

# Self-Other Relations in Sikhism: Theoretical Insights for Global IR

Written by Seerat Arora

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## Self-Other Relations in Sikhism: Theoretical Insights for Global IR

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SEERAT ARORA, AUG 17 2023

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While the epistemology and ontology of Western-centric International Relations (IR) claim to be universal in nature, they are culturally confined and geo-politically biased at their very onset. The foremost task, thus, is to engage with the epistemological-ontological mosaics emanating from non-Western intellectual resources. One such underexplored non-Western intellectual resource is Sikhism which emerged in India around the fifteenth century. It is generally defined as a philosophical tradition of monotheism with few elements of Hinduism and Sufism. The philosophy of Sikhism presumes a fundamental unity underlying the diverse realities of the world as encountered by a variety of 'self' and 'other/s'. As such, the diverse realities of the world are to be considered mutually interconnected. In contemporary times, when IR theory and practice seem fraught with increasing 'us versus them' tensions, the Sikh philosophy can become an important platform to rethink and re-approach the persisting dilemmas of (im)morality that engulf self-other relations. The present article aims to achieve this goal. It is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the Sikh view of self-other relations. The second section provides an analysis of the big questions of morality in Sikhism. Finally, the third section explores how the non-Western intellectual resource of Sikh Philosophy can provide an alternative understanding of self-other relations in world politics by logically expanding the boundaries of Western-centric IR and, in doing so, adding to the Global IR deliberations.

### 'Self' and 'Other' in Sikhism: Questioning Western-centrism in IR

In IR, the spectacle of Western-centrism uses Europe as a cultural rather than a cartographical expression which ties both Western Europe and North America under the rubric of the 'West'. This Western-centrism not only visualizes the world from a self-proclaimed elevated stance of European and American scientific approaches, cultural values, and political concerns but also ignores or downplays the theoretical and praxeological agencies of the non-West. The recently challenged and questioned hegemony of the West presents itself as universalist in nature and, thus, argues for worldwide replication of specific governmental models based on the Western-centric identifications of liberty, equality, justice, rights, democracy, free market, etc.; habitually, these models are seen as an elixir to every challenge in world politics, no matter how diverse the non-Western experiences are politically, socially, culturally, and historically. The intellectual and performative superiority of the West is substantiated through some arguments that remain implicitly rooted in two key conceptual claims. First, 'evolutionism', i.e., the belief that the Western societies (as 'self') evolved better and, thus, they are ahead of the non-Western societies (as 'other'). This belief is bound by the Darwinian assumption that the West constitutes the epitome of the principle of 'survival of the fittest', and the non-West needs to imitate the same Western evolutionary trajectory in order to survive and flourish (Marwah 2023). Second, 'dualism', i.e., the perception that the modern West (as 'self') is separated from the traditional East (as 'other'). This perception is influenced by the Husserlian phenomenology that renders the 'theoretical intentionality' of the modern West as superior to the "practical orientation" of the traditional East (Husserl 1970).

Since IR tends to explain the expansion of the international system without devoting sufficient attention to its colonial origins, it has misdescribed the origins and characters of the modern world order. The traditional IR scholarship appears to espouse a unidirectional linear view of historical progression where the *telos* is invariably the Westphalian

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state system arising from the modern West. But then, even when Western norms are accepted in non-Western settings, the need to probe the origins of such norms is not undermined. Sanjay Seth (2013, 19) writes:

[T]here have been alternative accounts of the development of capitalist modernity, ones in which the development of capitalism and modernity is not a tale of endogenous development in Europe, but of structural interconnections between different parts of the world that long pre-dated Europe's ascendance – and that, according to some accounts, provided the conditions for that ascendance. Others, also dissenting from the conventional account, have not sought a grand alternative explanation, but have rather sought to show that the 'great divergence' between the West and the rest happened much later than the conventional narrative would have it, and due to historical exigencies rather than any trait or cluster of traits exceptional to Europe; once meaningful comparisons are made, the factors commonly thought to be unique to European history can be seen to have been present in parts of Asia.

The 'post-colonial' scholarship highlights how "quite different colonial and imperial systems were being established beyond Europe" (Seth 2013, 19) or how "'Asia as Method'...delinks 'modernity' from the West... [and informs the] collective *subjectivity* [of the Asians in such a way that they become prepared for] *speaking back* to the West..." (Shani 2022, 2). Nevertheless, in so doing, this post-colonial scholarship succeeds in getting rid of the Western-centric traits of evolutionism, not dualism: the task of counter-elevating the non-West as a site of alternative modernity does not help in bridging the established oppositional (or dualistic) cognitive gaps between the West and the non-West (Shahi 2019), and, therefore, ends up promoting a sort of 'Eurofetishism' in both theory and practice of IR (Hobson 2020). The research project of Global IR (as distinct from the post- or de-colonial scholarship) is to redefine the multifaceted self-other relations in such a way that it assists in reconciling the West-non-West oppositions. It is in this context that the philosophy of Sikhism acquires special significance.

There has been a dearth of engagement with the philosophy of Sikhism as a valid mode of enquiry, despite the status of the Sikh religion as the world's fifth most extensive and the spread of the Sikh diaspora in every part of the world. This philosophy primarily revolves around the tenets and teachings of its founder, Guru Nanak, whose ideas and ideals hold the very base of the theory-praxis broadly discussed as *Gurmat*, i.e., the overlapping but distinguishable strands of religious and philosophical activities (Mandair 2022). At the philosophical level, Sikhism answers the following questions about self-other relations: Is the self inherently independent or detached from the other/rest? Or are the self and the other/rest mutually chained and coupled within the larger holistic paradigm?

In Western philosophy, the self is understood as an individual's own contemplative awareness. Plato's views on the self can be gathered from his idea of the soul: precisely, the self is an immortal soul that exists unassisted of the body and is competent of knowledge and understanding beyond the physical realm. Plato perceives the self as a knower and explains how the ideas of the self and knowledge are interconnected. For Plato (1943), the idea of the self is based on the nature of the soul, which is rationally placed at the highest level of cognition. Furthermore, for Hegel (1977), the self, as a distinct being, acquires self-consciousness through a 'dialectical process': here, the self as a subject becomes an object to the other (or another subject). In other words, the self identifies itself by looking at itself through the lens of the other. This dialectical process generates two opposing tendencies in self-consciousness: on the one hand, there is a moment of unification when the self identifies with the other, thereby enabling self-realisation, and, on the other, there is a moment of difference when the self is aware of the 'otherness', or say, 'alterity' of the other in comparison to itself, and vice versa (Levinas 2003). In the realm of IR, these opposing tendencies of mutual recognition and alienation are on sheer display: the 'us versus them' tensions between the self and the other are nothing but the expressions of these opposing tendencies, i.e., tendencies that often manifest themselves as 'life and death struggle' for recognition.

Unlike Western philosophy, which preserves dualism (or separation) at various moments of self-other interactions, Sikh philosophy advocates an idealistic monism with linkages of non-dualism, dynamism, and altruism. The idealistic monism here can be comprehended from two standpoints: first, the 'monist epistemology' whereby the object is not perceived as free of the subject/perceiver; second, the 'monist metaphysics', which starts with the probe of the ultimate reality and its essence, namely '*Ik Oankar*'. To put simply, the assumption that the ultimate reality underlying the diverse realities of the world is led by *Ik* (literally meaning 'one') is a testament to the claim of Sikhism being monistic in its spiritual nature yet pluralistic in its material manifestation: as such, the ultimate reality is infinite, yet

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finite.

According to the Sikh philosophy, the self is a part of one God, which is essentially called the 'Divine Self'. Whatever the self perceives or seeks is a creation of God wherein s/he himself exists as the true element. Therefore, the consciousness of the self is the realisation of oneself as the Divine Self. The ultimate state of realising the self is attained after liberating oneself from material and immaterial obstacles. This liberation is the point where one attains the utmost knowledge and moves forward in becoming one with the Divine Self. Therefore, it can be analysed that there are no clear boundaries between the self and the other. This characteristic of Sikhism can be corroborated by deducing a verse from the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the central text of Sikhism: "You are me, and I am You-what is the difference between us? We are like gold and the bracelet, or water and the waves" (Sri Guru Granth Sahib: Khalsa Consensus Translation 2018, 173).

If one draws inferences from Sikhism on self, mind, and consciousness, one realises that there exists no solid distinction between the self and the other; instead, there is a critical engagement with the idea of *Haumai*, i.e., the 'ego/self-centredness' as embedded in different tendencies such as lust, greed, wrath, pride, and attachment. As each individual struggles for perfection, the *Haumai* or ego/self-centredness of the individual finite self, is to be dismissed, and submission to the idea of *Ik* or oneness is to be imbibed. In fact, *Haumai* or ego/self-centredness "is both the main impediment to and a necessity for freedom. This means that freedom is attained not by negating the *I am*' (which would be pure asceticism in the worst sense) and the state of primal void or chaotic self-differentiation. The void (*sunn*) is not to be envisaged as a thing or an entity in the sense of a vacuum or nothingness but as a process of negating the psychic formation, '*I am myself*' in the very moment in which the '*I*' or self is produced. It is a [process of] self-emptying inscribed within the self' (Mandair 2022, 109), as indicated in this verse: "O Nanak, if one desires to recognize this imperative, Then avoid saying: '*I am myself*'" (Mandair 2022, 82). In a way, *Haumai* traverses the road of duality by disconnecting the notion of a separated self/I from every hurdle; it is here when the soul of self/I experiences the oneness with the other.

## Morality in Sikhism: Acquainting with Non-Dual Virtues

In Western-centric IR, the notion of morality is nothing but the process of forming a distinction between right and wrong or good and bad. A quote frequently attributed to Oscar Wilde reads, "Morality, like art, means drawing a line someplace" (Wassertheil-Smoller 2004, 189). As such, morality becomes a social construction of binaries whereby certain activities are either prescribed or prohibited. In Sikhism, the virtue of morality is not categorically mentioned as a manual of 'dos or don'ts'. Though there is an absence of such inflexible binaries, it does not mean that the Sikh philosophy lacks an essence of morality. Morality in Sikhism is not understood as something disconnected from the self; instead, morality is understood as the very extension of the realisation of an 'egoless self'. The idea of morality, thus, becomes an essential pre-requisite for the existence of the self. As such, this morality focuses heavily on unity, a collectivist view and more extensive good. The stress on the 'I-ness' of an individual self is discouraged as it goes against the foundation of the Divine Self: logically, the Divine Self (as the whole) is above the individual self (or a part of the whole); and this consideration is to be given significant priority in socio-political theory and praxis. Unlike the Western-centric notions of morality that draw a line between the self and the other (or West and non-West), the understanding of morality in Sikhism is firmly based on the imagination of 'unity of all'.

One can illustrate how the Sikh imaginations of 'unity of all' stand to reconfigure the traditional theory-praxis of 'social justice' and 'social equality' in domestic and world politics. With regard to social justice, one can refer to the Sikh conceptualization of *miri-piri*, which is symbolically represented by two swords signifying the unity of the political and spiritual facets of life: while *miri* denotes political authority, *piri* suggests spiritual authority. In practice, the principle of *miri-piri* involves seeking justice not just for oneself but also for the other/s that are needy, oppressed, and abused. As such, the principle of *miri-piri* creates no stiff borders between the self and beyond. The claim of Sikh morality addressing social justice can be understood through the sub- and supra-national unison of socio-political realms wherein the self witnesses high resistance against injustice and oppression. The Sikh activism here represents a form of 'alternative politics' that seeks to challenge the existing power structures and create new forms of spiritual/socio-political engagement that are rooted in the Sikh philosophy (Arora 2023).

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This form of alternative politics seeks to achieve and maintain social equality: the very foundation of Sikh philosophy rejects discrimination and exploitation of any individual, irrespective of socio-political affiliations in terms of race, caste, colour, creed or gender. In practice, the Sikh philosophy justifies the use of violence between equals. But violence is considered viable only to the extent that it is necessary for securing self-help and survival; to be sure, violence in the form of crimes against civilians is regarded as unjust and unacceptable. Also, violence is to be evoked only as the last expedient in the face of socio-political confrontations. Preferably, the Sikh philosophy argues for a collectivist and community-based tradition which stands on three pillars, namely *Sangat*, which means 'congregation'; *Pangat*, which means 'same row'; and *Langar*, which is the act of 'eating together' regardless of the dissimilarities in socio-political affiliations of the self and the other: here, the separated positionality of the self (as subject) is certainly questioned and discouraged. In the process of self-realisation, the Sikh philosophy considers the erasure of the boundaries between "us" and "them" as crucial, thereby creating an immutable universality which echoes the spirit of Global IR.

## Sikhism and Global IR: Revisiting the Self-Other Dynamics

Within the theoretical frameworks of Global IR, which intend to dissolve all kinds of binaries between the West and the non-West (Acharya and Buzan 2019, Eun 2022, Chu 2022), Sikh philosophy can serve as an analytical lens to navigate the negative consequences of 'othering' and the positive possibilities of redefining the collective identity of the self and the other, thereby formulating a new notion of 'globality' that goes beyond the post- and de-colonial ways of drawing a clear-cut line of separation between the West and the non-West.

Markedly, the post-colonial belief stems from the potential created by the cultural engagements of the past, which provides knowledge and perspectives of the 'other' or the 'occident'. The attempt is to decolonise the psyche and rebuild the vandalised knowledge traditions which remained demeaned throughout the colonial period. In this context, the agenda to problematize the colonial politics of language remains a potent tool. Wa Thiong'o Ngugi (1986, 9) argues: "In my view language was the most important vehicle through which that [Western colonial] power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation."

This poststructuralist exposition of the self is central to post-colonial thinking and, by extension, to its relatively actionable iteration, namely, de-colonial thinking (Foucault 1982). It is contended that post-colonialism cannot claim to be objectively intelligible as though it were a 'view from nowhere' (Nagel 1986). On the other hand, De-colonialism is sometimes used interchangeably with post-colonialism but has substantial differences. While post-colonialism examines anti-colonial movements to challenge imperialism and colonialism, de-colonialism encourages multiple knowledge formations by employing plural local histories. But both post- and de-colonialism aim to reject Western modernity and restore the notions of an 'authentic non-Western self'. In their attempt to voice dissent against Western modernity, they mimic the Western-centric IR by holding onto the duality of knowledge-production that endorses the subject-object/self-other divides amongst many other conceptual binaries.

However, the analytical lenses have moved over the years to the point where we observe the arrival of what we call 'Global IR', i.e., an intellectual movement that has gradually shifted away from post- and de-colonial studies in a bid to transcend the divides/binaries between the West and the non-West (or Global North and Global South). An exciting way to look at the self-other relations under the aegis of Global IR is through 'relationality', which implies an understanding of the interconnected world wherein nothing exists in isolation or on its own. Instead, there is a constant interplay of miscellaneous embodiments of the self and the other (including the political actors coming from the West and the non-West) that remain consistently tied to an underlying interconnected world. Taking the Sikh philosophy into account, which argues that there is 'no other', one can make a case for the formation of a unified world order that goes beyond the fixed level of analysis (local or global). In this context, Sikhism and its collectivist theory-praxis could be applied as an analytical approach to developing an alternative understanding of the rational and irrational anatomies of the self and the other.

Intriguingly, the 'new wave of globality' sanctioned by Global IR is an overarching canopy where discourses like Sikhism can exist and strengthen the discipline by promoting alternative knowledge traditions without creating the

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West-non-West divides or binaries. The idea is to reclaim one's history and not erase the colonial or Western universalities but engage in an infinite assortment of knowledge resources. The validity of these new knowledge sources should depend on their dialogical capability. The dialogical capability of Sikhism in understanding the self-other relations in the international system at large can be appreciated only when it coexists, negotiates, compromises and navigates its way through a range of parallel Western and non-Western knowledge traditions. As such, any single knowledge tradition (including Sikhism) is to be accepted only tentatively, and no claim of finality should be made. The desirable effort in advancing the Global IR research project is to build a co-constitutive arrangement which is unconfined, unbound and at liberty to improve the nuances of different Western and non-Western positions in knowing the self and its engagement with the other.

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