PUNJABI CENTURIES: TRACING HISTORIES OF PUNJAB. By Anshu Malhotra. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2024. 391 pp.

On first thoughts, Anshu Malhotra's edited volume Punjabi Centuries is an odd title to review for a publication dedicated to comparative literature and aesthetics: it is not invested in any aesthetic or formal frameworks for understanding texts. Indeed, there are no texts in the conventional sense of the term. Instead, it brings together different perspectives on history of Punjab from print culture, song and performance in the Punjabi diaspora, sacred spaces, progressive movement in literature, controversial case of sexual harassment, status of music in pre-independence period Lahore, and the appropriation of a Sikh king's fight for sacred space as political victory. These questions fall across many disciplinary investigations: sociology, history, political science, and anthropology, for instance. However, where the book becomes relevant for the readers of this Journal is the approach it can open up for examining a lot of projects in aesthetics, especially in the postcolonial contexts. In order to do justice to spelling out this approach as a takeaway for the readers, this review shall refrain from summarising every chapter, and, instead, focus on only a couple of chapters that make for an interesting reading for the implications they hold for the role of art and performance in postcolonial imagination today, especially in South Asia.

One must begin with the penultimate chapter "Commemorating Baghel Singh's 'Conquest' of Delhi: The Fateh Diwas" by Kanika Singh. Singh deals with the history of a celebration of Fateh Diwas in March 2014 at Red Fort. The grand ceremony was meant to honour the memory of the hoisting of the Sikh flag Nishan Sahib at Red Fort by Sikh military commander Baghel Singh in 1783, challenging the supremacy of the Mughal empire. As historical accounts have it, he relented when the Mughals agreed to build gurudwaras in the region, as a way of paying a tribute to the Sikh religion and its gurus. However, the calendar art that represents the general's exploits as 'historical paintings' has a different story to tell, which, in turn, needs to be seen in the nineteenth century account written by Sikh historian Ratan Singh Bhangu about the episode. His text was written in terms of asserting Sikh kingdom as legitimate and sovereign, and not as subordinate to the Mughal empire. Over a period of time, the historical details seem to have been overwhelmed by the narrative of military conquest over the Mughals, while it alienates Muslims as oppressive tyrants and foreigners or invaders and invokes a sense of pride in Indian identity. The claim by the DSGMC (Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee) around the historical episode has dangerous consequences for communal harmony in the contemporary times:

> [T]he DSGMC press release for the Fateh Diwas celebrations in 2015 claimed that Baghel Singh's conquest 'paved war for Independence' . . . . The DSGMC therefore demanded that the Indian government announce the 'conquest of Lal Qila by the Sikh forces in 1783 as a national event celebrated annually' . . . . This particular demand is a claim for a place – a pride of place – in the larger narrative of Indian history. In fact, Sikh leaders frequently like to point out that the Sikhs' role in Indian history has been neglected. As the Fateh Diwas makes a claim for the Sikhs' place in Indian history, it also reinforces the broader right-wing propaganda of Mughals being considered foreigners, whose rule was characterised by the tyranny and oppression of other religious groups. (321)

While reading Singh's narrative of Fateh Diwas into the open for discussion, one cannot help but think about the need for texts in popular/visual culture to be situated in the wider questions of history of colonisation and the partition. Texts partake of a popular imagination, constitute it, while also moulding it for a different present. The way they clash with history, interpret or appropriate it to divisive agendas call for imagining ways of comparison with, not just other texts, but with other forms of representation such as the historical accounts, and performance and celebrations in the present. Aesthetics, thus, finds an enriching, wider scope for inquiry.

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The other chapter in the book that has strong implications for aesthetics is Nicole Ranganath's "Soundscapes of the Self: Music and Identity Assertion among Diasporic Punjabi Sikh Women in California, 1950s–2000s". In the chapter, Ranganath documents the songwriting/composition and performance by two Punjabi women in California, Mohinderjit Kaur Thiara and Harbans Kaur Panu who sing of the landscape of the Punjab and their lives in the US.

> This is the first study exploring autobiographical songs composed by the first generation of South Asian American women. The songs offer rare insights into women's interior emotional lives – into their loneliness, sorrows, desires and aspirations. Music represents a particularly powerful vehicle for understanding the continuities and disjunctures in transnational cultural flows, which I refer to as 'soundscapes' (aural cultural flows) . . . . The discovery of these songs is especially valuable given that women's lives remain largely neglected in South Asia diaspora studies. Equally important is the fact that women barely exist in the public record of early South Asian migration to North America. Moreover, elderly Punjabi women are generally relegated to the private sphere of the home, rarely garnering public attention within the community and in the border American society. The fact that *bibian* (elderly women) composed poetry will come as a surprise to many in the local Punjabi community. (81)

The songs that Ranganath foregrounds as texts, or as an oeuvre in themselves, reveal the importance of anchoring that the context of the diaspora provides to South Asian fashioning in North America. While countless scholars working in diaspora studies have been looking at fiction and other genres from various perspectives of identity and hybridity and so on, Ranganath's choice of the composition of the two women (among several others in her larger work) reveals that aesthetics has a lot to do with the everyday aspects of life, not easily accessible as texts. The songs, evocative of the folk text of Hir, show fascinating continuities and adaptational possibilities within South Asian cultural heritage as remembered by different genders.

As the above glimpses into the book hopefully have shown, *Punjabi Centuries* offers different perspectives of history and politics that can be meaningfully engaged with by postcolonial scholars researching aesthetics in South Asia, alerting them to newer questions and connections across disciplines.

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DISCOVERING INDIAN PHILOSOPHY: AN INTRODUCTION TO HINDU, JAIN AND BUDDHIST THOUGHT. By Jeffrey D. Long. London, New York and Dublin: Bloomsbury, 2024. 236 pp.

What must one look for in an introduction to Indian philosophy? Is it an accessible account of often overlapping traditions? Or is it a coherent account of contradictions within one tradition? Is it an accurate or neat rendering of different schools of thought and their leaders on a chronological scale? Or is it a narration that speaks to how the different worldviews stand in contemporary, postcolonial practices today? Is it a concern for the historical and socio-political contexts that different philosophies emerged? Or is it the focus on the timeless and the essential aspects of the various forms of thought?

It is with these questions that one approaches Jeffrey D. Long's *Discovering Indian Philosophy*. The book works brilliantly at various levels: given the complex and vast nature of the subject, it manages to touch upon main philosophies and philosophers, the network of thoughts they draw from, their principles, as well as their contestations. Organised along the lines of Hinduism, the systems that challenged it Jainism, Buddhism, and innovations within Hinduism (such as the Shastras, the epics, the Vedanta, the Tantra, and modern, colonial era interventions such as those by Ramakrishna),

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