

Review Article: A New Encyclopedia of Sikhism

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Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair, ed., 2017. *Sikhism* (e-book). *Encyclopedias of Indian Religions* series, Springer.

All of us are aware of the comprehensive 4-volume *Encyclopedia of Sikhism* very ably edited by late Professor Harbans Singh of Punjabi University, Patiala. Together with Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha's *Mahan kosh*, it has for long served the academe as well as the general public admirably well.

Now, quite recently, two new encyclopedias of Sikhism have been published abroad and released worldwide in both electronic and print formats. One is Brill's *Encyclopedia of Sikhism* edited by Knut A. Jacobsen (Norway), Gurinder Singh Mann (USA), Kristina Myrvold (Sweden) and Eleanor Nesbitt (UK) – all specialising in Indic religions, including Sikhism. Only the first volume of Brill's encyclopedia is out at the moment; the next and last will follow in due course.

The second encyclopedia of Sikhism has been published by Springer under the editorship of Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair, an Associate Professor of Sikh Studies in the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures, University of Michigan. In the Springer encyclopedia, there are about 120 entries by thirty-five scholars, all of whom are, with one or two exceptions, academics based in the universities of North America, the UK or Australia. It is indeed encouraging to note that of the contributors to the encyclopedia, twenty-nine are Sikhs with most of them having roots in Punjab countryside. It augurs well for serious academic work on Sikhism in the West in future. It also signals that henceforth the center of Sikh studies, at least those executed in English, is likely to shift from Punjab to western countries. Already, literature produced on Sikhism in North America and Europe in the form of introductory texts, dictionaries, and research publications is substantial.

As for the Springer encyclopedia, the editor writes: 'The aim is meant to provide [a] a critical resource to scholars interested in Sikh intellectual history and philosophy...[b] The entries cover some of the most important topics necessary for understanding the nature of Sikhism. [c]Unlike other encyclopedias we have tried to incorporate more thematically oriented entries which collectively give the reader a better picture of the fluid and ever-changing nature of contemporary Sikhism and its relations with other societies and contexts.'

The encyclopedia entries may or may not be thematically oriented, as claimed, but they are not categorized thematically. The entries, long and short, proceed in a simple alphabetical order with each entry displaying a list of synonyms immediately beneath it and cross-references at the end. For the entry 'Truth', for instance, Accuracy, Actuality, Exactness, Fact, Factuality, Genuineness, Legitimacy, Precision, Reality, Validity, and Veracity are listed as synonyms. Are they really synonyms? How do they help the reader, anyway? Even if they are helpful, what is the point of including them in the table of contents or the list of entries except to confound the reader?

How will a curious reader approach an encyclopedia of Sikhism? With what expectations? Naturally, one will expect to be updated on the perennial questions about Sikhism: Its genesis, context, specificity, growth and transformation during and after the Guru-period; its vision of Truth, Absolute or God, Nature and Man in their interrelationship as revealed in scriptures; the prescribed or preferred moral and spiritual Way to Truth and Liberation; the concepts of Time and History; social and political ideals; the institutions, rites and symbols and so on. Then, secondarily, there are the vast subjects of Sikh tradition and history in their different phases; literature, music and arts; the kingdom and royalty; and the struggles for survival and identity, sects and reforms before, during and after colonialism. All along, one will be interested in knowing how the earlier scholarship, including Gurbani exegesis and interpretation, grammar, and orthography as well as historiography, has been evaluated. Last but not least, a reader will look for a fair and objective account of some of the contemporary controversies and issues relating to, e.g., Dasam Granth, Nanakshahi calendar, Khalistan, Operation Bluestar and suchlike.

Indeed, Mandair's encyclopedia does cover most of the above topics directly or indirectly, partially or wholly and there is no need to list its contents all over again. If certain topics have been omitted or dealt with

somewhat unsatisfactorily in the book, this may be attributed to the post-theistic bias of the editor, or to unknown extraneous factors. There are no focused entries on the Divine, Nature, and Man in Sikhism or their interrelationship. Although there are entries on Bhagti, Bhagats, and Sants, Sufism has been left out. Not to speak of Sikh mysticism which is always less accessible and less palatable to the *homo academicus*, even the more rational topics of Gurbani grammar (*vyakaran*) and orthography have not been touched. To be sure, there are articles on Zafarnama and the poetry of Dasam Granth, but there is no full-fledged entry on the controversial Granth itself. Then, it is not clear why Bhai Vir Singh alone among 20th century Sikh scholars gets an exclusive entry but none else. One could go on in this vein pointing out omissions, but I stop¹.

What is disappointing above all and ought to be registered, however, is the absence of a suitable general introduction to Sikhism. There is a short entry on 'Sikhism' by Mandair, but that only defines it as a specific ideological articulation or representation of Sikhi formed during the colonial period by Singh Sabha scholars. In a separate brief entry on 'Sikhi', Mandair contrasts the emic term Sikhi (the same as Gursikhi, Gurmat or Sikh Dharam) with the etic and western notion of Sikhism and explains why the former is to be preferred to the latter. I think the conceptual contrast between Sikhi and Sikhism or the restricted meaning assigned to Sikhism by Mandair is idiosyncratic and may not be considered very important or useful by other scholars. In a general introduction or overview, Mandair could present his view of Sikhism as one among others and not as its only or standard conception. Actually, in the way he abstractly defines Sikhi – as 'a path of learning through lived experience', 'a path of self-perfection' or 'the core principles taught by Sikh Gurus' – Sikhism could always take its place. In any case, Mandair is himself forced to use Sikhism in the generic or non-ideological sense not only in the very title of the book but at many other places. Well, Mandair's post-theism encompassing his views on Sikhism, Sikh theology and Sikh philosophy requires a separate essay. At least there is one contributor to the encyclopedia, Balbinder Singh Bhogal, who seem to disfavor post-theism and regard 'non-dual monotheism' or 'monopanteism' as the right way to characterize Gursikhi.

Let us now turn to the entries in the encyclopedia. A good number of contributors have written on topics, which they have researched and

written about in the past. This is as it should be. On the other side are quite a few young scholars, either research students or recent entrants into the academe as teachers, who contribute a large number of articles to the encyclopedia. A mention should be made of the two retired Indian professors – Gurnam Kaur Bal and Himadri Bannerjee – who have written for the encyclopedia.

The entries, although generally well-written, vary in terms of sophistication, depth, clarity and elegance. And since the contributors' work seek legitimacy within the western academe, they cannot remain immune to its rationalist and empiricist orientation or to the intellectual currents and modes of discourse predominant in it. Thus, the transformation of Sikhism in relation to colonialism, modernity, and orientalism remains a recurrent concern in the articles with deconstruction, genealogy, postcolonialism and a certain historicism providing theoretical props as well as occasional jargon. As far as I can see, there is no serious engagement with the important work done by earlier Sikh scholars on various aspects of Sikhi or Sikhism. Some contributors write unmindful of the dictum that an encyclopedia is meant to share 'accumulated knowledge' in a chosen epistemic field and not to plough a lonely furrow.

Let us briefly consider some specific articles by way of example. Take the entry on 'Knowledge (*gian*)'. In the context of Sikhism or, for that matter any other religion, knowledge is to be understood as *gnosis* meaning 'an awareness of divine mysteries', as Aldo Margis defines it in the *Encyclopedia of religion* edited by Lindsay Jones. Gnosis is beyond or, at any rate distinct from, any commonsensical, scientific, or philosophical knowledge. For the Gurus, the *gian* does not progress from the perceptual level to the rational level and thence to the intuitive level, as the author of the author mistakenly believes, but is received or revealed to the gnostic seeker all at once. Both perception and reason get transformed in the gnostic light.

The article on '*dharam*' defines this original Indic concept with the help of Macmillan Dictionary instead of Kane, Olivelle, Hiltelbeitel or Arvind Sharma – all acknowledged authorities on the subject. It is well known that Sikhism invests the virtues of *sannyas*, *grihasta*, and *rajya* 'conjointly in a single body of faith and conduct' thereby overcoming dialectically the Brahmanical and the Buddhist or *shramanic* traditions of *dharmā*. Such a formulation should provide the key to the Sikh *Dharam* but is not considered in the entry or the book. In any case, if a reader

wants to know what *dhoul dharam daya ka put* (*dharam* is the son of mercy) in *Japji* means, he or she has to turn to F. Schuon's *The transcendent unity of religions* or elsewhere if Schuon is considered indigestible.

The entry on '*seva*' (service), similar to the ones on 'Miri-Piri or 'Sant-Sipahi', only scratches the surface. *Seva* is a transformation of renunciation (*sannyas*) as renunciation is an internalization of sacrifice (*yajna*). In the history of Indic spiritual dialectics, Vedic *sacrifice* gets internalized in the form of renunciation and asceticism with the latter mutating into the ethics of *self-sacrifice* or *seva*, including martyrdom, when it gets incorporated into the social world as in Sikhism. No such interpretation is to be seen in the entries on '*seva*' or 'Martyrdom'. In the latter entry, the author makes no reference to the works of JPS Uberoi or J.S. Grewal on the subject. What would one say to an entry on Sikh symbols that does not refer even to Uberoi's classic essay on the five Ks included in the book cited above, or to the view that directly relates Guru Nanak's thought to the 'emergent mercantile order' and 'money-based commodity exchange' as expressed in the article on modernity?

The encyclopedia articles dealing with Sikh art, architecture, music, biography, history, relics or other less abstract subjects such as Khalistan, Bluestar and the like are more satisfying than those dealing with Sikh theory and philosophy. As a general comment, I would say that all *theoretical* formulations made about Sikhism in its different phases or aspects in the book be treated as theses or hypotheses to be carefully examined and investigated in future studies.

All said and done, Springer's *Encyclopedia of Sikhism* will be a useful compendium and resource, particularly for the westerners including the Sikh diaspora, even if it does not much deepen our understanding of the truth and message of Sikhism or its project and problematique. At any rate, all will gain an insight into how academics abroad, Sikh and non-Sikh, view important issues related to Sikhism. Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair is normally a meticulous editor; I wonder how he let so many typos pass into the book. Mandair says in the 'Preface' that the encyclopedia is a project in progress and its digital edition will be available for updates and expansions. I hope some of the shortcomings and blemishes I have pointed out in the review can be taken care of in the future revisions.

I thank Springer for providing me access to the electronic version of the book for review. The access was granted for six months, but it was mysteriously suspended in the last week of December. Even though the access was later restored, the interruption affected my work and led me to hastily conclude the review essay.