

In the Modern World

The Sikh *panth* (community) presently comprises approximately 25 million adherents, 20 million of whom live in East Punjab, the Sikh homeland in northwestern India, and two million in neighboring states that were formerly part of Punjab. The Sikhs began to fan out of this region early in their history, and one million or so of them are currently settled in other parts of the subcontinent. In addition, nearly two million left the region during the 20th century and have settled in countries across Asia, East Africa, Europe, and North America. This steady and significant migration has turned an erstwhile Punjabi ethnic group into a global community.

The demographic intricacies of the Sikh locations are due in part to the British arrival in Punjab around 1800, its partition into East (in India) and West (in Pakistan) Punjab in 1947, and the further division of East Punjab in 1966, which established a Punjabi/Sikh-majority state separated from the Hindi/Hindu-majority areas of Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. The difficulties of partition, coupled with years of advocacy and agitation for a Sikh majority state, and the protection of its economic interests seemingly brought the dream of a sovereign state of Khalistan (“Country of the Khālsā Panth”) to the forefront within a segment of the *panth* in the early 1980s (Grewal, 1989).

Based in the Darbār Sāhib (“Honorable Court”), Amritsar, the center of Sikh sacred geography, Sikh separatists under the leadership of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale (1947–1984) organized one of the most potent challenges to the unity of India in its postindependence history. In June 1984, Indira Gandhi, the prime minister of India, ordered Operation Blue Star, an army assault that mobilized its full might to subdue the separatists’ threat under the command of a Sikh general, K.S. Brar. The fierce engagement that unfolded within the precincts of the Darbār Sāhib entailed considerable loss of life, including that of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the destruction of the Sikh Reference Library, a Sikh national treasure holding over a thousand rare manuscripts, and severe damage to the Akāl Takhat (“Throne of the Immortal”), the site from where religiopolitical decisions related to Sikh *panth* are announced.

The immediate reverberations of Operation Blue Star included isolated rebellions by Sikh soldiers within the Indian army (one of which involved the assassination of R.S. Puri, a Hindu brigadier general), tacit celebrations of the army action within a segment of the Hindu community in India, and the repairs to the Akāl Takhat, which were overseen by Santa Singh (1928–2008), a leader of a militant Sikh group (the Niha gs), with Indira Gandhi’s blessings. These events were followed by her assassination at the hands of her Sikh bodyguards in October 1984, the slaughter of Sikhs by Hindu mobs in New Delhi and a few other Indian cities, the demolition of the repaired Akāl Takhat, and its reconstruction under the control of mainstream Sikh leadership, and the Indian government’s suppression of the Khalistan movement, which triggered an exodus of Sikhs seeking asylum abroad (Sandhu, 2013).

All these events – the death of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his Sikh supporters (separatists), the casualties sustained by the Indian troops under the command of a Sikh general (nationalists), the assassination of Indira Gandhi, the killings of Sikhs living outside of Punjab, the demolition of the Akāl Takhat built under the stewardship of Santa Singh, and its replacement with a new one – attest to the variety of perspectives within the Sikh *panth* as to its vision for the future, and to the importance of the political reality of its relationship with the Republic of India. This complexity is further underscored by the fact that the top positions within the country, including those of the prime minister, the chief of the Indian army, and chief of the Indian supreme court have been occupied by Sikhs such as Manmohan Singh (prime minister of India, 2004–2014); Joginder Jaswant Singh (commander of armed services, 2005–2007); Bikram Singh (commander of armed services, 2012–2014), and Jagdish Singh Khehar (chief justice, Supreme Court of India, 2017–).

How can we understand the present-day Sikh situation and the significance of developments during the colonial period in its making? Currently, two broad narratives of Sikh history are in circulation among historians.

The first periodization presents the five centuries of Sikh history in three phases. It begins with

the founding of the *panth*, based on the revelation of Bābā Nānak (1469–1539), and its development under the guidance of his nine successors, ending with Gurū Gobind Singh (1675–1708). The second covers the establishment of the Khālsā Rāj (“Sikh Kingdom”) under Mahārāja Ranjīt Singh (1780–1839) and the loss of political power to the British in the 1840s. The third phase, lasting from 1873 to 1900, presents the activities of the Singh Sabha Movement or Singh Sabha Lehar as geared toward “reclaiming” the golden past of the Gurū period, which was deemed to have been lost in the glow of political power under Ranjīt Singh (H. Singh, 1989).

A second group of historians tend to present the trajectory of Sikh history in two broad phases. As for the opening phase, they argue that Bābā Nānak’s beliefs essentially evolved from his Hindu religio-cultural background, and that the early Sikhs saw themselves as part of the larger Hindu fold. With the coming of the British to the region, however, new modes of thinking and activity created a context in which leaders associated with the Singh Sabha Lehar “reformed,” or rather, “re-formed” Sikh self-understanding, resulting in their seeing themselves as a distinct religious community for the first time in their history (Fox, 1985; Oberoi, 1994; McLeod, 1997).

Although the latter historians are convinced of their methodological sophistication in comparison with the former, it is hard to miss the fact that the research of scholars belonging to both of these camps is built on two shared assumptions. First, they both believe that contemporary Sikhism resulted from the happenings of the final quarter of the 19th century, which either “reclaimed the original” or “reformed the earlier tradition” in response to the developments associated with the arrival of the British in the region. Second, their studies reflect the absence of a firm grasp of the origin, and context, of the primary sources of information upon which they base their respective arguments pertaining to early Sikh history as well as to the events that unfolded in the last quarter of the 19th century. The only reasonable course of action left for a scholar interested in understanding the present-day Sikh *panth* is to construct a fresh narrative of its early history that is rooted in the primary sources, then trace the continuities, and subsequently chart the transformations that occurred with the arrival of the British in Punjab.

This chapter is divided in four sections. It begins with an examination of the sources for understanding early Sikh history, makes a set of observations about Sikh society around 1800, traces the nature of

Sikh responses to the coming of colonial rule (1800–1900), and assesses their implications for subsequent Sikh history. I hope that this modest effort will help understand the state of affairs of the present-day Sikh community, while also offering some useful data for those interested in measuring the impact of modernity on religious communities in general.

Sources and Resources

Since the Sikh *panth* has emerged in the relatively “full light” of history, there is an abundance of extant sources to study its origin and historical progression. The majority of these sources are textual, which includes scriptural manuscripts and a wide range of nonscriptural writings. Material artifacts, ranging from Bābā Nānak’s cloak, which is embellished with quranic verses, to the portraits of his successors, Sikh weaponry of the period around 1700, and so forth, offer an additional layer of information that furthers our understanding of Sikh history. The locations of early Sikh towns, from Kartarpur (“Creator’s Town”), established around 1520, to Anandpur (“Town of Ecstasy”), developed in the 1690s, also provide a window into the social and geographical expansion of the community. (Since Nānak preferred the epithet *bābā* [religious leader] for himself in his compositions, we will use that title instead of *gurū* [teacher], which is more popular in current scholarship.)

Bābā Nānak was born in the area around Lahore, which was connected with Hindustan on the one hand, and the Middle East and Central Asia on the other, via active trade and military routes. Islam came to the region in the 730s, and Muslim rulers directly controlled it from 1000 onward. By 1500, Muslims comprised the majority of the local population. Given the socioreligious context, it is appropriate to contextualize Bābā Nānak’s thinking and activities within the larger cultural matrix of Islamic, Hindu, and Jain beliefs and practices, which will result in significant qualifications and recalibrations of the commonly accepted localization of the Sikh *panth* within Hindu religious traditions.

For instance, Bābā Nānak carefully recorded his poetic compositions in a distinct script, Gurmukhi (“Of the *Gurmukhs*,” i.e. those who face the *gurū*), and compiled them in the form of a *pothī* (book; Mann, 2001, 33). Prior to his death, he ceremonially passed this on to his successor, Gurū Aṅgad (1539–1551; *Sākhī Babe Nānak kī: Ādi Ant kī* [Story of Bābā Nānak: From Birth to Death]; Jaggi, 2010, *sākhī*

56). Over time, this corpus grew in size, reached its canonical form, and, by the late 1670s, came to be assigned the title of *Gurū Granth* (God's book/God manifested as the book; see Mann, 2001, 82). The tradition of commentaries on its contents was also cultivated by 1600, and the text has served as the central and uncontested source of Sikh beliefs and practice (Jaggi, 1987). Although valiant efforts have been made to relate the rise of Sikh scripture with the Hindu side of things (Coward, 2000, 133–135), there is no doubt that it fits in naturally within the Islamic and its parent traditions' beliefs in divine revelation (*ʾalh*), the prestige assigned to the people of the book (*ʾahl al-kitāb*), and the practical need of exoneration from the religious tax (*jizya*) imposed on them under the Muslim rule.

The Sikhs also created a large corpus of nonscriptural writings that command a varying degree of authority. These include narratives of the lives of the *gurūs*. An anonymous text, entitled *Sākhī Babe Nānak kī: Ādī Ant kī* (later also known as *Purātan Janamsākhī*), was compiled in the 1580s and represents an authoritative account, having been composed by a Sikh who may have met Bābā Nānak. Bhāi Gurdās Bhallā (d. 1628), a Sikh savant of the period, wrote 40 ballads (containing more than 800 stanzas) and over 650 short poems explicating the teachings of Bābā Nānak and his successors while also narrating episodes from their lives (Jaggi, 2010).

In the next layer, we have texts related to the Sikh code of conduct (*rahit*). The seeds of this literature can be traced back to Bābā Nānak's verses, which emphasized the importance of ethical conduct and productive living, and the elaborations of which appear in the poetry and letters addressed to distant Sikh congregations by his successors. By 1600, there were lists of things a Sikh should and should not do. The period of Gurū Gobind Singh witnessed the rise of the formal genre of the code-of-conduct literature (*rahitnāmā*). These documents range from statements of two to three pages to an elaborate treatise (the *Prem Sumārag* [Good Path of Love], also known as *Param Mārg Granth* [Book of the Great Path] and follow three fundamental principles:

1. this code is addressed to the Sikhs and no one else;
2. all Sikhs should follow it to the best of their ability; and
3. these norms were to be seen as open ended, that is, the Sikhs could add to or modify them within the spirit of Sikh beliefs as enshrined in the *Gurū Granth* and the historical traditions of the *panth* (Padam, 1995).

Right from the very outset, the professional bards undertook the patronage of the Sikh court. During the period of Gurū Arjan (1581–1606), a group of high-caste Hindu poets called the *bhaṭṭs* entertained the Sikh audiences (G. Singh, 1961), and this activity reached new heights during Gurū Gobind Singh's tenure (Jaggi, 1966). The latter writings fall into two broad clusters. The first comprises poetic compositions that detail events from the lives of the *gurūs*, the activities at the Sikh court, the code of belief and practice which the Sikhs need to follow, and so forth. The second contains the writings of Hindu and Muslim poets whose poetry, though recited or perhaps sung at the Sikh court, variously reflects their respective religious backgrounds. These poets wrote in a variety of languages such as Brajhasha, Persian, and Punjabi, and used a plethora of literary forms and meters. The *Bacitar Nāṭak* (The Wondrous Drama), *Pakhyān Caritr* (Stories and Stories), and *Sarbloh* (All Steel) are the primary texts of the period.

Finally, we have a literary corpus that emerged within two 17th-century schismatic Sikh groups – Choṭā Mel (“Junior Line”) and the Handālīās (“[Followers] of Handāl”; d. 1648). Miharvān Sodhī (d. 1638), a nephew of Gurū Arjan who did not recognize the succession of Gurū Har Gobind (1606–1644), spearheaded the former group. Three of the texts attributed to him – *Sac Khaṇḍ Pothī* (Book of the Divine Abode), *Caturbhuj Pothī* (Book of Caturbhuj), and *Harijī Pothī* (Book of Harijī) – include deliberations (*goṣṭs*) about Bābā Nānak's life and compositions (K. Singh, 1969, 58–220). Handāl, a deputy (*masand*) at the Sikh court, parted ways with the mainstream Sikh community, and succeeded in creating a personal following and a seat of authority that is still intact in Jandiala, near Amritsar (V. Kaur, 1989). In the 1650s, the *Janam Sākhī Srī Gurū Nānak Dev Jī* (or *Janam Sākhī Srī Gurū Bābe Nānak Jī kī*; Life Story of Gurū Bābā Nānak), popularly known as the *Bālā Janamsākhī* (or *Bāle [Sandhū] Vālī Janam Sākhī*), emerged from within this group. The writer of this text had a penchant for the miraculous, and the person of Bābā Nānak presented therein clearly transcends the limitations of time and space (G. Kaur, 1987).

These nonscriptural sources shed significant light on the moods and motivations prevalent within the Sikh *panth* at the time of their respective production. The inability to distinguish the scriptural from the court poetry, and the mainstream from the schismatic, together with a general absence of precision in establishing a reliable chronology for these

texts' production, have meant that they are only hesitantly used in current academic scholarship on the Sikhs.

The Sikh *Panth* around 1800

Our knowledge of the Sikh *panth* at the cusp of the colonial period finds its clearest expression in the *Srī Gur Panth Prakāś* (The Rise of the Gurū *Panth*), written around 1810 (Mann, 2016). Rattan Singh Bhaṅgū (d. 1846), its author, was a figure of considerable standing. His parents and grandparents from both sides were affluent people, and he accordingly received the best education that his times had to offer. Additionally, given his family connections, he was well versed in contemporary events. He is the first Sikh historian to have established a clear prioritization of the sources employed to create his account. Rattan Singh Bhaṅgū's assessment of Sikh religious, social, and political concerns thus provides an excellent conclusion to our discussion of the early Sikh *panth*.

The title of Rattan Singh Bhaṅgū's text, *Srī Gur Panth Prakāś*, reflects his belief that Gurū Gobind Singh raised the *panth* to the level of the Gurū *panth* (God's community). Also, the Gurū *panth* was to work toward realizing the teachings enshrined in the *Gurū Granth*, which he deemed the highest authority within the *panth*, the center of its worship and the leading light in the battles that befell the Sikhs. Since the text represented the Sikh *panth*, the enemies of the Sikhs made efforts to destroy its manuscripts by throwing them into wells and rivers (Dhillon, 2004, 303–305). Interestingly, Rattan Singh Bhaṅgū associates the large-scale destruction of the *Gurū Granth* texts with a Hindu official working for the Afghan administration.

The *gurdvārā* provided the center for Sikh religious and public activity. Rattan Singh Bhaṅgū reports that Sikh devotional life included reading its text (*pāṭh*), singing its contents in accompaniment with musical instruments (*kīrtan*), exegeting its verses (*kathā*), addressing supplication to its text (*Ardās*), and seeking a response to the supplication from the text (*vāk*). We have references to the reading of the complete text – including, on occasions, an uninterrupted reading of the entire document (*akhand pāṭh*) – as a common practice of the time. Rattan Singh Bhaṅgū provides a sense of the text of the *Ardās*, which opens with words attributed to Gurū Gobind Singh and closes with the wish “to die with uncut hair intact.” He refers to the *granthī*, the

custodian of the *Gurū Granth*, whose duties included leading prayers, teaching children how to read Gurmukhi, and overseeing the *gurdvārā* establishment. For Rattan Singh Bhaṅgū, the *granthī* was neither a substantial leadership figure nor a ritual expert of any kind, but a devout Sikh capable of executing the aforementioned responsibilities (Dhillon, 2004, 381).

Rattan Singh Bhaṅgū makes a distinction between *gurdvārās* serving as places of daily worship and the historic *gurdvārās*, which were deemed sites of worship as well as of Sikh pilgrimage. The Darbār Sāhib in Ramdasapur – by this time known as Amritsar – held a unique status among Sikh sacred sites. Its sanctity resulted from its association with three *gurūs*: Gurū Rām Dās had started the construction of Ramdasapur, his son Gurū Arjan built the Darbār Sāhib in the midst of a pool of water (*sarovar*), and his grandson Gurū Har Gobind erected the Akāl Takhat, from where he oversaw the deliberations on the temporal affairs of the *panth*. The heroic sacrifices that the Sikhs had made to preserve its integrity during the Afghan invasions of the mid-18th century added another sacred dimension to its sanctity.

Rattan Singh Bhaṅgū provides us with an account of a gathering of the Gurū *panth* at the Darbār Sāhib in 1761. The Sikh leaders arrived there, bathed in the pool, gathered in the presence of the *Gurū Granth*, pressed their foreheads in front of it before sitting, listened to the evening prayers, and then made their supplications. After the prayer service, a Brahman from Kasur, a town near Lahore, made an appeal: the local commander had taken his wife away, and the Sikh leadership was his only source of help. In response to the request, the leaders returned to the presence of the *Gurū Granth*, offered another supplication, and the Sikh sitting in attendance took the *vāk* (*GG*, p. 1193). The text was interpreted as an approval for the Sikhs to attack Kasur, and that was precisely what was done in the following days (Dhillon, 2004, 362).

As for the content of Sikh religious beliefs, Rattan Singh Bhaṅgū is not interested in giving us a catalogue of normative beliefs, but rather describes contemporary practices. Interestingly, he presents us with a model of both a Sikh male and a Sikh female to show what was expected of them. In addition, he furnishes us with a good sense of the divisions within Sikh society. He registers the continuation of the dissensions associated with personal authority that had arisen during the Gurū period, and also refers to the ones that came afterward.

He also describes divisions among the Sikhs of his time that were based on their pre-Sikh social backgrounds. As for the norm, Rattan Singh Bhaᅅgū is clear that, after having undergone the ceremony of *khaᅅᅇ dī pāhul*, all Sikhs were placed on equal footing. He emphasizes that it was the personal qualities of a leader that mattered most, and that many prominent ones of the time had come from the low-ranking social groups. It is, however, evident that one's ancestral background – Jaᅇᅇ, Khatrī, and so forth – continued to play a role in 18th-century Sikh self-understanding.

There were also regional divides with political overtones among the Sikhs of the period. Rattan Singh Bhaᅅgū finds it hard to reconcile himself to the fact that the chiefs of the Malwa region had accepted the suzerainty of the British East India Company, and offers evidence to support his suggestion that these leaders had been prone to such sycophancy right from the very beginning of their political ascendancy (Dhillon, 2004, 351). According to him, the religious center of the Sikh *panth* was Amritsar, and its political power was based in the Khālsā Darbār at Lahore, under the leadership of Raᅅjīt Singh.

For the most part, Rattan Singh Bhaᅅgū's worldview reflects the patriarchal values of the wider society, but his attitude toward gender distinctions is complex. He refers to "Mātā Jī," the wife of Gurū Gobind Singh, the mother of Jassā Singh Ahlūvālīā (d. 1783), and to his own mother with a very high degree of respect (Dhillon, 2004, 128, 212). He shows great appreciation for his mother as a crucial source of information for his narrative; the site of her cremation is preserved today at the edge of his family lands, in the village of Bhari. He insists upon the Sikh rejection of "those who kill their daughters," and other evidence of the period portrays women and children participating in Sikh prayer services at the Darbār Sāhib during this period.

Rattan Singh Bhaᅅgū presents the political mission of the *panth* as an indivisible part of its worldview from its very inception. Looking back to 16th-century traditions, he recalls that Bābā Nānak was the "master of both spiritual and temporal matters, but in his grace gave the political power to Mir Bābur (1483–1530), the founder of the Mughal dynasty" (Dhillon, 2004, 263). He claims that three generations later, Bābur's descendants began to misuse their power – the execution of Gurū Arjan, and later that of Gurū Teᅅ Bahādur being the concrete instances of this – and forfeited their right to rule as a result of their actions. Gurū Gobind Singh

decided to "elevate the Sikhs" to the position of rulers and assigned them a visible identity by ordering them to wear their hair uncut and bear weaponry.

For Rattan Singh Bhaᅅgū, sacrifice was part of the narrative of how Sikhs fulfilled their promise to rule over the land blessed by their *gurūs*, as exemplified by Gurū Gobind Singh himself, who lost his father, mother, and four sons in pursuit of this goal. Rattan Singh Bhaᅅgū describes the scene of Sikh prisoners being paraded through the streets of Delhi in 1716, the public execution of Manī Singh, a leading Sikh figure based at the Darbār Sāhib in the early 18th century, in Lahore in 1738, and the killing of many others, including his own grandfather, to highlight the redemptive power of Sikh blood. He also underlines the ability of Sikhs to withstand physical pain while reciting compositions from the *Gurū Granth*.

By the turn of the 19th century, the Sikh *panth* comprised people of diverse backgrounds who followed the *Gurū Granth*, believed in the authority of the Gurū *panth*, and considered the Majha region to be their rightful inheritance. Within this scheme, the protection of the descendants of the erstwhile enemies – the Mughals, the Afghans, and Hindus such as Massā Ranghar and Lakhpat Rāi, who worked for them as mid-level administrators – was part and parcel of fulfilling the vision of the Khālsā Rāj, which entailed dispensing welfare and justice for all (*sarbat dā bhalā*). The earlier metaphor of the small Sikh numbers being "a mote in the [Hindū and Muslim] eyes" (*Caupā Singh Rahitnāmā* [c. 1700]) turned into its contrary, with the Sikhs representing themselves as a "mountain standing aloft among the [Hindū and Muslim] hills" (*Sudharm Mārg Granth* [Book of the Good Path]; MS 90280, Punjabi University; c. 1800). The Darbār Sāhib, the Akāl Takhat, and the two Sikh flags (*nīsāns*) in their vicinity symbolizing Sikh spiritual and temporal concerns, respectively, were a proud announcement of their sovereign status (*pātīśāhī*; Dhillon, 2004, 389).

Colonial Rule (1800–1900)

Around 1800, Raᅅjīt Singh, in his efforts to strengthen the Khālsā Rāj, created opportunities for Europeans to join the Khālsā Fauj ("Khālsā Army") and help train it along modern lines. Raᅅjīt Singh's plans for expanding the Khālsā Rāj beyond the Majha alarmed the Malwa Sikh chiefs, who invited the British East India Company, which had a firm base in Delhi by this time, to move its army into the area as their protector. This divided Punjab into two

geographical units: the kingdoms of Sikh chiefs in Malwa (under British protection) and the Khālsā Rāj under Raṅjīt Siṅgh – the latter marking the fruition of Gurū Gobind Siṅgh's vision of Sikh sovereignty. After Raṅjīt Siṅgh's death, circumstances changed rapidly. The British brought the Khālsā Rāj under their direct control, while the Sikh chiefs continued their rule in Malwa.

Keeping this geographical distinction in mind, let us survey the changes in the landscape of Punjab that occurred under British control. The towns of Amritsar, Lahore, and Multan were linked by roads, and connected with Karachi and the Arabian Sea on the one hand, while the Grand Trunk Road, from Peshawar to Calcutta, linked them with the Bay of Bengal. The British devoted considerable effort to agricultural development and constructed an elaborate system of canals in Punjab, bringing four million acres of land under cultivation. The agriculture department introduced improved varieties of maize, oats, rice, and cotton, adding to the prosperity of the region. Lahore emerged as one of the ten largest towns on the subcontinent, and the telegraph system, as well as roads, connected it with larger markets.

Within the context of this overall development, a close look at the Darbār Sāhib provides an insight into the complexity of the shifts that became manifest in the Sikh religiopolitical landscape. During the previous century, Sikh leaders had built their resting quarters (*buṅgās*) in the precinct of the Darbār Sāhib. Chief among these was the residence of Raṅjīt Siṅgh. As a replacement for his authority, the British demolished his residence and constructed a clock tower on the same spot in the 1860s. What could be a more poignant symbol of changed times than the presence of this 45-meter-tall Gothic structure, with a clock and a cross on top of it, standing at the north-western corner of the Darbār Sāhib?

How did the Sikh leadership respond to this dramatic shift in the political landscape? To answer this question, the history of the family of Laihiṅā Siṅgh Majiṭhiā (d. 1854), the custodian (*sarbrāh*) of the Darbār Sāhib under Raṅjīt Siṅgh, provides an interesting point of departure. Laihiṅā Siṅgh Majiṭhiā migrated to Banaras to escape the violence that engulfed the Khālsā Darbār at Lahore in the mid-1840s, and his son, Dayal Siṅgh (1848–1898), was born there. With Laihiṅā Siṅgh's death, Dayal Siṅgh was brought back to his village, Majiṭhia, as a “ward of the state.” A British governess was appointed to oversee his education, and he was sent to Church Missionary Society School, Amritsar, for some time.

In the 1870s, he traveled to England and returned home convinced that the interests of his community lay in accepting the best of industrial and democratic modernity (Gopal, 2007).

From this point on, his admiration for modernity guided his personal and public life. He invested in real estate in the fast-expanding city of Lahore, and further added to his considerable wealth in the process. Having witnessed the power of the media in Europe, he established an English daily named the *Tribune* in 1881. He used this tool to support the advocates of English education over and against their opponents, such as G.W. Leitner from the British administration, who wanted to preserve indigenous forms of learning. An ardent admirer of what the British had brought to the subcontinent, he was the first Sikh to speak of Indian nationalism (*The Tribune*, Dec 28, 1893).

However, Dayal Siṅgh died a sad and broken man; his fellow Sikhs remained indifferent to his modernist agenda, showed no interest in supporting the *Tribune*, and did not even approach him for financial help for the initiatives that they were developing in the 1890s. True to his belief in the spread of Western education, he bequeathed his substantial assets to the Brahmo Samaj, a group of liberal Bengali Hindus whose representatives had arrived in Punjab during the colonial period. His bequest was used to run the *Tribune*, Dayal Siṅgh College, and the Dayal Siṅgh Library, all of which were located in Lahore.

A counterbalance to the leadership of this ideological bent can be seen in the life and activities of Rām Siṅgh (1816–1885). He was born in a rural Sikh family of modest means at Bhaini, near Ludhiana, the primary base of the British between 1805 and 1849. In 1841, he moved to Lahore, joined the Khālsā Fauj, and worked there until the defeat of his unit by the British troops in 1846. He was seemingly involved in a spiritual search during the next decade or so, and returned to his native village around the time of the rebellion within the British ranks in 1857. There, he cultivated a modest following, administered *khaṇḍe dī pāhul* to both men and women within this group, and called them the Sant Khālsā (J. Singh, 2010).

Rām Siṅgh emphasized Sikh beliefs in social and gender equality, political sovereignty, and divine immanence, as a result of which the members of this group came to be known as Nāmdhārīs (“The Bearers of *Nām*”). In the 1860s, he made pilgrimages to historic *gurdvārās* at Muktsar, Amritsar, and Anandpur Sahib, and expected to communicate his message to the Sikhs gathered there. The British interpreted his activity as a threat to law and order in the region,

and blocked his efforts. Tensions reached a climax when a mob of Sant Khālsā attempted to capture arms and horses from Malerkotla, the capital of a small Muslim princely state, in early 1872. The British blew up 66 of the Nāmdharīs by tying them to cannons. Rām Singh was exiled to Burma (present-day Myanmar); he died there in 1885, a lonely man dreaming of returning to Punjab and working for the revival of the Khālsā Rāj.

In spite of fundamental differences in their attitude toward the British, Dayal Singh and Rām Singh shared a sense of profound commitment to what they believed in. Unlike these two substantial figures, however, many midlevel Sikh leaders, mostly landed gentlemen and their urban cohorts, followed the model of submission to the British adopted by the Sikh chiefs of the Malwa region. In the scholarship of the past decades, they are presented as the creators of the Singh Sabha Lehar, and their activity is assigned great importance. The evidence at our disposal, however, indicates that their influence was far less extensive than has been suggested. To start with, two Sikh associations were established at Amritsar (1873) and Lahore (1879), while some fifty more can be firmly dated to the two decades that followed (Oberoi, 427–430). Yet, it is important to underline that this activity was initiated by a small group of five or so Sikh leaders who started together, but soon parted ways, and competed with each other for legitimacy as the spokespersons for the Sikh *panth* in the eyes of the British officials. While rural leaders outdid themselves in displays of loyalty to the new rulers, all in the hope of gaining prestige and status, their urban counterparts wanted easier access to the jobs that had become available in the burgeoning colonial administration. With support, coming basically from the Malwa Sikh chiefs, they founded the Khalsa College in Amritsar in 1892, an educational institution that was to prepare younger generations to pursue job opportunities in the civic and colonial administration. Unlike Dayal Singh (representing Indian nationalism) and Rām Singh (championing Khālsā Rāj), the political stance of these Sikhs revolved around professing absolute loyalty to the British, and ensuring the stability of their rule on the subcontinent (Deol, 1992).

In the midst of this activity, the hourly chimes of the clock tower continued to blend into the sacred singing of the text of the *Gurū Granth* in the Darbār Sāhib. Such a mix was indicative of other significant shifts in Sikh religious life during the period: the replacement of the manuscript of the *Gurū Granth* with a printed version, the substitution, for more

traditional stringed musical instruments, of the harmonium (brought to the region by Christian missionaries), and the introduction of electricity in the Darbār Sāhib precincts in the mid-1880s (P.B. Singh, 1999, 87–108).

The British also streamlined the administration of the Darbār Sāhib, which meant sorting through its large land grants, clarifying its income and expenses, systematizing the functioning of the establishment that ran it, and deciding on duties, positions, and remunerations of its employees. All those who worked there were made to understand that their jobs were dependent on their loyalty to the British, and that no matter what their authority may have been on paper, ultimate control remained within the hands of local British officials. Here, one needs to remember Rattan Singh Bhaṅgū's comment that although the *Gurū Granth* and *gurdvārā* constituted the center of Sikh communal activity, the position of the *granthī* had no special weight or influence within the Sikh *panth*. Unaware of this detail, the British erroneously took the *granthīs* to represent Sikh religious leadership along the lines of a church hierarchy, assigned them a high degree of respect, and in turn expected them to win the good will of the Sikh masses for the new administration. Once the *granthīs* became accustomed to their new status, they began to compete with each other in their display of obedience to the British, while also trying to wield a new semblance of authority within Sikh society. A seemingly inconsequential misperception on the part of the British changed the status of the *granthīs* markedly, and led to a significant disruption in Sikh socioreligious life.

Beginning in the late 18th century, a group of Sikh scholars had moved to the vicinity of the Darbār Sāhib, where some of them established their schools of Sikh learning (*taksāls*), in which they taught Sikh boys and girls. By and large, the British maintained the state patronage for these scholars and their activities. With the hope of receiving adequate preparation for jobs that had recently become available, however, urban Sikh children quickly switched to government and Christian mission schools. This shift had a profound impact on the *taksāls*, which became restricted to rural Sikh children only, who then went on to work in the *gurdvārās* after the completion of their studies. Slowly but steadily, changed circumstances reduced the number of *taksāls* and, as a result, started the process of erosion that caused Amritsar to gradually lose its status as supreme center of Sikh learning in the course of the late 19th century (Leitner, 1883).

This development also coincided with an increased interest of the Malwa Sikh chiefs' in Sikh scholarship. They decided to go beyond patronizing individual bards, singers, and so forth at their courts, as they had always done. Their new initiatives included the establishment, in the 1860s, of a center for Sikh learning named Dharam Dhuja ("The Banner of [Sikh] Religion") at Patiala. They invited Tara Singh Narotam (1822–1891) and Gian Singh Dulat (1822–1921) to work there, and in the process bestowed a high degree of prestige upon them (Narotam, 1877; Dulat, 1880). Interestingly, they both were trained as Nirmalās, a line of Sikh scholars who believed the *Gurū Granth* to be the latest and best among the Hindu sacred texts. Tara Singh Narotam's unprecedented attribution of the *Bacitar Nāṭak* and *Pakhyān Caritr* to Gurū Gobind Singh, which was later followed by his identification of the actual spot of "meditation of Guru Gobind Singh in his previous birth (Hemkunt), based on his mastery of the Hindu epic *Mahabharat*," created a context in which this text was published at Sangrur, under the patronage of the local Sikh chief (Narotam, 1877, 343).

The coming of the printing press to Punjab had a complex impact on Sikh scholarship and the larger Sikh *panth*. We know that the first Gurmukhi font was created in the 1808 and that printing enterprises arose in Lahore from 1849s onward, arriving at Amritsar around 1900. The Koh-i-Nur Press, based in Lahore, released the first printed edition of the *Gurū Granth* in the mid-1860s. Harsukh Rai (d. 1890), a Hindu businessman who had moved from the Allahabad area to Lahore at the invitation of the British in order to work with them, took this decision based on the commercial interests of the press (Davis, 1983, 32). There is no reference to him enlisting the services of Sikh scholars in creating an accurate text for this enterprise.

A plethora of non-scriptural works of Sikh literature also came forth as the printing enterprises in Lahore flourished. The *Bālā Janamsākhī*, the most miraculous and dramatic narrative of Bābā Nānak's life, became a favorite of the printing enterprises at Lahore. The publication of the *Dasam Pāṭiśāh dā Granth* at Sangrur, in the 1880s, was followed by five different versions of its texts in British Punjab. From this point on, the combinations of the texts of the *Bacitar Nāṭak* and *Pakhyān Caritr* came to be popularly known as the *Dasam Granth* (Book of the Tenth [Gurū]). Three observations about this published corpus are in order.

First of all, it appears necessary to underline the fact that Sikh texts printed during the last quarter of the 19th century were based exclusively on decisions made by the owners of printing enterprises. Once published, however, these texts attained an authority of their own, and left a deep imprint on subsequent Sikh thinking. For instance, although Rattan Singh Bhaṅgū had denounced the *Bālā Janamsākhī* for being a schismatic document (Dhillon, 2004, 179), it nonetheless became the most popular Sikh text in print from the 1880s onward, while its narrative came to be regarded as the most comprehensive and historically accurate version of Bābā Nānak's life. Its 38th reprint came out in 2009, and I have no doubt that a few more have followed since then.

Secondly, Tara Singh Narotam's attribution of the *Bacitar Nāṭak* and *Pakhyān Caritr* to Gurū Gobind Singh, in 1877, boosted the popularity of their printed versions, which in turn led a group of Sikhs to firmly believe that these compositions belonged to Gurū Gobind Singh and thus deserved to be assigned scriptural status. Instead of recognizing that there was no historical basis for Tara Singh Narotam's claim, these people accused those who questioned the historical accuracy of their contention as challenging the fundamentals of Sikh beliefs. In addition, Tara Singh Narotam's colleague Gian Singh Dulat's two tomes – *Panth Prākāś* (Rise of the *Panth*, evoking Rattan Singh Bhaṅgū's title) and *Tvārikkh Gurū Khālsā* (History of the Gurū Khālsā), which at best could be situated in the genre of historical fiction – underwent several reprints in the decades that followed. They attained authority in *gurdvārās* and other Sikh educational centers, and their narratives shaped subsequent Sikh thinking.

Finally, scholars of the past generation seem to take it for granted that the Singh Sabha Movement produced a huge body of literature, and in the process left an indelible stamp on the understanding of Sikh history. On the basis of my extensive work on the books printed during this period, it is reasonable to argue that a large part of them consisted of Sikh devotional texts and their commentaries, pamphlets addressing sociopolitical issues facing the Sikhs of the time, and polemics contributing to debates raging amongst the Sikhs and their non-Sikh neighbors, notably with regard to the interpretation of Sikh beliefs.

With the exception of two texts, there is nothing that stands out within the literature of this period. *Sikh Dharam Śāstar* (Sikh Religious Code), by Avatar Singh Vahiria (1848–1916), is supposed to have been

published in 1894. He was a protégé of Khem Singh Bedi (1832–1905), a descendant of Bābā Nānak, under whose patronage the book must have been released. There are only references to this particular edition, with few stray copies of its 1914 version available. We have no information about how many copies of these two editions were published, nor is there any basis to argue that they had any impact on the Sikh thinking of the time or that of later decades. *Ham Hindū Nahīn* (We are not Hindus), by K.S. Nabha (1861–1938), was first published in 1898, but we only have access to the edition that came out for the first time in 1921. This polemical tract hardly meets the criterion of a foundation-shifting text that has been assigned to it by scholars of the past generation (O’Connell *et al.*, 1988, 136). Contrary to the current perception in the field, the most influential texts of the last quarter of the 19th century came from Tara Singh Narotam and Gian Singh Dulat, both of whom had undergone the Nirmalā training of Sikh scholarship which the so-called Singh Sabha Movement leaders were supposed to have categorically rejected. The awareness that what is taken for granted “as received” does not go beyond Tara Singh Narotam and Gian Singh Dulat, even when it pertains to critical issues of the present-day Sikh community, was an eye opener for my own study of the tradition.

Returning to the clock tower for one last time, we can observe that its presence at the edge of the Darbār Sāhib helped the area evolve from being a Sikh sacred place to becoming the civic center of the town of Amritsar. The reasons for non-Sikhs to gather there ranged from the need to step out of their houses on hot summer evenings to the desire to bring their wares in order to sell them to Sikh pilgrims and other local residents. We have references to Hindu icons appearing at the edges of the Darbār Sāhib precinct, with their custodians seeking donations, to the roadside selling of Sikh memorabilia, including the pictures of the *gurūs*, and to the presence of women of easy virtue, who roamed the vicinity in search of clients and had access to places to which they could take them if they succeeded. Later scholars associated these vendors with the times of Ranjīt Singh and the degeneration of Sikh values, but this development makes better sense when related to the civic/commercial space created by the clock tower and all that it signified.

The public nature of the area also provided a venue for the *granthīs* to buttress their newly minted status. There is firm evidence that their effort to

establish their leadership did not go far within the Sikh *panth*, particularly among those with a rural background, but it seemingly worked with the Sikhs and Hindus living in Amritsar itself. In an interesting complaint from 1877, the *granthīs* and the manager of the Darbār Sāhib made a submission to the British authorities on behalf of “many local Sikhs and Hindus” who were “upset” because Sikh soldiers from erstwhile untouchable backgrounds had taken a dip in the sacred pool, away from the area marked for their bath. The *granthīs* came to believe that the views of the Hindus, who were part of their personal following, should be taken into consideration in the running of the Darbār Sāhib (P.B. Singh, 93).

To sum up, it would appear that with the exception of a few committed voices such as those of Rām Singh and Dayal Singh, the mid-level rural Sikh leadership of the erstwhile Khālsā Rāj followed the example of the Malwa Sikh chiefs, seeking personal gain in return for public silence on the issue of Sikh sovereignty, which is so central in Rattan Singh Bhaṅgū’s and Ranjīt Singh’s thinking. In the sphere of Sikh religious life, the British misunderstanding of the *granthīs* resulted in them bestowing authority on a new group of Sikhs. The *granthīs’* frantic efforts to create a following attained a degree of success among urban Sikhs, who brought some of their Hindu caste counterparts along with them. The self-serving agenda of Sikh leadership in the Singh Sabhas co-opted the *granthīs*, bringing further legitimacy to both concerned parties. Finally, thanks to the printing enterprises, the authority of the *Gurū Granth* developed an appendage in the form of the *Dasam Granth*. At the same time, the *Bālā Janamsākhī* became the authoritative narrative of Bābā Nānak’s life and legacy, while the mythic/fictitious ideas of Tara Singh Narotam and Gian Singh Dulat’s became the authoritative version of Sikh history. Readers can judge for themselves whether or not this had anything to do with the centrality of the Singh Sabha Movement during this period.

From 1900 Onward

Leaving this currently circulating paradigm behind, our story of the 20th century should perhaps begin with a leader who has been both marginalized and misunderstood in current scholarship: Teja Singh Bhasaur (1867–1933). Hailing from Malwa, his family association with the Sikh *panth* went back to the times of Gurū Gobind Singh. His education began

with the study of the *Gurū Granth* and the use of weaponry at the village *gurdvārā*, and went on to involve a basic knowledge of Persian, Urdu, Sanskrit, and accounting. He then matriculated at the Central High School in Patiala, and obtained a diploma from the Technical College at Roorkee. He found employment as an overseer in the Canal Department of the Sikh state of Patiala. Here is one of the first Sikh leaders who had acquired both a traditional education and its modern/technical counterpart.

Soon after finding employment, Bhasaur became committed to serving the *panth*. He made a pilgrimage on foot to Nanded, the place of Gurū Gobind Singh's death, over a thousand kilometers away from his home. There, he underwent the *khaṇḍe dī pāhul* a second time, received a new name, Teja Singh, and rededicated his life to the welfare of the Sikh *panth*. A prolific writer, a powerful orator, and a social activist of considerable energy, he emerged as the core Sikh leader in the first two decades of the 20th century. Scholars such as K.S. Nabha (1861–1938) and L.S. Sangrur (1887–1975) were part of his close circle, and his writings and public addresses dealt with almost every key issue facing the Sikhs (T. Mann, 1997, 251).

For Teja Singh Bhasaur, the *Gurū Granth* constituted the center of Sikh beliefs and practice. To make its reading and understanding easier, he worked with K.S. Nabha in the mid-1910s and prepared a text in which the words were separated from each other (*padced*, for the original “connected” writing that continued in the printed editions until the 1970s). A purist by temperament, he believed that the core of the *Gurū Granth* comprised the writings of the *gurūs*, and that the sections belonging to the Sikh court poets and non-Sikh saints could not be treated on a par with them. His discomfort with a reading of the *Gurū Granth* that seemed to underplay the distinctive superiority of the writings of the *gurūs* was not solely of his making. It can be traced back to the writings of early Sikhs, such as Gurdās Bhallā, but had faded over time, the canonical status of the whole text having overridden its internal distinctions. In the late 1910s, Teja Singh Bhasaur responded to what he thought to be the need of his times and published the *Gurū Granth* in what he saw as its pure form, that is, by excising the writings of the Sikh bards. In line with the early Sikh traditions, the *Dasam Granth* had no relevance in his conception of things, and he categorically rejected its scriptural status, which had come up in the 1880s among some Sikhs (T. Mann, 1997, 280).

In addition, Teja Singh Bhasaur worked hard to revive the concept of Gurū *panth* by arranging meetings at historical sites such as Talwandi Sabo, and calling them the “Khālsā Parliament.” Large numbers of Sikhs were invited to attend, and efforts were made to develop a consensus on the issues facing the *panth*. It was from these discussions that his *Khālsā Rahit Prakāś* (Rise of the Khālsā Code of Conduct) emerged in 1907. This document fully endorsed social and gender equality within the *panth*, and encouraged the administration of *khaṇḍe dī pāhul* to women, low caste people, and Muslims. Teja Singh Bhasaur also took considerable interest in female education. He was the key sponsor of the first school for Sikh women, which was started in Firozpur in the 1890s by Takhat Singh (1870–1937), and brought a group of women to perform the ceremonial singing at the Darbār Sāhib, an initiative that was blocked by the local *granthīs*.

As for Teja Singh Bhasaur's position on Sikh politics, the sovereignty of the Gurū *panth* was non-negotiable. He denounced, in no uncertain terms, both the Malwa Sikh chiefs for having accepted British suzerainty, and mid-level Sikh leaders for their public displays of loyalty toward the British. Having challenged a large number of people both within and without the Sikh *panth* by forcing them to address thorny issues, he eventually became a target of a multilevel smear campaign, and was forced out of the public eye in the late 1920s (Ashok, 1982, 53–58).

In any case, his efforts brought the *gurdvārās* and the Gurū *panth* back to the center of discussion in the 1910s. This also provided the context for a new generation of Sikh leadership to confront the remnants of the Singh Sabhas at Amritsar and Lahore, including the *granthīs*, whose sustenance depended upon the British patronage. From this protracted conflict, there emerged a new institution called the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC, the Supreme Gurdwara Management Committee), which was created to oversee the activities at historic Sikh sites. From 1925 onward, the SGPC became the modern version of the Gurū *panth*, whose more than one hundred and fifty odd members were elected by Sikh men and women. Since its inception, this institution has played a crucial role in the consolidation of Sikh religious, social, and political life (Dhillon, 2009).

The formal structure of the SGPC assigned no authority to the *granthīs*, thus rectifying the earlier British misunderstanding of their position; they

simply became the paid employees of the SGPC, and oversaw activities at the Darbār Sāhib and other places. It may be useful to underline that with the exception of Gurmukh Singh Musafir (1899–1976), who worked at the Darbār Sāhib and went on to emerge as a political leader in his own right, no one from this hierarchy left any significant mark on Sikh history over the course of the past century (Ashok, 1982, 119).

In the subsequent decades, the SGPC developed an ambitious publication program. The *Gurū Granth* stood at the center of their agenda. Its authoritative text was prepared in the middle decades of the 20th century, and a new version with separated words, the prototype of which had been created by Teja Singh Bhasaur, was published in the early 1970s. This is the text that is now available in *gurdvārās* around the globe. Drawing on *rahit*-related documents, the committee took 20 years to compile a text entitled *Sikh Rahit Maryādā* (Code of Sikh Belief and Conduct), and published it in 1951. This document has successfully served as the standard statement on this important subject ever since. In addition, the SGPC produced texts to teach Sikh history in schools and colleges. It also collected early Sikh manuscripts and artifacts for the museum established in the Darbār Sāhib precinct. Notably, the SGPC has refrained from publishing the *Dasam Granth*, or assigning it any position of reverence in the *gurdvārās* under its control – something which a small segment of the *panth*, and a large number of scholars writing in English, would perhaps consider logical to do. The SGPC also created the Dharam Prachar (“Propagation of Religion”) Committee to help disseminate Sikh beliefs, and invited Sikh scholars to join it. This committee made recommendations regarding Sikh religious issues and the SGPC’s leadership translated them into concrete measures (Ashok, 1988, 302).

In recent years, the Sikh openness to new things has found expression in the SGPC’s establishment of a bread-making plant in the community kitchen (*laṅgar*) of the Darbār Sāhib, where over five thousand pilgrims take their meals daily, the use of solar energy to complement its electric supply, and the establishment of a water purification plant at the pool. The SGPC has also solicited help from the Punjab Agriculture University, Ludhiana, in order to preserve and maintain the 16th-century jujube trees that stand in its precinct. The approximately 18 hours during which Sikh sacred compositions are sung in the Darbār Sāhib are broadcasted, and morning and evening services are televised for the benefit of Sikh devotees around the globe. A

visit to the Darbār Sāhib amply demonstrates that present-day Sikh religious life is thriving, as does the appearance of numerous new *gurdvārās*, both in Punjab and overseas.

The political stress on Sikh leadership during the early 1980s resulted in the most senior *granthī*, called *jathedār* (i.e. leader at the Akāl Takhat), assuming the role of a *panth* spokesperson, on the one hand, and the steady replacement of scholars on the Dharam Prachar committee by low-level Sikh political figures, on the other. In this broad reconfiguration, the *jathedār* at the Akāl Takhat, along with his counterparts at the four other *takhats* (Patna, Anandpur Sahib, Damdama, and Nanded, the sacred places respectively marking Gurū Gobind Singh’s birth, the declaration of the Khālsā Panth, the resting place after evacuation of Anandpur Sahib, and his death, respectively) began to make recommendations pertaining to religious matters. Some of these decisions include eliminating the use of chairs when *laṅgar* is served in overseas *gurdvārās* (1998), barring any private publisher from printing the text of the *Gurū Granth* (1998), specifying the way in which the text of the *Gurū Granth* should be kept in a private home (2013), and removing the chairs from the congregation hall used by the elderly who cannot sit on the floor (2013; R. Singh, 2003, 153, 155, 203).

As for the issue of social divisions, the late 1940s presented the Sikh *panth* with a significant new challenge. Given the substantial benefits granted to low castes by the Indian constitution, the Sikh leadership sought the same for Sikhs of comparable background, lest they return to the Hindu fold. The pragmatic needs of maintaining a unified Sikh voting block overrode the Sikh resistance to acting in the name of social inequalities, even if such action was pursued for progressive ends. The reversal of this position seems insurmountable at present. These social distinctions, however, do not play any role within the everyday religious activities of Sikhs. Any and every Sikh devotee can bathe at Amritsar and in the pools of other sacred sites, participate in the prayers, and share food in the *laṅgar*. Marriage patterns continue to be largely restricted to the pre-Sikh affiliations of different groups within the *panth*, but even that is slowly beginning to change.

Similar issues relate to Sikh women. Their relatively high public profile can be seen emblematically in Amrita Shergill (1913–1941), a pioneer figure in the history of South Asian painting, Amrita Pritam (1919–2005), a powerful literary presence, Rajinder Kaur Bhattal (1945–), the former chief minister of Punjab, and Jagir Kaur (1954–), the first and so far

the only female president of the SGPC. A number of women have made significant contributions to Sikh history. One must not, however, exaggerate Sikh claims for gender parity. Teja Singh Bhasaur's attempts to have a group of women perform the sacred singing in the Darbār Sāhib did not succeed in the 1910s, and the female voices remain absent there, with the Akāl Takhat denying a request to do so in 2008. A group of Sikh women from overseas put in a formal request to wash the floors of the Darbār Sāhib, but their request was summarily dismissed. Not surprisingly, less than 20% of the SGPC's members are women. Clearly, concerted thinking with regard to these issues is urgently needed.

Given the realities of the past century, the issue of Sikh sovereignty (*pāṭiśāhī*) has turned into a complex tangle for Sikh leadership. Within the Sikh *panth* at large, there is a continuous dream to revive some sort of *pāṭiśāhī*, along the lines of the leadership of Ranjīt Singh. In the early 19th century, for instance, some Sikhs called their leader Kharak Singh (1868–1963) the “uncrowned king” (*betāj bādśāh*). In the 1930s, *Bābā Tejā Singh*, a novel by Master Tara Singh (1885–1967), a powerful political figure of his times, urged that the Sikhs had to revive the Khālsā Rāj to live respectably. Simultaneously, the Sikh leadership was aware of their demographic disadvantage – the *panth* constituted less than ten percent of the population of the area that came to be East and West Punjab – and this had a drastic impact on the nature of political power that it could wield.

In the 1940s, the British quietly permitted the Sikhs to demolish the clock tower, and the two Sikh flags symbolizing Sikh spiritual and temporal concerns, respectively, once again became the highest and most visible markers on the Darbār Sāhib landscape. However, the hopes of many Sikhs that they would one day have their own separate country (Sikhistan/Khalistan) could not materialize, given the demographic and political realities at the time of British departure from the subcontinent. Following Rattan Singh Bhaṅgū's assessment of their motivations, the Malwa Sikh states effortlessly transferred their loyalty from the British to the new government in New Delhi. A large majority of Sikh political leaders followed this stance. The tensions between the central government and the Sikh leadership, however, emerged soon after partition, and Master Tara Singh's activities were interpreted as a threat to the state's law and order. He was briefly imprisoned in early 1949. While this conflict took different forms in the subsequent decades, the historically ingrained

promise of Sikh sovereignty, which Rām Singh and Teja Singh Bhasaur had so emphatically evoked, resurfaced with Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale in the early 1980s. The response of the government in New Delhi was no different from that of its predecessors – any Sikh aspiration to territorial independence within the country was to be crushed with force.

With Manmohan Singh, Joginder Jaswant Singh, Bikram Singh, and Jagdish Singh Khehar having occupied the highest positions of power in India's central government, and Prakash Singh Badal's (b. 1927) Akali Dal having aligned itself with the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party so as to rule Punjab at the state level, it seems reasonable to assume that the Sikh *panth* has made peace with its destiny as one of the many communities within the contemporary Indian state. Yet, one has to notice the inauguration of a memorial dedicated to “Sant Giani Jarnail Singh Ji Khalsa Bhindranwale and all other martyrs of the 1984 massacre” next to the Akāl Takhat in 2012. There is no doubt that both Manmohan Singh and Prakash Singh Badal did their level best to oppose its construction and dedication, but clearly they did not succeed. Circumambulation of the sacred precinct of the Darbār Sāhib now makes a visit to this new landmark obligatory for any ordinary Sikh pilgrim.

The most significant new reality for Sikhs as a whole, however, is the fact that roughly 15% of them reside outside of Punjab. Three observations are in order. First, a new ceremonial edition of the *Gurū Granth* containing the Gurmukhi text along with a Roman transliteration and an English translation of the same has been prepared for the use of generations of Sikhs born outside of Punjab. The same text is now available on the internet, with provisions for searches of various kinds.

Second, concerns in the overseas *gurdvārās* range from the aesthetic – buildings reflecting various architectural designs and displaying pictures of different sets of Sikh leaders – to issues of their ownership. For the first time in Sikh history, there are cases of *gurdvārā* buildings being owned by private individuals. As a result, the owners have the right to decide what happens there, who can attend, or even if it should remain open. This practice is now prevalent among Sikhs of British Columbia, Canada, and seems to be spreading to other places where Sikhs live.

Finally, there is a range of changes symbolized by the Happy, Healthy, and Holy Organization (or Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere). A mid-level

Sikh official in the Indian civil services, Harbhajan Singh Puri (1929–2004), came to Toronto in the fall of 1968, and reinvented himself as a *yogā* teacher (calling himself Yogi Bhajan) in Los Angeles in early 1969. His young students soon became interested in his Sikh beliefs, and two of them partook in the *khaṇḍe dī pāhul* in April 1970. Others joined this path, and by the end of the year, their leader took 84 of them to the Darbār Sāhib. In the subsequent decades, their numbers continued to grow. Known as the American Sikhs, this miniscule group of people holds a position within the larger Sikh *panth* that is still unclear. With the passing of Yogi Bhajan, these people are in a state of transition. Perhaps the future of this group will prove to be a test case for the promises and challenges of joining the Sikh *panth* in the 21st century (Khalsa, 1995).

Looking Ahead

As we conclude, let us imagine that Rattan Singh Bhaṅgū makes a pilgrimage to the Darbār Sāhib in 2017. The large clocks at the main entrances, indirect progenies of the British clock tower, the sound of a harmonium accompanying the sacred singing on the public broadcasting system, the pipe at the edge of the pool supplying clean water, and the solar heaters on the roofs would in all probability thoroughly confuse him at first sight. Apart from these cosmetic and structural changes, the rest of it would be comfortably familiar – people entering the precinct and taking their baths, the patterns of devotion around the *Gurū Granth*, the display of weaponry and the beating of the drum at the Akāl Takhat, the Sikh flags at its side, and the *laṅgar* busy feeding people. Seeing the number of Sikhs present in the Darbār Sāhib complex, their overall devotional fervor, and the maintenance of the early Sikh traditions would be compelling and reassuring for him.

Knowing Rattan Singh Bhaṅgū's scholarly inclinations, we can be sure that he would look for some information on the Sikhs. Arriving at the bookstore run by the SGPC, he would be dazzled by the sheer quantity of the titles on display there. Without question, he would carry away a large pile for himself, including an edition of his own *Srī Gur Panth Prakāś* published under the SGPC's imprint. It is fair to assume that he might start examining this pile by looking at his own book, and it is not difficult to imagine his shock at reading its introduction and finding out that the editor places the text's completion in 1841, which is 30 odd years after its

actual production. Furthermore, he would surely find the editor's claim that the text emerged out of the context of anxiety surrounding the inevitable British takeover of the Khālsā Raj to be downright disconcerting.

Having had this strange glimpse into the present-day understanding of his text, he would find it hard to assess the level of scholarship in Sikh studies. Given his interest in the nature of sources of information for a historian, he will find it enigmatic to note that the most detailed study of the Sikh *panth* in the 19th century, H. Oberoi's *Construction of Religious Boundaries* (1994), which was awarded the best book of the year award by the American Academy of Religion, does not make any mention of him in the text or the bibliography.

We can, however, help him find his way by going back to the two scholarly camps referred to at the beginning of this essay. If he were to join the skeptical historians, he would learn to cull ideas from biblical studies, culture studies, feminist studies, whatever is the latest *mantra*, and apply them to selected, sometimes even imagined data from Sikh history (Oberoi, 1994; Mandair, 2010; among many). The effort here is largely to prove or disprove the efficacy of current ideas in the academy, as they apply to things Sikh, and thereby to bring Sikh studies within the orbit of what counts as significant within the broader academy, at a particular moment in its ongoing evolution – often with little concern for the veracity of the history that is being used to make those connections or for the sentiments of the Sikh *panth* as the process advances.

Or, alternatively, Rattan Singh Bhaṅgū could leave that aside. He could stake out his position by drawing information from early sources, attempting to interpret the relevant details in terms of the categories that emerge from within the Sikh context, and generating a historically accurate narrative of the Sikh past. I have a distinct feeling that he would choose the latter – and as his own scholarship shows, the chances are good that whatever emerged from his investigations, it would be more than just antiquarian interest. A fresh engagement with history, attempting to understand how that history was actually lived, should provide deep resources for reflecting on problems that confront the Sikh *panth* in the present day, perhaps even presenting plausible solutions for problems that, at first glance, seem so modern that the past cannot be a guide in learning how to face them. Our time, no less than his own, is a very exciting one for a scholar to be working in Sikh studies.

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