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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Sikh Advaita Vedānta

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Abstract
This article examines the *Sūraj Prakāś* (1843), a devotional historical narrative on the Sikh Gurus by Santokh Singh, to argue that the text mobilizes an Advaitic lexicon within a distinctively Sikh framework of Guru-centred devotion. Drawing on the intellectual training Santokh Singh received at the Giānīā Bungā in Amritsar, the *Sūraj Prakāś* systemically enumerates Advaita Vedānta concepts only to sublate them into Sikh practices of *bhakti* and service (*sevā*). The article situates Santokh Singh within a broader Sikh lineage stretching from Bhai Gurdas (1551–1636) and Mani Singh (1644–1738), while also setting his writings alongside wider early modern devotional Vedānta writers like the Assamese writer, Śaṅkaradeva (1449–1568). Using Michael Allen's framework of a 'Greater Advaita Vedānta' and Rao and McCrea's notion of an 'Age of Vedānta', the article demonstrates how Santokh Singh's writings exemplify the devotional reworking of non-dual philosophy across sectarian lines. More broadly, it highlights how Sikh scholastic traditions were not passive borrowers of Vedānta but active participants in reshaping it, demonstrating how Advaita was a pliable, transregional idiom that could be domesticated through Guru-centred devotion into what may be called Sikh Advaita.

Keywords: Sikh; Advaita Vedānta; Santokh Singh; Giānīā Bungā

Introduction

This article explores Sikh articulations of Advaita Vedānta in the *Sūraj Prakāś* (1843), a devotional historical narrative on the lives of the ten Sikh Gurus, contextualizing the text's generous usage of Advaita terminology and concepts. This epic genre (*mahākāvya*) styled Brajbhākhā[1] text was composed on the eve of the British annexation of Punjab (1849). Its articulation of a Sikh Advaita will be shown to follow from earlier eighteenth-century Sikh texts. As the *Sūraj Prakāś* was completed before British rule in Punjab in many ways it represents the pinnacle of precolonial Sikh literary

[1]Punjabi does not employ a retroflex sibilant 'ṣ'; in vernacular adaptations of Sanskrit vocabulary this sound is commonly represented as the guttural 'kha', producing Brajbhākhā rather than Brajbhāṣā.

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production.[2] To contextualize this usage the article will briefly foreground the rising role Vedānta played in the early modern period, its role in courtly culture, and how devotional communities such as the Dadu Panth, along with Vaishnava thinkers, contributed to the field of Advaita Vedānta. In shedding light on Advaita in the Sikh intellectual spheres of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the article will contribute to scholarship on devotional and vernacular Vedānta. This project will add to the broader field of early modern Vedānta research which was spearheaded by Minkowski,[3] Venkatkrishnan,[4] and later formulated as 'Greater Advaita Vedānta' by Allen.[5] This formulation has expanded the boundaries of 'Vedānta' to include vernacular works and non-philosophical works which include the *bhakti*, Yoga, Sāṁkhya, Tantra genres, to name but a few. This article will explicate how the *Sūraj Prakāś* fits within Allen's framework of 'Greater Advaita Vedānta' while the text itself remains beyond the confines of 'Hinduism'. This exploration of Sikh intellectual traditions' use of Advaita during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provides valuable insights into the popularity of Advaita in early modern South Asia and how it functioned across transregional and transreligious realms, adding weight to the work of Rao and McCrea, who argue an 'Age of Vedānta' arose between 1500–1800.[6]

The rising sun of early modern Vedānta

Even though Vedānta can be traced back to the earlier Upanishads (800–300B CE) it achieved widespread engagement during the early modern period within philosophical, devotional, and even courtly settings, across both North and South India. As mentioned earlier, Rao and McCrea argue that the period from 1500–1800 can be seen as the 'Age of Vedānta', where Vedānta rose to such prominence that sectarian communities were forced to draw upon its conceptual language to articulate their theology and practice. To this effect, Fisher, writing of the early modern period, notes 'a community's stance on Vedantic ontology—the nature of the world according to the Upanishads—became the philosophical foundation of intersectarian polemic'.[7] This section will trace the varied trajectories of Vedānta, highlighting how different communities and traditions sought novel ways to integrate, adapt, and appropriate Vedānta, which also extended into royal courts.

[2]Christopher Shackle, 'Survey of Literature in the Sikh Tradition', in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, (eds) Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 118.

[3]Christopher Minkowski, 'Advaita Vedānta in Early Modern History', *South Asian History and Culture*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2011, pp. 205–231.

[4]Anand Venkatkrishnan, 'Love in the Time of Scholarship: An Advaita Vedāntin Reads the Bhakti Sūtras', *Journal of Hindu Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2015, pp. 139–152.

[5]Michael S. Allen, 'Greater Advaita Vedānta: The Case of Niścaldās', *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2017, p. 291.

[6]'Age of Vedānta: 2019 Conference', Stanford University Center for South Asia, Stanford Humanities Center, 15–16 November 2019, https://southasia.stanford.edu/age-vedanta-2019-conference. Also see Elaine M. Fisher, *Hindu Pluralism: Religion and the Public Sphere in Early Modern South Asia* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), p. 45.

[7]Fisher, *Hindu Pluralism*, pp. 45–46.

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Within Mughal, Rajput, and Sikh courts, Vedānta texts were being translated and retold. Recent work on Vedānta in early modern period, notably Shankar Nair's exploration of Persian translations of the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*, demonstrate the attention that, specifically, Advaita Vedānta received from Hindu and Muslim intellectuals alike. During this period translation projects—such as Emperor Akbar's *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* projects, as well as Sufi Persian renditions of the *Bhāgavad Gītā*—varied greatly in their intentions, ranging from fostering social unity and seeking philosophical and religious commonality to merely seeking confirmation of one's own theological views.[8] For example, one identified motivation behind Emperor Akbar's translation project was to reduce the bickering and tension between Muslims and Hindus at the time.[9] Meanwhile, in regard to a *Gītā* translation by 'Abd al-Raḥmān Chishtī, Nair writes, 'it seems, the motivation for studying non-Muslim materials was more a matter of finding confirmation for 'Abd al-Raḥmān's own theological views, rather than necessarily appreciating Hindu teachings in their own terms'.[10] While 'Abd al-Raḥmān would openly critique doctrinal errors in the text, like divinity of Krishna, he found commonality in the principle of the Unity of Existence (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) and the idea of non-dualism (*Advaita*), as mentioned in the *Gītā*.[11]

Within devotional communities too, Vedānta held considerable currency. While *nirguni*[12] devotees like Kabir are not classified as Vedāntins, Lorenzen notes how scholars, like those in the Kabir Panth, argue that 'Kabir's God clearly reflects his debt to the idea of nirgun Brahman associated with Shankaracarya's Advaita Vedanta'.[13] In fact, the interplay between devotion (*bhakti*) and the *jñāna*, or wisdom, of Vedānta, was central to many devotional writers, including the famed Tulsidas (1511–1623) in his *Rāmacaritamānas*. Ankur Barua notes that from the text's opening verse 'the interfusion of Advaitic and devotional motifs is evident'.[14] Barua, whose work on devotional Vedānta will be explored in depth, productively maps the spectrum of ways in which medieval Vaishnava communities and thinkers engage with Advaita alongside their devotional practice. These differing perspectives of Vedānta will be important to note and will be revisited when exploring Santokh Singh's articulation of a Sikh Advaita.

During the same period of Tulsidas, another devotional community emerged: the Dadu Panth, or the Path of Dadu, centred on the charismatic leader Dadu Dayal (1544–1603), whose devotional poetry resonates strongly with that of Kabir and Guru Nanak. The devotional community continued to expand, forming a branch of Naga armed ascetics, who were also integrated with royal courts, like that of the Kachvāhās of Amer and Jaipur in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, fighting in states'

[8]Shankar Nair, *Translating Wisdom: Hindu-Muslim Intellectual Interactions in Early Modern South Asia* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), pp. 173–174.

[9]Ibid., p. 173.

[10]Ibid., p. 174.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Viewing the Divine as without 'qualities' and thus without form.

[13]David N. Lorenzen and Adrián Muñoz (eds), *Yogi Heroes and Poets: Histories and Legends of the Nāths* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), p. 48.

[14]Ankur Barua, 'The Devotional Metaphysics of Śaṅkaradeva (1449–1568): The Advaitic Brahman as the Beloved Friend', *Journal of Hindu Studies*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2017, p. 316.

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conflicts.[15] Meanwhile successors of Dadu, like Sundardas, were producing devotional literature, which, Allen argues, clearly articulates Advaitic principles. Allen's exploration of Dadu Panth writers leads to his formulation of the 'Greater Advaita Vedānta' model to expand the boundaries of classical Advaita, normally located within Sanskritic scholastic circles which excluded devotional writers such as Sundardas. Allen's 'Greater Advaita Vedānta' formulation rests on two doctrinal criteria for identifying texts or individuals as belonging to this framework: first, that the acknowledgement of the world as illusionary, and second, the assertation of the identity between *jīva* (soul) and Brahman (underlying ground of existence). Allen's expanded criteria also include: third, an appeal to the authority of the Vedas; fourth, an appeal to the authority of Śaṅkarācārya; fifth, institutional affiliation or lineage back to Śaṅkarācārya; sixth, recognition or acceptance by later Advaita Vedāntins; and seventh, use of Advaita conceptual vocabulary.[16] Allen's analysis of a Dadu Panth writer, Sundardas, ties his work to the first two and the seventh criteria but not to points three to six: not all of these elements need to be present for a work or individual to be understood within the formation of Greater Advaita Vedānta.[17] It will become clear that Santokh Singh also fits within this formulation in accordance with the first two criteria—accepting the illusionary nature of the world and the identity between *jīva* and Brahman—as well as through his broad use of Advaitic conceptual terminology. Furthermore, Santokh Singh's articulation of a Sikh Advaita will mirror previous articulations, as detailed by Barua when exploring the Assamese Vaishnava, Śaṅkaradeva (1449–1568).[18]

Contesting Vedānta in Sikhi—the place of Santokh Singh

While the *Sūraj Prakāś* developed widespread appeal in the decades following its completion, during the reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the text came under attack for its use of Vedānta and Purānic mythology. During a time of polarization and communal conflict, finding commonality was replaced with proclamations of difference. The *Sūraj Prakāś*, in a precolonial fashion, embraced both commonality and difference, but in the colonial period readers selectively used the text for their ideological ends.[19] In the colonial period Vedānta was

[15]Monika Horstmann, 'On the Dual Identity of Nāgas', in *Devotion Divine: Bhakti Traditions from the Regions of India*, (eds) Diana L. Eck and Françoise Mallison (Groningen: E. Forsten, 1991), p. 255.

[16]Michael S. Allen, 'Greater Advaita Vedānta: The Case of Sundardās', *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2020, p. 58. Jason Schwartz presents an alternate model to find commonality between the vastly different positions presented by Advaita thinkers, arguing that doctrinal uniformity was not the shared attribute but rather a commitment to a common set of hermeneutical strategies to read a text: Jason Schwartz, 'Parabrahman Among the Yogins', *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, vol. 21, 2017, p. 346.

[17]It should be noted that Sundardas was described by Raghavdas as being the 'Second Śaṇkara' in his 1660 hagiography, the *Bhaktmal.*

[18]Barua, 'The Devotional Metaphysics of Śaṅkaradeva'.

[19]Prominent Sikh reformist Kahn Singh Nabha, in his 'Ham Hindū Nahī' ('We Are Not Hindu'), published in the *Punjab Gazette* (30 June 1899, no. 447, p. 7), commences his work by quoting the *Sūraj Prakāś* as evidence that Sikhs were not Hindus. By contrast, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* (first published 1923; here citing the 5th edn, Bombay: Veer Savarkar Prakashan, 1969, p. 55), quotes the *Sūraj Prakāś* to argue that Sikhs are Hindus.

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re-coded as 'Hindu only', which forced reformist Sikh scholars like Bhai Vir Singh (1872–1957) to treat Santokh Singh's Advaita as an anomaly or error, rather than a continuation of the Giānīā Bungā tradition. As mentioned before, while Sufis could draw on Vedānta in the precolonial period, during the colonial period it became exclusively associated with Hinduism, in much the same way that Yoga too was removed from Sufi practice. It was this backdrop that created issues for the *Sūraj Prakāś* when scholars attempted to explain away any Vedāntic-oriented teachings and terminology. The turn away from Vedānta in the Sikh community during this period does not only occur in historical texts—the shift is also evident in the commentarial traditions.[20]

By the time the *Sūraj Prakāś* was printed in the 1930s in a more accessible format, in spaced script as opposed to the tradition scriptio continua (*laṛīīvār*), the shift away from Vedānta in the Sikh community was complete. Any such mention of Vedānta was deemed foreign to the tradition and thus its presence needed to come with extensive disclaimers. The publisher of this version, the renowned reformist Bhai Vir Singh (hereafter 'BVS'), explained away these elements by claiming that they were only included because Santokh Singh was influenced by the Brahmanical circles in which he learned about the *Purāṇas.* According to BVS, it was in this environment that Santokh Singh took a liking to Vedānta and it was this personal connection alone that caused him to infuse the stories of the Gurus with Vedāntic instruction.[21] One example from the first section of the text, related to Guru Nanak, includes a story where the Guru is telling a tale of Rumi's teacher, Shams Tabrizi. BVS adds a comment at the end, remarking: 'These stories of Mansūr and Shams are well known among the people of India, Sufi thought, and Hindu Vedāntins. It would have been better if the respected poet had told such stories in poetry and not have placed them in the lotus-like mouth of the True Gurus.'[22] BVS attributes the inclusion of Vedāntic materials solely to Santokh Singh, without considering that he may have been drawing on eighteenth-century source materials at his disposal, a point to which we shall return later in the article. An extension of the argument that Santokh Singh was influenced by his early education and environment to include Vedānta is to claim that he belonged to the Nirmalā order of Sikhs, a scholastic group focused on the translation of Sanskritic literature to vernacular languages. This will be explored in the next section which details Santokh Singh's early education.

Little critical work has been conducted on Santokh Singh's engagement with Vedānta, and the limited scholarship that does exist has not meaningfully analysed his writings in depth. Balasubramiam's edited volume on *Advaita Vedānta*, which brings together articles on Advaita from both Sanskritic and vernacular traditions, provides an extensive survey of Advaita across South Asia. In the chapter on the Sikh tradition's exploration of Advaita by Nirbhai Singh, a brief entry on Santokh Singh's works is included, which describes them as an important contribution to the field of Advaita without much explanation as to why.[23] In his *Historical Analysis of the Nānak*

[20]Taran Singh, *Gurbāṇī Dīan Viākhiā Praṇālīān* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1980).

[21]*Nānak Prakāsh*, Uttarāradh, Aṅsū 51, verse 6, footnote.

[22]*Nānak Prakāsh*, Uttarāradh, Aṅsū 37, verse 99, footnote.

[23]Nirbhai Singh, 'Advaita in Punjabi', in Advaita Vedānta, vol. 2, pt. 2 of *History of Science, Philosophy, and Culture in Indian Civilization: Life, Thought, and Culture in India*, (ed.) R. Balasubramanian (New Delhi: Centre for Studies in Civilizations, 2000), p. 610.

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Prakāś,[24] Sagar examines the work and its sources, taking issue with the undercurrent of Vedānta in the text, viewing it as an outside influence which lessens the value of the text. Unproductively, Sagar does not define what type of Vedānta and understands it as a monolithic philosophical system that was utilized by the ruling classes to maintain the status quo. Deol, in writing a review of Sagar's work, soundly critiques this formulation as well as Sagar's failure to introduce the reader to the peculiarities of these 'Punjabi explications of Vedānta';[25] he then urges further scholarship on Santokh Singh's work, since critical scholarship on it is nearly non-existent.

Thus, this article will, for the first time, explore Santokh Singh's usage of Advaita, arguing that the *Sūraj Prakāś* mobilizes an Advaitic lexicon within a Guru-centred devotional soteriology. Through the exploration of eighteenth-century sources, the article will demonstrate that this usage is not anomalous nor borrowed from the Nirmalā order but rather stems from the intellectual training of the Giānīā Bungā in Amritsar. Through Allen's 'Greater Advaita Vedānta' framework, the article demonstrates how Santokh Singh adapts and links Advaitic concepts to *gurbāṇī*, Sikh scripture, and Guru-centred devotion (*bhakti*). Santokh Singh will be situated alongside figures such as the Assamese writer Śaṅkaradeva, whose devotional Vedānta similarly reworked Advaitic concepts for sectarian aims. This comparison highlights how early modern devotional communities across South Asia transformed Advaita into a vernacular resource. More broadly, I argue that Santokh Singh exemplifies a larger early modern phenomenon—the devotional reworking of Advaita across sectarian lines. By placing Sikh materials within this wider constellation, I demonstrate that Advaitic categories were not confined to Sanskrit scholasticism or narrowly 'Hindu' traditions, but were vernacularized, domesticated, and mobilized in Sikh intellectual life.

The Giānīā Bungā

The *Sūraj Prakāś*, also known in full as the *Gurpratāp Sūraj Granth* ('The Sun-like-Illumination of the Guru's Glory'), is a text of epic proportion, surpassing 60,000 verses by Santokh Singh who has been described in the Sikh tradition as being akin to Vyāsa, a sage in Vedic tradition who is credited with compiling and dividing all the Vedas, as well as composing the epic *Mahābhārata*.[26] Completed in the city state of Kaithal, Haryana, just prior to the arrival of the British into this region in 1843, in many ways the text represents the pinnacle of precolonial Sikh literary production, based on the esteemed praise the text received along with it becoming foundational for the texts created thereafter. To this day the text has an 'enormous and continuing influence'.[27] The author of the text, Santokh Singh, was born in 1787 in a village outside of Amritsar,

[24]Sabinderjit Singh Sagar, *Historical Analysis of the Nānak Prakāś* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1993). The *Nānak Prakāś* comprises the first two sections of the larger compiled *Sūraj Prakāś*. This section only focuses on the life stories of Guru Nanak.

[25]Jeevan Deol, 'Sabinderjit Singh Sagar: *Historical Analysis of Nanak Prakash* by Bhai Santokh Singh. 169 pp. Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1993', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 61, no. 1, 1998, p. 166.

[26]Harmeet Singh, *Mahā Kavi Bhāī Santokh Singh (A Collection of Seminar Papers)* (New Delhi: Punjabi Academy, 1991), p. 94.

[27]W. H. McLeod, *Sikhism: Textual Sources for the Study of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 12.

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Punjab, to a clan of tailors. The bright child showed promise, first studying with his father Deva Singh, before being admitted under the tutelage of the most prominent Giānī (scholar) in Amritsar named Sant Singh, where he would study for nearly a decade, learning Brajbhākhā, Sanskrit, Sikh scripture and history, along with Vedāntic and Purāṇic literature. His teacher Sant Singh had himself written a commentary on the *Tulsī Rāmāyaṇa*, which was well received outside of the Sikh community, and he would have likely taught various Sanskrit works to the young Santokh Singh, as they were frequently mentioned within the *Tulsī Rāmāyaṇa* commentary and can also be seen referenced in the *Sūraj Prakāś*.[28] To understand Santokh Singh's use of Advaita it is important to have a clear sense of his training and affiliation with the intellectual tradition in which he was trained.

Early modern Sikh intellectual traditions have largely been associated with the Nirmalās and Udāsīs, two ascetic and celibate orders that trace their lineages to the Gurus. The Nirmalā group, literally meaning 'spotless', came to prominence during the nineteenth century due to Sikh patronage from Sikh rulers in the Malwa region.[29] This group connects its origin to Guru Gobind Singh, who they claim sent five Sikhs to Varanasi to study Sanskritic literature, so they could bring back that knowledge and educate the rest of the Sikh community.[30] These five students of Sanskrit formed the foundation of the Nirmalā *sampradāya*, which was an intellectual tradition engaged in various scholarly activities including, but not limited to, producing commentaries on Sikh and Sanskrit texts, *kathā* (discourse), and the maintenance of Sikh shrines.[31] The Udāsī tradition links its origin to the ascetic son of Guru Nanak, Sri Chand (1494–1630), and was a group which, while having no uniform organizational structure, all practised asceticism, differentiating themselves from the Khalsa Sikhs.[32] The Udāsīs set up seminaries and from the eighteenth century, produced vast amounts of literature, writing many different types, including commentaries on *Gurbāṇī*, scripture written by the Sikh Gurus, and historical texts.[33] While the Nirmalās and Udāsīs were, and continue to be, important, the field of Sikh intellectual traditions, however, was broader than a focus on these two groups allows. A primary example of this is the Bungā (institution) of the Giānīs ('wise ones'), which was an influential school in Amritsar that claimed a lineage back to Mani Singh (1644–1738), a close associate of Guru Gobind Singh, who scribed the Damdama recension of *Guru Granth Sahib*.[34] McLeod writes of the Giānīā Bungā:

> The hereditary Gianis were those exegetes of the Adi Granth who did not follow the strongly Vedantic cast of Nirmala thought. According to tradition, some Sikhs were appointed to interpret the scripture by Guru Gobind Singh. It was

[28]Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Rāmcaritmānas of Tulsidas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 142.

[29]W. H. McLeod, *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism*. Historical Dictionaries of Religions, Philosophies, and Movements, no. 5 (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1995), p. 155.

[30]Piara Singh Padam, *Sikh Sampradāvalī* (Patiala: Kalgidhar Kalam Foundation, 2000), p. 49.

[31]Ibid., pp. 64–65.

[32]McLeod, *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism*, p. 215.

[33]Padam, *Sikh Sampradāvalī*, p. 32.

[34]McLeod, *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism*, p. 134.

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> in the nineteenth century, however, that certain families acquired reputations for teaching and interpretation, particularly in Amritsar. Their most influential pupil was Santokh Singh.[35]

The lineage and details of the Giānīs of Amritsar were noted in the *Bhāī Sāhib Candrikā*, an early, unpublished nineteenth-century text written by Megh Singh, a student of Sant Singh Giani and classmate of Santokh Singh. Megh Singh writes after that Guru Gobind Singh blessed Mani Singh with the meanings of Guru Granth Sahib, he instructed him thus:

> *Srī mukhavāka bhāī manī singha prati. Doharā.*
> *ādi grantha ke aratha kī rahī rīta guru pāhi.*
> *Aba tuma ko bakhasī hamai pragaṭa karo jaga māhi.*

> From the Exalted Mouth [of Guru Gobind Singh] to Bhai Mani Singh. Dohara meter:
>
> 'The tradition of expounding the meanings of the *Ādi Granth* had remained with the Guru; now, having been graciously entrusted to you, make it manifest in the world.'[36]

Megh Singh details the lineage continuing from Mani Singh to Gurbakhsh Singh, who passes the teachings on to Surat Singh, Sant Singh's father. Drawing a distinction between the Giānīā Bungā and the Nirmalā and Udāsī intellectual traditions will be important in thinking through Sikh intellectual traditions more broadly during this period. Recent English scholarship has incorrectly associated Santokh Singh with the Nirmalā tradition: Shackle considers Santokh Singh to be one of the most prominent Nirmalā exegetes.[37] As McLeod's quote above makes apparent, Vedāntic or Purānic scholarship was associated with groups like the Udāsīs and Nirmalās and not with the Giānīs of Amritsar. This article will challenge this assumption, demonstrating that not only was Santokh Singh invested in these frameworks, but it followed from his training at the Giānīā Bungā.

Exploring the literary productions of the Giānīā Bungā is crucial for understanding how Vedānta, in particular, is expanded upon in the works of Santokh Singh. Many of their texts were arbitrarily attributed to the Udāsīs or Nirmalās largely due to how they incorporated Advaita in their writings.[38] Yet, the historical record from the nineteenth century is clear that these texts do have a connection, in some form, to Mani Singh, who represented the core of the Tatt Khalsa[39] tradition within Amritsar during the eighteenth century. The Nirmalā association, as noted by Shackle,[40] should

[35]Ibid., p. 86.

[36]MS 279, accessed at Guru Nanak Dev University.

[37]Christopher Shackle, 'Repackaging the Ineffable: Changing Styles of Sikh Scriptural Commentary', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 71, no. 2, 2008, p. 263.

[38]This is notable in regard to *Gyān Ratnāvalī* and the *Gurbilās:* see Surjit Singh Hans, 'Historical Analysis of Sikh Literature (A.D. 1500–1850)', PhD thesis, Guru Nanak Dev University, 1980, p. 305.

[39]'Tatt Khalsa' was a term used for the mainstream Khalsa Sikhs of the eighteenth century, differentiating from ascetics orders like the Udāsīs and the Bandai Khalsa, followers of Banda Bahadur.

[40]Shackle, 'Repackaging the Ineffable'.

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therefore be challenged, as should Taran Singh's insertion of Santokh Singh's name under the category of Nirmalās in his *Gurbāṇī Dīān Viākhiā Praṇālīān:* he does so because 'Nirmala scholars have recognized him as a Nirmalā' (*par niramale vidavānān ne uhnān nūn niramalā maṅiā hai)*.[41] However, famed Nirmalās like Giani Gian Singh and Tara Singh Narotam themselves do not claim Sant Singh or Santokh Singh as their own in their lineage charts.[42] While Tara Singh Narotam writes that Santokh Singh has written the 'boat of great praise of the Guru' (*guru ke jas ka jihāj likhyā)*, his Nirmalā vegetarianism is apparent when criticizing other authors who copy the *Sūraj Prakāś* without discerning what is appropriate or not, pointing to Santokh Singh's description of meat in the *langar* (communal free kitchen) of Guru Angad.[43] For his part, Santokh Singh never writes a historical origin story for the Nirmalās in his expansive work, nor does he ever write of himself being a Nirmalā.[44] The lack of a Nirmalā origin story is striking considering the breadth of the text, covering other origin stories of *sampradāyas* (lineages/groups) like the Akālī Nihangs, Sevāpanthīs, and Udāsīs. Why would Santokh Singh omit the origin story of his own *sampradāya?* Santokh Singh clearly positions himself as a student of Giani Sant Singh, even beginning the text with an invocation praising his teacher, thereby linking him with the Giānīā Bungā.

Clarity on this point is important and must shape how we understand the development and genealogy of Santokh Singh's text. I argue that Santokh Singh's import of Advaita was not from any Nirmalā influence, but rather was consistent with his training from the Giānīā Bungā, as evidenced from the texts produced from this institution. This also challenges McLeod's assertion that the Giānīā Bungā 'did not follow the strongly Vedantic cast of Nirmalā thought', which has encouraged scholars to treat Advaitic elements in Sikh texts as Nirmalā or Udāsī imports. Re-reading Santokh Singh within the Giānīā Bungā lineage directly challenges this assumption: his Advaitic usage then appears not as a borrowed anomaly, but as the organic continuation of Sikh intellectual traditions. It also demonstrates how widespread the currency of Vedānta was during this time. At the beginning of his *Sūraj Prakāś*, Santokh Singh explicitly refers to utilizing the 'texts of Mani Singh',[45] thereby situating himself within the lineage of the Giānīā Bungā. His engagement with Vedānta, particularly Advaita, must be understood within this lineage, aligning with the teachings and textual traditions of the Giānīā Bungā, as will become evident below.

The 'fifth season'

This section will highlight portions of a ten-chapter section within the 'fifth season' (*punjavī ruti)*,[46] an encyclopedic section that explore widely topics from *karma, haṭha*-yoga, Vedānta, and teachings specific for the Singhs, the martial Sikhs. This

[41]Singh, *Gurbāṇī Dīan Viākhiā Praṇālīān*, p. 121.

[42]Vir Singh, *Srī Gur Pratāp Sūraj Granth Jilad Pahilī: Srī Gur Pratāp Sūraj Granthāvalī Dī Prastāvanā* (Chandigarh: Bhasha Vibhaag, 1989), p. 100.

[43]Tara Singh Narotam, *Gurmat Nirnay Sāgar*, (ed.) Balbir Singh Viyogi (Hardwar: National Press of India, 1979), p. 353.

[44]Singh, *Gurbāṇī Dīan Viākhiā Praṇālīān*, p. 121.

[45]See Rāsi 1, Aṅsū 5.

[46]The *Sūraj Prakāś* is organized in 22 roughly proportional sections. Guru Nanak's portions are divided between two halves, *pūrabāradh* and *uttarāradh*, or in the context of the larger text the sun rise, and sun

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section serves as Santokh Singh's textual laboratory for integrating Advaitic philosophy into a Sikh idiom—Vedāntic concepts are enumerated systematically but at key moments are sublated into Guru *bhakti* and Guru-centred practice. Thus, this section provides the clearest window into what I term Santokh Singh's 'Sikh Advaita'.

While the source material of many portions of the *Sūraj Prakāś* is identifiable, it is unclear if the ten chapters in the fifth *'ruti'* or season (as the sections are called) are reworkings from a previous Sikh source or if they are a novel creation by Santokh Singh. However, it should be noted that portions of this section can be found in his earlier work, such as a commentary on Guru Nanak's *Japu*, called *Garab Gañjanī* (1829) (see below). Within the *Garab Gañjanī*, Santokh Singh declares that he is relaying the information taught to him by *Gurmukhs* (those facing the Guru) to his teachers and others in Amritsar (*jis rīti gurmukh te sunayo hai so kahat hain*). Thus, it is likely he is conveying material taught within the curriculum of the Giānīā Bungā. G. W. Leitner (1840–1899), a British linguist who would become the principal of Government College University in Lahore, wrote *History of Indigenous Education in Punjab Since Annexation* in 1882, which provided a grand survey of popular literary texts during this time. While detailing the curriculum of study for a Giānī, Leitner noted that to obtain this title one needed to be knowledgeable in Vedānta.[47] However, as mentioned before, during the reform movements Vedānta lost its appeal in Sikh circles, creating a need for extensive explanatory footnotes in BVS's printed version. Indeed, when BVS published his printed version of *Sūraj Prakāś* in 1935, he noted that 'for scholars (*gyānian)* they made apparent this "fifth season" section was their biggest struggle, the most studied and famous scholars would get stuck while trying to traverse this section'.[48] Clearly, the content of this section was perceived as being unfamiliar, complex, and difficult.[49]

For reasons of brevity, the article will highlight only select passages from the ten chapters that illustrate Santokh Singh's method of drawing on Advaitic concepts while embedding them in a Sikh devotional framework. Among the clearest illustrations is Santokh Singh's treatment in the third chapter, where he directly engages with the four great sayings *mahāvākyas* used in Advaita, which declare non-duality.[50] Defined by Santokh Singh as utterances that manifest awareness of the undivided consciousness (*akhaṇḍa caitana*), they are enumerated with their Vedic sources. Yet Santokh Singh immediately turns this enumeration into instruction for a Sikh audience by conjoining them with *gurbāṇī*. He asserts that the four *mahāvākyas* are already written in Guru Nanak's *Japujī*, the first composition within the *Guru Granth Sahib*. The *Japujī* can easily be considered the most important single composition of Sikh scripture. As the foundational composition of Guru Nanak, its recitation is mandated as a daily prayer. Santokh

set. The sections of the second Guru, Angad to the ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur, are located within the 12 *rāsi* (Skt. *rāśī*), zodiac signs, and the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, has sections within the six seasons, *che rutān*, and two solstices, *do ayan*, with each chapter within these sections called *aṅsū* (Skt. *aṁśū*) or sunray.

[47]G. W. Leitner, *History of Indigenous Education in the Panjab Since Annexation and in 1854* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1882), p. 32.

[48]Singh, *Srī Gur Pratāp Sūraj Granth Jilad Pahilī*, pp. 12–13.

[49]A recent publication by Gurmeet Singh Khosa Kotla, *Anubhavatā dā Samundara* (Divana, Barnala, Punjab, India: Sac Kī Belā, 2023) is a Punjabi commentary on this 'fifth season'.

[50]The four *mahāvākyas* include: 'You are it' (*tattvamasi*) from *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, 6.8.7, 'I am Brahman' (*ahaṁ Brahmāsmi*) from *Brihadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 1.4.10, 'Wisdom is Brahman' (*prajṇānaṁ Brahma*) from *Aitareya Upaniṣad*, 3.3, 'This Self is Brahman' (*ayam ātmā brahma*) from *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, 1.2.

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Singh details within *Japujī* four verses which each relate to hearing (*śravana*), reflection (*manana*), and contemplation (*nididhyāsana*).[51] The four verses of *nididhyāsana* all end with a phrase that, according to Santokh Singh, is equivalent in meaning to the *mahāvākyas*. The verses end with the lines *tū sadā salāmat niraṁkār*:[52] for Santokh Singh the *tū* represents the You (*jīv*), It; *sadā salāmati* represents the *tatt* or *īśvar* (supreme divinity); and *niraṁkār* ('the formless') represents Brahman. Together it reads: 'You and It are both the Niraṁkār', which Santokh Singh sees as equivalent to the meaning of the *mahāvākyas*. More examples are then given from the *Japujī* relating to the *ektā* (oneness) of *jīva* and Brahman, alongside examples from the writings of the fifth Guru, Arjan. Ultimately Santokh Singh writes that these are just a few examples: 'the wise who contemplate on the meaning of the verses within the Guru Granth will find many more examples of the *abheda eka*, the undifferentiated one'.

Later in the chapter Santokh Singh glosses the three chapters (*kāṇḍa*) of practice, notably action (*karam*), devotion (*upāśana*), and wisdom (*gyān*). Within the *gyān kāṇḍa*, Santokh Singh quotes directly from the Taittirīya Upaniṣad, 'The Absolute is Existence, Knowledge, Infinitude' (*satyam gyāmantantam braham*), linking this to the 'You are That' (*tattvamasi*) *mahāvākya*.[53] It is notable that in this section Santokh Singh also quotes a line that Śaṅkarācārya uses repeatedly within his *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, 'There is indeed only one Absolute, non-dual Brahman, there is not even an iota of duality here' (*ekamevā dutīyam brahamam neha nānāsati kimcana*).[54] This section then glosses the term 'Vedānta' as that which is concerned with *gyān kāṇḍa*, the chapter of knowledge instruction, which all the Upaniṣads explicate. The chapter ends with the line 'Santokh Singh says when understanding one's form (*sarūpa*), then all becomes fruitful'.

The following chapter—47—now dives deeper into the concept of *śravana* (hearing), glossing the indicators of meaning (*tātparyaliṅga)* of the two types and the six parts, consisting of the unity of the beginning and ending of a composition (*upkarama and upsaṁahāra*), repetition (*abhiyāsa*), newness (*apūrabatā*), result (*phala*), declarative portion (*arthabāda*), plausibility (*upapati*). Originating from Prakāśātman, a follower of Śaṅkarācārya, these hermeneutic tools were developed to aid in understanding the essence of a text under examination.[55] The explanation of these terms, as provided in the *Sūraj Prakāś*, was written by Santokh Singh earlier, in his commentary on Guru Nanak's *Japujī* (*Garab Gaṅjanī Ṭīkā*). There Santokh Singh concludes his commentary on the set of four stanzas within *Japu* which relate to 'listening' (*suṇiai*).[56] Just as in the *Garab Gaṅjanī Ṭīkā*, in this chapter, Santokh Singh utilizes the six-fold analysis of *śravana* and reorients them, with references from *Gurbāṇī*. In relation to *upkarama* (opening), Santokh Singh provides the example that within the *Guru Granth Sahib*, it begins and

[51]For Santokh Singh, in the *Japujī*, verses 8–11 are related to hearing (*śravana)*, verses 12–15 are related to reflection (*manana)*, and verses 16–19 are related to contemplation (*nididhyāsana).*

[52]Christopher Shackle and Arvind-pal Singh Mandair (eds and trans), *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus: Selections from the Sikh Scriptures* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 9, translate this line as 'O Formless One, secure forever'.

[53]Taittirīya Upaniṣad 2.1.1, transated in John Grimes (ed. and trans.), *The Vivekacūḍāmaṇi of Śaṅkarācārya Bhagavatpāda: An Introduction and Translation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 159.

[54]Vivekacūḍāmaṇi, verse 470.

[55]Yigal Bronner and Lawrence McCrea, *First Words, Last Words: New Theories for Reading Old Texts in Sixteenth-Century India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 41.

[56]Santokh Singh, *Srī Gur Pratāp Sūraj Granth* (Amritsar: Chatar Singh Jivan Singh, 2006), p. 75.

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ends describing *ek*, the One. With reference to the second component, *abhiyāsa*—that element which is repeated consistently to drive home its importance—Santokh Singh gives the example of the non-dual consciousness which is written repeatedly; he then quotes two different lines from *gurbāṇī* as evidence. For the result (*phala*), Santokh Singh writes of the service to the Guru, which delivers knowledge of the *ātmā*. Later in the chapter, Santokh Singh claims these six indicators of purport are mentioned in the sixth chapter of the *Chandogya Upaniṣad*, and in the same way, Guru Nanak's *Japujī* expounds on the importance of *śravana*. Here too we find a repurposing of these components, tailored to a Sikh audience with Sikh-specific practices and references from *gurbāṇī*.

The second to last chapter of this section—49—begins with questions posed to Daya Singh on how Brahman can become apparent via means of knowing if Brahman is outside of the purview of *pramāṇas*. This leads to a discussion on two types of perspectives (*pakṣa*). The first is *vidhimukhya*, the perspective of affirmation, in which Brahman is considered within the scope of the *pramāṇas* to aid in its discussion and explanation for the audience. The second is *niṣedha pakṣa*, the perspective of negation, where Brahman is called *neti neti* ('not this, not that'); from this viewpoint or perspective (*pakṣa*), Brahman cannot be located within any *pramāṇa*.[57] Daya Singh then explains the two *shaktī*s or powers of *māyā* (illusion), *āvaraṇa* (concealment), and *vikṣepa* (projection). Daya Singh explains that through the practices of hearing, reflection, and contemplation (*śravana, manana, nidhidhiyāsana*), the divine becomes apparent (*sākhyāt*), separating from the three material qualities of the world, and one's mind-state (*vṛitti*) becomes still within the fourth (*turiyā*) state of being, which is beyond the illusion (*māyā*). The two *shaktīs* of *māyā* are destroyed via the Guru's *śabada* or 'word'. A short description of the making of meaning—the understanding of connotation, exploring *jahallakṣaṇā, ajahitī, bhāgatyāga*—follows, before an exploration of the six qualities of *jīva* compared to the six qualities of *īśa* (the Divine). This chapter concludes with a stark warning against those who recite the *mahavākyas* but who are unripe within. Santokh Singh insists that the *mahāvākyas* are to be silently internalized, while the spoken word is to affirm humility:

> *Paḍhe granṭha bana baiṭhe gyānī. Nānā jugatini karahin bakhānī.*
> *ahambrahamāsami kahain sunāi. Tanahaṅtā nahin chuṭī balāi*. 34
> Reading texts and setting up as Giānīs [learned ones/priests], speaking in all types of ways.
> Saying to others, *'ahambrahmāsami* [I am Brahman]', but they have not escaped from the catastrophe of the identification with the body.

> *Tina mahin sāra na payyati kaise. Bhasama būāḍa tilani mahin jaise.*
> *kidhaun gyāna briti kācī rahī. Thiratā bhale na mana ne lahī*. 35
> How would they obtain the essence within themselves? They are like dried up weeds in a field of sesame.
> His cognition of knowledge is unripe; he has not properly grasped tranquillity in his mind.

[57]Rut 5, Aṅsū 49, verses 1–2.

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karamani mahin nisaṅga hui baratā. Bahai su janama marana kī saritā.
sunahu khālasā satigura mata ko. Jisa te jīva pāi sada gati ko. 36
He will without carry on according to his *karma*, the river of death and rebirth will continue to flow.
Listen Khalsa to the *mat* [understanding/teaching/path] of the Guru, by which the individual obtains eternal liberation.

beda sāsatra ko sāra nikāra. Hita sikkhani satigurū ucārā.
sakala matani son milyo pachāno. Ara sabhi te nyāro pahicāno. 37
The Grand True Guru extracted the essence from the Vedas [and] recited it the sake of his Sikhs.
Know that this knowledge is merged with all paths but understand it [is] distinct from them all as well.[58]

The conclusion of this ten-chapter section ends with a chapter mirroring the position above, entitled 'Teachings for the Singhs' (*siṅghan upadēś*), the initiated Khalsa Sikhs of Guru Gobind Singh. Here again we see how this knowledge of Advaita is being specifically integrated within Sikh practice, with clear instructions not recite the *mahāvākyas* out loud, but rather to hold their meaning within one's heart, (*ahaṁbrahamāsami vahira na gāvo, eis briti hiyare bikhai tikāvo*). The recitation of such phrases does not eradicate one's association with the body, without the incorporation of a humble devotional practice, *bhakti*. For Santokh Singh this is the essence of Guru Nanak's teachings: knowledge (*jñāna*) alone does not lead to liberation. What is required is the integration of devotional practice alongside knowledge (*milyo bhagati soṁ gyān bakhāna, kal mehiṁ kevala nahiṁ śubha jānā*). Additionally, contrary to the classical Advaita of Śaṅkarācārya, which holds that knowledge (*jñāna*) is the sole means to liberation, Santokh Singh expands the paths through which Sikhs can attain liberation. He emphasizes that the Guru would also liberate those Sikhs who practise selfless service (*sevā*), charitable giving (*dāna*), and righteous warfare (*dharmayuddha*).[59] Throughout the text Santokh Singh makes it clear that knowledge alone can, at best, provide a temporary taste of liberation—and at worse, it can lead one further down the path of duality, plunging them into the depths of hell. The remedy to this problem, he argues, is the mixing of *bhakti* with *jñāna* (knowledge), creating a recipe which ensures the proper digestion of knowledge but also the attainment of liberation.

The perfect recipe: balancing wisdom's ghee with sugary sweet devotion

Throughout Santokh Singh's work, we find a recurring metaphor being used: the mixing of the sweet sugar-like devotion (*bhakti*) with the dry, dense, ghee-like knowledge (*jñāna*). Without this combination, the ingestion of knowledge alone would lead only to further problems. This metaphor finds a striking parallel in early modern devotional Vedānta elsewhere in South Asia. Ankur Barua, in his study on the Assamese devotional poet Śaṅkaradeva, highlights how Advaitic metaphysics was interwoven with *bhakti* in ways that dissolved the binary between the two paths. Śaṅkaradeva, drawing on the

[58]Rut 5, Aṅsū 49, verses 34–37.
[59]Rut 5, Chapter 49, verses 40–45.

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Bhāgavata-purāṇa, describes spiritual progress as an interfusion of *jñāna* and *bhakti*, 'closely interrelated spirals' of knowing the Lord and devotion directed toward the Lord.[60] Barua's study provides an example of how devotional communities did not treat *jñāna* and *bhakti* as alternatives but as mutually sustaining forces. Placed alongside Śaṅkaradeva, Santokh Singh's recipe metaphor signals his participation in a broader early modern mode of devotional non-dualism—Advaita is not denied but is domesticated through Guru-centred *bhakti.* This strategy underscores the larger argument of this article: Sikh scholastic traditions such as the Giānīā Bungā were not passively borrowing Vedānta but were actively reshaping it into a distinctive Sikh Advaita, one in which knowledge can only be digested when sweetened by devotion.

A particularly vivid illustration of this principle in the *Sūraj Prakāś* is found in Santokh Singh's account of Guru Arjan and the compilation of the *Ādi Granth* (later known as the *Guru Granth Sahib*). The *Ādi Granth* not only includes the writings of the Sikh Gurus but also many famous *sant* poets like Kabīr, Nāmdeva, Trilochan, etc. Santokh Singh frames the episode as a test of discernment—when a call was sent to poets to submit their writings for possible inclusion, many arrived hoping to have their verses preserved in the scripture. Bards from Varanasi arrived reciting praise of the Gurus, recorded as the *bhaṭṭan de svaiaye*, while others came only to have their compositions rejected. The story is instructive on the types of poetry deemed unacceptable for inclusion in Sikh scripture, giving us a clear articulation of what type of writings were acceptable. The story, as told in the *Sūraj Prakāś*, begins when three friends—Kānā, Pīlū, and Shāh Hussain, in Lahore—hear that Guru Arjan is collecting writings from across the subcontinent for their new *granth.* While none of them has their writings accepted by Guru Arjan, the reasons for their rejection are highly informative. Kāna is the first to present his writings, which leads to an argument (discussed below); Pīlū then has his passage rejected for being too negative 'towards women, promoting celibacy over the householder tradition (*grishtī jīvan*)'. Shāh Hussain, the last of the group, is dejected by the previous two negative responses, and does not bother to present his verses; instead, he recites a line about the benefit of remaining quiet.[61]

Pertinent to this discussion about Advaita is the response Guru Arjan provides to Kānā, utilizing the metaphor of balancing food according to *ayurveda.* Kānā's objectionable composition is recorded as the following:

> I am that, oh I am that!
> Which the *Vedas* and *Purāṇas* have sung about, and which no one has ever been able to search and find!
> That which *Narad* and *Saraswati* serve, and which all other Gods and Goddesses serve
> That which *Brahma, Vishnu*, and *Shiva* worship, and that to which all serve!
> Says Kānā, that is my True Form, the infinite, the indescribable, the undivided![62]

[60]Barua, 'The Devotional Metaphysics of Śaṅkaradeva', p. 314.
[61]Rāsi 3, Aṅsū, verses 45–46.
[62]*Ohī re main ohī re*
jānkau beda purana sabhi gāvain khojati khoja na koeī re
Jāko nārada sārada sevain sevai devī devā re
Brahamā bisanu mahesa arādhahin sabhi karade jākī seva re

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Santokh Singh writes that when Kānā recited this passage Guru Arjan stopped him, saying that such a composition would only increase the ego of Sikhs who read this. The Guru explained that despite the sentiment being philosophically true, such a truth cannot be administered in the dark age (*kaliyuga*), and upon listening to it men would ruin themselves and run towards vice (*hai to sahī taū nara kali ke bigarahin lagahin bikārani dhāei*). Guru Arjan then explains in a metaphor that knowledge of the self is akin to clarified butter, and for someone with a *kapha* disposition,[63] having clarified butter would only increase their belly: this is akin to an egotistical person only increasing their ego with the knowledge of Brahman. For someone with a *pita* disposition, having clarified butter would only result in diarrhoea: this would be akin to a vice-filled person only increasing their propensity to partake in vice. Therefore, the proper delivery for knowledge of Brahman would be with the sugar like devotional worship (*so brahama gyāna ghritta ko le kari misarī bhagati milāvana ṭhāni*). The Guru concludes:

> All know that this mixture brings peace, and through this method one achieves liberation.
> Keep *ahambraham* ('I am Brahman') within one's heart, but on one's lips should say, 'I am the slave of the slaves'.[64]

This is a consistent framework and metaphor utilized throughout the *Sūraj Prakāś*, both in the portions related to Guru Nanak (*Nānak Prakāś*) and in the spiritual instruction delivered by various Gurus. Philosophical knowledge of the reality of the world is by itself not enough to secure a liberative state: the interaction and engagement with the Guru through the mode of *bhakti* is key. Unlike Sundardas, who articulates a clear hierarchy between *bhakti* and Vedānta, with Vedānta at the top, for Santokh Singh these two elements must be combined in equal ratios.[65]

A precedent for this connection between *bhakti* and knowledge (*jñāna*) can be seen in *Gurbāṇī*, such as in Guru Gobind Singh's *Akāl Ustati* ('Praise of the Immortal'), from the *Dasam Granth*: 'Without contemplating wisdom the fool drowns in the waves of hell; without *bhāvana* (devotion/love) how can one contemplate on wisdom?'.[66] This connection between devotional practice and knowledge is critical for Santokh Singh, as we will see for other eighteenth-century writers, even amid Advaitic exegesis. In the text the locus of devotional practice is centred on the Gurus themselves, which guides the construction of this text. It is not surprising, then, that the text has been understood as a vessel of praise of the Gurus by later writers.[67] While the sectarian devotional focus can differ, in Santokh Singh's case it is centred on the Gurus, and in

Kahi kānā asa mama sarūpa hai aparampara alakha abhevā re
Rāsi 9, Aṅsū 45, verse 26.

[63]This relates to three Ayurvedic body types, *kapha, vāta*, and *pitta*.

[64]*Sukhadāyaka sabhi nara ko jānahu eisa prakāra kari ke kallyāna.*
ahambrahma tau ura mahin base mukha te kahai dāsa dāsāni. Rāsi 3, Aṅsū 46, verse 29.

[65]Allen, 'Greater Advaita Vedānta', p. 72.

[66]*ḍūbe naraka dhāra mūḍha giāna ke binā bicāra bhāvanā bihīna kaise giāna ko bicāra hīn*. Dasam: 14.

[67]Sumer Singh writes that Santokh Singh created a vessel of praise of the Gurus that liberates those who engage with it; see Sumer Singh, *Gurpad Prem Prakāś (1880)*, (ed.) Achhar Singh Kahlon (Patiala: Punjabi University, Patiala, 2000), p. 527.

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Śaṅkaradeva's case on Krishna, the model of devotional focus to an Advaitic form of liberation is key. Śaṅkaradeva writes, 'For there is no liberation without devotion'.[68]

Integration into the plot

While the previous section explored a group of chapters which provide an encyclopedic glossing and explanation of Advaitic concepts, these concepts also appear throughout the narratives related to the Gurus. These concepts manifest in the teachings emerging from the mouth of the Gurus but also in the conception of the Guru. While for a narrative story this may appear difficult, Santokh Singh is drawing from narrative frameworks such as the *Rāmacaritmānas* by Tulsidas, where we see the 'integration of the Advaita and Vaishnava systems'.[69] More will be said regarding this connection: it must be remembered that Santokh Singh trained under the renowned Sant Singh of Amritsar, who wrote a commentary on the *Rāmacaritmānas.* Throughout the *Sūraj Prakāś* we have not only the articulation of Advaita principles, albeit with the Sikh flavouring detailed above, but also of the Gurus portrayed as an embodiment of the non-dual Brahman, an incarnation (*avatāra*) of the ground of reality.

One unique concept within Advaita is that of *anirvacanīyakhyāti*, the perception (*khyāti*) of the world as neither *sat*, true, or *asat*, untrue, the idea that the world doesn't exist, but it doesn't not exist either. In the section entitled the 'fifth zodiac' (*punjavī rāsi*), Guru Hargobind, the sixth Guru, on his way to Delhi, stops at Majnu Tila where he meets an elderly saint who asks whether the world is illusionary or real. Guru Hargobind explains that the world is dreamlike, a common Advaita trope, and utilizes the theory of *anirvacanīyakhyāti* to explain:

> When a man sleeps and dreams, when within that dream state, they think that entire world they are in is real,
> As long as that person is in that dream they think, they act as if that world is real,
> They might get scared in the dream and run, they might experience love and great joy,
> If we are to say that well a dream is false, if they didn't act as if it was real then why do some men, while having a wet dream, ejaculate?
> When they wake up and the dream dissipates, and if the dream was real, then why cannot you view the dream then? Why has the dream world vanished?
> This is why the world, which is illusionary and created by the Divine cannot be called or thought of as real or false, it is neither existent nor non-existent [*anaravacani*].
> But this correct awareness, this clarity in vision is not obtained without the Grace of the True Guru.[70]

[68]Barua, 'The Devotional Metaphysics of Śaṅkaradeva', p. 324.
[69]Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text*, p. 7.
[70]*Suni satiguru tabi utara dīni. Jabi nara supatani niṅdrā līni.*
Supana avasathā jabihūṅ pāi. sagala jagata jānahu tisa bhāi.
Jabi lau supanā nara ko rahai. Tabi lau sāco hī tisa lahai.
bhai pāvati aru bhājyo jāti. Kai Priya dekhati ura harakhāti. 33
Je supane ko jhūṭhe jānahi. Trāsa bikhāda harakha kyoṅ ṭhānahi.
tabi sāco lakhi kai sabhi karai. Bīraja bina sāce kyoṅ girai. 34

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Guru Hargobind continues with more common Advaita tropes, such as erroneously seeing a snake instead of a rope. The notable shift in the application of Advaita here is a necessity upon the Guru's grace as a release from erroneous perception. The sections of Advaita explored above in the 'fifth season' are consistent with the teachings of the Gurus throughout the narrative, implying they are not just there solely for exploration of non-relevant metaphysical points, but are to provide an enumerated collection and explanation of core philosophical concepts.

In another important instance, two Sikhs travelled to Kiratpur, in the Punjab hills, to visit Guru Har Rai, the seventh Guru. When these two Sikhs arrived, they saw the Guru was resting on his bed, appearing to be asleep. These Sikhs who were known for their melodious singing of *Gurbāṇī* began discussing whether they should begin singing for the Guru or not. They thought perhaps the singing would awaken the Guru, causing him to be angry. Then one of the Sikhs remarked:

> The True Guru is forever within the *turīyāvasathā* (the transcended state, i.e. the fourth state), wherever and whenever, he is the witness (*sākṣī*) form behind the three states of consciousness. Like a lotus flower beautifully detached from water. They will hear the remembrance of Hari and be in joy and will be pleased with us.[71]

The Sikhs then began performing the kirtan, melodiously and with great love, at which point the Guru awoke and quickly dismounted off his bed, striking his knee against the bed stand. The Sikhs were shocked and asked why the Guru jolted off the bed in such haste, to which he explained that in order to respect *gurbāṇī*, no one should sit higher than anyone reciting it. Beyond an instructive lesson on how to respect *gurbāṇī*, this exchange shows how Santokh Singh has integrated concepts of Advaita into the conversation between Sikhs, relating to the nature of the Guru. Throughout the text Santokh Singh writes of the Gurus experiencing the full range of the nine *rasas* (aesthetic flavours of experience) which may demonstrate that the Guru is not firmly within the *turīyāvasathā*. For instance, when Guru Hargobind's mother, Mata Ganga, passes away, Santokh Singh cleverly describes the actions of the Guru as part of the play (*līlā*) of the Guru who, 'akin [or playing the role] of a man, [Guru Hargobind] broke out in tears'.[72] This verse drew the attention of the publisher in 1935, BVS, who writes a footnote defending the position of the Guru, attacking cold-hearted men—wise in name only—for not being able to understand such deep inner feelings. Here Santokh Singh wants to have it both ways: the Guru is the substratum, the ground of all being, yet displays emotion that can evoke and conjure up emotions within the listener. The role-playing strategy is employed throughout the text in these situations, in

jāgrata jabahi avasathā pāi. Je sāco tabi kyoṅ na disāi.
yāṅte anaravacani prabhu māyā. Jānī parahi na bina guru dāyā. 35
sāca jhūṭha kichu kahī na jāi. Tiha kāraja iha jaga tisa bhāi.
māyā ko ākhaya agyānā. Isa ko rūpa na nija ko jānā. 36
Rāsi 4, Aṅsū 53, verses 32–36.

[71]*Kahahi parasapara satigura sadā. Turī avasathā mahi jada kadā.*
tīna avasathā sākhī rūpa. Jayon jala kamala alepa anūpa.
suni hari simarana ānaṅda dharain. Ham har khusī āpanī karain. Rāsi 10, Aṅsū 21, verses 6–7.

[72]*Nara anuhāra rudana ko ṭhānā*. Rāsi 5, Aṅsū 62, verse 16.

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a manner that allows some readers to connect with the Guru's emotions, while others understand the Guru to be beyond the condition of a mortal.

Innovation or expansion?

Santokh Singh's usage of Advaita is arguably more explicit than any other Sikh historical narrative, due in part to the sections within the 'fifth season', but also to the frequent incorporation of Advaitic concepts and dialogues within the narrative accounts of the Gurus. However, the integration of Advaita is not unique to Santokh Singh; it continues a trajectory established by the Giānīā Bungā, as will be shown from the eighteenth-century texts from this intellectual tradition. The Giānīā Bungā's appropriation of Advaita sources and synthesis with Purāṇic mythology illustrates how non-Vaishnava communities engaged with what were typically construed as Advaita or Vaishnava sources, simultaneously recognizing shared themes yet reconfiguring them to reinforce their distinctive devotional orientation towards the Sikh Gurus.

BVS mentions that Santokh Singh was first taught by his father Deva Singh, who 'was a great scholar, a *gyānī* (scholar) and connoisseur (*rasīe)* of *Gurbāṇī*, as well as studied on the knowledge of Vedānta'.[73] Deva Singh's father had a brother who lived in the market of Nihal Singh, where he would occasionally take his son, Santokh Singh, to stay for periods of time. Eventually, at a young age, Santokh Singh trained under the most renown scholar (*giānī*) in Amritsar, Sant Singh. In Lutgendorf's exploration of Tulsidas's *Rāmacaritmānas*, he notes the reception of Sant Singh's commentary, quoting Sharan who writes, 'In the presentation of interpretations and in the resolution of doubts, this commentary is in a class by itself; no one else's influence is to be found here.'[74] Sant Singh's command of Sanskrit allowed him to make frequent reference to *Vālmīki's Rāmāyaṇa, Śiva, Viṣṇu, Padma*, and *Bhāgavata Purāṇas*, along with the *Upaniṣads*.[75] Alongside these references Sant Singh includes references and points of clarification from the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Ganesha Das, who wrote the *Char-i-Bagh-i-Punjab*, notes, 'Bhāi Sant Singh Gyani was famous for his understanding of the *Granth*'.[76] This training was likely available to Santokh Singh, who took up learning in Sanskrit, Awadhi, and Brajbhasha. While Sant Singh completed the commentary after Santokh Singh left his tutelage, the similarities in narrative style of the *Rāmacaritmānas* and *Sūraj Prakāś*, curating the adventures of personalities while expanding on philosophical, particularly Advaita, and devotional, particularly *bhakti*, fit easily to the idea Santokh Singh was influenced by this text under Sant Singh. Santokh Singh's connection with Sant Singh, and thus the Giānīā Bungā, afforded him many resources which sprung out of this lineage. Santokh Singh was consistent in his expansion of Sikh thought integrated with Advaita terminology and paradigms, as they followed from the works associated with the Giānīā Bungā.

[73]Singh, *Srī Gur Pratāp Sūraj Granth Jilad Pahilī*, p. 89.

[74]Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text*, p. 142.

[75]Panjab Digital Library: http://panjabdigilib.org/webuser/searches/displayPage.jsp?ID=12708&page=1&CategoryID=3&Searched=W3GX&sbtsro=1&viewall=1, [accessed 18 February 2026].

[76]Ganesha Das, *Chār Bāgh-i-Panjāb*, (trans.) J. S. Grewal and Indu Banga (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 122.

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Literary contributions from the Giānīā Bungā

As mentioned earlier, the Giānīā Bungā, the teaching institution of Giānīs, was a *sampradāya* based in Amritsar that linked its origin back to Mani Singh (1644–1738). Many eighteenth-century texts are connected to this institution and were later utilized by Santokh Singh. According to the institution's lineage narrative, Mani Singh learned the meanings of *gurbāṇī* directly from Guru Gobind Singh before travelling to Amritsar, where he began teaching.[77]

It is from this context that a group of eighteenth-century texts became associated with Mani Singh. Some of these texts feature question-and-answer dialogues between the author and Mani Singh, while others present Mani Singh himself as the narrator of these stories. The *Shahīd Bilās*, an early nineteenth-century text centred on the life of Mani Singh, notes that when Guru Gobind Singh travelled to southern India, his departure left the Sikhs in a sombre state. At this point, Mani Singh is said to have begun composing stories (*sākhīān*) for their solace and enjoyment. Jaggi interprets this as the moment when Mani Singh began teaching and composing in Amritsar, which subsequently led to the association of these texts with the Giānīā Bungā.[78] These texts, in some manner or another, were linked with Mani Singh and are sometimes addressed as 'the writings of Mani Singh'. The group of texts in question are the following: *Gyān Ratanāvalī, Sikhān Dī Bhagatmālā, Gurbilās Pātśāhī Chevīn*, and *Gurbilās Pātśāhī Dasvīn.* They all include Mani Singh as either the orator or the author. For the purposes of this article, we will explore two texts, the *Gyān Ratanāvalī* and the *Sikhān Dī Bhagatmālā* (hereafter *Bhagatmālā*), detailing their utilization of Advaita and how Santokh Singh draws from these sources.

S. S. Padam, who produced a new critical edition of the *Bhagatmālā* published in 2011 writes that the *Gyān Ratnāvalī* and *Bhagatmālā* appear to be two sister texts, with similar language, style, and format.[79] Both texts are written in Punjabi prose, in the narrative frame of Sikhs asking Mani Singh to expand on the history of Guru Nanak, within the *Gyān Ratanāvalī* and within the *Bhagatmālā*, an explanation of the Sikhs who are listed within the eleventh *vār* (ballad) of Bhai Gurdas (1551–1636), who was a poet and amanuensis of the fifth Guru, Arjan Dev (1563–1606). Padam provides evidence from nineteenth-century texts from within the Gīanīā Bungā that support the claim that these texts are written by a scholar named Surat Singh, the father of Giani Sant Singh. These sources describe how Surat Singh heard these accounts from a Gurbakhsh Singh, who heard them directly from Mani Singh.[80] Surat Singh, the author of two of these texts, was the head of the Giānīā Bungā and appointed the superintendent of the buildings for Harimandar.[81] The youngest of his two boys, Sant Singh, would go on to head the institution, and would mentor and teach a young Santokh Singh for 12 years.[82] Contrary to this position, Jaggi provides manuscript evidence to assert the

[77]S. S. Padam, *Sikhān Dī Bhagatmālā* (Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 2013), p. 369.

[78]Rattan Singh Jaggi, *Bhai Mani Singh Jīvanī ate Racnā* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1995), p. 8.

[79]Padam, *Sikhān Dī Bhagatmālā*, p. 38.

[80]Ibid., p. 41.

[81]Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 312.

[82]Padam, *Sikhān Dī Bhagatmālā*, p. 64.

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Gyān Ratanāvalī and *Bhagatmālā* were completed before 1739,[83] while Padam provides a later date of compositions between 1774–1783.[84] Hans has regarded the *Gyān Ratanāvalī* as an Udāsi text of the early nineteenth century due to the Vedāntic material, a claim which is also ignorant of extant manuscripts explored by Jaggi and Padam.[85]

Gyān Ratanāvalī

The *Gyān Ratanāvalī* is a *janamsākhī* text related to Guru Nanak, which begins with the explication of passages from the works of Bhai Gurdas. This text is an extraordinary intervention on the life stories of Guru Nanak, which were largely associated with the heterodox groups like Miharvān. The text's structure and philosophical undercurrent, being Advaita, differ greatly from previous *janamsākhīs*. The *Gyān Ratanāvalī* first focuses on providing a commentary on the first *vār* of Bhai Gurdas, which covers the life stories and feats of Guru Nanak.[86] Bhai Gurdas's works provide the structure of the text which then integrates significantly more Indic mythology, core Vedāntic texts, and even includes Sanskrit quotes from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Sagar's analysis on *Nānak Prakāś* notes how Santokh Singh utilizes this text as a source for certain chapters, a point we shall return to.[87]

This text exhibits a clear undercurrent of Advaita, flowing beneath the currents of *bhakti.* A passage worth further examination is the commentary on Bhai Gurdas's first ballad (*vār*), the eleventh stanza (*pauṛī*), which itself criticizes a type of Vedānta, devoid of devotional engagement (*bhakti*):

> Vyāsa recited Vedānta after churning and researching the thought of the *Sāmavedā*.[88]
> That which is beyond description and expression, that which is oneself, he denoted as Brahman
> It doesn't come within anyone's sight, in ego he has deluded the world
> Having himself worship in the world, he did not obtain the secret of devotional worship
> Through churning the Vedas he was not satiated, within him the fire burned
> The club of the illusion (*māyā*) was not removed over him, through Death's club, in great pain he cried [to Narad]
> The *muni* Narad instructed him, churning the *Bhāgavata*, having him sing the virtues [of the Divine]
> Without entering the sanctuary no one crosses [the world-like ocean].[89]

[83]Jaggi, *Bhai Mani Singh Jīvanī ate Racnā*.
[84]Padam, *Sikhān Dī Bhagatmālā*.
[85]Hans, 'Historical Analysis of Sikh Literature', p. 305.
[86]Jaggi, *Bhai Mani Singh Jīvanī ate Racnā*, p. 48.
[87]Sagar, *Historical Analysis of the Nānak Prakāś*.
[88]It is unclear what is meant here but perhaps this references Vyāsa drawing from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* which is connected to the *Sāmavedā* and quoted frequently by Vedāntins.
[89]*siāma veda kau sodhi kari mathi vedāntu biāsi suṇāiā.*
Kathanī badanī bāharā āpe āpaṇā brahamu jaṇāiā.
nadarī kisai na liāvaī haumai andari bharami bhulāiā.
āpu pujāi jagati vici bhāu bhagati dā maramu na pāiā.

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The commentary which follows provides a storyline for Vyāsa's redemption via devotional worship, providing the original Sanskrit from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa's* second canto, chapter nine, verse 31–35, emphasizing devotional service as a means for knowledge (*jñānaṁ parama-guhyaṁ me yad vijñāna-samanvitam // sarahasyaṁ tad-aṅgaṁ ca gṛhāṇa gaditaṁ mayā*). The text then expands on both the *Bhāgavata* and Bhai Gurdas's *vār,* explaining, 'without the sanctuary of the Name no one is saved'.[90] The similarity, in principle, of this point—that without devotion to the Guru wisdom cannot be obtained—remains the consistent thread through the works of the Gīānīā Bungā and Santokh Singh. This idea can be traced back to Bhai Gurdas, flowing into the works attributed to Mani Singh, and thus through the Giānīā Bunga into the works of Santokh Singh. It is worth noting that Śaṅkaradeva's poetry was also developed by drawing upon the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, as Barua describes: 'where the ultimate reality, which is indicated with highly characteristic Advaitic analogies, is also repeatedly described as the beloved friend who lovingly protects the devotees and who even becomes subservient to them'.[91] One of Śaṅkaradeva's many works includes an Assamese transposition of several cantos of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. In the Sikh world too, Guru Gobind Singh composed a Brajbhasha retelling of the tenth canto of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* in 1688. Clearly this text was important to both Vaishnava communities and beyond, who absorbed and reappropriated the text in differing ways.[92]

The *Gyān Ratanāvalī* includes a significantly larger portion of Indic mythology in the stories of Guru Nanak than previous texts, indicating the way Mani Singh (or more likely Surat Singh) was integrating with larger discourses, engaging with popular streams of thought, and twisting and reappropriating them when necessary. In the medieval period the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha* became a seminal work related to Advaita Vedānta.[93] Regardless of the date of the original of this text, which some date to the tenth century, the text, as popularly read and translated in the early modern period, represented a pinnacle in Advaita articulation and was selected by Jahangir to be translated into Persian in 1597. A portion of this text was included in the *Gyān Ratanāvalī*, and the explanation of the *saptabhūmikā*, the seven stages of spiritual ascension, located within the *Nirvān Prakarana* (the book of liberation), in the *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*. Towards the end of Guru Nanak's parents' lives, they come to converse with the Guru on the nature of wisdom (*jñāna*) and how it can be enshrined within. Following Guru Nanak's discussion on *vāsanā* (traces/impressions) and how, without their removal, wisdom cannot be fully enshrined, Guru Nanak's father, Kalū, asks his son how wisdom can be enshrined (*gyāna diḍh kio kara hovai*). Guru Nanak replies, explaining the *satpabhūmikā*, ending with 'the

tripati n āvī vedi mathi again andari tapati tapāiā.
māiā ḍaṅḍa na utare jamaḍanḍe bahu dukhi rūāiā.
nāradi muni upadesiā mathi bhagavata guni gīta karāiā.
binu saranī nahi koi tarāiā. 11.
Bhai Gurdas, *Vār* 1, *Pauṛī* 38.

[90]*Gyān Ratanāvalī*, lithograph manuscript, p. 24: https://archive.org/details/pothi-janam-sakhi-bhai-mani-singh-ji/page/n33/mode/2up?view=theater, [accessed 18 February 2026].

[91]Barua, 'The Devotional Metaphysics of Śaṅkaradeva', p. 302.

[92]A forthcoming essay on Guru Gobind Singh's version of the tenth canto of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* explores how it significantly differs from both the original Sanskrit work and from vernacular retellings at the time, infusing a distinctive martial spirit (*vīrarasa*) into the text.

[93]Nair, *Translating Wisdom*.

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seventh stage is *turiyā*, where one Vahigurū is experienced (*bhāsatā)*, and where there is no second'.[94] Here we see the Advaita conceptual terminology interwoven with a distinctly Sikh term for the divine—*Vahigurū*—further indicating the adaptation of Advaita.

Beyond the usage of *Yoga Vasiṣṭha*, the *Gyān Ratanāvalī* leans heavily on another popular Advaita text, the *Prabodhacandrodaya*, an eleventh-century allegorical Sanskrit Advaita text detailing the virtue-vice like personalities involved in a battle between ignorance (*moh*) and discernment (*viveka*). A lengthy chapter of 40 pages in *Gyān Ratanāvalī* retells this story, narrated by Nānū Pandit to a congregation in Kurukshetra during a solar eclipse with the twist that Vishnu remarks he will descend (*avatāra*) in the dark age as Nanak who would take away the strength of 'the great illusion' (*mahāmāyā*) and would spread peaceful *bāṇī* throughout the world.[95] Nānū Pandit then proceeds to narrate the *Prabodhacandrodaya*, concluding that just like Vishnu had ten main *avatāras*, Guru Nanak would take ten forms in the dark age (*kaliyuga*). Following this, Sikhs would then rule the world and those who practise the Guru's *śabada* will obtain peace, in this context liberation.[96] The model, drawing from these Advaita texts while situating a devotional practice focused on the Sikh Gurus and their writings, continues into Santokh Singh's works. Furthermore, Sikh appropriation of these two texts are further examples of Advaita continued to spread, as Allen notes, 'the Mughal-sponsored translations of the Upaniṣads, the *Prabodhacandrodaya*, and the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* add a further dimension to the spread of Vedāntic ideas outside the classical, Sanskrit tradition'.[97]

One passage worth further examination relates to the teachings Guru Nanak delivers to his successor Angad at the conclusion of the text. In Sagar's useful chart of sources for *Nānak Prakāś*, which links each chapter in *Nānak Prakāś* with the relevant *janamsākhī* source, he simply labels chapter 51 of the *uttarāradh* (second portion of *Nānak Prakāś*), as 'Vedantic ideas discussed'.[98] Sagar does not list the *Gyān Ratanāvalī* as a source here, while listing it as a source of many other chapters. On closer inspection the Vedāntic ideas are indeed found in the *Gyān Ratanāvalī* under that relevant chapter. Guru Nanak says:

> Angad, recognize your own form (*sarūpa*), that form of yours and mine is made out of the five elements, [but] the consciousness power (*cetan kalā*), that resides equally within both your body and mine. Just like the reflection of the sun brightens within all houses yet the sun is not separate (in all those houses), in the same way, the power (*satiā*) of the *ātma* provides consciousness in all bodies but the *ātma* is not separate.[99]

[94] *Gyān Ratanāvalī*, lithograph, p. 539.
[95] Ibid., p. 141.
[96] Ibid., p. 185.
[97] Allen, 'Greater Advaita Vedānta', p. 292.
[98] Sagar, *Historical Analysis of the Nānak Prakāś*, p. 143.
[99] *Gyān Ratanāvalī*, lithograph manuscript, pp. 584–595: https://archive.org/details/pothi-janam-sakhi-bhai-mani-singh-ji/page/n33/mode/2up?view=theater, [accessed 18 February 2026].

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While the narrative slightly differs in the *Gyān Ratanāvalī* compared to *Sūraj Prakāś*, the latter's version can easily be seen as an expansion of this idea of the all-pervading consciousness (*cetan*), the *ātmā*. The above quote in *Gyān Ratanāvalī* is a response by Guru Nanak after Guru Angad curses his foot for allowing it to be touched in salutation by Guru Nanak. This occurs at the end of Guru Nanak's life when he was passing over the title of Guru to his successor; at that time, Guru Nanak urges Guru Angad to recognize his true form, the *ātmā*, and not the body. In Santokh Singh's related chapter, Guru Angad approaches Guru Nanak with a question, 'I desire to recognize my true form … Within my heart there is the great darkness of ignorance, and your words will be like the sun.'[100] What follows is an explanation that traverses the three states of consciousness (*jāgarat, supana, sakhopat*), the four components of the *antishkarana* (*mana, cita, buddhi, ahankāra*), the five sheaths (*pancakoś*), the snake and rope analogy, and the nature of *māyā.* Following this Guru Nanak looked graciously upon Guru Angad, the grace being the true catalyst for the change, which removed all of his ignorance (*avidiyā*). The conclusion of the chapter is the crux of the application of this undercurrent of Advaita, where Guru Nanak explains to Guru Angad not to openly declare '*ahambraham*', 'I am Brahman', rather to keep it firmly in his heart and to perform externally all the pure (*subha karama*) of devotional worship (*bhāu bhagati*).[101] Santokh Singh's ubiquitous metaphor within the *Sūraj Prakāś* of balancing knowledge's ghee-like nature with the sweetness of devotion (*bhakti*) is stressed again, before a command that the congregation of the true (*satsaṅg*) must never be abandoned, being the foremost of all practices from which one obtains everything (*sabhi sādhana mukha satisaṅga joeī, esa milane sabhi prāpati hoeī*).[102] Interestingly, and a significant departure from traditional Advaita, even liberated beings require this constant environment:

> *Jina pāche kīno satisaṅgā. Mukati bhae se tina brahma bhaṅgā.*
> Those who leave behind the true congregation, even after becoming liberated, they [can be] destroyed by delusion.

However, this idea was not unique to Santokh Singh. Barua notes how Śaṅkaradeva also constricts Advaita within a devotional frame: 'that while the liberated individual sees Brahman as present everywhere (*brahmamaya*), and becomes liberated in life (*jīvante mukuta*), if they have not developed devotion to the Lord they can be caught by *māyā* again (*dunāi māyā āsi dharai*). Their knowledge (*jñāna*) of Brahman is lost, and they return to the world.[103] This was likely a common strategy for devotional Vedāntins who wanted to ensure that devotional practice did not ever cease but rather was continually tied to the pursuit, and continual enjoyment, of liberative wisdom.

Despite the various ways of liberation mentioned above by Santokh Singh within the 'fifth season', in this chapter to stress the importance on devotional worship, *bhakti*, Guru Nanak explains to Angad:

> *Kali mai aura upāei na koeī. Bhagati gyāna te kaivala hoeī.*

[100]*Nānak Prakāś, Uttarāradh*, Aṅsū 52, verses 5 and 7.
[101]Ibid., verse 62.
[102]Ibid., verse 69.
[103]Barua, 'The Devotional Metaphysics of Śaṅkaradeva', p. 307.

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tina kī prāpati je nar cahieīn. So satisaṅga khoja jaga lahieīn. 64
In this *kaliyūga*, there is no other means, but devotional worship with wisdom, thus *kaivala* [non-duality liberation] is obtained.[104]

These are but a few examples from the *Gyān Ratanāvalī* that are related to Advaita which are used by Santokh Singh. The Advaita undercurrent within the *Gyān Ratanāvalī* moves throughout the text, alongside the current of *bhakti*, which is the only medium with which to engage in the project of *jñāna*. This principle is consistent within the texts associated with the Giānīā Bunga, and while they differ in the degree of articulation and the amount of integration with popular Advaita works, they are connected to this stream in one way or another.

The garland of devotee Sikhs—*Sikhān Dī Bhagatmālā*

Santokh Singh explicitly mentions his source material at the beginning of the *Sūraj Prakāś*, noting the works of Mani Singh. As such BVS details how Santokh Singh included the entire *Bhagatmālā* within his text, reworking the prose stories into the collected poetic narrative.[105] The *Bhagatmālā* also meets the primary criteria of Allen's litmus test; the world as illusionary (#1), and the unity of *jīva* and Brahman (#2), and the inclusion of conceptual Advaita terminology (#7). Arguably the text also makes an appeal to the authority of the Vedas. Santokh Singh himself writes that *Gurbāṇī* is the extracted essence of the Vedas.[106] However, this too follows from the *Bhagatmālā*, 'Writing the vernacular writings within the Granth Ji the essence of all the Vedas was described in an understandable format.'[107] The 'essence of the Vedas' is a play on the meaning of Vedānta, which means 'the end/goal of the Vedas'. Later in the text, when mentioning that through the practice of Vedānta *tattgyāna*,[108] true knowledge occurs, the writer adds that Gurbani is full *sāra*, essence of the Vedas (*vedānta dā sāra*), which by practising, one obtains enshrined true knowledge.[109] Here too we see the adaptation of Advaita, agreeing that through its practice, knowledge is obtained but redirected into the medium of the Guru, being Sikh scripture (*Gurbāṇī*), in which devotion is emphasized.

Beyond the more commonly used terminology of hearing-reflection-contemplation (*śravana, manana, nidhdhiyāsana*),[110] the *Bhagatmālā* also includes a discussion on *vivartavāda*, the theory of illusory transformation, in contrast with *pariṇāmavāda*, the theory of real transformation, within the context of a conversation between Guru Arjan and a Yogi who used to be a Sikh of Raja Janak in the age of *Tretayuga*. The Yogi raised

[104]*Nānak Prakāś, Uttarāradh*, Aṅsū 52, verse 64.

[105]Singh, *Srī Gur Pratāp Sūraj Granth Jilad Pahilī*, p. 179.

[106]*Sāra nikāsyo beda te jagata dikhāe asāra. Sāra guru arajana laeī nija jana kī samsara.* Rut 1, Aṃśū 1, verse 8.

[107]*bhākhā bāṇī girantha jī vikhe sabha vedān dā tatu sugamu kari ke kahiā hai*. Padam, *Sikhān Dī Bhagatmālā*, p. 278.

[108]Padam, *Sikhān Dī Bhagatmālā*, p. 327.

[109]It should be noted that this was a common rhetorical device used by writers in South Asia. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, for example, claims to present the essence of the Vedas while clearly diverging from earlier Vedic emphasis on sacrifice. The device allows for a reframing and reinterpretation of hegemonically accepted texts or concepts.

[110]Padam, *Sikhān Dī Bhagatmālā*, p. 312.

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the question as to how the world should be conceived: is it real (*saca)* or false (*jhūṭha*), remarking that if it is false, then why does it appear as real? Conversely, if it is real, then why does it appear to disappear to those who embody knowledge (*gyānavāna)*. Guru Arjan replies, 'like everything in a dream appears real, and upon awakening it all is destroyed, in the same way the world and body in times of ignorance (*agyāna*) appear as real, and upon the obtainment of knowledge (*gyāna*) they go away'. Guru Arjan then quotes a passage from *Guru Granth Sahib*, worth quoting to show how eighteenth-century writers were utilizing the *Guru Granth Sahib* to purport technical Advaita conceptual frameworks like *vivartavāda*:

> Just like a magician puts on an act, taking many forms and displaying disguises. When the mask is taken off, the support [of the act] is thrown aside. Then only the One (lit: Ekonkār) remains.
> How many forms were seen and disappeared? Where did they go? Where did they come from?
> Countless waves splash up from water. From gold many types of jewellery are made.
> It is seen from planting a seed many parts [of a tree] emerges. When the fruit is ripe there is the one [the seed].
> In a thousand pots there is the one sky. When the pot is broken the sky remains the same.[111]

The Yogi replies to this passage wondering if this passage via the jewellery analogy implies *pariṇāmavāda*, in that gold changes or transforms (*pariṇāma*) into an ornament, thus Brahman changes into the world. Guru Arjan replies:

> It is *pariṇāmavāda* if one forsakes their own form. If gold, while an ornament, remains gold, and water while a wave also is still water, then it is *vivartavāda*. A gold ornament is also still gold, and a wave of water is still water. In the same way the world is the form of Brahman. Thus, those who have recognized the world in this way, they are *jīvanmukt*, liberated while live. Just like the sky is within a thousand clay pots, and the sky wasn't created upon the creation of a thousand pots, and doesn't get destroyed upon their destruction, such is Brahman. When creating the world itself was not created, and upon the world's destruction it isn't destroyed. That sole seed is within all the fruits. In the same way that sole one Brahman is within all animate and inanimate things, all-pervading and is *vivartavāda*. Due to delusion [the world instead of Brahman] is perceived.[112]

[111]*Bājīgara jaise bājī pāeī. Nānā rūpi savāga dikhalāeī.*
sāngu utāra thamio pasārā. Tabi ekai ekamkārā.
kuoni rūpa upajio binasāio. Kahā gaeo oha kahi te āeo.
jail te upaje anika tarangā. Kanika bhūkhani kīne bahu rangā.
bīju bīju dekhio bahu parakāra. Phali pāke te ekamkārā.
sahansa ghaṭā maiha eka akāsa. Ghaṭ phūte te ohī prakāsu. Guru Granth: 736.
[112]Padam, *Sikhān Dī Bhagatmālā*, pp. 305–306.

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From this explanation the Yogi felt assured in this perspective, remarking 'that which I desired to know, I now know', before forsaking his body. Guru Arjan marked this spot, creating a pool named Santokhsar, one of the five major pools (*sarovars*) in Amritsar which pilgrims bathe in even to this day.[113] While the last lines of the passage in the *Guru Granth Sahib* are not included in the *Bhagatmālā* quote, they are implied via the storytelling, that via the true Guru the dirt of the ego, which creates this separation from oneness, is washed away (*guri pūrai haumai malu dhoeī*). This is important because it is consistent in the way in which Santokh Singh is utilizing Advaita, as explanatory and promoted by the Gurus, but redirects the application of Advaita back to the Guru who is the sole provider of such insight. This too is the Sikh adaptation of Advaita previously mentioned, and we can see how Santokh Singh is drawing from the usage of Advaita in previous texts.

It is notable that Santokh Singh reproduces this story, holding very close to the *Bhagatmālā* in the usage of the Advaita terminology of *vivartavāda* and *pariṇāmavāda*, only adding one component in the discussion related to the concealing (*āvaraṇa*) and dispersing (*vikṣepa*) powers (*shaktī*) of *māyā*.[114] Even at times the wording bears a striking resemblance. For the sake of comparison this example below is when the Yogi responds to the teachings of Guru Arjan, the *Bhagatmālā*'s version:

> *tānte jogī boliā abi merī nisacā bhaē hai. Jo kacu mai jānaṇā thā so mai jātā hai.*
> Then the Jogi said, 'now I am certain, that which I wanted to know I now know.[115]

Santokh Singh in a *caupai* metre conveys the Jogi's response:

> *Abi mokahu nisacā driḍa bhayo. Huto jānibo jāni su layo.*
> Now I am firmly certain, that which I wanted to know I have properly understood and acquired.[116]

Santokh Singh repurposes the *Bhagatmālā* with stunning accuracy, like many of his sources, but does expand upon these sources with additions. In this chapter it includes added dialogue and metaphors, including the rope-snake delusion, as well as expanding more on *pariṇāmavāda* with analogies of milk transforming to yogurt and not being able to transform back into milk. More technically, terminology is included, such as *anirvacanīyakhyāti* in explaining both the passage from the *Guru Granth Sahib* and the idea of *vivartavāda.*

> Due to *māyā* the world is perceived as opposed to Brahman, like the spectacle of the magician.
> When ignorance (*agyāna*) is destroyed, then nothing but Brahman remains [to be perceived].
> Māyā is not false or true, nor does it become the real of real.

[113]The other *sarovars* are: Bibeksar, Ramsar, Kaulsar, and Amritsar.
[114]Rāśī 2, Aṃśū 35.
[115]Padam, *Sikhān Dī Bhagatmālā*, p. 306.
[116]Rāśī 2, Aṃśū 36, verse 23.

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Thus, understand it as *anirvacanīya*, it cannot be spoken about in any way. [117]

Conclusions

This article has argued that Santokh Singh's *Sūraj Prakāś* mobilizes an Advaitic lexicon, situating it within a Sikh framework of Guru-centred devotion. This flowed as an organic continuation from his intellectual training by the Giānīā Bungā in Amritsar. Throughout the 'fifth season' and related narratives, we have seen how the text systemically enumerates Advaita's philosophical categories only to sublate them into a Sikh framework, where liberation is dependent not only on knowledge alone but on its combination with a perpetual devotional practice. The repeated injunction to internalize the *mahāvākyas* silently while voicing humility and devotion, or to balance the clarified butter of knowledge with the sugar of devotion, crystallizes what may be called a distinctively Sikh Advaita. In this formulation, the non-dual metaphysics of Advaita are acknowledged as philosophically true but is domesticated through Guru-centred devotion and embodied practice.

Allen's framework of 'Great Advaita Vedānta' helps situate this case within a broader intellectual constellation. Pursuant to Allen's criteria, which emphasizes shared vocabulary, recognition of the illusionary nature of the world, and the *jīva-Brahman* identity, the *Sūraj Prakāś* clearly belongs within the wider field of vernacular Vedānta. At the same time, Santokh Singh's work demonstrates the limits of a purely doctrinal definition of Advaita, since its force in Sikh tradition lies precisely in the domestication and application within devotion.

This reconfiguration of Advaita through Guru-centred devotion was not unique to Santokh Singh but resonated with broader patterns across early modern South Asia. When set against the backdrop of devotional Vedānta articulated by figures like Śaṅkaradeva, Santokh Singh's work underscores a broader early modern conviction that *jñāna* and *bhakti* must be fused as mutually sustaining forces on the path to liberation—with the locus of devotion shifting according to sectarian context. Santokh Singh himself is not an anomalous Sikh thinker dabbling in Vedānta, but as one voice within a longer Sikh lineage—from Bhai Gurdas to Mani Singh and onward—that articulated the principle of joining knowledge with devotion. These writings collectively resonate with a wider South Asian intellectual moment that scholars such as Rao and McCrea have described as the 'Age of Vedānta'.[118]

Recognizing Santokh Singh's contribution to this moment has important implications. It compels us to reconsider Sikh intellectual history not as separate from, or derivative of, larger Vedāntic traditions, but as an active site for philosophical creativity that reshaped Advaita into a Sikh idiom. It also challenges colonial and reformist narratives that sought to provincialize Vedānta as exclusively 'Hindu' by showing that Advaita circulated transreligiously and transregionally in ways that were generative

[117] *Māyā kari brahama te jaga bhāsā. Jima bājīgara kera tamāsā.*
hohi binās jabai aggyāna. Nahin puna rahai brahama binu āna. 10
nahin asattya nahin sattya su māyā. Sattyāsattya bhī nahin bani āyā.
lakhahu anarabacanī ehu yānte. Kiha bidhi kahibe jāhi na kā te. 11
Rāśī 2, Aṃśū 36, verses 10–11.

[118] Rao and McCrea, 'Age of Vedānta 2019 Conference'.

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rather than oppositional. Reading Santokh Singh in this way gives us a broader sense of how Advaita itself was never fixed, but continually reshaped in different sectarian and regional contexts, where its metaphysics could be reframed through devotional, practice, and lineage.

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