

### Book review: Gurharpal Singh, Georgio Shani: Sikh Nationalism - From a Dominant Minority to an Ethno-religious Diaspora

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A notable strength of the book is that it shows how individual events and non-academic narratives, written by underprivileged working-class women without a university education, can be studied and considered academically. The book was published at the right moment and remains highly relevant, given how current and yet underappreciated the issue is.

*Silvia Mayasari-Hoffert*

GURHARPAL SINGH / GEORGIO SHANI, *Sikh Nationalism: From a Dominant Minority to an Ethno-religious Diaspora*. (New Approaches to Asian History). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 264 pages, 5 maps, £22.99. ISBN 978-1-3165-0188-7 (e-book)

Gurharpal Singh and Georgio Shani's book is a timely contribution to the study of Sikh nationalism for two reasons. First, the year-long farmers' protests in India that culminated in 2021 with the repeal of three contentious farm laws brought an intense spotlight to bear on Sikhs and Sikh nationalism. Second, debates triggered by census methodologies in the UK and elsewhere have drawn attention to Sikhs as an ethnic category, and prompted renegotiations of definitions of what constitutes an ethnicity.

The authors set out their intention at the outset – to challenge existing tropes of nationalism, and to reconceptualise Sikh nationalism away and apart from the dominant Marxist framework that sees nations as imagined communities, brought into existence after the fact of creation of nation-states, especially in the erstwhile colonies. To this end, the authors present Anthony D. Smith's model of nationalism as a more appropriate fit to the Sikh case than the classic formulations of Benedict Anderson and Paul R. Brass.

Smith's critique of nationalism is based on the ethnosymbolic approach, which views nationalism as the result of primordial communities evolving to adapt to modern political structures. Smith used the term *ethnie* as the preferred nomenclature for a set of features that bounded such primordial communities together in their collective movement through history. The *ethnie* includes a shared origin myth, common culture, language and claims to a defined, bounded territory. Drawing on Smith, the authors assert that the Sikh *ethnie* is anchored to the Khalsa – the brotherhood of baptised Sikhs – and to a territorial boundedness with the geographical limits of Punjab.

The book provides a comprehensive overview of the history of Sikh nationalism, from its birth to developments as late as 2018, covering a period of roughly 550 years. Throughout each chapter of this broad sweep of history, the authors succeed in striking a balance between summing up existing debates and

providing fresh perspectives, leaving the reader with a sense of being enlightened. For instance, the chapter on the partition of India and the Sikhs succeeds in extracting the Sikh narrative from the complex web of negotiations that accompanied the partition. Such an exclusive focus allows for a better understanding of the Sikh situation, enabling the study to distinguish itself from other scholarly works on the partition, in which Sikhs are relegated to footnotes in the larger negotiations between Hindus, Muslims and the colonial state.

Similarly, the authors provide illuminating insights into the period of Sikh militancy, challenging several commonplace, propagandist narratives. The authors propose that it was the army that in fact neutralised the prominent militants, while the Punjab Police merely took credit to provide a veneer of legitimacy to the Indian state's violent response to the Sikh insurgency. It is to this period of Sikh militancy that the authors also trace the roots of Punjab's present financial crisis, it being a consequence of the security state that Punjab had developed into, as the exigencies of anti-terrorism operations became the main consumer of the state's revenue.

Finally, the authors justifiably devote significant space to the role of the diaspora in shaping Sikh nationalism, while at the same time signalling precaution in "overemphasising" this role (p. 190). The authors conclude by proposing a shift in thinking about Sikhs from being a minority community to comprising a worldwide diasporic nation.

Perhaps the only weakness that this otherwise monumental study betrays is the chinks in Anthony D. Smith's theory of nationalism itself, upon which the authors build their argument. The first of these is that while Smith expresses discomfort at the idea of the nation as a mere "imagined community", the concept of the *ethnie* that he proposes as the alternative can be shown to be equally a constructed entity that is "imagined" into existence within the time-frame of modernity. This is perhaps even more palpable in the Sikh case, where the process of the evolution of the Sikh community is proximate enough in historical time to the present moment to allow for a much more lucid viewing of the unfolding of its historical narrative of creation and evolution than that of other, older communities.

This leads to a second, intimately related limitation of Smith's framework – that of the compartmentalisation of historical time into the modern and pre-modern. Smith conceived of *ethnie* as a "pre-modern" entity, and while definitions of what constitutes the modern are vague, the Khalsa, born in the eighteenth century, would by most definitions be regarded as modern rather than pre-modern. The various practices and codes of the Khalsa, called the *Rehit*, scattered among numerous historical documents called the *Rehitnamas* that were often at considerable variance with each other, evolved through the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries towards a gradual convergence, finally being codified into a single *Rehit Maryada* or code of conduct for the Khalsa

only in the twentieth century. To take the Khalsa as the core of the Sikh *ethnie*, rather than the older Sikh tradition dating back to the birth of the religion in the fifteenth century, would involve a significant reworking of Smith's conception of the *ethnie* as a bridge between a pre-modern ethnic core and the modern nation. Without such a reworking and adaptation, the *ethnie*, far from being primordial, can be shown to be a modern construction teleologically invested with significance, or what Ozkirimli and Sofos in their critique of Smith's theory term "retrospective ethnicization" (*Tormented by History: Nationalism in Greece and Turkey*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Another nominal issue with the application of the concept of the *ethnie* to the Sikh case relates to language and territory. The authors mistakenly, or perhaps inadvertently, attribute to Gurmukhi the status of a language, when in fact it is a script. Much of the Sikh scripture, and the majority of the Sikh canon, is written in the Braj-Awadhi dialect of what is known today as Hindi, using the Gurmukhi script. The Punjabi language as it is understood today appears conspicuously absent from Sikh religious and historical literature until the twentieth century, as do references to Punjab, its territory and its spatio-cultural geography.

Given the vast scope of the book, it is but natural that deviating into such tangents would be unfeasible – a limitation the authors acknowledge at the outset as the natural consequence of the convoluted and contested nature of Sikh and Punjabi history. Within the scope that the book sets out for itself, it emerges as an excellent resource, and would no doubt be indispensable to researchers, scholars and lay readers seeking to gain a deeper understanding of Sikh nationalism, from its inception to the second decade of the twenty-first century.

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ANNA-MARIA WALTER, *Intimate Connections: Love and Marriage in Pakistan's High Mountains*. New Brunswick et al.: Rutgers University Press, 2022. 244 pages, 19 images, 5 tables, \$34.95. ISBN 978-1-9788-2048-7 (pb)

All over the world, love and relationships are two central themes of songs, poems, fairy tales, films and literary works. Love and affection are intrinsic to social interactions and human relationships and this is why every human being can relate to them in one form or another. Yet few people can put into words how love and affection are manifested in interactions and relationships. In her monograph *Intimate Connections: Love and Marriage in Pakistan's High Mountains*, Anna-Maria Walter provides glimpses of how love and intimacy evolve in heterosexual (pre-)marital relationships in Gilgit district. Gilgit city is the urban centre