaps, most misunderstood, of South Asia’s religious and cultural traditions is now an established part of curricula and scholarly programs across North America and the United Kingdom. Much of the foundational scholarship in the field of Sikh studies has followed historical and textual approaches, sometimes to the extent of softening the focus on Sikh practices, performances, and every day “doings” of Sikh lives. The growing turn in religious studies toward “lived religion” calls scholars to be aware that “religions” are at least as much about the things that people “do” as about the ideas, ideals, and central narratives enshrined within their texts and scripture. Rather than dichotomize text and practice, the articles in this Special Issue have drawn attention to the intersections between Sikh sacred texts and actual practices of the Sikh community.

It should be emphasized at the outset that there is a continuing conflict over the nature of traditions and between opposing views of history and practice among Sikhs for over a century, covering a wide range of significant academic issues such as religious orthodoxy/orthopraxy versus fundamentalism, nationalism, economic and political mobility, gender awareness, and cultural transmission and adaptations. Although the limited number of essays in this volume do not address all these issues specifically, they do focus on the transmission of Sikh culture and heritage as well as current dilemmas confronting the Sikh community at the global level. Historical interpretations, ritual performances, the nature of authority and creative responses to changing circumstances are the burning questions that



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do not lend themselves to easy solutions. However, we do hope that an open exchange of ideas and alternative interpretations reduce tension and ultimately lead to a resolution of differences acceptable to Sikhs as a whole. This volume makes a positive contribution towards that process, and for this reason alone this Special Issue may be regarded as the path-clearing work in the field of Sikh studies.

At least four articles in the volume are closely related to the life and teachings of Guru Nanak (1469–1539), the founder of the Sikh tradition. The worldwide celebration of the 550th anniversary of his birth in 2019 prompted both Sikh and non-Sikh scholars to creatively engage with new understandings of his works from fresh perspectives. This is what is obvious in the editor's opening essay, "Speaking Truth to Power," (P. Singh 2020) in which he explored Guru Nanak's *Bābar-vāṇī* in the historical context of Babur's memoirs, called the *Baburnama*. Based on rigorous textual analysis, the essay has made the case for the extension of the number of works in the collection of the *Bābar-vāṇī* from a "fixed" assemblage of "four" hymns to "nine", making it an open collection that dynamically responds to the specific questions raised by historians about Guru Nanak's encounter with Babur. The resulting framework offers a counter perspective to the imperial narrative of Mughal history, providing a fresh analytical gaze into the critical events related to Babur's invasions of India and helping the novel readings of Guru Nanak's verses shine through. Highlighting a radical new reading of the traumatic events of Indian history it has shown how Guru Nanak's voice of resistance became the source of multiple interpretations in the life-narratives (*Janam-sākhīs*) produced by later generations. Departing from traditional views, this essay has brought forth a fresh understanding of the impact of the *Bābar-vāṇī* on the evolving Sikh conceptions of the relationship between spiritual and political powers.

The second article by Louis E. Fenech (2020) examines the "Image of Guru Nanak in the Dadu-Panthi Sources," particularly in the *Bhakt-māl* or "Garland of Devotees" prepared by the Dadu-panthi savant Raghavdas. This late seventeenth or early eighteenth-century text follows the similarly titled *Bhakt-māl* written in 1600 CE by Nabha Das, a text which excludes Guru Nanak, while Raghavdas' text embraces him prominently: "Nanak's true form is that of the sun, the sovereign whose light is diffused throughout the entire world." Fenech takes a notice of this early non-Sikh text and examines the reasons of Dadu strategy of "taming and containing" to bring the Sikhs under the large tent of Vaishnava Bhakti by "Dadu-ising" Guru Nanak and thus by extension the Sikhs: "Raghavdas notes enough of Guru Nanak in his *Bhakt-māl* to ensure that the First Master is fairly ensconced within the model of four [Vaishnava] *sampradāys*." The description of Guru Nanak's children, Siri Chand and Lakshmi Das, along with four established houses of veneration of Udasis, indicates that the author of the text had much interaction with the Udasi lineages, preaching in the southern part of India. The spiritual reputation of the Udasis may be discerned from the sources within the Maratha polity about which Professor Stewart Gordon made a presentation at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. The editor brought this reference to South Indian context to Fenech's attention, who was able to cite from his published work (Gordon 2000), providing a detailed account from the city of Burhanpur dating to the 1760s and noting the grant of "monthly wages" to a *Nānak-putra* or an Udasi sadhu. The vibrant presence of the ascetic Udasis in the south provided a stiff competition to the Dadu-panthi protagonists. This seems to be the principal reason for Raghavdas to assimilate Guru Nanak and by implication the ascetic Udasi tradition within the fold of Dadu-panthi tradition.

The third article by Tejpal Singh Baniwal (2020) deals with the first Sikh Center established by Guru Nanak in 1519 at Kartarpur on the right bank of River Ravi, now situated in Pakistan on the border between India and Pakistan. He examines the "religious and political dimensions of the Kartarpur corridor" by exploring "the global politics behind the lost heritage of the Darbar Sahib." The celebration of the 550th anniversary of the birth of Guru Nanak and the construction of the Kartarpur Corridor has helped the Darbar Sahib at Kartarpur in Pakistan gain global attention. In November 2018, the decision of the governments of Pakistan and India to open the Kartarpur Corridor across

the river Ravi—linking Dera Baba Nanak Sahib (in India) and Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Kartarpur (in Pakistan)—marked the possible beginning of a new era of cooperation and a symbolic movement in the shared cultural history of the Punjab. After the completion of the corridor in 2019, thousands of Sikhs embarked on a pilgrimage to Pakistan to take part in this momentous occasion. However, conversations surrounding modern renovations, government control of sacred sites, and the global implications of the corridor have been missing in the larger dialogue. Using historical and ethnographic methods of interviews and examining the Darbar Sahib through the context of the 1947 partition and the recent construction of the Kartarpur Corridor, Bainiwal departs from the metanarrative produced in Indian media surrounding the Darbar Sahib and explores the impact that Sikhs across the globe had on the “bridge of peace”, the politics behind the corridor, and how access to sacred Sikh spaces in Pakistan was only partially regained. He specifically highlights the role of Diasporic Sikhs in reviving the lost heritage of Darbar Sahib, particularly the Sri Nankana Sahib Foundation and the Guru Nanak Shrine Fellowship for starting the process of renovation of this sacred site. In fact, the original impetus for this renovation resulted from the close friendship between two men: Dr. Gurcharanjit Singh Attariwala, a Canadian-based ophthalmologist, and Lieutenant General (Retired) Jahandad Khan, a General in the Pakistan army and former governor of Sindh. The two first met when Genral Khan was traveling across Canada and the United States to raise funds for his Al-Shifa eye hospital in Rawalpindi in the late 1980s. The humanitarian purpose of the Al-Shifa hospital motivated Dr. Attariwala and other Sikh professionals in Calgary to help General Khan’s efforts. Dr. Attariwala visited Pakistan to attend a conference in Karachi in 1992 that coincided with an invitation to attend the marriage of a friend’s son in Lahore. It was during this trip that Dr. Attariwala and his wife Gurdev Attariwala were informed of “Pakistan’s Darbar Sahib” at Kartarpur, a sacred heritage which they found in ruins on their visit. Dr. Attariwala prevailed upon his friend, General Khan, to approach Pakistan authorities to start the process of renovation of this dilapidated shrine. During the editor’s research visit to Pakistan for a week (24–31 May 1999), he saw firsthand the work of renovation in progress. After the completion of renovation, the Gurdwara of Darbar Sahib was opened for the first time to public in November 1999 at the celebration of Guru Nanak’s birth anniversary. However, it took another two decades to open the Kartarpur Corridor to provide access to Sikhs living in India and abroad. Bainiwal ends his article with a caution that “the threat of closing the corridor due to political tensions may always remain, but so will the drive of the global Sikh community to keep these sites intact and accessible.”

The fourth article on “Remembering Guru Nanak: Articulation of Faith and Ethics by Sikh Activists in Post 9/11 America” by Sangeeta [Kaur Luthra \(2021\)](#) explores the role of activism as an inflection points for engagement with religious and cultural identity by younger generations of Sikhs in the US. As an anthropologist, Luthra employs the method of ethnographic field work by interviewing young Sikh millennials who view social justice activism, humanitarianism and Sikh *sewā* (“selfless service”) as central and equal to other pillars of Sikhism, such as worship and devotional practice. In everyday acts, such as serving meals to those in need, organizing for civil rights, lobbying governments, marching and speaking out against bigotry and hate, and working to build a more just and equitable society, they seek an alchemy of imagination and ethical practice at the heart of Guru Nanak’s faith. Luthra begins with the reflections of a female Sikh activist about her personal journey learning about Sikh faith and history, and her activism and personal interests. In her analysis, the effects of the post 9/11 backlash against Sikhs in the US are compared to Guru Nanak’s experiences of and response to violence, strife, and injustice. The social, psychological, and spiritual benefits of service for those who provide service and care are explored in relation to Sikh philosophy, and from the point of view of contemporary cultural and historical studies of Sikh *sewā* and humanitarianism. For Luthra, the current generation of Sikh American activists, a mix of millennials and Generation Z, often express their faith and identity first and foremost through ethical practice.

The fifth related article on “Narratives in Action: Modelling the Types and Drivers of Sikh Activism in Diaspora” is written by J. Singh (2020), who develops a typology of different types of activism among Sikhs in diaspora based on an analysis of historic and contemporary media sources (newspapers, radio, television, online), academic literature, ethnographic fieldwork and a series of semi-structured interviews with self-identifying Sikh activists mainly in the United Kingdom. He assesses the reasons behind a variety of different incidents involving Sikh activists, how they view the drivers of their activism and to what extent this activism can be regarded as being “religiously motivated”. The author critiques existing typologies of “religious activism” by developing a typology of Sikh activism which challenges the distinction often made between “religious” and “political” action. His analysis is based upon narratives from the Sikh tradition, namely (1) organizing a protest in Birmingham against the staging of a play, *Behztī* (“Disrespect”), and its depiction of rape and murder in a gurdwara; (2) campaigning against interfaith *Anand Kāraj* (“Sikh marriage”) ceremonies in gurdwaras, highlighting how Sikh activism often reference the Sikh literature to support their claims; (3) referring to the Sikh concept of *mūrī/pīrī* through which religion and politics are bound together; and (4) mobilizing around single-issue campaigns (*morchās*), from the Akali *morchās* in the 1920s to the turban campaigns in the 1960s to various campaigns post-1984, highlighting how martyrs (*shahīd*) continue to inspire the Sikh activists. Concluding his arguments skillfully, Jasjit Singh brings forth six essential features that trigger Sikh activism: social justice, humanitarianism, religious enforcement, diaspora nationalism, community defense, and personal/factional strategy to gain control of the gurdwaras.

The sixth article on “Autoethnography: A Potential Method for Sikh Theory and Praxis Research” by Narinder Kaur-Bring (2020) makes the case for a new method of doing research in the field of Sikh studies. She argues that the systematic analysis in autoethnography of a person’s experience through reflexivity and connecting the personal story to the social, cultural, and political life has synergy with the Sikh sense-making process. Accordingly, deliberation (*vichār*) of an individual’s experience through the embodied wisdom of the Gurū (*gurmat*) connecting the lived experience to a greater knowing and awareness of the self is an established practice in *Sikhī* (“Sikh practice”). Kaur-Bring explores autoethnography as a potential research method to give an academic voice to and capture the depth of the lived experiences of Sikhs: first, by articulating the main spaces of synergy of autoethnography with *gurmat vichār* (“deliberation in light of the Gurus’ teachings”); second, discussing common themes such as inclusivity of disregarded voices, accessibility to knowledge creation, relational responsibility, and integrity in storytelling common to both autoethnography and *gurmat vichār*. She complicates that to write by foregrounding personal experience without “narcissism” requires a process of getting to know all the facets of self. About the inclusion of others, she maintains that autoethnography attempts to walk in “the shoes of the other” while simultaneously acknowledging that it is still “my feet in their shoes”. Citing a passage from Guru Amar Das’ *bāṇī* (“inspired utterances”) that “the stories of one’s ancestors makes their descendants good children,” she sums up her final arguments by claiming that the autoethnographic approach has the means to illuminate nuances in understanding *Sikhī* that is transformative and familiar to the ancestral process of how Sikhs have made sense of themselves and the world around them.

The final article on the “Institution of the Akal Takht” by Gurbeer Singh (2021) examines the transformation of authority in Sikh history within the Sikh Panth (“community”). Following the sociological approach, the author employs theories of legitimacy and authority to explore the validity of the authority and legitimacy of the Akal Takht (“Throne of the Immortal”) and its leaders. In addition to applying Max Weber’s three types of legitimate authority—*charismatic*, *traditional* and *legal*—he uses Berger and Luckmann’s theory of the *symbolic universe* to establish the constant presence of traditional authority in the leadership of the Akal Takht. Additionally, he refers to Merton’s concept of *group norms* to explain the loss of legitimacy at certain points in history, even if one or more types of Weber’s legitimate authority match the situation. He forcefully argues that the Akal Takht’s

authority, as with other political religious institutions, is in reciprocal relationship between the Sikh population and those in charge. He uses the fluidity in authority at various points in Sikh history to offer a solution on the issue of authenticity and authority in the Sikh tradition. In his conclusions, Gurbeer Singh makes the point that when the interests of Sikhs in India and abroad do not correlate and group norms between the two groups continue to grow apart, the disconnect of the Akal Takht with the greater Sikh populace will continue to grow. This may cause the need for the *Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee* (SGPC, “Chief Management Committee of Sikh Shrines”) at Amritsar and the Akal Takht to reorganize in a way that allows Sikhs in the diaspora representation in the Akal Takht and the SGPC in order to continue a proper reciprocal relationship between the institution and the people, especially as the structures of authority and legitimacy continue to change as time passes.

The essays in this Special Issue/volume reflect multiple approaches to look at various academic issues in the field of Sikh studies. They are presented to the wider audience through open access for critical appraisal so that new ways of understanding the Sikh subjects are developed in the future. Frequently, we come across the mention of “Global Sikhism” or the assertion that Sikhism is now a global religion because of the Sikh presence in the diaspora, with less explicit discussion of variations that may exist among and within the contexts of cultural and national locations. Thus, even as local specificity is held to be critical in the study of any Sikh population, we can discern a corresponding (if perplexing) increase in the discourse about both global and diasporic Sikhism. In order to problematize how local experiences, confirm and yet complicate notions of global and/or diasporic Sikh belief and practice, this volume is focused on “Sikh traditions and heritage”.

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