

Spiritual Synthesis in *Salok Mahla 9*: A Conceptual and Theological Engagement with Indian Knowledge Systems

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: *Salok Mahla 9* by Guru Tegh Bahadur articulates a profound philosophical vision that resonates deeply with foundational concepts of the Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). His teachings—grounded in spiritual insight, moral resilience in the face of Mughal persecution, and unwavering commitment to human dignity—embody civilizational ideals of Dharma and self-liberation. **Methods:** This study adopts a comparative textual methodology to analyze how the verses of *Salok Mahla 9* intersect with, reinterpret, and move across established Indian philosophical and spiritual traditions. The approach includes close reading, thematic mapping, and cross-traditional conceptual comparison. **Key Thematic Insights:** Key thematic insights indicate that Guru Tegh Bahadur's verses articulate a distinctive spiritual synthesis that aligns with, yet productively reframes, key IKS concepts of existence, transience, ethical agency, suffering, and liberation. The analysis shows that the verses not only echo major Indian intellectual currents but also introduce an innovative Sikh perspective that enriches these discourses. **Discussion and Conclusion:** Through historical contextualization, the study demonstrates that *Salok Mahla 9* is woven into the broader tapestry of Indian spiritual thought, contributing substantively to India's civilizational knowledge heritage. Guru Tegh Bahadur's insights therefore hold relevance not only for Sikh studies but also for scholars of Indian philosophy, comparative religion, and cultural history.

Keywords: Comparative philosophy, *Dharma*, *Guru Tegh Bahadur*, Indian intellectual traditions, Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), Liberation (Mukti), *Salok Mahla 9*, Sikh philosophy

1. Introduction

The Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) is an organizational structure that determines the historical development of the knowledge, cultural backgrounds and philosophical thought in the Indian subcontinent. IKS is interconnected knowledge and has manifestations in wisdom contained in various communities presenting a holistic vision for all. It is not limited to one book or a scripture but has flourished over centuries and extends to the number of oral and written texts, philosophies and disciplines from different regions of India and Indian languages. It incorporates Vedanta philosophy, Buddhism,

Jainism and Bhakti Movement. An essential aspect of IKS is the Bhakti Movement, which is not just a treasure of belief systems but also music and poetry, aiming at social reform. Sikhism is born out of the Bhakti tradition and reflects spiritual evolution where devotion, morality, knowledge and a resistance against social injustice are interwoven in the thread of Indian civilization. Guru Tegh Bahadur's teachings are closely linked to these schools of thought, including *Naam-simran*, *Sewa* and sacrifice and his life is an embodiment of his illuminating teachings. 'Guru Sahib traversed from 'Tegh' to 'Tayag' (Kaur, 2020), which culminated into his supreme martyrdom.

Although *Salok Mahla 9* has been widely studied from a devotional perspective, its systematic positioning within Indian Knowledge Systems has not received enough attention. With the growing emphasis on interdisciplinary and comparative frameworks for classical texts in Indian Knowledge Systems, *Salok Mahla 9* requires to be reinterpreted in the contemporary scholarly paradigm. Additionally, this approach encourages the integration of Sikh thought with wider-ranging philosophical and epistemological debates in IKS and global academia.

2. Analytical Framework

This study adopts a **qualitative, interpretive, and comparative philosophical methodology** grounded in textual hermeneutics and conceptual analysis. The research is primarily situated within the interdisciplinary domains of **Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), Sikh studies, comparative religion, and philosophical inquiry**. Rather than pursuing empirical generalization, the study seeks to critically interpret the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of *Salok Mahla 9* and examine their resonance with broader Indic intellectual traditions.

The primary textual source for this study is *Salok Mahla 9* as preserved in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, particularly the *saloks* attributed to Guru Tegh Bahadur. Authoritative English translations and interpretive commentaries were consulted to facilitate thematic interpretation and comparative philosophical engagement. Secondary materials include scholarly books, journal articles, historical analyses, and studies related to Indian philosophy, Sikh theology, Bhakti traditions, and Indian Knowledge Systems.

The methodological framework combines three interconnected approaches:

2.1 Textual Hermeneutics

The study undertakes close textual reading of selected *saloks* to interpret their metaphysical, ethical, and spiritual meanings within their historical and theological contexts. Hermeneutic interpretation is employed to understand how concepts such as *Dharma*, *Mukti* (liberation), impermanence, fearlessness, and self-realization are articulated in Guru Tegh Bahadur's Bani.

2.2 Comparative Philosophical Analysis

The research comparatively examines thematic convergences and divergences between *Salok Mahla 9* and selected streams of Indian philosophical thought, including Vedantic, Bhakti, Buddhist, and Jain traditions. In addition, limited comparative engagement with Western philosophical perspectives—particularly those of René Descartes and Jean-Paul Sartre—is incorporated

to illuminate differing conceptions of the self, existence, consciousness, and liberation.

2.3 Conceptual Thematic Mapping

Core philosophical themes emerging from the text were identified and organized into analytical categories, including:

- nature of existence,
- transience and impermanence,
- ethical duty (*Dharma*),
- fearlessness and sacrifice,
- liberation (*Mukti*),
- selfhood and spiritual consciousness,
- plurality and civilizational ethics.

These thematic categories were then interpreted in relation to the broader framework of Indian Knowledge Systems to evaluate how Guru Tegh Bahadur's teachings contribute to civilizational discourse and spiritual-humanistic thought.

The study is intentionally **conceptual and interpretive rather than empirical**. Its objective is not to establish causal relationships or statistical findings but to develop a theoretically informed understanding of the philosophical synthesis embodied in *Salok Mahla 9*. The research therefore aligns more closely with traditions of **comparative theology, philosophical hermeneutics, and conceptual humanities scholarship**.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, interpretive analysis of sacred and philosophical texts inherently involves a degree of subjectivity. Second, variations across translations of Gurbani may influence semantic interpretation. Third, the study selectively engages representative themes rather than offering an exhaustive doctrinal analysis of Sikh philosophy or Indian Knowledge Systems in their entirety. Nonetheless, the methodology provides a coherent analytical framework for exploring the intellectual and spiritual intersections between Guru Tegh Bahadur's teachings and broader Indic traditions.

2.4 Thematic Analysis

Guru Tegh Bahadur's *Salok Mahla 9* are concrete manifestations of the principles of the IKS, which must be adopted and exemplified by the Indian society in order to achieve the higher standards of civilization. Both *Salok Mahla 9* and IKS emphasize that resilience and restoration did not happen in isolation but are a part of collective consciousness and oral narratives and are accomplished by the sustained vitality of cultural and spiritual inheritance.

3. Discussion

Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib (1621-1625), the Ninth Guru of the Sikhs, opened the windows to the pathway for spiritual discourse in India. His *Salok Mahal 9* is considered a depository of truth for its divine contemplation and moral wisdom that transcends both time and space. Guru Sahib composed the 57 *Saloks* of *Salok Mahla 9* during the last phase of his life before he attained martyrdom in 1675 in Chandni Chowk, Delhi. *Salok Mahla 9* is compiled in Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred text of the Sikhs. During the course of his contemporary times, India was undergoing severe socio-political unrest following religious persecution and extreme intolerance and was struggling against Mughal tyranny. Aurangzeb, an orthodox Mughal Emperor, was pressurizing the non-Muslims to convert to Islam, especially in areas like the Deccan and Punjab. Under his selfish and ruthless directives, the temples and other religious places were being desecrated by the Mughal army. People were plunged into fear, and their ray of hope was drained. Subsequently, the leading light of IKS, the Kashmiri Pandits, who faced the same storm of persecution, sought help from Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib. Guru Tegh Bahadur embraced his duty to respect and defend their faith and championed the liberty to profess any faith of one's choice. The rights' regime necessitates protection and security for each person or group, and when the oppressive state was threatening the fundamental rights of a particular cultural group, Guru Tegh Bahadur emerged as a bulwark against abuse of the state functionaries, ensuring the Kashmiri Brahmins the liberty to profess their own religion and can be hailed as a saviour of plurality and a repository of the Indian Knowledge Systems that was at the brink of extinction at that juncture of history. Like his predecessors, Guru Tegh Bahadur did not believe in Brahmanical rituals such as idolatry, frontal mark or *tilak*, *janeu*, but he recognized compassion, duty towards others and empathy that were integral parts of his life of self-consecration and teachings, he chose martyrdom. In his book, *Sikh History from Persian Sources*, J.S. Grewal (2007) claims how some Persian chronicles portray Guru Tegh Bahadur martyrdom as a threat to state security. Either they were unaware of the Sikh movement or these were just partial political narratives.

Most of the non-Sikh sources mention Guru Tegh Bahadur's militancy as the reason for Aurangzeb's action. By contrast, the Sikh sources dwell exclusively on the religious dimension of the situation. (Grewal, 2007, p. 13)

Nikki-Guninder Kaur Singh (2019) contends that Guru Sahib's martyrdom has "finally consolidated the martial

aspect of Sikhism". Guru Sahib confronted the brutal regime of Aurangzeb by rising as a fearless defender of truth, a wellspring of empathy and a spiritual depth in his deeds and words. Instead of silence, Guru Sahib chose to answer through his actions and words, in his profound work 'Salok Mahla 9'. In this, he did not focus on external conflicting circumstances; rather, his verses delve deeper into the timeless inner battle of human beings, say, the silent war between illusion and reality, being egoistical and submissive, and attachment versus detachment.

Salok Mahla 9 is rich with sacred symbolism, poetic imagery and metaphors. Guru Sahib preaches about letting go of the false self, worldly desires and dualism and asserts that *Naam* (Divine) is the ultimate truth. It is not restricted to the Sikh worldview but is reflective of multiple schools within Indian intellectual heritage, such as the Upanishads, Buddhism, Jainism and the like. These schools of thought are united by core inquiries: nature of existence, reason for suffering, self-identity, equality, living justly, and the ways to achieve it. It aligns with the key concepts of the Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS).

Prof. Kapil Kapoor (2005), in his book *Indian Knowledge Systems*, claims, "In the Indian thought system, the function/goal of knowledge is not exercise of power over others but power over one self, *moksha*, liberation of the self from its own limitations/constraints. The direction of governing thought is the exact opposite of what pertains in the Western framework. The movement is from the individual to the social/collective — a continuum; not, from the social to individual in a relationship of rupture or tension". In his book *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, Sri Aurobindo (1953) differentiates between civilizational progress and spiritual realization of truth.

A mere intellectual, ethical and aesthetic culture does not go back to the inmost truth of the spirit; it is still an Ignorance, an incomplete, an outward and superficial knowledge. To have made the discovery of our deepest being and hidden spiritual nature is the first necessity and to have erected the living of an inmost spiritual life into the aim of existence is the characteristic sign of a spiritual culture. (Aurobindo, 1953) The aforementioned ideas are depicted in the sacred hymns of Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib.

Prof. Kapil Kapoor sheds light on the role of the Guru as both a teacher and an authority in the oral transmission of knowledge, which is embedded in its structure, preservation and interpretation. Within the colonial discourse, Sikhism was misconceived through its classification into rigid categories such as religion, scripture or founder-centred tradition. However, the term "Guru" is related to the word "*shabad guru*" which "refers less to a person than to an incorporeal concept

that radically undermines all vestiges of personhood” and “with the Gurus communicating authority according to the Indic tradition of oral mediation”. (Singh & Mandair, p. 25). In *Salok Mahla 9*, Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib says that the Guru is eternal and a true guide and one is liberated if one remains poised under all circumstances.

*Harakh sog jaa ke nahi bairi meet samaan.
Kaho Nanak sun re manaa mukat taahi teh jaan.
||15|| (SGGS: Pg. 1427)*

One who is not affected by pleasure or pain, who looks upon friend and enemy alike - says Nanak, listen, mind: know that such a person is liberated.

In *Salok Mahla 9*, Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib explains the transitory nature of life and none can escape from this. One's deeds should be conducted in light of this truth. This implies that despite having a deep understanding and a great empire, both Ram Chand and Ravana left the world reflecting upon the impermanence of life.

*Raam gaio raavan gaio jaa ko baho parvaar.
Kaho Nanak thir kichh nahi supne jo sansaar. ||50||
(SGGS: Pg.1429)*

Ram Chand passed away, as did Raawan, even though he had lots of relatives.
Says Nanak, nothing lasts forever; the world is like a dream.

An individual is directed to lift the veil from his soul, which has been entangled by the material possessions and then reconnect with the Guru. Here, the true knowledge is living with this awareness. An individual must see Guru as a refuge amidst chaos. This experiential knowledge is beneficial for mankind and should be practiced and transmitted from one generation to the next. Guru Sahib pronounces that only the *Naam*, the Saint, and the Guru remain:

Naam rahio sadhu rahio rahio gur gobind.

(At last, what remains is the Naam (devotion), the Guru, and that person who is spiritually empowered.)
(SGGS: Pg. 1429)

So, a life that is not entangled in materialistic pursuits is an ideal life. A person is liberated if he renounces Maya, ego and possessiveness and leads lives detached within attachments.

*Kaho Nanak woh mukat nar eh mann saachi maan.
||19|| (SGGS: Pg. 1427)*

Says Nanak, that person is liberated; O mind, know this as true.

Dharma and Sacrifice: A Sacred Duty

Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom demonstrates the culmination of inner awakening and resonates deeply in the Indian philosophical treasures such as self-knowledge and is divided into 'Sat' (true) and 'Asat' (false) knowledge (Kapoor, 2005, p. 25). It is essential to understand that knowledge is not external but internal. Guru Sahib restates that sensory knowledge is misleading and futile without spiritual synthesis. In *Salok Mahla 9*, Guru Sahib acknowledges the oneness of the Divine presence as the original source of knowledge, which, like a lantern, helps the seeker walk through the dark forest of ignorance and seek liberation (*mukti*).

Both the Indian Knowledge Systems and *Salok Mahla 9* observe fearlessness as a natural outcome of self-realization. In his Bani, Guru Ji has elaborated both the states of mind, one that is gripped with fear and one that is fearless" (Singh, Surinder, 2019). Guru Sahib says when a person is detached from the illusory life, vanity, ecstasy and grief, he possesses complete spiritual clarity. He does not have a fear of death, nor does Death strike him. He is prepared to make profound sacrifices.

*Bhae kahu ko det neh neh bhae maanaa aan.
Kaho Nanak sun re manaa giani tahe bakhaan.
||16|| (SGGS: Pg. 1427)*

(The spiritually wise person is the one who does not frighten others and not be frightened by anyone.)

The annals of history attest to the fact that Sikh Gurus have repeatedly encountered authoritarian rulers who have tried to hamper the social fabric of unity and diversity of India. Guru Tegh Bahadur's supreme sacrifice for protecting the fundamental rights of Kashmiri Pandits showcased that the Guru prioritized duty towards others and truth over personal interests. In the book titled, *History of the Sikh Gurus: A Comprehensive Study*, Prof. Surjit Singh Gandhi (1978) writes, "During all his travels, the Guru identified himself with the people and their sorrows and sufferings and he did whatever he could do to provide relief to them. He felt that only those minds which are strong in moral fervour and spirit were capable of struggling against tyranny and injustice (Gandhi 1978, p. 364).

According to *Wikipedia*, Guru Tegh Bahadur is rightfully called *Srisht-di-Chadar* (Shield of the World), *Dharam-di-Chadar* (Shield of Dharma), and *Hind-di-Chadar* (Shield of India). Guru Sahib's fight was against the 'Adharma', a prominent example of which was

Aurangzeb and the Sunni character of his government. (Gandhi, 1978, p. 377). When Guru Arjan Dev was martyred, Guru Hargobind responded to this in the "manner of a hero determined to hold aloft the banner of Dharma" (Gandhi, 1978, p. 376). It was seen in the light of 'Dharmyudh'.

Prof. Surjit Singh Gandhi quotes from the seventeenth-century *Bachittar Natak*, in which Guru Gobind Singh beautifully describes the *Dharma* character of Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom:

"The Lord (Guru Tegh Bahadur) protected their paste mark and sacred thread.
And performed a mighty deed in the Kali age.
To protect the good he spared no pains,
Gave his head but uttered not a groan,
For the protection of righteousness he did his noble deed,
Gave his head but not his ideal. (Gandhi, 1978, p. 377)

Guru Gobind Singh outlines his mission in defining Dharma:

For this purpose, am I born into the world,
For Dharma's sake I am sent here by Lord
Ordained to promote Dharma here and there
And to demolish the wicked and the evil-minded
Let all good people understand that I am born for this purpose:
To promote Dharma, to protect the good, to extirpate the evil. (Gandhi, 1978, p. 377)

It is worth noting that the Sikh's political independence in the eighteenth century was not immediate in occurrence, but it "was a logical as well as a historical development from the freedom of conscience defended by Guru Tegh Bahadur and ensured by Guru Gobind Singh". (Grewal, 2020)

Contours of the Self: Indian and Western Knowledge

In the Western tradition, 'knowledge' has been held as opposed to innocence, and associated with 'power' that leads to the Fall of man...Western history of ideas is the man-centered world-view. (Kapoor, 2005, p. 26).

The concept of the self has often been explored by the Western philosophers. Rene Descartes (1596-1650), a French scientific thinker and a metaphysician, is known for the foundation of modern philosophy in the West. *Cogito, ergo sum* is a philosophical statement coined by him in the Latin language, and the idea was first introduced in his book *Discourse on the Method* (1641). It means, "I think, therefore I am". Descartes argues that "I" is the stable

thing, and it has a substance. If a person has an ability to think, that guarantees his subsistence. This ultimate truth cannot be countered. "I" is a "thinking thing" and "truly existing" (Descartes, 1998, p. 65). 'But I have persuaded myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world: no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Is it then the case that I too do not exist? But doubtless I did exist, if I persuaded myself of something. But there is some deceiver or other who is supremely powerful and supremely sly and who is always deliberately deceiving me. Then too there is no doubt that I exist, if he is deceiving me' (Descartes, 1998, p. 63-64).

In the light of postmodernism, Jean Francois Lyotard (1984) claims that there is no unified self and that it is formed by language and power. He meant to say:

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. (Lyotard, 1984, p. 82-83).

It has reduced humans to the grim apparatus of death and destruction, culminated in social and moral collapse and spun the web of control.

But is it really unlimited to get to know the real self? Is the "self" permanent? Where to seek the answer? Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib explains that "Self" is just a stream of thoughts and sensations. "I" is an illusion. The human body is made up of five elements, and it will merge into the dust from where it originated. Hence, the "self" is always changing.

Paanch tat ko tann rachio jano chatur sujaan.

Jeh te upjio nanka leen tahe main maan. ||11||
(SGGS: Pg. 1427)

(The body is composed of earth, water, fire, air, and space, and it will dissolve back into them).

Descartes believes in certainty, whereas Guru Sahib points towards uncertainty that is reality of life and the acceptance of the will of the God:

Jo supna ar pekhna aese jag ko jaan. (SGGS: Pg. 1427)
(This world is like a dream. Everything is perishable here).

A French existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), discusses the notion of the meaninglessness of life in his book titled *Being and Nothingness* (1956); he writes, "Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being-like a worm" (Sartre, 1956, p. 21). Through a vivid imagery of decay and turmoil, Sartre says that Nothingness is like a worm

present inside the self that strangles the breath inside the heartbeat. This nothingness grants freedom (one has a choice to make), but it also comes with anxiety, anguish and responsibility (it has the capability of creating one's nature). Overcoming fear and acting in an authentic and passionate manner should be a conscious choice of man's action. Guru Sahib in his Bani says that life is temporary in nature, unreal and deceptive, but it doesn't mean to incite despair. Rather, it's a call to walk away from materialistic life.

*Janam janam bharmat firio mitio na jam ko taraas.
Kaho Nanak har bhaj manaa nirbhae paweh baas.
||33|| (SGGS: Pg. 1427)*

(A person wanders into the cyclic nature of birth and death in the fog of ignorance. He must abandon the state of his ego in order to align with the Lord.)

In this way, Sikh philosophy investigates the dichotomous logic of the Western worldview especially when it comes to understanding time, self and existence. Western Thinking emphasizes opposites- life versus death, time versus eternity and mortal versus immortal. Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair (2024) states that Sikh philosophy embraces the "logic of non-oppositionality". The idea is to rise above one's ego in order to "turning death against itself" (kāl kāle)".

The formula can be reduced to simple terms: when I am, God does not exist. For God to exist, myself or ego must disappear. (Mandair, 2024)

The Indian mind believes in the knowledge of the oneness of all. It "operates not with pre-X-post apparatus but with the configurational model" (Kapoor, 2005, p. 31). It "rests on cyclicity as against the Western linearity".

Indian thought systems support a kind of pagan pluralism and make plurality a ground reality of Indian intellectual life. This contrasts sharply with Hebraic monism and monotheism (Kapoor, 2005, p. 31).

Guru Sahib adopted the method of "pagan pluralism" that all human beings are part of a universe. He stood against the barriers of caste, class, race, gender and held the view that the inner self of human beings is the temple for the sacred divine. He upheld Dharma and self-liberation as a governance model for societal and political transformation. According to him, it is the social responsibility of a citizen to exhibit the virtues of self-respect and moral courage in response to abuse of power and totalitarian control. The Indian philosophers "disclaim originality" and see themselves evolving from the past without any pride.

4. Conclusion

Therefore, the concept of the nature of existence, liberation, and the reason for suffering has been thoroughly discussed and analyzed by the Indian Knowledge Systems. The shift from the man-centered worldview to the universal truth is a living legacy entrusted to the Indian intellectual tradition. Both *Salok Mahla 9* and IKS comprise the pluralistic framework of thought that offers solutions to human struggles such as mindfulness, self-awareness and transcendence of the self through holistic spirituality. Here, God is described as a true healer. In addition to it, Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib illuminates the enduring connection between *Atma* (human soul) and *Paramatma* (divine), which is the ultimate goal (*Mukti*). This ethical model is based on harmony and reciprocity, unlike Hebrew tradition. It attaches values to the multiplicity of truths and freedom of conscience in Sikhism.

This paper's original contribution lies in its interdisciplinary synthesis of Sikh theological thought and Indian Knowledge Systems discourse. By situating *Salok Mahla 9* within broader Indic spiritual traditions, it illuminates resonances with notions like detachment, self-expression, inner restraint and liberation while upholding the fundamental Sikh emphasis on divine remembrance, civic responsibility and shared spiritual humanity. Future research may examine the relationship of Sikh philosophy with Vedanta, Buddhism, and Bhakti traditions and ought to investigate the *saloks'* applicability to contemporary challenges, involving consumerism, psychological health, ecological sustainability, social justice, and global conflict resolution. On a global scale, this integrated model will make not just the citizens but also the nation self-sustaining, resilient, and resource efficient.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) did not employ any of the Generative AI and/or AI-Assisted technologies for Language refinement, drafting background section and did not perform any Task of the technology.

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Professor Dr. Harpreet Kaur has to her credit 34 Books, 19 Book Chapters, 52 Papers in National and 9 in International Journals, 28 Book Reviews and 13 Forewords and Editorials. She has been an expert Speaker in 30 national and 20 international conferences in USA, UK, Canada, Poland, South Korea etc. She is currently the Principal of Mata Sundri College for Women, University of Delhi. Dr. Harpreet Kaur is on Editorial Board of The Sikh Review and Advisor, GISS. She has received appreciation for research, academic endeavours and leadership in women education.



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She has presented papers at numerous national and international Conferences and seminars and has chaired sessions, including at the two-day national seminar on Nonsense Literature. She has directed one-act plays at the college level. She also translates between Punjabi and English and worked in the committee of Punjabi Literary Translation workshop.

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