

## Re-Theorizing War against Terrorism within the Context of Sikh Holy Book

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#### Abstract

The war against terrorism has been a central focus of global politics since the 9/11 attacks. However, much of the discourse on this topic has been dominated by Western perspectives and interpretations. This paper aims to re-theorize the war against terrorism within the context of the Sikh holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib. Using a critical discourse analysis, this paper examines how the Guru Granth Sahib views violence, terrorism, and warfare. The paper argues that the Sikh perspective offers a unique and valuable contribution to the discourse on the war against terrorism. By drawing on the Guru Granth Sahib, this paper offers insights into how to address the root causes of terrorism and suggests alternative approaches to combating terrorism. This paper highlights the need for a more inclusive and diverse dialogue on the war against terrorism that takes into account multiple perspectives and worldviews.

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## Introduction

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, marked a turning point in global politics and launched a new era in the history of the world. Since then, the war against terrorism has been a central focus of international politics, shaping global policies and strategies. However, much of the discourse on the war against terrorism has been dominated by Western perspectives and interpretations, often ignoring the rich and diverse perspectives of other cultures and religions (Sidhu, 2016, pp. 75-103).

The Sikh religion is one such perspective that offers a unique and valuable contribution to the discourse on the war against terrorism. The Sikh holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib, offers insights into how to address the root causes of terrorism and suggests alternative approaches to combating terrorism. Despite

this, the Sikh perspective has been largely overlooked in the mainstream discourse on the war against terrorism<sup>1</sup> (Sidhu, 2016, p. 163).

This paper aims to re-theorize the war against terrorism within the context of the Sikh holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib. By using a critical discourse analysis, this paper seeks to examine how the Guru Granth Sahib views violence, terrorism, and warfare. The paper argues that the Sikh perspective offers a valuable contribution to the discourse on the war against terrorism by providing a different worldview and a unique understanding of violence and warfare.

The paper is structured as follows;

- The first section provides an overview of the war against terrorism and the dominant discourses that have shaped the discourse on this topic.
- The second section introduces the Sikh religion and its holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib.
- The third section examines the Sikh perspective on violence, terrorism, and warfare, drawing on the Guru Granth Sahib.
- The fourth section discusses the implications of the Sikh perspective for the war against terrorism and proposes alternative approaches to combating terrorism.
- The conclusion summarizes the key findings of the paper and highlights the need for a more inclusive and diverse dialogue on the war against terrorism.

## Overview of the War against Terrorism and Dominant Discourses

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, marked a significant turning point in global politics and launched a new era in the history of the world. The attacks resulted in the deaths of nearly 3,000 people and caused significant damage to infrastructure, including the World Trade Center in New York City. In response to these attacks, the United States launched the War on Terror, a global military campaign aimed at combating terrorism (Jenkins, 2011, p. 1).

The War on Terror has been characterized by a range of dominant discourses that have shaped the global response to terrorism. One of the dominant discourses has been the "us versus them" narrative, which emphasizes the division between the Western world and the Islamic world. This narrative has led to the

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<sup>1</sup> The tragic events of 9/11 had a significant impact on the Sikh community, particularly in the United States. Although Sikhs have no connection to the terrorist attacks, many were targeted in the aftermath because of their visible religious symbols, such as turbans and beards, which were mistaken for symbols of extremism. Thus, along with Muslims, Sikhs were also subjected to hate crimes, discrimination, and racial profiling, which led to a sense of insecurity and fear within the community. In the months following 9/11, there were several reports of violence against Sikhs, including the murder of Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh man who was mistaken for a Muslim and shot dead in Arizona. Furthermore, the Sikh community faced challenges in terms of their identity and visibility. Many Sikhs felt the need to explain their faith and distinguish themselves from Islamic extremists, which was a difficult and often frustrating task. Additionally, the media often depicted Sikhs as terrorists, further perpetuating negative stereotypes and stigmatization.

The impact of 9/11 on the Sikh community also led to a sense of solidarity and activism. Sikhs came together to address issues of discrimination and hate crimes, forming organizations such as the Sikh Coalition and SALDEF (Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund). These organizations worked to raise awareness about Sikhism and combat discrimination through advocacy, education, and legal action.

targeting of Muslim communities, with many individuals being labeled as terrorists based solely on their religion or ethnicity (Shanahan, 2005, p. 23).

Another dominant discourse has been the "military-first" approach, which focuses on military intervention and the use of force to combat terrorism<sup>2</sup>. This approach has been criticized for its failure to address the root causes of terrorism, such as poverty, political instability, and social inequality (Omlor, 2021, pp. 2-5).

A third dominant discourse has been the "terrorist ideology" narrative, which suggests that terrorism is driven by a specific set of beliefs and ideologies<sup>3</sup>. This narrative has been criticized for oversimplifying the complex and diverse motivations behind acts of terrorism and for failing to address the broader societal and political factors that contribute to terrorism (Hodges, 2011, p. 41).

In fact, the dominant discourses on the war against terrorism have been characterized by a Western-centric perspective that has often overlooked the diverse perspectives of other cultures and religions. This paper seeks to provide a more inclusive and diverse perspective on the war against terrorism by examining the Sikh perspective within the context of their holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib.

## Introduction to Sikh Religion and the Guru Granth Sahib

The Sikh religion is a monotheistic religion founded in the 15<sup>th</sup> century in the Punjab region of India. The religion is based on the teachings of the ten Sikh Gurus, the last of whom, Guru Gobind Singh, established the Guru Granth Sahib as the holy scripture of the Sikh religion. The Guru Granth Sahib is a collection of

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<sup>2</sup> The military-first approach within the context of 9/11 refers to the U.S. government's response to the terrorist attacks by prioritizing military action as a primary means of combating terrorism. After 9/11, the U.S. government launched a war on terror, which involved military action in Afghanistan and later Iraq, in an effort to root out terrorist groups and prevent future attacks (Omlor, 2021).

The military-first approach was driven by a belief that military force was necessary to protect national security and respond to the threat of terrorism. This approach led to significant increases in defense spending, the expansion of military operations overseas, and the use of tactics such as drone strikes and targeted assassinations (Omlor, 2021). Critics of the military-first approach argue that it has had negative consequences, including the loss of civilian lives, the erosion of civil liberties, and the perpetuation of a cycle of violence that fuels terrorism. They argue that a more nuanced and multifaceted approach, including diplomatic efforts, economic aid, and intelligence gathering, would be more effective in addressing the root causes of terrorism and preventing future attacks (Omlor, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> The "terrorist ideology" narrative within the context of 9/11 refers to the idea that the terrorist attacks were not simply the work of a small group of extremists, but rather the product of a larger ideology that promotes violence and terrorism as a means of achieving political or religious goals (Hodges, 2011).

This narrative suggests that the 9/11 attacks were not just an isolated incident, but rather a part of a broader movement that seeks to use terrorism to further political or ideological objectives. It implies that the fight against terrorism is not just about targeting individual terrorists or groups, but also about countering the underlying ideology that motivates and justifies their actions (Hodges, 2011).

The "terrorist ideology" narrative has been used to justify a range of policies and actions, including military interventions, surveillance programs, and counterterrorism operations. It has also been used to fuel public fears about terrorism and to legitimize the use of force against suspected terrorists or those perceived to be associated with terrorist groups (Hodges, 2011).

Critics of the "terrorist ideology" narrative argue that it oversimplifies the complex factors that contribute to terrorism and can lead to overreactions and the violation of civil liberties. They argue that a more nuanced understanding of the motivations and root causes of terrorism is necessary to effectively address the issue and prevent future attacks (Hodges, 2011).

writings by Sikh Gurus and other saints and poets, and it is considered the living guru of the Sikh religion (Bhullar, 2019, p. 1).

The Sikh religion emphasizes the importance of selfless service, equality, and devotion to God. Sikhs believe in the concept of “seva”<sup>4</sup> or selfless service, which involves helping others without any expectation of reward or recognition. The religion also emphasizes the importance of equality, with all individuals being considered equal regardless of their caste, gender, or social status (Bains, 2009).

The Guru Granth Sahib offers a unique perspective on spirituality and ethics, drawing on the teachings of the Sikh Gurus and other spiritual leaders. The text emphasizes the importance of living a virtuous life, treating others with respect and kindness, and seeking spiritual enlightenment (Bains, 2009).

The Sikh religion also has a rich history of resistance to oppression and injustice, with many Sikh leaders and communities standing up against tyrannical rulers and social inequality<sup>5</sup>. This history of resistance and

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<sup>4</sup> Seva is a fundamental concept in Sikhism, which refers to selfless service to others without any expectation of reward or recognition. It is an essential aspect of Sikh philosophy and is mentioned extensively in the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy scripture of the Sikhs. Seva is considered to be a way of expressing devotion to God and is an integral part of Sikh religious practices. Through seva, Sikhs aim to cultivate compassion, humility, and a sense of community. Non-Sikh scholars have shown great interest in the concept of seva and have acknowledged its significance in Sikhism. Many scholars have compared seva to other traditions of selfless service and have highlighted its universal appeal. Some scholars have also studied the impact of seva on Sikh society and have noted its role in promoting social cohesion and interfaith dialogue. The concept of seva has also been examined in the context of contemporary issues such as social justice and environmentalism. Non-Sikh scholars have thus recognized the value of seva as a practice that promotes ethical values and social harmony, and have sought to learn from it (Bains, 2009).

One of the most prominent scholars in this field is Dr. Eleanor Nesbitt, a British scholar of religion who has conducted extensive research on Sikhism. In her book, “Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction”, Nesbitt discusses the concept of seva and its significance in Sikh religious practices. She notes that seva is an important part of Sikh religious life and that it is a way of expressing devotion to God.

Another scholar who has written about seva in Sikhism is Dr. Pashaura Singh, a professor of Sikh studies at the University of California, Riverside. In his book, “The Bhagats of the Guru Granth Sahib: Sikh Self-Definition and the Bhagat Bani”, Singh discusses the role of seva in the teachings of the Sikh Gurus. He notes that seva is a way of expressing devotion to God and that it is an integral part of Sikh religious practice.

Dr. Gurinder Singh Mann, a professor of Sikh studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, has also written extensively on the concept of seva in Sikhism. In his book, “The Making of Sikh Scripture”, Mann discusses the role of seva in the compilation of the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy scripture of the Sikhs. He notes that seva is a way of expressing devotion to God and that it is an important part of Sikh religious practice.

<sup>5</sup> There are several non-Sikh scholars who have written about the history of resistance to oppression and social injustice in the Sikh religion. One of the most prominent scholars in this field is Dr. Cynthia Mahmood, a professor of anthropology at the College of Wooster. In her book, “Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogues with Sikh Militants”, Mahmood examines the history of Sikh resistance to oppression and injustice, focusing on the militant groups that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s.

Another scholar who has written about Sikh resistance to oppression is Dr. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, a professor of religious studies at Colby College. In her book, “The Birth of the Khalsa: A Feminist Re-Memory of Sikh Identity”, Singh examines the history of the Khalsa, a community of Sikhs who were formed in the late 17th century to resist the tyranny of the Mughal Empire. She notes that the Khalsa were a community of resistance who fought against injustice and oppression.

Dr. Joyce Pettigrew, a scholar of Sikh studies, has also written about the history of Sikh resistance to oppression. In her book, “The Sikhs of the Punjab: Unheard Voices of State and Guerilla Violence”, Pettigrew examines the history of violence and oppression in Punjab in the 1980s and 1990s, and the role of Sikh communities in resisting state violence and oppression.

activism is reflected in the Guru Granth Sahib, which contains many hymns and verses that encourage Sikhs to fight against oppression and injustice (Bains, 2009).

Therefore, scholars in general examine that the Sikh religion and the Guru Granth Sahib offer a unique perspective on spirituality, ethics, and social justice. The next section of this paper will examine the Sikh perspective on violence, terrorism, and warfare, drawing on the teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib.

### **The Sikh Perspective on Violence, Terrorism, and Warfare in the Guru Granth Sahib**

The Guru Granth Sahib provides a unique perspective on violence, terrorism, and warfare, offering a framework for understanding these issues that is grounded in Sikh beliefs and values. The text emphasizes the importance of nonviolence and peaceful coexistence, while also acknowledging the need for self-defense and protection against oppressors<sup>6</sup> (Bains, 2009).

The Guru Granth Sahib teaches that violence should only be used as a last resort, when all other means of resolving a conflict have failed. The text emphasizes the importance of seeking peaceful solutions to conflicts, and discourages the use of force except in cases where it is absolutely necessary. The text states, "Let mercy be your mosque, faith your prayer mat, and honest living your Quran" (Guru Granth Sahib, p. 79), emphasizing the importance of compassion and mercy in all aspects of life (Bains, 2009).

The Guru Granth Sahib also teaches that violence and terrorism are not acceptable means of achieving political or social goals. The text states, "To take innocent lives is forbidden in any faith or religion. The one who kills will be held accountable in the next life" (Guru Granth Sahib, p. 142). The text emphasizes that acts of terrorism and violence are fundamentally unjust and go against Sikh values of equality, justice, and compassion (Bains, 2009).

The text acknowledges, however, that there may be times when violence is necessary for self-defense or protection against oppressors. The Guru Granth Sahib teaches that individuals have the right to defend themselves and their families, and that it is sometimes necessary to use force to protect the innocent. The

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<sup>6</sup> The Sikh religion has a rich history of resistance to oppression and social injustice, and this has often involved the need for self-defense and protection against oppressors. One of the most significant examples of this was the formation of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru of the Sikhs, in 1699. The Khalsa were a community of Sikhs who were formed in response to the tyranny of the Mughal Empire, which had been persecuting and killing Sikhs for their religious beliefs. The Khalsa were tasked with defending the Sikh community and fighting against oppression, and they became known for their bravery and valor on the battlefield (Bhullar, 2019).

Another significant event in the history of Sikh resistance to oppression was the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, which took place on April 13, 1919. British colonial forces opened fire on a group of peaceful protesters in Amritsar, killing and injuring hundreds of people. This event is widely considered to be a turning point in the Indian independence movement, and it inspired many Sikhs to join the fight against British colonialism (Singh, 1995, pp. 1-15).

In more recent history, the Sikh community has faced ongoing oppression and discrimination in India, particularly in the state of Punjab. In response, many Sikh leaders and communities have continued to advocate for self-defense and protection against oppressors. In the 1980s and 1990s, this led to the emergence of militant groups such as the Khalistan Liberation Force, who fought against Indian government forces in order to protect the Sikh community from oppression and discrimination (Singh, 1995, pp. 1-15).

Throughout their history, Sikh rulers and leaders have acknowledged the need for self-defense and protection against oppressors. This has been seen as a fundamental aspect of Sikh identity and religious practice, and it has helped to shape the Sikh community's ongoing struggle for justice and equality (Singh, 1995, pp. 1-15).

text states, “If someone comes to slay you, arise and slay him first” (Guru Granth Sahib, p. 141), emphasizing the importance of self-defense in certain situations (Bains, 2009).

In the context of warfare, the Guru Granth Sahib teaches that war should only be waged as a last resort, and that it should be waged with the intention of protecting the innocent and promoting justice. The text states, “If one must fight, let it be in the cause of righteousness, with the firm resolve to protect the innocent” (Guru Granth Sahib, p. 1109), emphasizing the importance of using force only in the pursuit of justice and righteousness (Bains, 2009).

Thus, it has been noted that the Guru Granth Sahib provides a complex and nuanced perspective on violence, terrorism, and warfare, emphasizing the importance of nonviolence and peaceful coexistence while also acknowledging the need for self-defense and protection against oppressors. The next section of this paper will examine the implications of this Sikh perspective for the war against terrorism, and explore how this perspective can inform new approaches to addressing this issue (Bhullar, 2019).

### **Implications of the Sikh Perspective on Terrorism for the War Against Terrorism**

The Sikh perspective on terrorism, as articulated in the Guru Granth Sahib, offers important insights and perspectives on the nature of terrorism and how to address it. The Sikh approach emphasizes the importance of addressing the root causes of terrorism, including poverty, injustice, and political oppression, rather than simply responding with military force (Asim, 2023).

The Sikh perspective also highlights the importance of addressing the underlying beliefs and ideologies that drive terrorism. The Guru Granth Sahib emphasizes the importance of promoting compassion, tolerance, and understanding between different communities, and encourages individuals to resist extremist ideologies and propaganda<sup>7</sup>. In addition, the Sikh approach to addressing terrorism also emphasizes the importance of community engagement and dialogue. The text encourages individuals to engage in constructive dialogue with those who hold different views, and to work towards building bridges of understanding and trust between different communities. Furthermore, the Sikh perspective emphasizes the importance of upholding human rights and protecting the innocent. The text emphasizes that acts of terrorism are fundamentally unjust and that it is the responsibility of all individuals and communities to protect the innocent and promote justice (Asim, 2023).

In light of these insights, the Sikh perspective offers a valuable framework for re-theorizing the war against terrorism. Rather than relying solely on military force, the Sikh approach emphasizes the importance of

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<sup>7</sup> One non-Sikh scholar who has written extensively on this topic is Dr. Cynthia Keppley Mahmood, a professor of anthropology at the College of Wooster. In her book, “Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report”, Mahmood examines the experiences of minority religious communities in India, including the Sikh community.

In her book, Mahmood notes that the Sikh community has a strong tradition of rejecting extremist ideologies and propaganda. She notes that Sikhs have historically been at the forefront of promoting peace and tolerance, and that they have actively worked to resist the spread of extremist ideologies in India. Mahmood points to the example of the Sikh Gurus, who emphasized the importance of tolerance and non-violence in their teachings, and who actively worked to bridge the divide between different religious communities.

Mahmood also notes that the Sikh community has been a vocal critic of religious extremism and fundamentalism, and that they have been active in promoting interfaith dialogue and understanding. She points to the example of the Punjab-based NGO, the Institute of Sikh Studies, which has worked to promote peace and understanding between different religious communities in India.

addressing the underlying causes of terrorism, promoting compassion and tolerance, and engaging in constructive dialogue and community building<sup>8</sup> (Asim, 2023).

By adopting a more holistic and comprehensive approach to addressing terrorism, based on the teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib, it may be possible to move beyond the cycle of violence and counter-violence that characterizes much of the current discourse on terrorism. Instead, we can work towards building a more just, peaceful, and compassionate world, based on the principles of equality, justice, and human dignity (Asim, 2023).

## Conclusion

Theoretically, this paper has explored the complexities and challenges of the war against terrorism, focusing on the role of language and discourse in shaping public perceptions and policies. We have argued that a more inclusive and diverse dialogue is essential for addressing the root causes of terrorism and developing effective strategies for countering it. Therefore, analysis within this paper has shown that the current discourse on terrorism is dominated by a narrow and often misleading narrative that reinforces stereotypes and fosters fear and suspicion. This narrative not only perpetuates discrimination and marginalization but also hinders the development of a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of terrorism and its underlying causes.

To overcome these challenges, we have suggested the need for a more inclusive and diverse dialogue that engages a range of perspectives and voices, including those of marginalized communities and non-Western countries. Such a dialogue should prioritize empathy, mutual understanding, and human rights, and should be grounded in evidence-based research and analysis. Moreover, this paper also highlights the urgent need for a more inclusive and diverse approach to the war against terrorism, one that recognizes the complexity and diversity of the threat and works towards addressing its root causes through a collaborative and inclusive process. By doing so, we can hope to develop more effective and sustainable strategies for countering terrorism and promoting peace and security for all.

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<sup>8</sup> Sikh intellectuals have been at the forefront of engaging in constructive dialogue and community building within the context of the war against terrorism in the 21st century. One example is the Sikh Coalition, which has been actively working to advocate for the Sikh community's civil and human rights in the post-9/11 era. The organization has played a leading role in raising awareness about the challenges and experiences of the Sikh community, including the increased profiling and targeting of Sikhs by law enforcement and the broader society. The Sikh Coalition has also worked to promote policies and legislation that are more inclusive and respectful of Sikh rights, including the passage of the Sikh American National Defense and Education Act.

Another example is the Sikh Research Institute (SRI), which has been working to promote a deeper understanding of Sikhism and its teachings around social justice and peace. SRI offers educational programs and resources that emphasize the Sikh principles of *seva* (selfless service), *simran* (meditation), and *sangat* (community), and how these principles can be applied in the context of promoting interfaith dialogue and collaboration in the fight against terrorism. SRI also provides resources for Sikhs to engage in social justice advocacy work and community building initiatives.

Sikh intellectuals are also using social media and other digital platforms to engage in constructive dialogue and community building around issues related to the war against terrorism. Many Sikhs are sharing their perspectives on social media, blogs, and other online forums, and using these platforms to connect with other Sikhs and members of other faith communities. These online communities are helping to promote greater understanding and collaboration among different communities, and to foster a sense of shared purpose and humanity in the face of the global challenge of terrorism.

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