

Gurū Granth: The Scripture of the Sikhs

A quick visit to a *gurdvārā* (Sikh place of worship) reveals the degree of reverence in which the Sikhs hold their scripture, the *Gurū Granth* (God manifested as the book). A tall flag (*niśān*) at the entry point of the precinct marks the sovereignty (*fateh*, “victory”) of the place, and the emblem of *deg* (“cauldron”) and *teḡ* (“sword”) imprinted on it reminds Sikhs of their obligation to ensure food and justice for all around them (please see the jacket for the early version of the symbol that has evolved overtime to take variant forms). Having made a ceremonial bow to the elevated base of the flag, the devotees enter a well-lit congregational hall (*darbār/divān*) that is meant to replicate a royal court, with the *Gurū Granth* lying at its head. The text is covered in expensive robes (*rūmālās*) and rests on a throne-like structure with a canopy above it (*pālki*), while an attendant ceremonially waves a flywhisk (*caur*) over it that is made from the hair of a yak’s tail or of peacock feathers. The flag at the entrance, indicating the location of the place from a distance, and the royal paraphernalia of the canopy, the flywhisk, the details of obeisance offered by the devotees, and so forth, validate the *Gurū Granth*’s supreme status within the Sikh *panth* (community). The text is ceremonially opened (*prakāś*) in the morning, stays up for display throughout the day, and is put to rest (*sukhāsāṇ*) after sunset. It is transported from its place of rest to its throne at an elevation above the human height, and with an appropriate retinue accompanying it.

Historic *gurdvārās* have pools attached to them where pilgrims bathe (*iśnān*) prior to presenting themselves to the *Gurū Granth* in the congregational hall. In other places, all entrants undergo a ritual cleansing that includes washing one’s feet, the hands up to the elbows, and the mouth or face – the five most exposed parts of the body (*pañj iśnānā*). They walk up to the *Gurū Granth* with hands folded, set down their offerings of cash or kind, show their reverence by touching their foreheads to the ground (*mathā tekaṇā*), and then move aside and sit on the floor, respectfully facing the text.

The *Gurū Granth* constitutes the center of Sikh devotional worship, which is structured around the following five elements:

1. the recitation of its verses (*pāṭh*);
2. the singing of the latter with the accompaniment of musical instruments (*kīrtan*);
3. their exegesis (*kathā*);
4. a supplication (*Ardās*) addressed through the text to Vāhigurū (“Great Gurū,” the most commonly used designation for God among post-17th-cent. Sikhs); and
5. the opening of the text at random – the first composition on the left-hand top corner of the page being considered the divine response (*vāk*) to the congregation’s supplication.

A routine worship session comes to a close with the distribution of sanctified food (*prasād*) in the congregation hall. Everyone present is expected to partake in the regular meal that is made available in the dining area (*laṅgar*). The Sikhs do not have a priestly class: anyone, regardless of gender and social status, can attend to the text, recite, sing, lead the prayers, receive the divine command, or carry the text to its place of rest.

This setting is recreated in Sikh households, where a separate room is allocated to the *Gurū Granth*. Family members gather there for daily prayers and other ceremonial events. If the house is not large enough for this arrangement, a smaller text (*guṭkā/señcī*) containing selected compositions from the *Gurū 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. Within the family setting, particularly, the lady of the house is responsible for the opening and closing of the text and for related activities.

The *Gurū Granth* also plays the central role in Sikh ritual and ceremonial life. This includes the following:

- the naming of the newborn (*nān rakhaṇā*) with the first letter of the *vāk* (divine response) to the family’s supplication after the birth of the baby;
- partaking in the ceremony of the nectar of the double-edged sword (*khaṇḍe dīpāhul*), symbolizing one’s commitment to serve the community with absolute dedication in the presence of the *Gurū Granth*;

- getting married, which involves the recitation of a specific composition and the fourfold circumambulation of the texts (*Lāvāṇ*); and
- the reading of the complete text followed by a prayer for the peace of the departed soul (*bhog*).

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

Given this centrality of the *Gurū Granth* in Sikh life, a variety of printed editions ranging from a large-size text used in congregational worship to multivolume texts for family prayers or study are available. The text contains around 3,000 poetic compositions and is now printed with a standard pagination of 1,430 pages. It opens with a liturgical section (GG, pp. 1–13), and its main body includes 31 chapters arranged around the musical modes in which these poetic compositions are to be sung (GG, pp. 14–1352). The final section closes with miscellaneous compositions that are not set to music (GG, 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, detailed commentaries, and histories of its compilation and structure (Grewal, 2008; Mann, 2001).

This article is divided into three further sections. It begins with a brief examination of the socioreligious context that gave rise to Sikh scripture. In the main section, it reconstructs the history of the text from its origins to its canonization, traces the rise of its authority, and, based on the information available in early scriptural manuscripts, comments on early Sikh devotional and social life. In a brief conclusion, I will then sum up the Sikhs' own understanding of their scripture and make a brief attempt to situate it within the larger field of scriptural studies (Coward, 1988, 130–137; 2000, 130–136).

The Context

The story of the *Gurū Granth* began around 1530 in the region that serves as a bridge between South Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia, and came to be called Punjab from the 1560s onward. The local society around this time was comprised of various segments – the Muslims constituted the majority, and the Hindus, Jains, and Jatts (nomads turned farmers) comprised the rest of the population. They all had their distinct understanding of scripture and of its role in life. The immigrant Muslims regarded themselves as the *'ahl al-kitāb* (the possessors of the

holy book), and the *Qur'ān* served as the source of their administrative law. The majority of the Punjabi Muslim community, however, consisted of converts originating from both Hindu and nomadic backgrounds, for whom the idea of the written text of the *Qur'ān* as scripture was relatively new. Among the Hindus, the priestly caste of Brahmins literally carried the vedic chants in their memory and believed in the oral transmission of this sacred corpus. Women and lower castes were not granted access to these sounds, only the upper caste males could listen to them. The Jains of 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 Śvetāmbaras accepted the role of scripture but the Digambaras did not. Finally, the Jatts, who had only recently been exposed to the notions of oral and written scriptures, would have brought their own historical proclivities while absorbing the role of scripture into their lives (Grewal & Banga, 1975).

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 Bābā Nānak (1469–1539), the founder of the Sikh tradition, appeared on the scene. He assigned a high degree of significance to sacred literature in general, carefully committed to writing his own compositions, compiled them in the form of a *pothī* (book), and allocated it the highest authority within the *panth*. We have reasonably firm evidence that copies of his compositions were also made and sent to Sikhs living away from the center at Kartarpur (Jaggi, 2010, 195). Building on this activity, the subsequent generation of Sikhs made every effort to protect the inherited manuscripts as well as to create new ones. As a result, a sizable number of them have survived despite the difficult climatic conditions and ravages of history associated with the region (G.B. Singh, 1944; P. Singh, 1992).

The information available in these manuscripts helps us reconstruct the history of Sikh scripture from its origin around 1530 to its canonization during the period of Gurū Gobind Singh (1675–1708). At an early stage of his leadership, the latter decided not to use the official signature of “Nānāk” in his compositions and rejected the possibility of adding them to the existing scriptural text, which was thus seen to have attained its definitive form. The availability of early manuscripts reflecting the expansion

of the sacred text, the notes recorded along their margins, and information about their scribes and custodians help us trace Sikh scriptural history with a degree of accuracy that is not possible in older religious traditions.

Bābā Nānak's beliefs, presented in more than five hundred of his poetic compositions, as well as the details of his life that are available in other sources provide a good beginning for this discussion. First, Bābā Nānak was well aware that writing down one's ideas was a critical step toward preserving them for times and people to come (GG. p. 566). Secondly, he was convinced that his compositions carried divine wisdom (GG. pp. 566, 722). Thirdly, he believed in the centrality of the institution of scripture in the life of a religious community. For him, both Hindu and Semitic scriptures were of divine origin, and following their contents helps save their adherents from evil (GG. pp. 791, 839, 930). Finally, Bābā Nānak believed that the inscribing of the sacred word was an act of total devotion on the part of the scribe, and accordingly he urged people to devote themselves to writing down the divine word (GG. pp. 16, 930).

Simultaneously, Bābā Nānak had no doubt that his compositions contained all the significant knowledge that appeared in the earlier scriptural texts of other religions, and all that was needed for those who put their faith in them to live a meaningful life (GG. p. 879). Since he expected his followers to understand the contents of his compositions and to put them into practice in their day-to-day activities (GG. pp. 752, 933, 1028), he preserved them in the form of a *pothī*, which was ceremonially passed on to his successor, Aṅgad (Guru, 1539–1551), at the time of his elevation to Bābā Nānak's position (Jaggi, 2010, 234).

The role assigned to the scriptural text in the succession ceremony was tantamount to a public declaration of the authority assigned to it within the *panth*. The possession of the *pothī* authenticated the position of the leader within the *panth*. The fact that its medium was the vernacular (*jaṭkī*) associated with the common people, that it was dressed in a script specifically created for this purpose and assigned the name Gurmukhi ("[Script] of the *Gurmukhs*," i.e. those who look toward the *gurū*), and that it contained divine knowledge to guide the Sikhs, but also its potential for permitting them to obtain the recognition of *ahl al-kitāb* and the resulting clemency from the tax paid by the non-Muslims (*jizya*) contributed to its unique status within the *panth*.

Bābā Nānak's *pothī* was subsequently expanded to include the compositions of five of his successors, which are largely seen as an extension of his own ideas – the latter having after all received their knowledge from him or one of his successors. These made their own claims to direct revelation (GG. p. 562), emphasized the inherently divine nature of their writings (GG. p. 628), and at times elaborated on the themes of Bābā Nānak (GG. p. 661). The emphasis on the revelatory character of this literary corpus is so strong that many Sikh scholars do not even see the need to make a distinction between the writings of different *gurūs*, despite the fact that they are carefully marked in the text itself.

Furthermore, Bābā Nānak commented extensively on the state of society of his times and composed four compositions upon the invasion of Hindustan by Bābur, the ruler of Kabul. From his point of view, history deserved to be recorded, as it helped to understand the nature of the divine design for the universe. This strand of thought continued in the verses of his successors. Gurū Aṅgad mentions the falsehood of Srī Cand, the son of Bābā Nānak, in claiming the authority of his father for himself (GG. p. 474). Gurū Rām Dās writes about the formal complaint against the *panth* that was brought before the Mughal rulers at Lahore (GG. p. 306). Gurū Arjan refers to the death of Śulāḥī Ḥān, a Mughal officer hostile toward the Sikhs (GG. p. 825), sings of the founding of the Darbār Sāhib (GG. p. 625), and rejoices over the expansion of the *panth* in the region (GG. p. 1141). Gurū Teḡ Bahādūr (1664–1675) underlines the need for fearlessness against the prevalent tyranny (GG. p. 1427).

While the verses of the *gurūs* constituted the core of Sikh sacred text, two additional streams flowed into this corpus during the period of Gurū Amar Dās (1551–1574 [Mann, 1997]). First, he seemingly included the verses of two bards (*dhāḍhīs*) at the early Sikh court (GG. pp. 966–968). We know them as Balvaṇḍ and Sattā, who came from lower levels of the Muslim society (*dūms*). In the process, Gurū Amar Dās paved the way for the *Sadu* (Call), a composition belonging to the genre of poetry recited at the time of cremation (here of Gurū Amar Dās) and associated with the barbers (Nāis). This literary corpus expanded as the Sikh court thrived in the final quarter of the 17th century, and includes the verses of over a dozen high-caste Hindu bards who had come under the patronage of the Sikhs. These people sang about the magnificence of the



Fig. 1: Darbār Sāhib, Amritsar (Kristina Myrvold, Sweden).



Fig. 2: The Gurū Granth at Darbār Sāhib, Amritsar (2013).



Fig. 3: The Goindvāl Pothī, c. 1570s (© Bhallas of Pinjore).



Fig. 4: The Kartārpur Pothī, 1604 (© Sodhis of Kartarpur).



Fig. 5: The Gurū Granth, mid-18th century.



Fig. 6: Bābā Nānak, a mural at Dehradun, c. 1675.



Fig. 7: Bābā Nānak, mid-20th century (© Shinder Singh Thandi, Coventry).



Fig. 8: Bābā Nānak, late 18th century (© Gurpal Singh Bhuller, Virginia).



Fig. 9: *Kīrtan* session at Darbār Sāhib (W. Carpenter, 1854; © V&A, London).

Sikh court and the status of the *gurūs* as the highest spiritual (*dīn*) and temporal (*duṇyā*) leader of their time. For them, the vibrant activity of the Sikh court constituted an important development in the religious history of humankind. If one is able to see through the professional idiom of praise, they offer important details about the Sikh socioreligious life of the time.

Finally, Gurū Amar Dās inserted a carefully selected set of writings of 15 *bhagats* (non-Sikh saints). Among them, Kabīr (224 hymns, 237 couplets, and 3 long compositions), Farīd (4 hymns and 112 couplets), Nāmdev (61 hymns), and Ravidās (40 hymns) are the most prominent ones. The remaining eleven saints – Beṛī (3 hymns), Bhikhan (2 hymns), Dhannā (in the Rajasthani tradition known as Dhanā; 2 hymns), Jaidev (In the Sanskrit tradition known as Jayadeva; 2 hymns), Parmānand (1 hymn), Pīpā (1 hymn), Rāmānand (1 hymn), Sadhanā (1 hymn), Saiṇ (in the Marathi tradition known as Senā; 1 hymn), Sūrdās (1 verse), and Trilochan (4 hymns) – hold more of a symbolic presence in Sikh scripture. While Bhikhan, Farīd, and Kabīr came from a Muslim background, all others were from the large Hindu fold (Mann, 2001; P. Singh, 2003). Some scholars associated the addition of the writings of these non-Sikh saints into the Sikh scriptural text with Bābā Nānak, and Gurū Arjan, but the manuscript evidence at our disposal firmly attributes this development to Gurū Amar Dās.

As for the status of the aforementioned writings, the text of the *Gurū Granth* sheds important light on their relative importance within Sikh scripture (Mann, 2001). The structure of the text manifests a hierarchical understanding of the nature of revelation. Bābā Nānak's compositions are situated at the top, as he had direct contact with Vāhigurū; next in line are the compositions of his successors, who learned their lessons from him; they are followed by the compositions of the Sikh bards, who worked with his successors; the lowest position in this hierarchy, finally, is assigned to the compositions of the non-Sikh saints, which were carefully selected. Only those that conformed to Sikh beliefs in divine unity, social equality, and a life of productivity were kept.

Given the nominal presence of 11 of these non-Sikh saints, the only reasonable explanation for the presence of these compositions in the Sikh text is that it resulted from the Sikh effort to underline the diversity of the social backgrounds from which these poets came. The caste background is not known for all of them, but some (Dhannā, Nāmdev, Ravidās, Sadhanā, and Saiṇ) came from a low caste

and untouchable background. The inclusion of their writings in the Sikh scriptural text is an emphatic assertion of the social comprehensiveness of the rising Sikh community. After all, Sikh beliefs supported social equality: if Vāhigurū is the creator of all, how can there be high and low, pure and impure (GG. pp. 83, 1238)? Moreover, the Sikh scriptural text was made to be accessible to all. What better way to make this point than to honor a number of saints of the time who did not enjoy social acceptability within the upper-caste Hindu groups?

Returning to the historical dimension of the Sikh sacred text for a moment, it is interesting to note that the early manuscripts include a list of death dates of the *gurūs*. It seems that these dates were originally recorded at the end of the texts, but, beginning with the manuscripts prepared in 1604, they were then shifted to the opening folios. Here were the details of a sacred history, unfolding right in front of the Sikhs of the time. Beginning with 1604, the manuscripts also carry a note about a large Sikh congregation in the south. They are reported to be running an extensive *laṅgar*. Whether this is to be taken as an indication of the large size of the community or of their philanthropy in serving food to the locals is not clear, but the reference to this thriving congregation nevertheless made it into the Sikh 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 don’ts” (*pañj kare pañj nā kare*).

The five dos are the following:

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 in joining the Sikh fold; and
5. praying for the welfare of all with no ill for anyone.

The five don’ts are the following:

1. no stealing;
2. no adultery;
3. no slander;
4. no gambling; and
5. no consumption of liquor and meat.

As the scriptural text was canonized in the late 1670s, the Sikh understanding of revelation was interpreted strictly in terms of the poetic compositions. Consequently, historical details such as the death dates of the *gurūs*, references to the congregation in

the south, or brief statements of moral imperatives were deleted. With the passage of time, these details became increasingly de-emphasized, whereas the eternal aspect of Sikh scripture was brought to the forefront. This implied that even the date of the compilation of a new manuscript was taken to be unnecessary, as the *Gurū Granth* was seen to transcend time.

In addition to the belief in revelation that runs through the scriptural text, the *Gurū Granth* became the Sikh counterpart of the Hindu and Muslim scriptures. For Bābā Nānak, after all, there was no doubt that the text of his compositions contained everything that the Sikhs needed to know in order to live their lives meaningfully. In the 1570s, the Sikh scriptural text took the form of four volumes. References indicate that the number four may have stood in relation to the four *Vedas* (Punj. *Veds*), on the one hand, and to the four *Kitābs* (Punj. *Katebs* ["Books"]), a term used to describe the four holy books of the Semites, namely *Tawrah* [Punj. *Toret*; Torah], *Zabūr* [Punj. *Jambūr*; Psalms?], *Injīl* [Punj. *Īnjīl*; Gospels], and *Qur'ān*), on the other. The Sikhs had absolutely no doubt that the revelation that had come to them went beyond the previous ones (GG. p. 897). In 1604, however, the Sikhs expanded the contents of the four volumes by adding the compositions of Gurū Ram Dās (1574–1581), the fourth *gurū*, and of Gurū Arjan (1581–1606), the fifth *gurū*, while simultaneously collapsing them into a single text. Over one hundred short compositions of Gurū Teg Bahadur, the ninth *gurū*, were added to it at a later date, thus giving rise to the Sikh scripture its canonical form.

Scriptural Authority

From the very founding of the Sikh *panth*, the text of the *Gurū Granth* was understood to be the receptacle of revelation and, as a result, the most precious communal treasure. Gurū Amar Dās declared that the compositions of the *gurūs* represented the divine (GG. p. 515) and were the light of the world (GG. p. 67). Gurū Ram Dās emphasized the liberating nature of the compositions of the *gurūs* (GG. p. 982). Gurū Arjan believed that the revealed text has the purpose of removing suffering from the world (GG. p. 628), and he unequivocally declared the text to be the abode of God (GG. p. 1226).

In early Sikh history, the role of the *gurū* was twofold: first, he served as the conduit for the revealed message for the *panth*, then exegeted its contents, and in the process established the guidelines for the

beliefs and practices of its members. This position is reflected in the early Sikh iconography, in which the open book constitutes the center, while the *gurū* is depicted reading it and transmitting its message to the audience.

With Gurū Gobind Singh's decision to keep his compositions out of the Sikh sacred text, the content of the divine message to the *panth* was declared to have reached its completion. Simultaneously, in the late 1690s, he renamed the Sikh *panth* as the Khālsā Panth ("Pure Panth/ The Panth of the Pure [one]"), which was now ready to assume the responsibility of reading the *Gurū Granth*, the repository of the divine revelation, on its own and of putting its message into practice in daily life without the day-to-day guidance from the *gurū*. The position of the scriptural text was thus elevated to become the *Gurū Granth*, a term that begins to appear in the writings of the 1690s, while the *panth*, in its new status of Khālsā Panth, was given the authority to interpret the message of the *Gurū Granth* and shape its destiny in the light of scriptural teachings.

Beginning with the turn of the 18th century, the centrality of the text resulted in the proliferation of the manuscripts of the *Gurū Granth*. Their physical form reflects the community's welfare at the time of their creation. During the difficult years of the early 18th century, the manuscripts were small in size and could be tied on a person's back and taken to the battlefield if the need arose. The time of Sikh political ascendancy resulted in beautifully illuminated and neatly calligraphed monumental editions with paintings on the binding pages. Scribal notes tell us about the quantity of gold powder that went into the illumination of the text. There is an interesting reference to a whole family being involved in the preparation of a manuscript:

[This] *Gurū Granth* was written by Pratāp Singh at the behest of Harnam Singh, whose wife, Bibi Mālaṇ, their son, Indar Singh, and his disciple, Fateh Singh, corrected it, and [they] offered it as a gift (*arpaṇ*) at Darbār Sāhib, Amritsar, on *poh sudi pañcamī sammat 440 nānakśāhī*.

As the Sikh numbers increased, they left their mark on the landscape of Punjab by building *gurdvārās*, which, by this time, had become the houses of the *Gurū Granth*. The Sikhs used the best expertise and the most expensive materials available to build these places to house the *Gurū Granth*. As mentioned, the Sikh belief system does not allow for a priestly class, but the *gurdvārā* buildings needed custodians to oversee them. This basic need resulted

in the emergence of the office of the *granthī*, the “the caretaker of the *Gurū Granth*.” In practice, however, the latter’s responsibilities included overseeing the building of the *gurdvārā*, leading the daily prayers and ceremonial activities, teaching Sikh children to read and understand the *Gurū Granth*, and officiating at ceremonies such as the naming of children, weddings, and funerary rituals. Historic places such as Darbār Sāhib, Amritsar, Takhat Sṛī Damdamā Sāhib, Talwandi Sabo, and Takhat Sṛī Harmandir, Patna, emerged as major centers of learning where the *granthīs* and other itinerant scholars of Sikh scripture and history could receive training.

After all, the contents of the *Gurū Granth* were not only to be recited and revered but also to be understood and put into practice (GG, pp. 560, 594, 933). Bābā Nānak’s successors elaborated on his themes, and by the turn of the 17th century, Bhāī Gurdās Bhallā (d. 1628) emerged as the first major exegete of Sikh sacred writings. The structure of his ballads (*vārs*), in which he takes up important themes and explains them on the basis of the *gurūs*’ writings, reveals his commitment to providing a clear interpretation of Sikh tenets (Jaggi, 1987).

Beginning with the 1850s, when the printing press became available, first in Lahore and later in Amritsar, numerous editions of the *Gurū Granth* were printed in various sizes and forms. In the early 20th century, the publishers realized that some Sikh groups in Sindh and the northwest province understood Punjabi but could not read Gurmukhi. To help them, transliterated editions in Devanagari and Indo-Persian scripts were created (Ashok, 1982, 261). 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 with Roman transliteration and English translation has been created (Chahil, n.d.). The emphasis on understanding the text has, in a way, overshadowed other beliefs such as the sacredness of the Gurmukhi script and the Punjabi language.

The elevation of the text to the status of *Gurū Granth* also resulted in the emergence of elaborate details on how to treat the text (no book mark was to be placed in it), how to show it proper respect (one was to wash up before going in its presence, and then always sit silently before it), and how to transport it from one place to another (it was to be carried in a palanquin or on one’s head, with a proper retinue 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 of

by placing it in flowing water. The belief may have been that water would wash away the revealed writing and that the paper would decompose (Padam, 1989). This ceremony has changed over time, and the Sikhs now cremate old texts. During the 1990s, Goindwal has emerged as the central place where the old texts of the *Gurū Granth* are brought for ceremonial cremation (Myrvold, 2010). People even come to watch the ceremony, which is held once a month. The details of the reverence offered to the *Gurū Granth* can be traced back to corresponding references in early 18th-century literature.

As the supreme authority within the community, the *Gurū Granth* was treated as the sovereign of the Sikhs, staying with them no matter where they were. Supplications were offered and the *vāk* was taken before the Sikhs engaged their enemy in battles. In the 1750s, the Afghan army’s capturing of the *Gurū Granth* in a battle was interpreted as a crippling blow and duly recorded in Sikh memory (H. Singh, 106–107). The presence of the *Gurū Granth* and of the *gurdvārā* remained an integral part of the Sikh military ethos, and these traditions continued during both World Wars, when the Sikhs fought for the British in Europe and other parts of the world (Madra, 1999, 124–127).

Sikh belief in the authority of their scripture contributed to a powerful sense of the authority of its manuscripts. Beginning with the mid-decades of the 16th century, all the schismatic groups possessed an important manuscript, which served as the primary ground for their claim to authority within the larger Sikh community. In the process, these families preserved rare precanonical manuscripts of unique historical value (Mann, 2001, 32–68). In addition, the existence of the text came to be viewed in human terms. Any attempt to tinker with the text’s contents was interpreted as severing its body. During the period of Sikh political power, land grants were assigned to the families owning early manuscripts of the *Gurū Granth*, and in certain cases even for owning the text itself (P. Singh, 1992, 251).

Additional Issues

The 17th-century scriptural manuscripts reveal details that shed an interesting light on the religious and social life of the early Sikh community. Bābā Nānak believed that the paper, the pen, the ink, the inkpot, and the scribe who writes the divine word are all blessed (GG, p. 1291). This belief permeated the consciousness of early Sikhs, who left us interesting

information regarding the writing of sacred verses as a devotional experience, its implications for literacy, and the social background and status of Sikh scribes within the community.

Gurdās Bhallā reports that the paper was made from hemp (bot. *Crotalaria junica*), a plant that grows in the region (Jaggi, 1987, 219). The skin of the plant was turned into a paste and then dried to form a light brown paper, which is nonacidic and has withstood the test of time. By the late 17th century, the Sikhs had also learned 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 a bundle of eight folios that were duly numbered. The opening folio, and in some cases the middle one as well, were illuminated, and a multilined 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 for making ink. Items such as alum, copper sulfate, collyrium, gold, indigo, musk, saffron, and sealing wax were ground together for thirty days in a copper utensil with a wooden stick coming from the margosa or *nīm* tree (bot. *Azadirachta indica*). In addition to producing ink with the proper shine, the copper sulfate and the *nīm* stick added a bitterness that made the ink unpalatable for mites. Once the writing was completed, the bundles were collected and sewn together, and neatly bound in cowhide exteriors with a free edge flap.

The preservation of the details of paper manufacturing and ink making indicates the degree of seriousness and affection that went into the preparation of these manuscripts. Almost a century and half after the equipment had fallen into disuse, the papermaking troughs at the Takhat Sṛī Damdamā Sahib in Talwandi Sabo were still preserved. 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" (GG. p. 1245). These manuscripts also indicate the debt that the Sikhs owed to Islamic techniques of bookmaking. The actual style of the drawings on the opening folios, the beautifully drawn borders, the technique of collecting folios in bundles, and finally the leather binding exhibit a close affinity with Islamic manuscripts. Hindu manuscripts of the period followed their own method of placing 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 their part, and it made the point that not their expertise but divine help had enabled the completion of these impressive tasks. After the text was elevated to the status of *gurū*, the possibility of recording the date of the manuscript or the name of the scribe, or any other detail, was perceived as challenging the basic integrity of the text.

Limited but intriguing data regarding the identity of the scribes in the early Sikh community are available. Sikh tradition has preserved the names of some early scribes. These include Saido and Śihān, two scribes who accompanied Bābā Nānak during his post-Kartarpur travels, carrying ink and pens, and committed to writing down his compositions as he sang them. There is also the case of Mansukh, a merchant from Lahore, who moved to Kartarpur and prepared copies of Bābā Nānak's compositions to be sent to congregations that had arisen far away from the center. Another case is that of Lahiṇā, whose name was later changed to Aṅgad when he was elevated to the duties of Bābā Nānak. He is believed to have helped Bābā Nānak compile and inscribe the original text, and some traditions even attribute the creation of Gurmukhi letters to him. We are told that Lahiṇā read out Bābā Nānak's compositions from stray folios and that Bābā Nānak then decided how the stanzas should fit together and finalized the arrangement of the text, which Lahiṇā then committed to writing. He eventually ended up as the successor of the Sikh founder.

Tradition has also preserved the memory of Sahansar Rām, the grandson of Gurū Amar Dās, as the scribe of the four-volume manuscript created in the 1570s. Next, Gurdās Bhallā is associated with the manuscript created in 1604. He enjoys substantial prestige as the interpreter of Sikh beliefs and practices. His compositions are considered the key to the *Gurū Granth* and enjoy the rare privilege of having been made part of Sikh devotional singing. High respect for the scribes continued as the tradition evolved. Gurdās Bhallā refers to a 16th-century Sikh scribe, Pāndhā Bullā, who was a prominent figure within the community. Leading 18th-century figures such as Mani Singh (d. 1738) and Dīp Singh (d. 1757) were closely involved in scribal activity.

In addition, the names of Jaganā, Puhkar, Rām Rāi, Būṛā Sandhū, Gurditā Jaṭeṭā, and Pākharml Dhillon appear in the 17th-century manuscripts. We thus have knowledge of the background of 15 early Sikh scribes, two of whom had come from a priestly Hindu

background (Bullā and Jaganā), six from a Khatri background (Lahiṇā, Mansukh, Puhkar, Gurdās Bhallā, Sahansarām, and Rām Rāi), and the remaining seven from a nomadic background (Saido, Śihān, Būrā Sandhū, Gurditā Jaṭṭā, Pākharṃal Dhillon, Manī Singh, and Dīp Singh). This provides us with some sense of the social background of those who joined the Sikh community, while also documenting the interesting feature of the rise of literacy among Sikh Jaṭṭs. With the exception of two Jaṭṭ poets, Dhanna and Jalaṇ, who have left us some poems, we do not have much involvement in literary or scholarly activity among the Jaṭṭs who had become part of the Hindu or Muslims communities.

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 to them before beginning the massive task (K. Singh 2003, 50–67). It seems that Sikhs took these foreign embellishments in their stride and did not regard them as presenting any contradiction to the message of the text.

Conclusion

Enjoying the central authority within the community, the text of the *Gurū Granth* has had a deep impact on all dimensions of Sikh life. It constitutes the normative source of Sikh beliefs and practices, a context for Sikh artistic and calligraphic endeavors, and, of course, the core 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 *Gurū Granth*. Since the early period, Sikh devotional experience has been centered on its reading, recitation, singing, and the exegesis necessary to understand its contents and then be able to put them into practice in day-to-day life. While the early scribes spared no pains in creating illuminated and calligraphically elegant manuscripts of the *Gurū Granth*, 18th-century Sikh blacksmiths inscribed its verses on swords and shields. The arrival of the printing press allowed

the text to proliferate in various sizes and forms. If ever there was a religion of the book, this is it.

In their understanding of revelation, of its manifestation as a bound and written text, and of the role of this text within the community, the Sikhs share a close affinity with Islam and other Semitic traditions. This should come as no surprise. The *Gurū Granth* was, after all, created in a socioreligious context in which Islam had been around for over half a millennium and in which the majority of people were Muslims. Yet, following the erroneous assumptions that Sikhs emerged only from the Hindu fold, scholars continue to resist registering the Sikh closeness to Semitic traditions (Coward, 2000, 133–135).

Finally, the Sikh case brings into 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 toward personal authority. Writing in the mid-19th century, Śāh Muḥammad, a Punjabi Muslim poet, claims that no matter who sits in the position of authority, the Sikhs have to pull him down (Jaggi, 1981, 16). Having followed a sedentary lifestyle 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 peoples 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 of Judaism, Islam, and Sikhism developed with the support of people of nomadic stock.

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