The Guru Granth: Scripture of the Sikhs

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A quick look inside a gurdwara (house of the Guru/preceptor, Sikh place of worship) reveals the high degree of reverence in which the Sikhs hold their scripture. The gurdwara is literally the house of the Guru Granth (Guru manifested as the book), which is covered in expensive robes (*rumalas*) and displayed at the head of a well-lit congregational hall replicating a royal court (*darbar/divan*). The text is placed on a throne like structure with canopy (*palaki*), and an attendant ceremonially waves a yak's tail flywhisk over it (*chaur*). The canopy and the flywhisk, two core symbols of royalty in the Indian culture, validate the Guru Granth's status as the supreme authority within the Sikh community. The text is opened in the morning (*prakash*) and put to rest in the evening (*sukhasan*) and it is transported from one place to another at an elevation above the human height and with appropriate retinue accompanying it.

Historic gurdwaras have pools attached to them where pilgrims have holy dip (*ishnan*) prior to entering the congregational hall. In other places, all entrants undergo a ritual cleansing that includes washing of feet, hands up to the elbows, and the mouth--five parts of the body considered most exposed (*panj ishnana*). They walk up to the Guru Granth with hands folded, leave their offerings there, register obeisance by touching their foreheads to the ground (*matha tekanha*), and then move aside and sit on the floor respectfully facing toward the text. The same setting is recreated in Sikh households where a separate room is allocated to the Guru Granth and families gather there for daily prayers and other ceremonial

events. If the house is not large enough for this arrangement, a smaller text (*gutka*/*sanchi*) containing selected compositions from the Guru Granth is used for prayers, and this text is assigned fitting respect by keeping it wrapped in silk cloth and placed on the top shelf of a cupboard when not in use.

The Guru Granth constitutes the center of Sikh devotional worship, which includes the following five elements: The recitation of its verses (*path*), their singing with accompaniment of musical instruments (*kirtan*), their exegesis (*katha*), a supplication (*ardas*) addressed through the text to Vahiguru (Great Guru, the most commonly used designation for God among the Sikhs), and the receiving of the divine reply (*hukam*) at the conclusion of the worship. The text is opened at random and the first composition on the left-hand top corner of the page is considered the *hukam* to the congregation's supplication. The Sikhs do not have a priestly class, and anyone regardless of gender or age distinction can attend to the text, recite, sing, lead the prayers, receive the *hukam*, or carry the text to its place of rest. Within the family setting particularly, the lady of the house is responsible for the opening and closing of the text and related activities.

The Guru Granth also plays the central role in Sikh ritual and ceremonial life. It includes ceremonies such as the naming of the new-born (*namkaran*) with the first letter of the *hukam* to the family's supplication after the birth of the baby; the taking of the nectar of the double-edged sword (*khande di pahul*) symbolizing one's commitment to serve the community with complete dedication in the presence of the Guru Granth; the listening to a special prayer from the text and circumambulating it four times to mark a wedding (*lavan*); and the recitation of the complete text followed by a prayer for the peace of the departed soul (*bhog*).

The primary thrust of the message of the Guru Granth being ethical, the text defines the norms of a meaningful and productive Sikh life.

Given this centrality of the Guru Granth in Sikh life, a variety of its printed editions ranging from a large-size text used in congregational worship to multi-volume texts for family prayers or study are available. The text contains around 3,000 poetic compositions and is now printed with standard pagination of 1,430. It opens with a liturgical section (pp. 1-13), its main body includes thirty-one chapters constructed around the musical modes on which these poetic compositions are to be sung (pp. 14-1352), and the final section closes with miscellaneous compositions that are not set to music (pp. 1353-1430). Sikh belief in the importance of understanding the ideas enshrined in the text has historically resulted in an array of annotated editions, translated versions, and detailed commentaries. The nature of scholarship on the Guru Granth has, however, remained exegetical, though studies are available on the history of its compilation and structure.[i]

This paper is divided into three sections. It begins with a brief examination of the socio-cultural context that gave rise to Sikh scripture. The main section reconstructs (1) the history of the text from its beginnings to canonization, (2) the rise of its scriptural authority, (3) and some observations about Sikh devotional and social life as reflected in early scriptural manuscripts. In a brief conclusion, I sum up Sikh understanding of their scripture, and attempt to situate this understanding within the larger field of scriptural studies.[ii] In addition to introducing the Guru Granth to scholars of comparative scripture, I hope this paper will also provide insights for those involved in theorizing about scripture and advance the agenda of the Institute of Signifying Scriptures.

I. The context

The story of Guru Granth began in the 1530 in central Punjab, the region that serves as a bridge between South Asia, the Middle East and Central Asia. Often not brought to focus, Islam came to the region much earlier than the rest of the subcontinent. Muhammad bin Qasim captured Multan, the southern tip of the Punjab, and built the first mosque there in the 730s. Later at the turn of the second millennium, Mahmud of Ghazni (d. 1030), the Turkish chief, annexed the Punjab to his large empire, which stretched from Samarkand in Central Asia to Ispahan in Iran. From this point on, the Punjab remained under the control of Muslim rulers who eventually moved their capital to the city of Lahore, the cultural center of the Punjab.[iii]

These developments left a deep impact on the socio-religious scene of the Punjab. The rise of mosques and Sufi centers (*khanqah*) changed the look of the regional landscape. Shaikh Fariduddin (d. 1173), a Sufi poet from southern Punjab, wrote in such beautiful Punjabi that local people turned his poetic expressions into proverbs. The arrival of Muslim ruling classes was accompanied by Afghan, Arab, Iranian, and Turkish immigrants into the Punjab. This created a difficult situation for upper caste Hindus--Brahmans and Kshatriyas, the priestly and warrior castes, respectively. A large number of them left the Punjab planes for the hills in the north or the desert in the south. The Khatris, an indigenous Punjabi mercantile caste, filled this vacuum thriving in their traditional profession as well as expanding their venues of employment by learning Farsi and seeking work in the administration.

A significant socio-economic factor came into play with the introduction of the Persian Wheel, a gear and pulley system, which could lift water from a

depth of around twenty feet. This resulted in an important development with the erstwhile nomads beginning settled agriculture. For the first time in their history, these people tackled the opportunity of becoming part of a settled society. In the northwest, the present day Pakistan, these nomads joined Islam in large numbers, in the central Punjab, they took up the Sikh path.[iv]

The Punjabi society around 1500 was comprised of various segments--the Muslims who constituted the majority, the Hindus, the Jains, and the nomads-turned farmers. They all had their distinct understanding of scripture and its role in life. The ruling classes regarded themselves as the *ahl-al kitab* (the possessors of the holy book), and their administrative law was rooted in the Quran. The Muslim community also included converts originating from both Hindu and nomadic backgrounds, for whom the idea of the text of the Quran as the scripture was relatively new. Among the Hindus, there were Brahmans who literally carried the Vedic chants in their memory and firmly believed in the "oral transmission" of this sacred corpus. Women and lower castes were banned access to these sounds, only the upper castes males could listen to them. The Jains in the Punjab like their counterparts in other parts of the subcontinent had a vast religious literature and sectarian groups from among them had different notions of a religious text: the Shvetambaras accepted the role of scripture but the Digambaras did not. Finally, the nomads, who had only recently been exposed to these ideas of oral and written scriptures, would have brought their own historical proclivities while absorb them into their lives.

II. Sikhs and their scripture

These diverse ideas about the physical form and the role of scripture had thus coexisted for over half-a millennium before Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the

founder of the Sikh tradition, appeared on the scene. The striking thing about the Sikhs is that they began to commit to writing their sacred literature very early in their history, taking care to protect and preserve these manuscripts for posterity. As a result, a sizable number of them including the pre-canonical documents have survived despite the difficult weather conditions and ravages of history associated with the Punjab. This unique empirical data help us reconstruct the history of Sikh scripture with a degree of accuracy not possible in older religious tradition. Scholars have been largely interested in the formation of Sikh canon and the related textual issues, the details such as the structure of the early manuscripts, marginal notes, information about those who inscribed and preserved these documents, and religio-social implications of this information are yet to be examined.

II.1. History of the text

Guru Nanak's beliefs, presented in more than five hundred of his poetic compositions, as well as details of his life available in other sources, help us understand his thinking that resulted in the creation of the Sikh sacred text.[v] First, Guru Nanak was convinced that he had direct access to divine knowledge and his compositions resulted from his conversation with Vahiguru (*jaisi mai avaai khasam ki banhi tesrha kari gianu ve Lalo*, M1, GG, 722, and *ta ma kahia kahanhu ja tujhai kahaia*, M1, GG, 566).[vi] Secondly, his writings register the importance of the institution of scripture. He accepted that Hindu and Semitic scriptural texts were of divine origin, and that following them helps to save their adherents from evil (*chauthi upae chare Beda*, M1, GG, 839; *oankari Bed nirmae*, M1, GG, 930; *Bed path mati papa khae*, M1, GG, 791). Finally, Guru Nanak believed that the inscription of the sacred word was an act of profound devotion requiring the heart and soul of

the scribe, and he urged people to devote themselves to inscribing the divine word (*jali mohu ghasi masu kari mati kagadu kari saru*, M1, GG, 16; *sunhi pande kia likhahu janajala, likhu ramnam gurmukhi gopala*, M1, GG, 930).

Having said that, Guru Nanak had no doubt that his own compositions contained all the significant knowledge that was needed to live life meaningfully (*sabhi nad Bed gurbanhi*, M1, GG, 879). It appears that he had written down his compositions as he had created them and compiled them in the form of a text later, during the 1530s. After all he expected his followers to understand the contents of his compositions and to put them into practice in their day-to-day activities (*gurbanhi nirbanhu shabad pachhania*, M1, GG, 752; *guri kahia sa kar kamavahu,* M1, GG, 933; *satigur ki banhi sati sati kari manahu,* M1, GG, 1028). The text containing his compositions was ceremonially passed on to his successor, Angad (Guru, 1539-1571), at the time of his elevation to the office of the Guru.[vii]

Here is an instance of consciously created scriptural text during the lifetime of the founder, and the role assigned to it in the succession ceremony of the Guru marked the public declaration of its authority within the community. The new revelation sprang up in the vernacular, associated with the rustic people, and was dressed in a new script specifically created for this purpose and assigned the name of Gurmukhi (of the Gurmukhs/Sikhs).[viii] As repository of divine knowledge, the text's contents were to guide the Sikh community. Its physical existence had the potential of allowing the Sikhs obtain the recognition of *ahl-al kitab* and the resulting clemency from the tax paid by the non-Muslims (*jizya*), which the law of the time authorized.

Guru Nanak's text subsequently expanded to include the compositions of six Gurus, those of bards at the Sikh court, and a carefully selected set of writings

of fifteen non-Sikh saints. Three of these saints came from Muslim and twelve from Hindu background. Eleven among them, however, have symbolic presence in Sikh scripture, in all nineteen short compositions are attributed to them. (One poet has four compositions, another one three, three have two compositions each, and six have only one composition each to their credit.[ix] By deciding not to enter his compositions into the text, Guru Gobind Singh (1675-1708), the tenth and the last personal Guru, declared the canon closed in the 1680s.

Building on Guru Nanak's belief regarding the nature of his compositions, Sikhs firmly consider their scripture as revealed. The compositions of six later Gurus are seen as an extension of Guru Nanak's ideas--after all they had received their knowledge from him or a successor of his. They have their own claims for direct revelation too (*mahali bulaia prabhu amrit bhuncha*, M5, GG, 562). The presence of the compositions of the bards at the Sikh court, and of Hindu and Sufi saints is attributed to the decision of Guru Arjan (1581-1606), the fifth in line of the Gurus, and according to some scholars of Guru Nanak himself. The early manuscripts, however, support the view that these writings entered Sikh scriptural text during the period of the third Guru, Amardas (1551-1574).

Whatever the time of their entry, the text of the Guru Granth itself helps us appreciate the presence of these compositions in it. The organization of the text manifests a hierarchichal understanding of the nature of revelation. Guru Nanak's compositions are situated at the top as he had direct contact with Vahiguru; following are the compositions of his successors who learned their lessons from him; the next come the compositions of Sikh bards who worked with his successors; at the end appear the compositions of the non-Sikh saints which were carefully selected. Only those that fully conformed to Sikh belief in

divine unity and a vision of productive social life were kept.

As mentioned above eleven of these saints have a nominal presence. The only striking feature of these compositions is the diversity of the social backgrounds of their creators. The caste background of all is not known, but some definitely came from low-caste and untouchable background (Dhanna, Sadhana, Sainh). The inclusion of their writings in the Sikh scriptural text does make an emphatic assertion of the social comprehensiveness of the rising Sikh community. After all Sikh beliefs fully support social equality: If Vahiguru is the creator of all, how can there be high and low, pure and impure (*sabhana jia ika chhau*, M1, GG, 83; *manda kisno akhiai jan sabhana sahibu ek*, M2, 1238).

The presence of bards at Sikh court sits well with another dimension of Sikh understanding of revelation. Guru Nanak is the only spiritual leader of his time who created three compositions commenting upon the most significant historical event of his time, the invasion of India by Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty in India, in 1526. Being part of the divine design, the historical events deserve to be recorded. In the verses of the Gurus, we find details of the rise of the Sikh community including references to the tension with the Mughal rulers. Within this context, the bards' songs about Sikh court, an important development in religious history, thus belonged to Sikh scripture.

In early manuscripts, the list of death dates of the Gurus is also available. It seems that these dates were originally recorded at the end of the texts but beginning with the manuscripts prepared in 1604, they were brought to the opening folios. Here were the details of a sacred history unfolding right in front of the Sikhs of the time. Guru Arjan sings of his followers scattered all over the region (*kirati hamari ghari ghari hoi, bhagati hamari sabhani loi*, M5, GG, 1141).

Beginning with 1604, the manuscripts also carry a note about a large Sikh congregation in south India. They are reported to be running an extensive community kitchen (*langar*), whether it was a marker of the large size of the community or of their philanthropy in serving food to the locals is not clear, but reference to a thriving congregation made it into Sikh scriptural text.

The emphasis on the ethical import of Sikh revelation surfaces in the form of brief entries regarding what the Sikhs should or should not do. A manuscript inscribed around 1600 records an interesting fragment under the title of "five dos and five do nots" (*panj kare panj na kare*). The five dos are:

1. Participation in congregational worship
2. Generosity to the needy, suffering, and poor
3. Arranging for the marriage of an unmarried Sikh
4. Assisting a non-Sikh join the Sikh fold
5. Praying for the welfare of all with no ill will for anyone.

The five donots are: no stealing, no adultery, no slander, no gambling, no consumption of liquor and meat.

As Sikh scripture became canonized in the 1680s, the text was considered closed. At this point, however, Sikh understanding of revelation was interpreted strictly in terms of the poetic compositions included in the earlier text and consequently all other details such as the death dates of the Gurus, references to the congregation in south India, or brief statements of moral imperatives were deleted. With the passage of time, the historical dimension of Sikh revelation that these details alluded to became increasingly de-emphasized, while the eternal aspect of Sikh scripture was supposedly brought to the forefront.

In addition to belief in revelation ensconced in the scriptural text, it also developed as a marker of the community's identity. Within this context, the Sikh text became their counterpart of the Hindu and Muslim scriptures. For Guru

Nanak, there was no doubt that the text containing his compositions had all what his followers needed to know to live their lives meaningfully. In the 1570s, Sikh scriptural text took the shape of four volumes and references indicate that the number four may have stood in comparison to the four Vedas, on the one hand, and to the four Kateb (literally, books, a term used in Punjabi, to describe the four holy books of the Semites—Toret (Torah), Jambur (Psalms), Injil (Gospels), and Quran), on the other. The Sikhs had absolutely no doubt that the revelation that they had received went beyond the previous ones (*dila ka malaku kare haqu, Quran kateb te paku*, M5, GG, 897). In 1604, however, the Sikhs expanded the contents of the four-volumes by adding the compositions of Guru Ramdas (1574-1581), the fourth Guru, and Guru Arjan and simultaneously collapsing them into a single text. With an addition of over hundred short compositions of Guru Tegh Bahadur (1664-1675), the ninth Sikh Guru, Sikh scripture reached its canonical form in the 1680s.

II.2. Rise of scriptural authority

In early Sikh history, the Guru enjoyed central authority within the community, which grew stronger with the emergence of the belief that he was the representative of Vahiguru on earth. By the turn of the seventeenth century, Bhai Gurdas (d. 1638) claimed categorically that Sikhs only recognized the authority of the Guru, and that the Mughal emperor was no match for him.[x] By the late 1690s, however, Guru Gobind Singh took a radical decision of formally dissolving the role of personal authority within the Sikh community by declaring the community to be the Khalsa (the pure) and answerable only to Vahiguru.

It may be argued that dissension within the community over the extent of the Guru's authority, and the vulnerability of the office exposed after Guru

Arjan's (1606) and Guru Tegh Bahadur's (1675) execution/martyrdom at the hands of the Mughal rulers may have influenced his thinking. Quite likely, Guru Gobind Singh concluded that the office of the Guru had served its purpose and needed to be replaced by a more enduring source of authority than that of a charismatic, but vulnerable, individual. Sikh scripture became the center of authority, hence the title, the Guru Granth, and the community was assigned the authority to interpret it.

This emergence of scriptural authority had antecedents that can be traced back to the very founding of the Sikh community. In a way, the symbolic authority of the Sikh scriptural text had coexisted with that of the personal authority of the Guru since the beginning of the tradition. The text was understood to be the container of revelation and a communal treasure beginning with Guru Nanak's time. Guru Amardas declared that the compositions of the Gurus represented Vahiguru (*vahu vahu banhi nirankar hai tisu jevadu avaru na koi*, M3, GG, 515) and they were the light of the world (*gurbanhi isu jag mahi chananu karami vasai mani ae,* M3, GG, 67). Guru Ramdas emphasized the liberating nature of the compositions of the Guru (*banhi guru guru hai banhi vichi banhi amritu sare. gurubanhi kahai sevaku janu manai partakhi guru nistare,* M4, GG, 982). Guru Arjan believed that the revealed text has the purpose of removing suffering from the world (*dhur ki banhi ai tini sagali chint mitai*, M5, GG, 628), and he declared the text to be the abode of Vahiguru, an object of significance in its own right (*pothi parmesar ka thanu*, M5, GG, 1226).

In early Sikh history, the role of the Guru was twofold: he served as the medium for the revealed message, and the guide of the community. By the end of the seventeenth century, this divine message to the Sikhs was felt to have

achieved completion with the canonization of the Granth, and the community as the Khalsa was ready to assume the burden of representing itself. At the time of Guru Gobind Singh's death, then, we see the two strands of religious authority within the community coming together in a unique form. The symbolic role of the Granth expanded to encompass the authority of the personal Guru, as manifested in its new title, the Guru Granth, and the community as a whole (Guru Panth) took up the authority to interpret it and follow their destiny in the light of its teachings.

Beginning with the turn of the eighteenth century, the centrality of the text resulted in the proliferation of the Guru Granth manuscripts. The physical form of these manuscripts points to the community's welfare at the time of their creation. During the difficult times of the early eighteenth century, the manuscripts were small in size and could be tied on the back and taken to the battlefield if the need arose. The time of Sikh political ascension resulted in beautifully illuminated and neatly calligraphed mega texts with paintings on the binding pages. Scribal notes tell us about the quantity of gold powder that went into the illumination of the text. As the printing press became available, numerous editions of the Guru Granth in various sizes and forms were created.

As the Sikh numbers increased, they left their mark on the landscape of the Punjab by building gurdwaras, which by this time had become the houses of the Guru Granth. The Sikhs used the best expertise and the most expensive materials available to build these places to house the Guru Granth. As referred to earlier, Sikh belief system does not permit a priestly class, but the gurdwara buildings needed custodians to oversee them. This basic need resulted in the emergence of the office of the *granthi*, literally, the caretaker of the Guru Granth,

but in reality its responsibilities included the overseeing of the building of the gurdwara, leading the daily prayers and ceremonial activities, teaching Sikh children to read and understand the Guru Granth, and officiating on ceremonies such as the naming of children, the weddings, and the post death rituals. Historic places such as Darbar Sahib, Amritsar, and Damdama Sahib, Talwandi Sabo, emerged as large centers of learning where the *granthis* and other itinerant scholars of Sikh scripture and history could receive training.

Beginning with the eighteenth century, Sikh savants reiterated the beliefs enshrined in the Guru Granth itself: its contents were not only to be recited and revered, but understood and put into practice (*guri kahia sa kar kamavahu*, M1, GG, 933; *dithai mukati na hovai jicharu sabadi na kare vichar*, M3, GG, 594; *sachu kamavai sachi rahai sache savi samai*, M3, GG, 560). Guru Nanak's successors attempted to elaborate on his themes and the exegesis of Sikh sacred compositions began soon after the death of the founder of the tradition. At the turn of the seventeenth century, Bhai Gurdas emerged as the first major exegete of Sikh sacred writings. The structure of his ballads (*vars*), where he takes up important themes and explains them on the basis of the Gurus' writings, reveals his commitment to providing a clear interpretation of Sikh tenets. With the passage of time, these efforts expanded to form different schools of exegesis.[xi]

In the 1860s, the Sikhs enthusiastically took up the opportunity of large-scale multiplication of the text of the Guru Granth, which occurred with the arrival of the printing press to the Punjab. In the early part of the twentieth century, it was realized that there were some Sikh groups in Sindh and the Northwest province, both in the present day Pakistan, which understood Punjabi but could not read Gurmukhi. To help them, transliterated edition in Devanagari

and Indo-Persian scripts were created. More recently, as large numbers of Sikhs moved to the Western world and with some Euro-Americans taking up the Sikh path in North America, an edition that has Roman transliteration and English translation has been created. The emphasis on understanding the text has in a way overshadowed other beliefs such as the sacredness of the Gurmukhi script and Punjabi language.

The period following the elevation of the text to the Guru Granth also resulted in the formation of elaborate details about how to treat the text--no book mark was to be put in it; how to show proper respect to it--one was to wash up before going in its presence and then always sit silently there; how to transport it from one place to another—it was carried in a palanquin or on one's head and a proper retinue was to accompany it. The Gurmukhi, its script, was sacred and any sheet of paper on which this script was inscribed was not to be used for mundane purposes. As the text aged, it was to be disposed off by placing it in flowing water. The belief may have been that water will wash away the revealed writing and the paper will decompose. This ceremony has over time changed and now the Sikhs cremate old texts.[xii] The details of the reverence offered to the Guru Granth can be traced back to the references in the early eighteenth century literature.

Being the supreme authority within the community, the Guru Granth was treated as the sovereign of the Sikhs and it stayed with them no matter where they were. Supplications were offered and the *hukam* was taken before the Sikhs engaged their enemy in battles. In the 1750s, the Afghan army's capturing of the Guru Granth in a battle was interpreted as a crippling blow and duly recorded in Sikh memory.[xiii] The presence of the Guru Granth and of the gurdwara remained

an integral part of the Sikh army ethos, and these traditions continued during both World Wars when the Sikhs fought for the British in Europe and other parts of the world.[xiv]

Sikh belief in the authority of Sikh scripture resulted in two other developments. In early Sikh history, this line of thinking contributed to a vigorous sense of the authority of scriptural manuscripts. Beginning with the mid-decades of the sixteenth century, all the dissident families possessed an important manuscript, which served as the primary ground for their claim for authority. In the process, these families preserved rare pre-canonical manuscripts of unique historical value.[xv] In addition, the text came to be presented in human terms, any attempt to tinker with the text's contents was interpreted as severing its body.[xvi] During the period of political power, the land grants were assigned to the text of the Guru Granth and later the Supreme Court of India assigned the Guru Granth, the status of a "juristic person."

II.3. Additional issues

The seventeenth-century scriptural manuscripts present data that shed interesting light on the religio-social life of the early Sikh community. Guru Nanak believed that the paper, the pen, the ink, the inkpot, and the scribe who writes the divine word are all blessed (*dhanu so kagadu kalam dhanu dhanu bhanda dahn masu, danau lekhari Nanaka jinni namu likhia sachu*, M1, GG, 1291). This belief permeated in the consciousness of early Sikhs and in the process they left us interesting information regarding the inscription of sacred verses as devotional experience, its implications for literacy, and the social background and status of Sikh scribes within the community.

Bhai Gurdas reports that the paper was made from hemp (*Crotolaria*

junica), a plant that grows in the Punjab. The skin of the plant was turned into a paste and then dried to form a light brown paper that was non-acidic and has withstood the test of time. By the late seventeenth-century, the Sikhs had also learnt the system of marking straight lines on the paper itself, which made writing easy and also aesthetically pleasant. The large sheet of paper was folded to create gathering of eight folios that were duly numbered. The opening folio and in some cases the middle one too were illuminated and a multi-lined border was drawn on all four sides of the regular pages before the writing began. The Sikh scribes carefully recorded the details of the recipe of making ink. Items such as alum, copper sulfate, collyrium, gold, indigo, musk, saffron, sealing wax were grounded together for thirty days in a copper utensil with a wooden stick coming from the tree of margosa/nim (*Azadirachta indica*). In addition to creating ink with proper shine, the copper sulfate and the nim stick added bitterness that made the ink unpalatable for mite. Once the writing was completed, the gatherings were collected and sewn together, and neatly bound in cow-hide exteriors with a free edge flap.

The preserving of the details of paper and ink making indicates the degree of seriousness and affection that went into the inscribing of these manuscripts. Almost a century and half after the equipment had fallen into disuse, the paper making troughs at the Damdama Sahib, Talwandi Sabo, were still preserved. They were disposed of rather reluctantly to clear the area for new construction in the early 1990s.[xvii] The manuscripts record scribal notes of gratitude for divine help in the completion of the work, and profuse apologies for any flaws that may have crept in their creation. The normative writings condemn any provision for selling these manuscripts: accursed are those who inscribe the sacred word for

the purpose of selling it (*dhrigu tina ka jivia ji likhi likhi vechahi nau*, M1, GG, 1245). These manuscripts also indicate the debt that the Sikhs owed to techniques of Islamic book making. In actual style of the drawings on the opening folios, beautifully drawn borders, the technique of collecting folios in gatherings, and finally the leather binding exhibit a close affinity with Islamic manuscripts. Hindu manuscripts of the period followed their own method of putting folios between two pieces of hardboard and then tying them with a thick thread.

The extant manuscripts normally do not include the names of the scribes who prepared them. The absence of the name was a mark of humility on the part of the scribe, they made the point that not their expertise but the divine help resulted in the completion of these impressive tasks. After the text was elevated to the status of the Guru, the possibility of recording the date or the name of the scribe, or any other detail was seen to challenge the basic integrity of the text.

Limited but intriguing data regarding the identity of the scribes in the early Sikh community are available. The Sikh tradition has preserved names of some early scribes. The first among them is Lehna, whose name was later changed to Angad when he was elevated to the office Guru Nanak held. He is believed to have helped Guru Nanak compile and inscribe the original text, and some traditions even attribute the formation of Gurmukhi letters to him. We are told that Lehna read Guru Nanak's compositions from stray folios and the Guru decided how the stanzas fit together, finalized the organization of the text, and Lehna then inscribed it. The first scribe known to the tradition eventually ended up as the successor of the founder.

The tradition has preserved the memory of Sahansar Ram, the grandson of Guru Amardas, as the scribe of four-volume manuscript created in the 1570s.

Next, Bhai Gurdas is associated with the manuscript created in 1604. He enjoys substantial prestige as the interpreter of Sikh beliefs and practice, his compositions are considered the key to the Guru Granth and enjoy the rare privilege of being made part of Sikh devotional singing. As a Sikh leader, he holds a status that is second only to that of the Gurus. High respect for the scribes continued as the tradition evolved. Bhai Gurdas refers to two sixteenth-century Sikh scribes, Pandha and Bulla, who were prominent figures within the community. Leading eighteenth century figures such as Bhai Mani Singh (d. 1738), and Baba Dip Singh (d.1757) were closely involved in scribal activity.

Although the data are restricted, it does offer an interesting look at the social background of the scribes prior to their joining the Sikh fold. In addition to the above-mentioned names, the seventeenth century scribes whose pre-Sikh background we know include Jagna (Brahman), Ramrai (goldsmith), and Burha Sandhu, Gurdita Jateta, Pakharmal Dhillon (all Jats, whose names appear in manuscripts recorded in 1605, 1653, and 1678, respectively). We have thus knowledge of the background of ten early scribes: one of them came from the priestly caste among the Hindus (Jagana), four from the Khatri caste (Lehna, Bhai Gurdas, Sahansaram, and Ramrai), and the remaining five came from nomadic background (Burha Sandhu, Gurdita Jateta, Pakharmal Dhillon, Bhai Mani Singh, Baba Dip Singh). This provides us with an indication of the distribution of the social background of those who joined the Sikh community, as well as the rise of literacy among erstwhile nomads who joined the Sikh community. We do not have their counterparts, scribes and scholars, among those who joined the Muslim and Hindu traditions.[xviii]

We may also address the role of Sikh patronage in the creation of scriptural manuscripts. When the Sikhs became politically powerful, their prosperity attracted the services of Muslim and Hindu scribes. In the process of working for the Sikhs, however, these scribes left the marks of their professional training on the products they created. For instance, a Muslim scribe elaborately illuminated the text using the Quranic style and created a beautiful painting of a cityscape on the binding pages with the mosque at its center. The Hindu scribes, on the other hand, could not resist painting some of their deities on the opening folios as part of their invocation before beginning the massive task.[xix] It seems that Sikhs took these foreign embellishments in stride and did not regard them as presenting any contradiction to the message of the text.

III. To sum up

Enjoying the central authority within the community, the text of Guru Granth has made a deep impact on all dimensions of Sikh life, it constitutes the highest authority, the normative source of Sikh beliefs and practice, and a marker of Sikh identity. If you see a Sikh male or a female carrying a suitcase on his or her head at the airport, rest assured that ITS contents comprise the text of the Guru Granth. Since the early period, Sikh devotional experience has been centered on its reading, recitation, singing, and reflection as means of communicating with Vahiguru. While the early scribes spared no pains in creating illuminated and calligraphically elegant manuscripts of the Guru Granth, eighteenth-century Sikh blacksmiths inscribed its verses on swords and shields. The printing press helped proliferate the text in various sizes and forms. If ever there was a religion of the book, this is it.

In their understanding of revelation, its manifestation as a bounded written text, and role of this text within the community, the Sikhs have close affinity with Islam and other Semitic traditions. It should come as no surprise. The Guru Granth was after all created in a socio-religious context in which Islam has been around for over half a millennium and the majority of people were Muslims. Yet, following the erroneous assumptions that Sikhs have emerged from the Hindu fold, scholars continue to resist registering the Sikh closeness with Semitic traditions, manifested in the functioning of the Sikh institution of scripture and the nature of its message.[xx]

Finally, the Sikh case brings to focus an interesting sociological dimension in understanding the nature of authority attributed to scripture. Contrary to the received wisdom, the overwhelming majority of those who joined the Sikh community came not from the caste-based Hindu society but from among the nomads, who have been historically known for their traditions of hostility to personal authority.[xxi] Writing in mid-nineteenth century, Shah Mohammad, a Punjabi Muslim poet, claims that no matter who sits in the position of authority the Sikhs have to pull him down (*jihrha bahe gaddi ohnu mar lainde*).[xxii] Having followed a sedentary life style for over six centuries, this attitude toward authority still does not seem to be fading away. One wonders if this is true of all nomadic people around the world, and if so, then a symbolic center of authority such as the sacred text suits their temperament better. After all, it cannot be a simple coincidence that all three traditions, Judaism, Islam, and Sikhism originated from people of nomadic stock. I leave it for those associated with the Institute of Signifying Scriptures to ponder over this issue.

Acknowledgement: I am grateful to Professor Vincent Wimbush for his interest in incorporating Sikh experience in broad scriptural debates, and his patience with my requests for extensions to complete this paper.

Notes

[i] For detailed studies of the Guru Granth, see Surinder Singh Kohli, *A Critical Study of the Adi Granth* (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1961), Pashaura Singh, *The Guru Granth Sahib* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), and my *Making of Sikh Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[ii] Discussion of Sikh scripture is not available in Miriam Levering, ed., *Rethinking Scripture* (Albany: SUNY, 1989), and Frederic M. Denny and Rodney L. Taylor, eds., *The Holy Book in Comparative Perspective* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993). Harold Coward, however, recognized the importance of the subject and included it both in his *Sacred Word and Sacred Text* (New York: Orbis books, 1988), and his edited volume *Experiencing Scriptures in World Religions* (New York: Orbis books, 2000).

[iii] For details see Andre Wink, *The Making of the Indo-Islamic World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[iv] Irfan Habib, "Jatts of Punjab and Sind," in *Panjab Past and Present* (1976), 92-103.

[v] For two very different reconstructions of Sikh history, see Hew McLeod, *Sikhism* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), and my *Sikhism* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004).

[vi] In these references M 1 stands for Mahala 1, Guru Nanak, M2 for Guru Angad and so on, and GG for the Guru Granth. The pagination of the text being uniform these page numbers would apply to any standard edition of the Guru Granth.

[vii] *Puratan Janam Sakhi*, ed., Shamsher Singh Ashok (Amritsar: SGPC, 1969), 195

[viii] *Dabistan-I Mazahib* in J.S. Grewal and Irfan Habib, eds., *Sikh History from Persian Sources* (Delhi: Indian History Congress, 2001), 63.

[ix] Among the Bhagats whose hymns appear in the Guru Granth, Kabir (224 hymns, 237 couplets, and three long compositions), Farid (four hymns and 112 couplets), Namdev (sixty-one hymns), and Ravidas (forty hymns) are the prominent figures. The remaining eleven Bhagats--Benhi (three hymns), Bhikhanh (two hymns), Dhanna (two hymns), Jaidev (two hymns), Parmanand (one hymns), Pipa (one hymn), Ramanand (one hymn), Sadhna (one hymn), Sainh (one hymn), Surdas (one verse), and Trilochanh (four hymns)--enjoy more of a symbolic presence in Sikh scripture. While Bhikhanh, Farid, and Kabir came from a Muslim background, all others were from the large Hindu fold. For detailed discussion of this aspect of Sikh scripture, see Pashaura Singh, *The Bhagats of the Guru Granth Sahib* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003) and my *Making of Sikh Scripture*, 102-120.

[x] Bhai Gurdas, *Varan*, ed., Gursharan Kaur Jaggi, (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1987), 160.
[xi] Bhai Gurdas, *Varan*, and Pashaura Singh, *The Guru Granth Sahib*, 239-261.
[xii] During the 1990s, Goindval has emerged as the central place where the old texts of the Guru Granth are brought for ceremonial cremation. People even come to watch the ceremony that is held once a month.
[xiii] The tradition appears in Giani Gian Singh, see Harbhajan Singh, *Gurbanhi Sampadan Nirnai* (Chandigarh: Satinam Prakashan, 1989), 106-107.
[xiv] For photographs, see Amandeep Singh Madra and Paramjit Singh, *Warrior Saints* (London: IB Tauris, 1999), 124-125, and 127.
[xv] For the details of these families see my *Making of Sikh Scriptures*, 32-68.
[xvi] Kesar Singh Chhibbar, *Bansavalinama Dasan Patshihan ka*, ed., Ratan Singh Jaggi (Chandigarh: Panjab University, 1972), 136. He interpreted the execution of Bhai Mani Singh by the Mughals as a result of his effort to restructure the text of the Guru Granth.
[xvii] In the winter of 1992, I happened to be there when the paper making equipment had to be removed to clear the area for new construction. I did examine these objects but did not have the presence of mind to take their photographs.
[xviii] With the exception of two Jat poets, Dhanna and Jalanh, who have left some poems, I do not know any one else involved in literary or scholarly activity.
[xix] Jeewan Singh Deol, "Illustration and Illumination in Sikh scriptural manuscripts," in Kavita Singh, ed., *New Insights into Sikh Art* (Mumbai: Marg, 2003).
[xx] Harjot Oberoi's "Sikhism," in Harold Coward, *Experiencing Scriptures in World Religions,* 133-35, is a characteristic exercise in scholarly fixation on situating the Sikh community within the Hindu fold. He concludes his essay by pointing out three differences and two similarities between the Sikh and Hindu understandings of scripture. He does not see the relevance of placing the Guru Granth along with Semitic scriptures to understand the Sikh concept of scripture or its role within the community.
[xxi] People from the nomadic background have historically constituted overwhelming majority of the Sikh community. The Jats, the primary group among them, presently comprises 66% of the total Sikh population and their ancillary rural groups include another 20% or so.
[xxii] Shah Muhammad, *Var Shah Muhammad,* ed., Ratan Singh Jaggi (Chandigarh: Panjab University, 1981), 16.