Sikhism and Holistic Trend in Western Philosophy: A Comparative Study

Introduction

The Context

The present thesis titled SIKHISM AND HOLISTIC TREND IN WESTERN PHILOSOPHY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY is an attempt to enquire into the Sikh philosophy and the philosophies of Spinoza, Hegel and Whitehead in a comparative perspective. The subject matter of the comparative study is about the holistic approach of the philosophical systems concerned. The present study is a comparative study of Sikhism which emerged in India in the late medieval period in relation to the Holistic philosophies of Spinoza, Hegel and Whitehead of the Western philosophical tradition. From the comparative perspective, it is an attempt to identify the similarities and dissimilarities of holistic approach advanced by Sikhism and the philosophies of Spinoza, Hegel and Whitehead.

Sikhism is a religion which came into being in the sixteenth century in Northwest India. The philosophy of Sikhism reflects the human protest against the Vedic religious orthodoxy which gave a metaphysical justification to caste system and feudalism. The founder of the Sikh movement is Guru Nanak Dev (1469-1539). Sikhism follows the Guru Tradition and there are ten Gurus in this tradition. After the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, the holy book of Sikhism, which contains the hymns of the Gurus and the Saints of various traditions, that is, Guru Granth Sahib is considered as the living Guru. Guru Granth Sahib, the Holy Scripture of Sikhism contains philosophical ideas of Sikhism. Unlike the religions which emphasize on the other-worldly aspects, Sikhism proposes the
combination of the spiritual and the worldly realms in the existential sphere.

Spinoza (632-1677), a Dutch Metaphysician, is generally regarded as one of the most important rationalists of the seventeenth century. Spinoza identifies Nature with God and thereby he conceives the oneness of reality. In his works entitled, ‘Tractatus Theologico-Politicus’ and ‘Ethics’ he rejects the notion of the duality of temporality and spirituality and presents the relatedness of the two in a holistic way.

Hegel (1770-1831), an idealist philosopher and dialectician, is a representative of the classical German philosophy. In his magnum opus, ‘The Phenomenology of Spirit’, he elaborates his thesis that the world is always in the process of becoming. That is, the world is portrayed as an entity which is in constant motion or change or transformation. In the dynamism of the world, Hegel perceives an internal connection among the objects of the world through the idea of the Absolute or God. In this sense, Hegel’s philosophy provides the idea concerning the unificatory nature of the material as well as the spiritual realities.

Whitehead (1861-1947) is an English logician and idealist philosopher. He elaborated the idea of cosmology incorporating the idea of God as the source and basis of the creative character of the world. His philosophy exerted a powerful influence on modern religious conceptions. In his most popular work, ‘Process and Reality’, he advances the idea of Process Theology. It says that reality is in process and that the reality consists of interrelated self creating entities. Whitehead perceives that if the idea of God has no attachment to the world, then it has no value. He considers the idea of God as the chief exemplification of the ultimate metaphysical principle. For him, the idea of God is immanent in the world and vice versa.
Autonomy is the goal of philosophy. Autonomy means the freedom of being able to decide for oneself by using one's own rationality. Holism offers space to bring forth the inherent qualities of humans to shape them autonomous. There are different trends in philosophy which analyze the nature of reality. Holism is one such trend in philosophy which analyses the nature of reality. Holism considers the reality to be dynamic in nature. The plural elements of reality make the system dynamic through their interrelatedness. So holism is considered as a philosophy of relatedness. The word, Holism, means that the whole entities of reality have an existence greater than the mere sum of their parts. The basic principle of holism is that a part is understandable only through its relationship to the whole. It means that a system is one which includes the ‘Whole’ and the ‘Parts’ and that the reality is the unity of the whole and the parts. That means, the plurality of existence makes a system holistic through their interrelatedness. Sikhism and the philosophies of Spinoza, Hegel and Whitehead advance the idea that plurality of realities are related to each other and that there is a unificatory element, that is, the idea of God which interconnects the multiplicity of reality.

Holism associates the idea of Whole with the idea of God and the idea of the world is conceived as the part of the Whole. Holism holds that the idea of God is spiritual and that the world is physical. So holism can also be called as the unity of the spiritual and the physical. This unity justifies the relatedness of the body and the mind in the microcosmic level. In holism, the human beings are considered as the mutuality of the physical and the spiritual phenomena. This idea diametrically opposes the dichotomy of the idea of God and the World. Instead, holism conjoins the binaries and allows their interplay in the realm of existence. Holism considers the world of objects as a real entity; it denounces the view that worldly
affairs are illusory. As holism emphasizes the reality of objects of the
world, it paves the way for the better understanding of the problems
plaguing the society.

In order to make the philosophical stand point of Holism clear,
the problem of One and Many and the idea of Flux and Permanence
have been analyzed in the present study. The problem of One and
Many is a major metaphysical issue. Another important problem is
that of the Materiality and Spirituality. Also the problem of
transcendental and immanence is the core issue in the
philosophisation of the idea of God. The idea of Flux and
permanence is also a living issue in the philosophical discourses.
The idea of flux is attributed to the world of change and the idea of
Permanence is attributed to the spiritual substratum. The binaries,
such as temporality and permanence, being and becoming, eternity
and time, etc., also pose a problem in the understanding of the
reality as these binaries present the dichotomical picture of the
reality. As holism intends to view reality through inclusivism, the
binary opposites are affirmed by the holistic perspective without
excluding either of them to understand the reality. Though the
binaries are contradictory to each other in their nature, the holism
accepts the reality with its contradictory moments and the
contradictions are viewed by it as the essential elements leading to
the progress. Also, the binary elements get related to each other, in
holism, through the all-pervasiveness of the idea of God. Thus,
holism offers space for the reality to be dynamic, ever-active and
creative. The idea of Holism can be understood only by the
examination of these binary aspects.

As a part of the study of Holism, the philosophical issues such as
the idea of Negation and the problem of Alienation have been taken
for study in the thesis. The idea of negation, in Sikhism as well as in
the philosophy of Hegel, does not portray a negative aspect. But they are considered as the necessary aspect of reality to make it to the next stage of consciousness and of progress. In other words, the idea of negation is identified as immanent in the process of dynamic reality. That is, the idea of negation is filled with the moments of creative actions.

The problem of alienation is identified, in Sikhism, as the offshoot of Haumain. Sikhism recognizes the problem of alienation as the expression of the individuated self which considers itself separate from the unity underlying the world of objects. Hegel elaborates the problem of alienation as the deviant behavior in the self-consciousness stage of the human beings who are supposed to realize the absolute consciousness. While dealing with the problem of negation as well as alienation, these philosophical trends do not stop with the diagnosis of the problems. Rather they prescribe the absolute consciousness or the realization of the essential unity of beings in relation to the idea of God as the ultimate reality. Thus, they reap over the idea of negation and alienation through holistic approach.

1.1 The Research Issues

The research issues that are taken up for philosophical analysis in the thesis are as follows:

1. Holism as a trend against individualism, dualism and Pluralism.

2. The idea of Sikhism as a holistic trend in Indian Philosophy. That proposes an alternative to Individualism, Dualism and Pluralism.
3. Comparative study of Sikhism and the philosophy of Spinoza on the idea of Manifestation, the concept of Divine law, the nature of human freedom and the problem of one and many.

4. Comparative study of Sikhism and the Philosophy of Hegel on the idea of Metaphysics, the idea of Negation, the relation between the whole and the Parts and the idea of Self-consciousness and Absolute consciousness.

5. Comparative study of Sikhism and the Philosophy of Whitehead on the idea of God, the concept of Transcendence and Immanence and the idea of Flux and Permanence.

1.2 The Significance of the Research Issues

In Indian context, most of the Philosophies ascribe negative status to the worldly reality and they emphasise the transcendental reality. Vedic teachings have influenced orthodox systems of Indian thought, who consider reality as purely transcendental. The transcendental nature of reality entails the reality of One without a second so it undermines the multiplicity of reality. The reality of the One proposed by Vedic texts is based on the presupposition or the prejudiced attitude that plurality of reality is illusion or Maya. But in actuality, World is of plural objects. So it can be said that the sociology of Vedic traditions attempts to undermine the plurality of reality and teach to withdraw oneself from the objects of reality to realize transcendental Reality. Sikhism, as an alternative tradition, rejects the idea of negation enshrined in the Vedic religions and maintains the plurality of reality with all its ingredients and inherent qualities. Sikhism argues that the plurality of reality is related to the idea of God. So the realization of the idea of God is meant to be the realization of plurality of reality or the world of objects which is the result of Divine creation. This idea is intimately connected to the
societal living. Sikhism considers the service to the society as the service to God. Sikhism advances a socio-religious thought which is significant to the present day philosophical discourse. In a comparative perspective, Sikhism and Western philosophy have been analyzed keeping the idea of Holism as the central theme.

1.3 The Scope of the Study

The present study analyses the metaphysical problem in a secular perspective and attempts to decipher the meaning of the transcendental metaphysics in the realm of immanence. This approach gives a positive definition to metaphysics. With this approach, the study of metaphysics is humanised to recognize the unity of the plurality of reality.

1.4 Methodology

The present thesis has been realized through analytical, critical and comparative methods. Descriptive method has been used to elaborate the arguments of each philosophical school.

1.5 Sources of the Study

Primary sources and secondary sources have been used for this study. Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the holy scripture of Sikh religion has been taken as the main source for Sikhism and original works of Spinoza, Hegel and Whitehead have been taken for the study. Many books, journals and articles dealing with the subjects concerned, have been used for furthering the discussions.

1.6 Contents of the Philosophical Ground of Study

The introductory chapter focuses the content of the study and the methods followed in the comparative study. The introductory chapter discusses the contents, expectations and the limitations of the thesis.
The first chapter of the thesis, titled, ‘Holism and Sikhism’ focuses the philosophical trend which is based on the Idea of Relatedness. Holism advances the Idea of unity of the plural elements of reality. Non holistic systems of philosophy like Individualism, Dualism and Pluralism undermine the unity of the plurality of reality. The idea of Holism from the religious point of view is that the idea of God and World are necessarily related. This relation justifies the world as real.

Sikhism, as a Holistic trend, emphasises the unity of spirituality and worldliness. The idea of Miri-Piri in Sikhism explains the holistic trend and it forms the basis of all the explanations of the reality.

Second chapter of the thesis discusses ‘Sikhism and the Philosophy of Spinoza’ in a comparative perspective. The comparative study discusses the following issues

1. **The Idea of Manifestation and Modification**: The idea of God is the basis of every creation and thus it manifests itself in the objects of the world. Also, according to Spinoza, the idea of God expresses itself in the objects of reality through its essences that is extension and thought. That is, the world of objects is the manifestation of the idea of God through its attributes namely extension and thought. So the concept of God becomes the essential unificatory moment of all the objects of the reality. Both in Sikhism and the philosophy of Spinoza, the substance is inalienably united with its modes of existence.

2. **The Concept of Hukam and Divine Law**: Sikhism and the Philosophy of Spinoza argue that the universe is guided by an order which, Sikhism calls it Hukam and Spinoza calls it
Divine law. Both the terms mean the divine command for a harmonious societal living.

3. **The Nature of Human Freedom in Sikhism and in the Philosophy of Spinoza**: This topic discusses the problem of human freedom from the religious point of view. Most of the religions consider that human freedom is predetermined. Some religions associate freedom with the concept of karma or fatalism. Under this topic the researcher revisits the idea of human freedom and explores as to how human freedom can be attained with responsibility and relatedness to the world of objects, through the philosophies of Sikhism and Spinoza. A least understanding of the divine law in association with voluntary attitude of the humans to the law explains the dialectics of law and human freedom.

4. **The Problem of One and Many**: It is to find the relation between God and the World. Here the idea of One represents the idea of God and the idea of Many represents the world of objects. Under this topic, the analysis as to how the idea of God and the world are interrelated has been made out.

5. **The Essence of Human**: Under this topic, it is to find out the essence of human being in the philosophies of Sikhism and Spinoza. According to these philosophical trends, the existence of human is possible only through the unity of mind and body. It can be found that the essence of body and mind is that they are the manifested forms of God. That is, the idea of God is the ultimate reference point of the unity of the temporal and the spiritual and this unity is the essence of human beings.

Third chapter of the thesis titled ‘Sikhism and the Philosophy of Hegel’ compares the similar ideas of Sikhism and the philosophy of
Hegel. The comparative study discusses four philosophical issues as follows:

1. **Sikhism and the Philosophy of Hegel: A Positive Definition to Metaphysics:** Under this sub-title, the idea of Metaphysics in Sikhism and in the philosophy of Hegel has been analysed in a comparative perspective. Here, the relatedness between the transcendental realm and the immanent realm of reality has been discussed in the holistic manner. Thus, Sikhism and the philosophy of Hegel step into a fresh definition of metaphysics.

2. **The Idea of Negation in Sikhism and in the Philosophy of Hegel:** The idea of negation is a positive method to unfold the nature of reality. The idea here is that negation is a method to find that reality is dynamic and that reality is unity. The idea of negation in the philosophies of Sikhism and Hegel is related to activism. In these philosophies negation does not mean renunciation of the worldly activities, but, quite contrarily, it means the active process in which negation plays a vital role in the synthesis of opposites.

3. **Relation between Whole and Parts in Sikhism and in the Philosophy of Hegel:** This topic discusses the idea of Holism and finds that the whole and parts are essentially related because parts are within the whole. Though the parts seem to be distinctively different each other by nature, they are interconnected through the essence of the Absolute. This sort of their essential interconnection admits the interplay of objects to realize the unity.

4. **The Idea of Self-consciousness and Absolute consciousness in Sikhism and in the Philosophy of Hegel:** Human thought
being starts with simple ideas and reaches the Absolute idea. That means human thought is in a process that moves from self-consciousness to absolute consciousness. When the human is in the self-conscious stage, he/she tries to alienate from the fellow beings considering the perceptible difference among them. But when consciousness develops into the absolute consciousness, the human realizes that he/she is related with other beings as a string of objects. Absolute consciousness makes a human aware of his relation to the nature of plurality of reality. The movement from self-consciousness to absolute consciousness is compared to the transformation of Manmukh into a Gurmukh in Sikhism.

The last chapter compares Sikhism and the Philosophy of Whitehead. The study analyses two issues in a comparative perspective.

1. **The Concept of God in Sikhism and in the Philosophy of Whitehead**: The Sikhism and the philosophy of Whitehead advance the monotheistic idea of God. The present topic elaborately discusses the characteristics of the idea of God. Sikhism and the philosophy of Whitehead consider God as the ground of order and the universally operative concept of reality. The multiplicity of reality or the world of reality is not rational without the idea of God. Another important aspect is that God is in process, because according to them, creation is a continuous process and God is within every creation. God is also in process. Sikhism and Whitehead’s Philosophy perceive that the idea of God serves as the valuation of the World. That means God values human action. The idea of transcendent nature of God and the immanent nature of God are discussed here. It is found that transcendent nature of God is
conceptual and unconscious, whereas the immanent nature of God is perceptual and conscious. Both the philosophies emphasize the immanent nature of God since it is perceptual and conscious.

2. **The idea of Flux and Permanence in Sikhism and in the Philosophy of Whitehead:** This is an enquiry to find the relation between the idea of Flux, which represents the idea of change and the idea of permanence. The idea of Permanence represents the idea of ultimate reality which is transcendental and beyond multiplicity. These two aspects, namely, flux and permanence are different in nature, or they are considered as binary opposites; but in the idea of God they conjoin to make a dynamic reality. Sikhism and Whitehead’s Philosophy perceive that even though they are different in nature, they stand to make a system holistic. In such a position it can be said that the flux is in permanence and that the permanence is in flux. That means both these aspects are interrelated. That reveals the idea of Holism.

The last part of the thesis is conclusion, which evaluates the thesis and derives the summary of the study. Summary of the thesis mentions the importance of holistic approach in philosophy and shows the possibilities of comparative moments present in Sikhism and the holistic trends in Western philosophy.

**1.7 Expectation**

The present thesis attempts to study a field of philosophy, that is, Holism. The holistic thought pattern is very much essential for human relationship and societal living. This thesis compares the two different traditions that arose in the East and West. Though the historical epochs in which Sikhism and the philosophies of Spinoza,
Hegel, and Whitehead emerged are quite different, their approach to philosophical problems is holistic in nature. In the world of divisions, the idea of holism can play a vital role for the intermingling of different aspects of reality. Further studies on this particular area are expected to yield better results for social cohesion.

1.8 Limitation

In this comparative study, only three Western philosophers who are known to be holistic philosophers have been compared with Sikhism. In Western Philosophy there may be many philosophical standpoints that can be compared with Sikhism but that is not addressed in the present thesis.