

**The Two Bhai Sahibs:
A Rejoinder to Professor Tejwant Gill's Article**

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In "The two Bhai Sahibs: Vir Singh and Kahn Singh in comparative perspective" (JSPS 23:1&2), Tejwant Gill passes rather severe judgment on two Sikh intellectuals; in his view, the two writers' vast array of writings were devoid of "originality" and their contributions were not "fundamental." Leaving aside the meaning of "originality" and "fundamental," this seems quite a taking down of two major Sikh personalities of the 20th century. It is an interesting assessment in so far as these two leading Sikh personalities of the colonial Punjab are brought together in the first place, especially as the second Bhai Sahib, Kahn Singh, has generally escaped the attention of literary critics since his contribution to literary genre is considerably smaller. Kahn Singh's *Magnus Opus* is an encyclopedia of Punjabi language, while his main writings concern Sikh theology and exegesis. There is, of course, his much discussed *Hum Hindu Nahin* (We are not Hindus), a book that sets out a case for the Sikh community's distinction from Hindu society. Social historians of Punjab have made extensive comments upon it as the first definitive statement of how the Sikhs started to demarcate themselves from the Hindu society during the colonial rule but it has generally not been treated as a literary text. Thus it is quite interesting that Gill brings these two Sikh intellectuals together, through his novel criterion, as a comparative exercise.

Reading through the article, Gill brings together several kinds of tests and contestations to judge the worth of each Bhai sahib. Not restricting himself to evaluation of their creative writings, Gill passes strictures on such matters as the prestige attached to the term "Bhai sahib" in Sikh society and why the two writers should have eschewed such a label. He does not tell us if they had accepted these particular labels formally or not. Gill finds Bhai Vir Singh dabbling in rather mysterious and mythological stories associated with Sikh gurus rather than more realistic economic and social factors in their lives, while Kahn Singh is taken to

task for not meeting the challenge thrown by Mr. Trumpp's commentary on Guru Granth Sahib. Leaving aside his subjective evaluation, Gill essentially employs two criteria while judging the merits of these two prominent personalities.

First is an "inclination" of the two writers to remain within what the author calls "comfort zone." Both Bhai Sahibs, Gill asserts, are "unable to transgress their respective "comfort zones." Let us call this as the first criterion of evaluation. Then there is what seems to be more formidable second test to measure their overall worth—this consists of the two writers' attitudes towards the anti-colonial struggle. Gill uses these two tests, namely "comfort zone" and "lack of an urge towards anti-colonial movement" on the part of the two intellectuals as contributing somehow to their mediocre and limited achievements. In Gill's judgment, their achievements were below par, as they lacked a critical attitude towards the colonial administration. Indeed either they endorsed the colonial rule or were "comfortable" with it; this attitude, according to Gill they somehow affected the quality of their writings. This lack of enthusiasm towards the rising nationalist tide, is contrasted, in Vir Singh's case, with Rabindranath Tagore, his contemporary in Bengali literature, and in comparison, Gill finds the Punjabi Sikh writer distinctly disappointing.

In this rejoinder I wish to question both the criteria Gill has used for assessing the two leading Sikhs during the colonial era besides attending to some peripheral points raised in his article. The first of his criterion, "comfort zone," I contend is simply ill-defined and too loose a term to serve as analytical tool for any serious evaluation. His second criterion merits consideration, but this is uncritically derived from the postcolonial "Indian ideology," which, as I argue at length below, distorts the lived experience of leading members of the Sikh elite as well as of the role played by such institutions. By using such a criterion of finding an absence of "urge to get rid of colonial rule" in the two writers, Gill has succumbed to the prevailing hegemonic discourse fostered by the Indian elite that is ill-suited to assessing the lives of the leading elite among India's minority communities. Effectively, Gill is using the wrong yardstick to assess two prominent Sikh personalities of the colonial period by employing a hegemonic discourse of the "Indian ideology."²

Coming from someone who is considered to be a leading critic and successor to the literary tradition handed down by Sant Singh Sekhon, this article demands a serious attention in terms of arguments and results derived therefrom. Gradually starting in this direction, but with what seems in retrospect a much finer assessment by Sant Singh Sekhon, subsequent critics have dismissed Vir

Singh's vast output as narrow and anachronistic. In fact, almost a consensus has developed to see him as a "reactionary" and castigated as of a "communalist"—a term of almost abuse in the Indian context. Gill is thus not only endorsing a consensus already achieved, he is, for the first time, providing a novel rationale for such an assessment. An exposition of the Punjabi Marxist tradition, of which Tejwant Gill is part and leading figure, will take us far from the paper's main theme, although it bears to keep in mind how the colonial Punjabi literature lacks serious exploration due to the rise of such a dominant leftist school of criticism.³ During the early 1970's, a wave of revolutionary Punjabi poets would routinely dismiss the writings of "traditional" writers, of whom Vir Singh was the putative head from the colonial era. In contrast, they offered praise for "progressive" and "nationalist" poetry of the Ghadar movement.⁴ Just to cite latest example, Harvinder Bhandal, a young school teacher turned literary critic has called Vir Singh an outright "communalist," while an editorial in a literary magazine *Hun* posed the question of Vir Singh's "unpatriotic" silence in 1919 in more stark terms, as though he was complicit in a heinous crime.

There is further reason to explore this trajectory, as the two Bhai sahibs are considered to be the most serious scholars of the Singh Sabha movement. In addition to criticism offered by intellectuals of leftist persuasion, there is the (absurd) postmodernist claim that all identities are imagined ones—that, in the case of Singh Sabha movement, its chief architects were somehow successful in carving out their dubious claims for a separate Sikh identity from what were more ambiguous social boundaries and exchanges among the Sikhs with its parental Hindu society. Why they were successful is generally attributed to the crucial help provided by the British policy of "divide and rule" in adopting a preferable policy towards the Sikhs as a "martial race." This issue was vigorously debated following the publication of Harjot Oberoi's "The construction of boundaries: culture, identity and diversity in the Sikh tradition" (1994) which resulted in a sharp divide among academics.

There is a wider issue lurking here of writing the Sikh historical experience under the colonial period in the postcolonial India. Faced with a highly diverse population living within the boundaries of India, the Indian polity is trying to pull together all of its peoples towards a shared consciousness of "Indian" nationality. The continuing claim of the Sikhs as a political community with a historical relationship with the Punjab as its homeland has come under an increasing gaze of sharp criticism. The cultural shoots of Sikh nationalism are attributed to the Singh Sabha movement, with the leading personalities of this movement in turn

being the two Bhai sahibs. Many an accusatory finger is pointed at the colonial administration, which facilitated the institutionalization of a distinct Sikh identity, in particular via two pieces of legislation: the first, passing control of Sikh historic shrines into the hands of adult Sikh franchise and, the second, accepting distinct Sikh marriage. The complicity of British administration is uncritically accepted to have fuelled the separatist tendencies within the evolving Sikh community, which was otherwise just another sectarian development within the larger Hindu Pantheon. Such historical factors from the colonial period and many personalities in that era are continuously recalled as part of explanation for the contentious claim of Sikhs to be a nationality, if not sovereign nation, in contemporary India. This formed part of explanations in most commentaries explaining the tragic events of 1984 events in Punjab. As a consequence, there is very cautious approach to the writing of various political and social movements in Punjab. Although there are similar issues arising in various provinces of India, this hesitance has especially been the case with respect to Bengal and Punjab, whose broken geographies are an affront to ideological claims regarding the unity of India.

Thus, by assessing the two Sikh personalities whose life spanned substantial period of the colonial Punjab, Tejwant Gill raises methodological issues: how to assess the colonial era's leading personalities, their ideas, roles and writings in the postcolonial India. This in turn raises a more fundamental problem in historiography; namely the writing or re-writing of Punjab history during the colonial period and how its main events are being incorporated into India's postcolonial "nationalist" narrative. As we shall see, Gill's assessment and use of the criterion essentially involves acceptance of a hegemonic discourse of a nationalist discourse that has become part of "Indian ideology." That discourse has been uncritically accepted, even by a leading leftist critic, as Gill's article illustrates, is a matter of serious concern and calls for a thorough discussion.

Towards a Severe Judgment? On Gill's Criterion of Assessment

Gill starts by acknowledging the status of these two writers by saying, "almost contemporaries, they ended up as the most revered Sikhs of the first half of the 20th century." Vir Singh (5 December, 1872—10 June, 1957) was a poet, novelist, editor, scholar and theologian who was a major figure in the movement for the revival and renewal of Punjabi literary tradition, as such he was: "The founder of modern literature in Punjabi...he was a creative writer—Punjabi modern poetry

began with him, he also brought into being the writing of fiction that was so far anecdotal" (p. 57). The second Bhai Sahib, Kahn Singh is praised with similar approbation:

As a polemicist, grammarian, explicator, and compiler of Mahan Kosh, Kahn Singh proved to be the most authoritative voice on Sikh theology, tradition and scripture... His polemics were couched in scholarship—the booklet (*Ham Hindu Nahin*) sought out to establish the identity of the Sikh community earned him credit that no other writing of this type has managed to gather during the last one hundred years... His magnum opus was... Mahan Kosh, which even after eight decades its publication has no parallel in Punjabi. (p. 57-8)

If that seems to readers something like fulsome praise and acknowledgement of two writers worth, Gill immediately offers a taking down. In a précis of his article, he asserts his judgment as:

...Rather than explorers, they ended up as explicators... their oeuvres proving original only in the metaphorical sense of being monumentality being distinct. They were not original in etymological sense of going to the origins or roots of the issues dealt by them." (p. 57)

One need not dwell on what Gill means by the terms "explorers" and "expositors." One gets the idea from his second sentence that they were deficient in "originality" and that their achievements are described mistakenly as "monumental." Surely Gill would not use such a term for them; still, they were not frauds, but any high praise for them, accordingly "can only be in the metaphorical sense only." So, how does Gill arrive at such a harsh judgment: what are his criteria like? As we read through the article, we come across something called "comfort zone." So this is the first criterion. Although Gill never defines "comfort zone," one comes to sense its meaning as illustrated through its application to the life of two Sikh scholars as in the following:

The mysterious, inevitable and rarefied flight of fancy, regarded by Vir Singh as of the ultimate vision, fascinated him so much that he chose to stay engulfed in its range. This was the comfort zone, one that he never felt like transgressing. Parallel was the case of Kahn Singh... (p. 82)

The Criterion of "Comfort Zone"

We have no clear meaning or the sense in which Gill makes use of it—only an approximation through such words as "mysterious," "rarefied flight of fancy," and "ultimate vision."⁵ He uses this phrase throughout the article and draws substantial conclusions from it; however, it is surprising choice. It is not generally

accepted as an analytical term for literary evaluation. Turning to the Oxford English Dictionary to clarify, we find “comfortable zone” means a settled method of working that requires little effort and yields only barely acceptable results. As in common day use “if you stay within your comfort zone you will never improve.” Thus “comfort zone” is not a criterion or a hypothesis but already a loaded statement—a mild accusation at the least. Readers should ask: is this a proper criterion to use to sum up someone’s career or achievements? Isn’t this an ill-defined concept or term that is already suggestive of contemptuous evaluation? Does Gill mean to say that these two writers lived in a dreamy spiritual domain, barely stepping out in the world to challenge or take part in any public matter?

Perhaps Gill implies that the two Bhai sahibs were not “modernists” or “socialists,” as was the case of, say, Sant Singh Sekhon (1909-1997). In this Gill is surely right; if anything, the two Bhai sahibs’ thinking and lifestyles were of what can be called “conservative philosophy.” I would venture to say that both would have been comfortable with the kind of conservative thought as outlined by a contemporary leading English philosopher, Roger Scruton.⁶ But on the other hand, their “spiritualism” is not that of the popular image of sadhus among the rural folks.⁷

However if Gill means a quiet and unchallenging life, he is quite wrong. They were highly productive and engaged in worldly affairs; indeed they led exemplary Sikh lives, dedicated to the building of community institutions and safeguarding the interests of the Sikh community.⁸ Both were reshaping source materials from the past required for a new Sikh tradition by searching for obscure Sikh classics and editing them. Here were two creative writers laboring day and night to bring out pamphlets, books and earlier manuscripts. Theirs was not mere interpretation of the Sikh tradition or just elaboration of existing texts; rather, they were crucially engaged in its re-interpretation for the new Sikh audience of readers coming into the widening circle of literacy through western style education.

Let us also remember the historic context of their writings. With the fall of the Sikh Empire and the proselytising movement among Christian, Muslim, and Hindus, the Sikh scene was that of despondency. For more than three decades starting in the late 1880’s until the 1920, there was volatile public debate, essentially forced by an aggressive section of Brahma Samaj at first and then by the Arya Samajis, that targeted Punjabi Muslims and Sikhs for different reasons. The two Bhai sahibs started their writing careers at a time when Sikh religion, culture and Punjabi language were under attack by Punjabi Hindus such that the

Sikhs had begun to doubt the value of their way of life. None believed the Punjabi language would survive—its written form little different from mixture of Hindi and Urdu, strongly championed by Hindus and Muslims respectively. The colonial administration did not help by adopting Urdu as official language of the province. They also faced the challenge of the Sikh elitist tradition shaped by Udasi or Nirmala School of learning with emphasis upon Sanskritised commentaries upon the sacred Sikh literature and propagation of sanatan version of the Sikh faith, indeed indistinguishable from the Hindu tradition. It was Vir Singh and Kahn Singh who took it upon themselves to challenge such a dominant discourse. For this they were highly conscious of newly available print media, especially in the form of monthly magazines and newspapers, and used it extensively.

It was in such an atmosphere that Kahn Singh and Vir Singh began revitalizing Sikhism through their works of literature. They took on the far more resourceful, financially secure, and highly educated leaders of Arya Samajis in Lahore and Amritsar. Both Vir Singh and Kahn Singh, along with several other friends and colleagues, were actively involved in Sikh public affairs and newly founded institutions such as Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Ferozepur, Khalsa College, Amritsar, Chief Khalsa Diwan and Sikh Educational Conferences and other on-going activities. Unlike many others, both also managed to refrain from highly inflammatory language that had become common currency in inter-community debates.⁹

Kahn Singh had intervened in this debate with a solemn and reasonable set of pleas for the recognition of Sikh community. In his new book *Hum Hindu Nahin* he made a cogent appeal to Hindu leaders in general by extensive citing of Sikh scriptures and illustrations of historical tradition to show regard and understanding for the dissenting Sikh tradition. Whatever its status to begin with, he asked the Hindu statesmen and others concerned to recognize Sikhs as a distinct community of India. In its subsequent edition, Kahn Singh was at pains to show how he was under acute pressure of an influential section of Hindus and tried to defend his stand producing testimonials from associations and individuals of the Sikh society. Then he was engaged in producing the encyclopedia of Sikh literature, the *Gurushabad Ratanakar Mahan Kosh*, considered to be a permanent monument to Kahn Singh's unmatched industry and erudition. Starting in 1916, Kahn Singh spent some fourteen long years on the *Mahan Kosh* manuscript collecting, collating entries of succinct exposition of the history, religion, culture and literature of the Punjab and the Sikhs. Still used as a

standard reference book through various editions and formats, this work was originally published through the patronage of the Maharaja Bhupendra Singh of Patiala.¹⁰ Compare his pioneering undertaking, determination and industry with the Punjabi University's latter-day production of the Sikh Encyclopedia by a team of scholars led by Professor Harbans Singh that took almost two decades to produce.¹¹

However, Gill will only be convinced of his contributions if Kahn Singh had confronted Trumpp's observations on the Sikh scriptures. First Gill does not make a case for this proposition, and then almost annoyingly Gill insists on providing reasons too as to why Kahn Singh did not take the initiative as it would have upset his "comfort zone." Gill advances on such a precarious path by saying: "Engagement with Trumpp would have meant a distance from Macauliffe's work, which he chose not to create because he was disinclined to transgress his comfort zone" (p. 85).

There is no evidence from Kahn Singh's life to support such a conclusion. Kahn Singh was crucial ally and supporter of M.A. Macauliffe, who had already undertaken such a task. Since Trumpp's introduction to his half-finished translation of the Guru Granth Sahib was in the English language, it was natural that Sikh elites were looking for an expert in that language to bring out a proper reply to the German scholar's charges. The atmosphere among the Sikh elite, which prompted Macauliffe to resign his prestigious administrative post so as to undertake his writings on Sikhism, was one in which Kahn Singh played a crucial part. It was Kahn Singh and some other leading Sikhs associated with Chief Khalsa Diwan who conveyed the hurt that Sikhs felt at Trumpp's introductory disparaging remarks on the Sikh scriptures. Macauliffe's resignation did not please the colonial authorities.¹² Here was another Western scholar, an official of British administration, who had decided to bring out a more satisfactory version of Sikh history and its scriptures than the German scholar. Kahn Singh, by offering to assist him in this task, was responding to Trumpp's challenge more effectively than he could have by undertaking such a task on his own. It was more pragmatic and, in retrospect, a wise move. Kahn Singh undertook his first visit to England to provide crucial support to Macauliffe as his six-volume work was at the galley proof stage by Oxford University Press in London.

Gill's evaluation of Kahn Singh in terms of "comfort zone" is a quite insensitive description of such a busy and engaged life. However, it is worth looking into some other minor points concerning Kahn Singh. This concerns the Mahan Kosh (1930), about which Gill contends that Kahn Singh was not a

“genius” but rather someone who drew upon friends, acquaintances and others for specific entries on historical shrines, popular beliefs and practices, fauna and flowers, and local legends, while entries on traditional herbs and medicines might have come from Mohan Singh Vaid.¹³ Gill further discovers that Kahn Singh has given a fictitious genealogy to Guru Nanak’s family, though he is not certain, so adds a crucial “perhaps.” That is hardly any advance but mere nit-picking. Gill also charges the somber Kahn Singh with sycophancy, raising the query “how a sober person like Khan Singh can praise the Sikh maharajahs” in such inordinate ways. In describing various entries for rulers of the Punjab States rulers, Gill has many harsh words:

The descriptions he awards to the rulers of the state of Patiala, Nabha, Jind etc., could be considered offensive to the summit of the intelligentsia and even the matt of the Sikhs in general. It is remarkable to see the extent to which he could have recourse to sycophancy. In glorifying the Gurus, martyrs and heroes he has historical documents to refer to, but in flattering the rulers of states he dispenses with all sobriety and sagacity. (p. 74-5)

This is an uncalled-for denunciation, and Gill here employs additional words from Punjabi language to emphasize his point, using *sumatt* (wise sense) and *matt* (discerning mind) from Sikh theology. Is this fair? Let us look at the entry for Maharajah of Patiala in Mahan Kosh to see whether he deserves such criticism. The entry runs into a history of Patiala state from earlier times down to the designation of the present incumbent of Patiala state’s ruler, Bhupinder Singh, starting with “Major-General His highness Farzande-Khas.”¹⁴ This seems a correct entry, giving the full title for the maharajah of Patiala, as would be expected in an encyclopedia. Why read sycophancy in it unless one is looking at it from the postcolonial era, where such titles are now an anachronism?¹⁵

Taking Vir Singh’s activities into account, here we are dealing with a leading Sikh writer and theologian who was chiefly responsible for raising the Punjabi language to a literary level never before attained.¹⁶ Apart from other things, Gill has left a large chunk of Vir Singh’s public life and commentary aside. Vernacular journalism was the direct result of competitive spirit of resurgence movements in the three communities of Punjab, and it was geared towards propagation of respective views rather than news-gathering or commentary upon events. News was covered in the Khalsa Samachar in two or three columns usually on the first page, while the rest of the paper carried essays preaching reforms of Sikh practices or institutions. From early years of 20th century, the paper carried news of overseas Sikhs and their donations to Punjab causes. In editorials Vir Singh combined persuasion with rational arguments for the Sikh community to reform

itself. In Harbans Singh's terms, Vir Singh castigated conservatism (*Pitapurkhi* of established tradition), disunity (*Hanne Hanne Mir* or every saddle is sovereignty), and graft (*jis birch pur behna use noon katna*; to undermine one's supporting hand). He campaigned for Punjabi language in the face of highly negative views of Punjabi Hindu leaders, especially those of Arya Samajis who would not recognize Punjabi as a language, by engaging with their arguments directly but more significantly by using the Punjabi medium to enrich its expressions and advocating its adoption in educational institutions. A typical example of his plea to the Sikh elite alerting them to recognise the worth of Punjabi was as follows:¹⁷

They sing Urdu couplets and favour ghazals. They make their correspondence in Urdu or English. Their conversation is either pidgin Urdu or broken Hindi... no one used Punjabi idiom. Even the office records of Sri Darbar Sahib and of the Sikh States are maintained in Urdu.

Gill does not discuss at length Vir Singh's weekly paper, *Khalsa Samachar*, with his extensive commentaries, editorials, and essays on public affairs, such as his reply to Lajpat Rai on the Punjabi language and so on.¹⁸ With his versatile pen, Vir Singh extolled past Sikh virtue of courage, philosophy, and ideals, gathering respect for the Punjabi language as a literary vehicle. Taking an active interest in the affairs of the Singh Sabha movement, Vir Singh promoted its aims and objects by launching in 1894 the Khalsa Tract Society. In the case of Vir Singh, besides editing the weekly *Khalsa Samachar* from November 1899 to the last year of his life in 1957, his publications are so extensive as to dwarf any notion of "comfort zone" in the sense of an easy, sedentary and unchallenging life. Publishing nearly two hundreds pamphlets on diverse subjects, alongside more substantial popular and scholarly books, Vir Singh worked a disciplined and dedicated life. No other Punjabi writer has done half as much. He was among the principal promoters of several of the key Sikh institutions of the period, such as Chief Khalsa Diwan, Sikh Educational Society (1908) and the Punjab and Sind Bank (1908). Interest in corporate activity directed towards community development remained Bhai Vir Singh's constant concern, simultaneously with his creative and scholarly pursuits. In this engagement and, at the same time, in his avoidance of any political activity, the Christian missionary example was apparently his model.

To start with, he revised and enlarged Giani Hazara Singh's dictionary, *Sri Guru Granth Kosh*, originally published in 1898, then in revised version of 1927 that stamped his command of etymology and of the classical and modern languages. He undertook critical editions of old Sikh texts. This painstaking work includes *Sikhan di Bhagat Mala* (1912), *Prachin Panth Prakash* (1914), *Puratan Janam*

Sakhi (1926) and *Sakhi Pothi* (1950). Then he undertook an annotation of Bhai Santokh Singh's magnum opus, *Sri Gur Pratap Suraj Granth*, published from 1926 to 1935 in fourteen volumes covering 6668 pages—a truly monumental scholarly work. For this in addition to above manuscripts, he consulted, and quoted from several other sources such as Janamsakhis, Bhai Gurdas, *Gur Bilas Patshahi Chewin*, Bhai Mani Singh Saina Pat's *Gur Sobh*, Sukha Singh's *Gur Bilas Daswin Patshahi*, Sewa Das' *Parchian*; Sarup Das Bhalla's *Mahima Prakash*; Giani Gian Singh's *Twarikh Guru Khalsa*; Ram Das' *Walian Sakhian*; and the Persian authorities such as *Tuzuk-i-Babari*, Ardastani (*Dabistan-i-Mazahib*), Sujan Rai Bhandari (*Khulasat-tu-Tawarikh*), Khafi Khan (*Muntakhab-ul-Lubbab*) Ghulam Husain Khan (*Siyar-ul-Mutakherin*), Ghulam Muhayy-ud-Din (*Tawarikh-i-Punjab*) and Sohan Lal (*Umdat-ul-Tawarikh*). In a way, exegesis was his lifelong occupation. Finally he was ready to prepare commentary on the Guru Granth Sahib, something in his earlier career he had started and published as *Panj Granth Satik* in 1906. Now in his 80's, Vir Singh devoted himself unsparingly to the commentary until the year of his death in 1957 with a lifetime of unrelieved hard work.

While “comfort zone” can be dismissed for the two Sikh personalities under discussion, two further issues need response. Reading through Vir Singh's *Lives of Guru Nanak* (published in 1928) and *Guru Gobind Singh* (published in 1925), popularly known as *Chamatkars*, Gill concludes:

In short, whether Vir Singh is narrating some event from the lives of the gurus or describing their movements, actions and discourses, he creates around them an aura that is rendered resplendent with images drawn from nature and human being living in its lap. Thus this language marks an extraordinary distance from that of the people who are occupied with socio-economic and politico-historic engagements. It is extremely sophisticated and civilized, characteristic of sermons overflowing with erudition, drawing upon mythological references on the one hand and scriptural meanings on the other... It is bereft of all engagements with events, experiences, feelings and thoughts of the actual world. In place of the world saturated with labour, work, hardship and struggle, it is suffused with mystery, ineffability and rarefied flight of fancy. (p. 79)

Rather than explaining the life of Guru Nanak in modern terms he finds a mix of stories, myths and history in a strange combination. This is simple misreading from a vantage and viewpoint of 21st century. What he forgets is the kind of readership Vir Singh was aiming at. The Sikh society was turning around from oral narratives towards the written word; nevertheless it was still common practice to read religious texts (Sikh books called *sakhis* or *Janam-sakhis*) at a gathering at a common site in a village. Someone able to read will read aloud

while others will listen attentively. It was magic, imagination and the poetical stanzas in such narratives which held the audience together, not the rational element or arguments expected by literate readers of the 21st century. Thus, such criticism is quite out of context when placed amongst sociological factors and the literacy levels of Sikh peasantry, who were having a first blush of literary writings. For Gill, it seems difficult to imagine that world that is now lost as his exasperation in the following remarks show:

In a moment like this, the rational element in Vir Singh, however insignificant, as compared with the miraculous, demurs from veracity. At the same time, the devotional element prevents him from rejecting it altogether. Here his aesthetic sense gets into the foreground that impels him to exercise suspension of disbelief and take the miraculous elements into regions, beyond those covered by the *janam sakhis*. No wonder, then, that all details of Guru Nanak's birth, marriage, sojourns, abode at Kartarpur, the later part of his life and lastly his demise, have an imaginative aura, and to accept them the suspension of disbelief is absolutely essential. (p. 79)

In fact Vir Singh makes quite clear his main aim in writing and framing Guru Nanak's life as he did in the introduction that is common to both volumes:

Catalogues of years, dates and events do supply substance and they might be helpful in other ways as well. But from them arises no breath of life. This breath, this current comes into life only when lives are presented as they were lived, moving and vibrant engaged in their daily tasks experiencing joys and sorrows, adventuring, slipping, and then rising again, striving and achieving, pulsating with high ideals... (*Sri Kalgidhar Chamatkar*, 1963, vol. 1 introduction)

In writing these biographies, the author was not aiming for "veracity" or "rationality" or any other characteristics demanded by Gill, as Vir Singh explicitly says "these books are in the nature of history; they are an exposition in the language of history, of Sri Guru Granth Sahib and the teachings of the ten Gurus." Moreover, it is well-known how Vir Singh's writings, especially novels, and in particular *Sundri* and two *Chamatkars*, continue to attract modern readers—as these have been in continuous print—unlike many other such writings of that period.¹⁹ Some of his lines of poetry have become daily phrases of Punjabi life, and common people can cite them from memory:

It is my wish to remain unknown and thus to cease in anonymity

I grow low that my spring may remain obscured

I hide myself in the hills that no envious eyes may look upon me

And such lines as:

Thou touched, and I broke into song
 Like a pyre freshly stringed
 Thou left off, and I became silent
 Like one who is dumb
 Magic abides in thy hand
 Its touch fills me with life
 Part me not away from thee
 Ever—I am a daily suppliant at thy door

“Bhai Sahib”

The second issue concerns Gill’s observation about the title “Bhai sahib”—that is, how Kahn Singh and Vir Singh should have been sensitive to these traditional titles. Gill delves on the term *Bhai* and its adjunctive *sahib* and shows how this title has lost its earlier halo, travelling from earlier Sikh theological literature to a popular use in the 21st century, when it has a somewhat contemptuous connotation. Although it is altogether unclear what Gill’s objection amounts to, it is important to clarify how both writers were averse to public honors.²⁰ This is again something which cannot be captured through modern eyes, where Punjabi writers can be seen jostling for state awards, prestige and cheap publicity for their meager talents. In Vir Singh, modesty was elevated to such an extent that he never put his name as an author for his publications. Indeed, this is commensurate with the Bhai title in its noblest meaning—i.e., as humble, undemonstrative, and someone serving others not seeking any recognition or public platform. Such a virtue is difficult to find in a world of selfies! Nevertheless, Vir Singh was given “modern” honors too. It is on record that on the first post-partition convocation of the East Punjab University that took place in March 1949, Vir Singh was awarded Doctor of Oriental Learning (*honoris causa*) along with Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, India’s Home Minister. Even this distinguished honor could not persuade Vir Singh to attend the ceremony.²¹ Then, in 1952, Vir Singh was nominated to the Punjab Legislature Council but attended very few sessions. According to Harbans Singh, this was “not because he did not feel it is important to thrash out public affairs, but he was reluctant to pronounce for the sake of publicity,” as members’ role was meant to be.²² In 1953, when the Sahitya Akademi in New Delhi offered its award, he again declined to travel to receive with it—far from the show and publicity accompanying such award ceremonies in contemporary times.²³ It is

amusing to read Vir Singh's reaction to the award of D.Lit. by Panjab University. He wrote a letter to the editor of *Khalsa Samachar*, gently scolding the recipient (himself) in the following depreciating humor:²⁴

In nameless humility did I live?
 When this epithet was cast upon me
 What shall I do with it and what shall I fasten it on?
 How can interest accrue where there is no principal?
 On this interest I am receiving felicitations
 But who should render gratitude?
 Interest or principal which modest, modest ever was?
 Grandfather and father were doctors indeed
 And healing was in their touch
 A quack all the time
 I could become neither *vaid* nor *hakim*
 And now this word doctor stuck to me
 How fit, how fair will it be?

The above discussion suggests the "comfort zone" criterion employed by the author in evaluating the two Bhai sahibs is singularly inappropriate. I would not suggest that only residue meaning left of the author's "comfort zone" is to make a little mockery of the two great scholars of Sikh renaissance period; it certainly flies in the face of two dedicated and disciplined lives. Perhaps the fault lies with the observation post; two Bhai sahibs were working, raising resources, seeking patronage but firmly setting their own agenda dictated by what they thought were the Sikh community's interests, with a firm belief that the Sikh gurus were their guides. One way or the other, Gill's evaluation of Kahn Singh's and Vir Singh's works and lifetime achievements through "comfort zone" criterion is both irrelevant and misplaced.

Kahn Singh passed away in 1938; while Vir Singh in his mid-70's lived on to see the freedom of India from colonial rule. As he witnessed the partition of Punjab, he covered the news of sufferings of Punjabis through his weekly. He was instrumental in recording several memoirs of Sikh sufferings later published in booklets by Chief Khalsa Diwan. What did he make of the price the Sikh community paid through the decolonization process? As a witness and combatant against the aggressive Hindu nationalism expressed by the Arya Samaj leaders of Punjab, was he apprehensive of the Sikh community's future in the new Indian

polity dominated by the Hindu elite?²⁵ By the early 1950's, Vir Singh, with his formidable reputation in terms of his contribution to Punjabi literature, naturally attracted much critical acclaim. He was given recognition through nomination to Punjab Legislative Council while he was awarded the title of Padam Bhushan by the government of India. But he was not enthusiastic for such accolades, as we have seen.

“Lack of Indian nationalism” among two Bhai Sahibs

This brings us to Gill's second criterion for evaluation of two Bhai sahibs in his article: through the lens of the two writers' attitudes towards the colonial rule. Applying this criterion to the first Bhai Sahib, Gill draws inference from two sets of letters written by Kahn Singh during his two sojourns to England during 1907-08 and 1911. Gill's scrutiny of this correspondence leads him to conclude the following:

The content of these letters provide insight into Kahn Singh's perception of the West. Not for a moment did he feel he was from a country under colonial rule... he had no compunction in feeling that England was like his own country. An anti-colonial feeling did not occur to him even for a second, although he would have seen restlessness among young men from India studying in institutions there. In fact a Punjabi youth named Madan Lal Dhingra, hailing from Amritsar, a place so sacred to the Sikhs, was to go to the gallows for committing a political murder. However the urge to get rid of the colonial rule that had begun to simmer in the minds of the Indian people did not bother Kahn Singh at all. Homeliness was what he felt for the West. (p. 69)

So lacking in the spirit of Indian patriotism, Gill builds a portrait of Kahn Singh's perception of Britain and his own personality in the following terms:

If he went one step forward in hailing, though mutely, the women agitating for voting rights, then he moved two steps back regarding the British monarch no less a ruler of India. He was not bothered by the fact that India was a colony of the British. Being the resident of the Nabha State nominally independent of the British rule but essentially dependent upon it, he felt no urge to cultivate national awareness. His involvement in the metaphysical-cum-theological side of Gurbani did not let its social-cum-political side assert itself. (p. 69)

In order to affirm his thesis of absence of urge against colonial rulers, Gill infers “homeliness was what he felt” for the West. For such subjective evaluation there seems no objective foundation except the author's imagination. Did Kahn Singh feel at home in England? Examine the assertion Gill so confidently makes of Kahn

Singh's acceptance by ordinary English people; "The observance of his own religious practice so kindly was such that Kahn Singh had no compunction in feeling England was like his own country." This is Gill's own imagination without any verifiable evidence. There is no basis for such a confident assertion—in fact the whole article abounds with such kind of judgments not only for Khan Singh but also for Vir Singh. Basically, he had an assigned mission to assist M.A. Macauliffe in checking his history of the Sikhs manuscript as it was going into print by Oxford University Press. Kahn Singh was unique among a small number of Sikh visitors to England at that time. As a high official of the Nabha State and a known intellectual, he called upon some English and Scottish administrators who had retired and returned to their homes in England or Scotland after working in Punjab. It was part of his upbringing or of being "Bhai Sahib" that he acknowledged or reciprocated fully the courtesy offered by some ex-Punjab officers in London and elsewhere. But did he feel comfortable? Is Gill sure to derive that kind of statement from his letters? On my reading, it is not established.

Gill is either unaware or does not emphasize that Kahn Singh, during second visit, was mainly occupied with a sensitive diplomacy on behalf of Maharajah of Nabha. As a matter of fact, we know little of that intrigue and how well his meetings went with the India Office officials, as none has brought out this episode into public as yet. All that is apparent from his letter back home is how he cautioned the prince to keep patience and seemed himself exhausted and despondent by such negotiations.

Gill points out how Kahn Singh took no notice of "anti-colonial urge" that was simmering in the minds of some Indians in London in 1907-08. He is referring here to India House activities of Shyamji Krishnavarma, a lonely dissenting voice from Gujarat who was trying to mobilize a small band of angry young men—a few of them had come on scholarships he had offered for study from India.²⁶ Altogether there were six or seven of them: Krishnavarma, Savarkar, Bhikaji Rustomji Cama, R. S. Rana, Virendranath Chattopadhyaya (Chatto), and Har Dayal, Madan Lal Dhingra, occasionally joined by a few students preaching violent strategy against the imperial rule in India. Kahn Singh duly noted in his letters from London the adverse propaganda of some Arya Samajis in London who were advising odd Sikh visitors to shave their beard and hair. But why does Gill expect Kahn Singh to note and be influenced by anti-colonial propaganda of the Indian House? Congress leaders visiting London at the time were dismissive of such crude characterization as was published by Krishnavarma in his "Indian Sociologist." Many avoided Krishnavarma and his associates as "hot-headed"

extremists—self-styled “captains” without any “regiment” to lead. Gill cites Dhingra’s hanging in London after a brief trial for the murder of an ex-official of British Indian administration, Sir William Wylie (1848-1909); and he takes out Kahn Singh for not mentioning such an important event. The murder committed by Madan Lal Dhingra at the prompting of Savarkar was peculiar indeed. Sir Wylie was assisting Dhingra towards proper educational course in London; hence this murder was betrayal of personal trust. A confused and uncertain young man, Dhingra, coached by Savarkar played the role of “martyr” to India’s liberation in his court plea—a farce and reprehensible play in the circumstances. This murder was condemned by Gandhi, and more notably by Dhingra’s parents in Amritsar, who deplored it in no uncertain terms while assuring their loyalty to the empire. That a young lad’s frustrations in London were channeled by Savarkar tells more of India House’s isolation than of a shared feeling of “national anger” turning into “anti-colonial urge.”²⁷ However, looking through the postcolonial focus, Gill can afford to ignore the proper historical context of the incident. In a similar vein, Gill mentions the resignation of Har Dayal in 1907 from Oxford University as example of Kahn Singh’s obliviousness to “national sentiment” surfacing among the Indian elite in London. Did Har Dayal’s resignation create a stir in London at that time? Did it appear in headlines of the Times or in the Punjab papers? Gill provides no clue, but writes again with his usual confidence, “he could not have missed it!”²⁸ We know now that there was an embarrassing exchange of several letters from the Indian Office to the Punjab government—but Kahn Singh was not privy to official information, was he?

Applying his second criterion to Vir Singh, Gill makes quite a drama of it. He cites the Jallianwala massacre of 1919 “occurring within two miles from writer’s home” at Lawrence Road in Amritsar. Stressing it as a “national” awakening, Gill asks why Vir Singh, who “could have heard the firing” on that day, kept silence over it! Trying to put this in some context, Gill elaborates on Vir Singh’s contacts with the West and his impressions of Western literature (Wordsworth, Dante, etc.), then poses the question: “what was his attitude to the colonial rule?” and provides the following answer:

About the impact of colonial rule, his [Vir Singh’s] attitude was marked by ambiguity of another sort. He was in favour of English rule because of the progress, particularly in education, that the colonial administration had brought about. He believed that it was only by advancing further and achieving greater heights in education that the Sikh could realize their aspirations. The realization of their aspirations meant that liberation from colonial rule was not a categorical imperative. Political struggle by itself did not matter to him. (p. 63)

Then Gill in his concluding section charges Vir Singh with not taking notice of Amritsar Massacre in such graphic terms:

The sound of incessant firing to which the people gathered were subjected could have been audible to Vir Singh... It is hard to fathom, all the same, that Vir Singh would have remained oblivious to the news of these events and the outrage perpetrated upon the citizens of Amritsar and neighbouring villages. (p. 82)

If Vir Singh chose to remain oblivious of a major event of 20th century India, Gill supplies the reason while also embroiling Kahn Singh into his stricture by evoking again the “comfort zone” phrase throughout the article: “It was because the horror did not suit his poetic vocation of glorifying the past and celebrating the beauty of luxuriant nature” (p. 83), and also,

The mysterious, inevitable and rarefied flight of fancy, regarded by Vir Singh as of the ultimate vision, fascinated him so much that he chose to stay engulfed in its range. This was the comfort zone, one that he never felt like transgressing. Parallel was the case of Kahn Singh... Had their dispositions not been so... some horrendous event... could have impelled them to transgress their comfort zone? (p. 82)

To show the complacency of Vir Singh more starkly, Gill compares his reaction against that of Rabindranath Tagore, who returned his “Sir” title and henceforth delved into “nationalist” and international politics. This comparison ends with “...sadly, for himself and to the misfortune of his language; Vir Singh did not do so” (p. 83). Comparison with Tagore is uncalled for, as it means comparing Punjabi and Bengali political sensibilities and literary expressions. By the year 1919, Bengal had several revolutionary groups who had turned from earlier Bengali regional nationalism towards an Indian one. This was almost a linear path, with the Bengali Bhadarlok seeking to rehabilitate the past glory of Hindu civilization. Tagore himself, though a strong advocate of Bengali cultural nationalism, was part of this changing outlook. Hence for Tagore, a distant event was an opportunity to spread his wings—with his Nobel Prize making him immune from prosecution or other kind of embarrassment that might befall a lesser secure elite. Moreover, by 1919, Tagore was a well-travelled man knowing the world beyond Bengal and India. Moreover, Bengali language that was clearly part of Bengali nationalism was not in conflict with Hindi nor was it disputed among Hindus or Muslims of that province, in contrast to the situation of Punjabi language in early decades of 20th century Punjab.²⁹ Denied the status of a distinct language by Punjabi speaking Hindus, Punjabi never attained the kind of legitimacy and literary flourishing despite the best efforts of Vir Singh and others for its propagation. And the language issue remained part of several Sikh

grievances in the postcolonial India.

Still, Gill is surely right in seeking a proper explanation of Vir Singh's silence over the 1919 massacre. If true, his exception is truly unique and calls for detailed elaboration.³⁰ This would have been a deliberate decision not to comment upon a horrendous and quite painful event amidst his home city. However, as Gill talks of lack of "national awareness" in two Bhai sahibs, he fails to interrogate the term "national awareness" properly, and indicates nowhere what was its status in early 20th century Punjab. Thus the necessary task is to attend to the evolution of the idea of "India" and how an "Indian national" consciousness developed across different regions, communities and over time.

However, before we turn to this rather complex and controversial issue, it is interesting to view Vir Singh through the searching eyes of colonial authorities. David Petrie, as head of CID with much knowledge of Punjab's leading elite, filed his secret report on Vir Singh as a potential subversive, "though loyal as yet." His report can be read to advantage:

Bhai Vir Singh is the son of Charan Singh, who sued to practices as a doctor but never qualified. He was first employed in the office of the Tract Society and afterwards became a partner in the Wazir-i-Hind Press which is now said to own. He is Editor and manager of the Khalsa Samachar, a Gurmukhi journal, which is published at Amritsar. Vir Singh is mentioned from many sources as a leading figure in the Sikh revival and as disloyal to the core. The same opinion is entertained of him by local officers. Vir Singh has much influence over Sirdar Sunder Singh and is very intimate with Tirlochan Singh. He is also a cousin of Harnam Singh, the barrister of Indian House fame. He is reported to be making overtures to the Head Granthi of the Golden Temple with a view to bringing that institution under the control of the new-Sikh party. He also associates with Harnam Singh, Jodh Singh M.A., and other persons of similar character. At present he has complete control of the Khalsa Tract Society. He is a member of the council of the Khalsa College... Though Vir Singh was originally a man of no position he seems to have acquired for himself the position of Guru and obeisance has been done to him even by Sirdar Sunder Singh. He may safely be regarded as a zealous new-Sikh and thoroughly anti-British.³¹

Although this assessment by police authorities stands corrective to the bland accusation of "loyal Bhai Sahib," the assertion that these two leading Sikhs lacked Indian national consciousness demands an extended response. The pertinent question to ask here is: what kind of "national awareness" prevailed among the Sikh intelligentsia during the early part of the 20th century? If there was something "national" in early 20th century Punjab, what was it? And what was the idea of "India" within the Punjabi population under the colonial rule? Let us examine the

course of “national awareness” and the idea of “India” as it emerged among the peoples of different provinces inhabiting this vast land earlier known as Hindustan.

Sikhs’ “National Consciousness”: A Sovereign Punjab

The two Bhai Sahibs were young men at the turn of the 20th century and it can be fairly assumed that they were inheritors to an oral culture with memories of Sikh rule fresh in their families and circle of friends.³² For Sikhs in Punjab generally, there was strong sense of being rulers and this was the “national awareness” most of them cherished. Both Bhai Sahibs were to emerge as part of newly educated Sikh elite. By their family circumstances and inclinations, they were committing themselves to such roles that would lead to further consolidation of Sikh “national” consciousness as a separate community of distinct religion, Punjabi language and culture. They keenly sensed the roles and tasks ahead for themselves as the community faced challenges both within and without. They were to become part of the newly launched Sikh associations in Amritsar, Lahore and elsewhere that later came to be known as the Singh Sabha movement.

During the early decades of colonial rule, for the Sikhs “national” awareness was related to Punjab being an independent entity. Many had heard stories of their fathers or grandfathers being part of the Khalsa armies or daring feats of the great Maharajah Ranjit Singh occupying the Lahore Fort whose generosity saw the gold-plating of the Harimandir at Amritsar. It was the memory of the Sikh kingdom which at its zenith that had subdued the mighty Afghans and its new border symbolized by grand Peshawar Castle and in the east the Khalsa flag near Ladakh encompassing the Kashmir province.

Much of Sikh political developments during the colonial Punjab sought to consolidate the Sikh-army connection that brought huge material advantage to the Sikh peasantry. On the part of English administration, such dependence on Sikh soldiers for the defense of the Empire meant any dissent among the Sikhs was taken far more seriously. This mutual dependence, call it the Anglo-Sikh bond, developing from 1860s onwards, meant that the Sikh peasantry remained more or less loyal subjects of the Empire, with only a small dent in 1914 by the Ghadarite Sikhs.³³ However, devoid of sympathy from the Punjabi population, the returning rebels paid heavy price for their miscalculated insurrection, with scores hanged and over 200 banished to the notorious Andaman torturing jail.

The Uneven Course of Indian Nationalism

It is fairly certain that until the end of nineteenth century, there was no common notion of being an Indian. It was to the credit of the colonial institutions, “orientalist” discourses, and formal requirements of administration that brought the idea of “India” to the fore. Besides the mental processes set in motion for human beings who were residing in this region, a process of physical and administrative integration of diverse kingdoms and principalities began, with railways, telegraphs, and roads linking previously unconnected zones of geography from Kashmir down to Kerala and from hills of Assam to further ends of Punjab and North Western Frontier Province. Passports in the name of King or Queen to her “Indian” subjects were to be issued to those leaving these territories. The subcontinent was never before brought together in a more or less centralizing power with its headquarters first in Kolkata and then in a newly constructed capital at Delhi. With formal educational policy and institutions a new curriculum was devised which ensured a space for mapping all these territories into a new entity called “India” as part of the grand British Empire.

The emergence of Indian National Congress (INC) in 1885 was a unique manifestation of such a phenomenon – that is, an association of people from different provinces of British India who for the first time started transcending their regional and local roots. But the colonial administration impacted upon different regions stirring local and provincial loyalties that created difficulties for the emergence of any all-India political party such as the Indian National Congress that consciously set itself such a representative task. Even as it organized as a formidable structure with membership in each province and annual conferences in different cities, it remained a loose alliance of sectional interests at best representing the educated elite. Moreover, as Kaviraj (2010) has reminded in his historical survey of the nationalist project how the idea of “India” ran parallel and in opposition to regional identities. In the case of Punjab, this was endeavors of the Sikh elite to consolidate the communal identity and reinvigorate the idea of Sikh nationalism while the Punjabi Muslims were also engaged in a similar process of community building. Then the Indian National Congress faced an internal debate forced by some Punjabi Hindu leaders regarding how much accommodation the organization could offer to Muslims and other minorities—whose leaders by the 1930s started expressing doubts about its dominant Hindu character despite assurances by Congress leaders of its secular credentials.³⁴

The British subjugation of the entire territory meant that a more mobile population could now imagine a larger entity than their regions of local kingdoms and they had a common language to express this new notion through introduction of the English language as a language of power. A single authority for the entire territory also enabled and indeed brought people of diverse regions together to react, participate, and mobilize on various common platforms. It was the advent of the British rule that for the first time brought the whole of India in its widest geographical limits under one administration. Even this grand imperial empire in its actual administration reflected fragmented polities, with several hundred princely states governed by local rajas of diverse administration conventions, the rest of territories of India ruled directly by the imperial state with its capital at Calcutta and later from New Delhi.

Thus "India" as a new term of imagination was made available to the newly educated regional elites. It started with the metropolitan Bengalis, being the first recipient of such colonial modernity. Its elite, the *bhadarloks*, were the first to meditate upon the new challenges for their collective identity as Bengalis. It will not be too far off the mark if we term Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay as the first writer to formulate a way out of his Bengali regional identity towards something wider by suggesting a song, "*Vande Mataram*," and "Hindu" as a common platform to rally around. Thus a start was made in transferring and translating regional "selves" into a "Hindu" belonging and a progressive assertion of an ancient civilization that then, of course, was propagated across other regions. This Hindu elite subsequently proceeded to usurp the geographical entity of "India" as part of its common consciousness and there ensued much debate and focus on "India's" contemporary condition under the British rule.

The emergence of the Muslim League and the Akali Dal with their respective brands of anti-colonialism indicated, in a sense, the failure of Indian nationalism as advanced by the Congress. The Muslim elites from various regions of India were soon united by what Zachariah calls "the fear of being swallowed up in a majoritarian 'mainstream' that did not represent their interests."³⁵ In Punjab, the Sikhs were divided by the dilemma of whether the community's interests could best be served by being loyal to the colonial state or by joining the Congress campaign and seeking assurances from its leaders. Both the Muslims and Sikhs could not fully convince themselves of the Congress' anti-Hindu sectarian stance as genuine. The partition of Punjab, of course, confirmed the caution and fears of the Sikh leadership towards the Congress, as the latter hastily abandoned the idea of united India to inherit the political power.

Thus, being and feeling “Indian” was not a shared condition in the early part of 20th century and was not so until several decades later. Punjab as a major region of British India posed a difficult route for “Indian nationalism” as advocated by Indian National Congress. Sikhs in general and its emerging elite were moved by a parallel vision of the Khalsa raj, either with the return of Duleep Singh from England or as an independent region in place of the colonial regime. Despite Sikhs’ small proportion of Punjab population, many ordinary Sikhs felt themselves rightful inheritors of Punjab as a separate country. Besides the recent past history of such a sovereign Punjab, the British administrators had, without any deliberate scheme, created the necessary infrastructure for such consciousness. The mutiny of 1857 had led to drastic shift of areas chosen for army recruitment, with Punjab becoming the preferred region. With so many Sikhs serving in regimental armies, the British became rather fond of turbaned security men saluting the Union Jack in as remote as cities as Shanghai, Singapore, Hong Kong in the Far East to outlying posts of Zanzibar, Tanganyika, Kenya and Uganda in the African continent. Parading in London the Sikh soldiers could attain the coveted rank of Subedar-Major, coming to feel almost part of the ruling elite and their fidelity on the field won them army commanders’ admiration and confidence.

It will be fair to say that non-Hindu population of Punjab had considerable reservations or at least more fluid attitudes in associating themselves with the larger geographical entity called India. For example, we know of Muhammad Iqbal, famous for his patriotic song for Hindustan, who nevertheless soon began to advocate an Islamic state of Pakistan. Other non-Hindu public figures from Punjab, such as Khizar Tiwana, Master Tara Singh and several other Muslims and Sikhs showed marked preference for “Punjabi nationalism” and their understanding of the Congressite leaders’ conception and advocacy of “India” was punctuated by many doubts and concerns about the susceptibilities of minorities’ future in such a country.

Misunderstanding Sikh Lives: Indian Nationalism as Disciplinary Lens

If, as argued above, the course of Indian nationalism was not smooth and had to confront in the case of Sikhs and equally and more legitimate force of Punjabi nationalism, why does Gill not take account of provincial nationalism while accounting for the lives of two leading Sikh writers? Instead of exploring the role played by Punjabi national awareness among the Sikh elite, Gill is instead seeking

to find “Indian national awareness.”

The idea of India ran parallel to a similar and more cogent and appealing idea of Punjab among the Sikh elite, as also for almost 30 years among the Punjabi Muslim elite. Some of the Sikh elite joined the Congress while also keeping a foot in the Sikh nationalist vision centered on the Punjab region. Thus, if we look upon the lives of Sikh statesmen and political organizations in the Punjab and at their reaction to and participation in the Indian National Congress, the above account of the contested domain of “Indian” nationalism versus “Punjabi” nationalism makes much better sense of Sikhs’ lives and their associations from the late nineteenth century to 1947.³⁶ Through this lens, we can make much better sense of how various political developments impacted upon public men of the Punjab, its writers, politicians, administrators and others. Considered in this light, the long and public lives of Vir Singh and of Kahn Singh presents themselves in all their complexity and point toward a deeper understanding. They embraced and nurtured the idea of Sikh nationalism with a vision and consciousness harnessed around a Punjabi consciousness. At the same time they were trying to understand of the rising tide of Indian nationalism advocated by the Congress under such leaders as Gandhi, Nehru and others.

An author who wants to understand the salience of silence of Bhai Vir Singh over the 1919 massacre in Amritsar might problematize the issue of “why a leading Sikh intellectual of his stature could not condemn it” and then take on the comparative regime exercise as trying to see two major episodes of state violence (the 1919 massacre under the colonial British administration and 1984 invasion of the Golden Temple by the postcolonial Government of India) occasioned elite silence. This would open up further questions of two regimes’ strategies and policies towards minority communities. Remembering how Vir Singh was not quite enthusiastic about the postcolonial regime (e.g., his reaction to honors conferred after 1947; his observations on the partition of Punjab; his generally pessimistic later writings), this comparative exercise would make considerable sense. Such a study would require a portrait of Hindu elite’s enthusiasm for new “Indian” awareness, including Punjabi Hindus abrogating their Punjabi sensibilities. Acrimonious debate followed and tensions existed as Aryas excluded Sikhs in demonstrable ways, belittled the Sikh scriptures and launched a campaign to assert Hindi in place of their spoken language Punjabi. These were factors that had dampened Vir Singh’s feelings for the new “Indian” consciousness as promoted by a majority of the Hindu elite. As an acutely aware Sikh intellectual, he could mentally compare the current colonial regime with the

possible postcolonial state yet to come. He was close witness to the arguments and postures of Arya Samajis, the Indian national Congress, of the Hindu Mahasabha and so on. Such a study, which would place the writings of two Sikhs as central to their understanding of the emerging Hindu dominated polity, might bring forth a different assessment than mere condemnation of two writers lack of “national urge.”

By assuming that Indian nationalism was prevalent in Punjab in the early decades of 20th century (and one should note more recent efforts to stretch it to the 1857 Mutiny), as is assumed by Gill, we can hardly do justice to the lived experiences of Kahn Singh, Vir Singh, and their contemporaries. Gill’s finding of an absence of “urge for anti-colonialism” or indeed the spurious “comfort zone” is unhelpful to illustrate or explain the committed and public life of two Sikh personalities and indeed to make sense of much of developments and events in Sikh politics. Such a narrow lens of Indian ideology fails to engage with factors that formed the sensibilities of two young men in the colonial Punjab. A criterion of testing and evaluating the lives of colonial Punjabi elite through a framework of “national awareness” overlooks the formation of the “idea of India” and the evolution of “Indian nationalism” as a complex and uneven process. Gill has leisurely assumed that Punjabi Sikhs were equally involved in this process. This is an assumption that simply does not stand up for colonial Punjab and does little justice when examining the life and times of Vir Singh and Kahn Singh.

What is notable is that such a discourse has become predominant in postcolonial India. Both the Congressite and BJP phases of central government in India have encouraged such an institutional framework for its historians and social scientists. Through such a discourse three pillars of what Anderson calls “Indian ideology” have emerged: a. India’s sacrosanct unity; b. India’s status as a secular state; c. India’s unique experiment as a democratic polity.³⁷ Anderson reminds us how such an ideology cloaks the reality of the Indian Union, as its unity owes all to the colonial regime and this democratic experiment has never been properly deployed in certain regions of India (i.e., in north-eastern states, Kashmir, and Punjab—all states with non-Hindu populations). He argues Indian polity is largely a majoritarian democratic arrangement that ensures hegemonic authority over non-Hindu regions of India. As to its so-called secular credentials of the Indian republic—much venerated by its elite, this is but another name for an almost confessional state. Anderson observes, “yet despite these compound flaws, liberal Indian intellectuals continue to fall over themselves in tributes to their native land.” Anderson deems these as fabricated notions of India’s

diversity, unity, secularism, and democracy. Debunking the notion of democratic representation in the Indian republic, he provides a stark portrait of its application in Kashmir.³⁸ He could have very well added the case of Punjab's experience of the 1980's.

In the case of Punjab, resistance to the centralizing Indian state has come from a regional political party, the Akali Dal, which has sought a degree of provincial autonomy, demanding more control of local matters and contesting a separate status for the Sikh community as a nationality within the Indian union. The Akali Dal campaign for a limited autonomy, of course, led to a disastrous outcome, as the Indian state militarily crushed the campaign after a decade long turmoil dating from June 1984. From the late 1990's, much maligned and amidst accusations of trying to break up the Indian Union, the Akali Dal has formed an alliance with BJP and became governing party in the Punjab. The bargaining process has now narrowed down to subdued demands to the federal government in New Delhi for appropriate financial resources for Punjab on the basis of Punjab's contribution to India's economic development, seeking financial patronage from federal grant-giving bodies for the role played by Punjabis in the freedom struggle, and so on. It has tried to project Sikhs' past sacrifices for the liberation of India as proof of the community's patriotism, while at the same time nurturing community's separate history through some of its own institutions – such as the SGPC. Altogether it is uneasy and dangerous rope-trick trying to protect and project a community's cultural autonomy against the onslaught of a highly centralized integrating Hindu polity.

Why would a Sikh intellectual, having gone through the dark period of 1980's, stick to the narrow meaning of "Indian nationalism"? Gill could have used the recent experience of Punjab under the Indian state's draconian measures which crushed the limited autonomy demand for Punjab to see earlier cautious approach adopted by two Sikhs towards such "Indian nationalism." Perhaps Gill's admiration for Nehru will not let him see the side of first Prime Minister of India that Anderson has starkly brought out.³⁹ Anderson shows convincingly how both Nehru and Patel unleashed the first barrage of liberticidal laws starting with the Preventive Detention Act in February 1950 less than a month after the promulgation of the new constitution, followed by the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (1958), Unlawful Activities prevention Act (sic 1971), Maintenance of Internal Security Act (1971), National security Act (1980), Terrorism and Disruptive Activities Act (1985), Prevention of Terrorist Activities Act (2002), Unlawful Activities Amendment Act (2004).⁴⁰ Gill seems to have forgiven or

forgotten the deployment of police, the Army and the Central Reserve Police Force, Border Security Force, Central Command Industrial Security Force, Home Guards, let alone the clandestine powers and activities of the Intelligence Bureau. As defense analysts remind us, India has a vast military, paramilitary and surveillance complex totaling upwards of two million operatives.

The question arises how such an ideology has prevailed among the Punjabi elite of which Gill is typical example? First there is enormous pressure on regional elites that takes many forms, chief among them financial incentives for research. There are obvious bureaucratic requirements whereby grant applications are routinely asked to highlight how regional projects contribute towards “national integration” or “Indian identity.” So it is always a safe bet to overplay this angle. The underlying assumptions of central governmental institutions (which largely govern institutional grants and infrastructure of curricula—in education, archaeology, museums and arts) privilege projects that emphasize “Indianness” as against any signs of provincialism or a minority religious affiliation, i.e. “Punjabi” or “Sikh.” Despite the enormous reality of regions with populations of different cultures and languages living in a vast territory, resource allocations are effectively governed by “India is a nation” and its “unity is sacred.” Anything that suggests otherwise is ineligible for patronage. Tributes to India’s diversity can be paid, but any notion of multinational polity is increasingly not only discouraged but penalized.⁴¹

Gill seems totally oblivious to the hegemony of such a discourse and its domain in the field of literary studies. For someone who has translated part of Gramsci’s writings for Punjabi readers and is known as a leading leftist critic, it only indicates the vulgarization of Punjabi leftist intellectual tradition since its high ground established by Sant Singh Sekhon some decades back. It is not surprising the Punjabi elites are unaware of the engulfing charms of the “Indian ideology.” A dozen or more of leftist adventurist groups of Punjab all toe the right or left wing of Communist Party of India – all converging to negate the region and the locality. Rare among them, it was only Sant Singh Sekhon who had explicitly warned of falling into the trap of contemporary propagation of “Indian patriotism” or Indian unity as preached by its Hindu dominated elite.⁴² Unsurprisingly, a major work by Sekhon assessing the times of Vir Singh and his literary output is not discussed at length by Gill.⁴³ For someone assuming the position of inheritor of Sant Singh Sekhon, Gill is committing a fatal misjudgment to propose to examine two Sikh writers through the lens of Indian ideology.

Concluding Remarks

In assessing the achievements of Vir Singh and Kahn Singh, highly reverend figures of the Sikh community, Gill has undertaken an easy route. Terming their life-styles, which drew inspiration from an “ideal Sikh” was no more than living in “comfort zone” Gill hardly captures the challenges they faced during the crucial phase of Sikh society undergoing modernization through western education. This “comfort zone” phrase has no evaluating role in the arts or social sciences.

To view two Sikhs lives through a criterion of “lack of Indian consciousness” Gill accepts an uncritical acceptance of the postcolonial state ideology. He is thus unable to map the thinking and writings of two leading Sikhs in the colonial Punjab. Indeed, by using such a biased yardstick of “their attitude to anti-colonial struggle” (a derivative of “Indian ideology” as elaborated by Anderson in his recent publication), he is unable to comprehend the lived experiences of two major personalities under discussion, as indeed such a criterion would be problematic when applied to any leading elite among minority communities of India. No wonder, then, that two Sikh lives stand diminished, with no proper account of their thinking, inclinations, and achievements. That a leading critic frames the article through the disciplinary lens of Indian nationalism is a sad commentary upon the state of literary critical tradition in Punjabi language. As a leading literary critic, Gill has made a “category” mistake of seeking “Indian patriotism” in the two “Bhai Sahibs.”

Away from the disciplinary lens of Indian nationalism that Gill uses, the two Sikh lives under discussion present the most interesting cases for a comparative regime exercise. Their perceptive attitude towards the colonial rule and their extensive commentaries on and reservation about the Hindu dominant “Indian nationalism” that was just appearing at the turn of the 20th century can illustrate the contours of Sikh political processes in the colonial and as also in the postcolonial phase. How the idea of Sikh nationalism weakened from its heydays of 19th century to find accommodation with the Indian nationalism but was never entirely submerged can be discovered through a fresh look at two Sikh writers. Such an analysis may even illuminate the continuing force of Sikhs’ yearning for autonomy in the postcolonial India, as also the community’s lament over the partition of their homeland and its desire for open borders to its sacred shrines in the western Punjab. But framing this kind of inquiry will mean awareness of the biased lens of Indian ideology; one which cannot allow talk of its porous borders,

its composite polity of competing nationalisms, and the idea of India and Indian nationalism as narrow constructs of Hindu dominated elite which resulted in the truncated Indian Union of 1947.

Only by stripping the snare of Indian ideology from our analyses we shall be able to grapple with the works of these two Sikh writers in their proper context. By such a focus we should be able to read in the silence of Bhai Vir Singh to “national” awakening of 1919 the fear and apprehensions of a mature mind of the postcolonial rule yet to come. In a metaphorical sense, was Vir Singh’s studied silence over the roaring guns of colonial administration leading to massacre of 1919 in Amritsar an apprehension of a barbarous attack on the most sacred shrine of the Sikhs in the same city through the kind of “Indian nationalism” that he saw as coming and was apprehensive of?

Certainly, the experience of Sikhs and other non-Hindu minorities under the postcolonial rule alert us to read the colonial experience away from the dominant Indian ideology. This is what Gill fails to do in his article. In the meantime one can turn to old fashioned assessment of Vir Singh’s personality as someone who:⁴⁴

...never attempted to build for himself a public personality... He was essentially a shy man... shunned the limelight. His one wish as he sang was to live in anonymity. He did not lend his name to the newspaper he edited nor to his books. He never made a platform speech in his life... His politics like those of the Chief Khalsa Diwan were moderate... He sought favours and honours from no quarters. Unlike leaders of other minority groups seeking to establish their self-identity he preached no adulation of the foreign authority. He had no belief in British permanence and was against westernization. He sought to create consciousness among the people by awakening in them a sense of pride in their own history and culture.

This seemed a fair judgment. Since then, knowing how Vir Singh’s work and achievements have been vilified by various Punjabi literary critics, there is little hope of seeking more balanced judgment in Vir Singh and now Kahn Singh is also embroiled in the same net. Equipped with the highly suspect goal of seeking “Indian national awareness” for colonial Sikh personalities, their lives will remain buried under such labels as “communalists,” “reactionaries” or indeed tomorrow’s “separatists” —until we change the focal lens of Indian ideology.

Notes

¹ Darshan S. Tatla is a Fellow at Punjab Historical Studies Department, Punjabi University. I am grateful to Professor Verne A. Dusenbery for queries, suggestions and for improving my tacky style. The usual caveat applies for remaining errors.

² The term “Indian ideology” is used here as elaborated by Anderson (2012). Although summary is not easy but there are five amendments to the Indian elite’s consensus type analysis of India; firstly, that the idea of a subcontinental unity stretching back thousands of years is a myth. Secondly, that Gandhi’s injection of religion into the national movement was ultimately a disaster for it. Thirdly, that primary responsibility for Partition of Indian subcontinent lay not with the Raj, but Congress. Fourthly, that Nehru’s legacy to Republic was far more ambiguous than his admirers will admit. Lastly, that Indian democracy is not contradicted by caste inequality, but rather enabled by it. India’s (Hindu) elite has reacted to Anderson’s *Indian Ideology* with much discussion, some almost hysterical indictment accusing him of crude “orientalism” to being apologist for “British ideology.” Rebuttal has come from many but see Pankaj Mishra, “India and Ideology: why western thinkers struggle with the Subcontinent,” *Foreign Affairs* (December 2013); Partha Chatterjee, Sudipta Kaviraj, Nivedita Menon, with an introduction by Sanjay Ruparelia, *The Indian Ideology: three responses to Perry Anderson*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2015.

³ The history of Punjabi leftist tradition goes back to the 1930’s when some Indian writers, among them, Sant Singh Sekhon (1908-1997), Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911-1984) and a few others from Punjab became part of “Progressive Writers’ Movement.” Sekhon eventually emerged a leading literary critic as well a creative Punjabi writer while Faiz opted for Urdu poetry with many memorable contributions including the well-know, on the partition, *Ye daagh daagh ujaalaa, ye shab-gaziida sahar... Vo intizaar thaa jis-kaa, ye vo sahar to nahi...* (...this was not the morning). In the post-partitioned Punjab of India, these progressive or leftists writers became allies to two splintering groups of the Communist Party of India (Right and Left). As a result, two parallel literary organizations were formed while for while a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist faction of writers also emerged taking inspiration from short-lived Naxalite movement in Punjab (1968-1971). This movement pushed several young Sikh poets into limelight with “revolutionary” poetry, among them Pash became a much celebrated poet. Apart from their internecine head-splitting ideological disputes, they had achieved some consensus in treating Punjab’s local, provincial, cultural, linguistic and political issues as merely “communalist” unworthy of serious attention. Collectively called the Punjabi Marxist tradition, its list includes almost all names, starting with Sant Singh Sekhon; roll call goes to Tejwant Gill, Ravinder Ravi, Kishan Singh, Harbhajan Singh Mangat, Satinder Singh Noor, Takseen, Sarbjit Singh, Sukhdev Singh Sirsa, Guriqbal Singh, Surjit Singh Bhatti, and Bhim Inder Singh to the latest young critic Harvinder Bhandal.

⁴ Past political and social movements of Punjab are generally classified into two categories; “nationalist” or “communalist.” The only ideal candidate under the “nationalist” category is the Ghadar movement (1913-1918); a close second comes the Naujawan Bharat Sabha (1926) led by Bhagat Singh. Then stretching it bit further, the Namdhari movement (1872), the Komagata Maru episode (1914) can be placed under that label while the Chief Khalsa Diwan (1902-), Central Sikh League (1919-1933), Shiromani Akali Dal (1920-), and parallel organizations among Punjabi Muslims e.g. the Unionist Party and the Muslim League are branded “communalist” and/or “reactionary.” Even a little reflection of course will complicate this neat binary division but it has not stopped using such crude labels by academics; e.g. see Harish Puri, *From Ghadar movement to Bhagat Singh* (2012) and several of Bipan Chandra’s writings; e.g. *Communalism in modern India* (1984); and Bipan Chandra, et al., *India’s struggle for independence* (1989).

⁵ The ambiguity of “comfort zone” as used by Gill does not help as he gives example of it in two modern Sikh scholars, saying “McLeod’s hermeneutics” and “Grewal’s academism” are illustrations of it.

⁶ I am thinking of contemporary British philosopher Roger Scruton’s elaboration of political and social ideals that could have been of interest to Vir Singh. See Roger Scruton, *A Political Philosophy: arguments for Conservatism* (2007). But my argument here is not dependent upon this persuasion.

⁷ A crowd of ganja-smoking Hindu sadhus sitting in a hut wasting their time in contemplating the world in next-life would be common image among Punjabis—as literal meaning of “comfort zone.”

⁸ Another and perhaps more accurate way to describe two Bhai Sahibs’ lives will be; how they strove to ideal Gursikh outlined by Bhai Gurdas (1551-1636) in his *Vars*.

⁹ For the long running controversy between the Punjab’s Arya Samaj and the Singh Sabha leaders in the late nineteenth century to early decades of the 20th century, see Kenneth Jones, *Arya Dharam: Hindu consciousness in 19th century Punjab* (1976)

¹⁰ The original edition of *Mahan Kosh* consisted of 3338 folios was published by Patiala Durbar in 4 volumes in 1930, it consists of some 70,000 word-entries of which nearly 7000 are drawn from Persian language.

¹¹ Gill provides brief sketch of Kahn Singh’s life and details of his writings can be picked up from various websites. Born into a Dhillon Jat family of Nabha state Kahn Singh (1861-1938) was educated at home acquiring knowledge of Persian, Urdu, Sanskrit and English. His maiden work, *Raj Dharam* (1884) was written at the instance of Maharaja Hira Singh of Nabha. This was followed by *Natak Bhavaarth Dipika* (1888), an exegesis of extracts from the Hanuman Natak, based on his notes prepared for the instruction of the young prince under his tutelage. In 1898, he published *Hum Hindu Nahin*, which set forth forcefully the Singh

Sabha standpoint with regard to Sikh identity. The *Gurmat Prabhakar* is a glossary of Sikh terminology, concepts and institutions (1898), and *Gurmat Sudhakar*, an anthology of important Sikh texts, scriptural and historical was published in 1899. His *Guru Chhand Divdkar* (1924) and *Gur Sabad Alankar* (1925) deal primarily with rhetoric and prosody employed in the Guru Granth Sahib and some other Sikh texts. *Guru Gird Kasauti* answers some of the questions raised by his pupil, Tikka Ripudaman Singh, about the meanings of certain hymns in the Guru Granth Sahib, and his *Sharab Nikhedh* (1907) is a didactic work stressing the harmful effects of drinking. Other works are *tikas* (exegeses) of *Jameni Asvamedh* (1896), *Visnu Purana* (1903), *Steek Chandi di Var* (1935). Kahn Singh left behind several finished and unfinished volumes among them, *Gurmat Martand* (2 volumes), which essentially follows the formal of his earlier *Gurmat Prabhakar* but includes more explanatory material was published in 1960. A travelogue to England was published in 1984. He was conferred a title of Sardar Bahadur in 1933 by the Punjab government.

¹² For M.A. Macauliffe's undertaking of study of Sikhism and other issues of western scholars' interpretation of Sikh scriptures and tradition, see J.S. Grewal, *Contesting interpretations of the Sikh tradition* (1998).

¹³ Tejwant Gill leads a team of academics who are translating *Mahan Kosh* into English as a project of Punjabi University. Gill cites a few entries on herbal remedies, which he guesses are from Mohan Singh Vaid's expertise, citing an example, "this is effective only if sexual indulgence is avoided." Gill terms such prescriptive kind of entry as "Nabha's sagacity or Vaid's proficiency? It is impossible to know for sure."

¹⁴ For Maharaja of Patiala, the entry reads as: (mhwn koS ivc mhwrwjw swihb dw pUrw iKqwb ies qrW idqw hY): myjr jnrl ihz hweInYs PrzMdy Kws dOlqy ieMgilSIaw mnsUry zmwn AmIrul aumrw mhwrwj-iDrwj rwjySvr sRI mhwrwjwey-rwjgwn sr BUpyNdR isMG mhYNdR bhwdur, pitAwIwpIq, jI. sI. AYs. AweI.; jI. sI. AweI. eI.; jI. sI. vI. E.' jI. bI. eI.; ey. fI. sI.; AYP. Awr. jI. AYs.; AYP. zYf. AYs.; AYm. Awr. ey. AYs.; AYm. Awr. AYs. ey.; AYP. Awr. sI. AweI.; AYP. Awr. AYc. AYs. So, the charge of sycophancy against Kahn Singh is quite unwarranted but one can make fun of princes' former entitlements as long we remember encyclopedias are used by historians and linguists, not by comedians.

¹⁵ The Government of India, seeking integration of princely states, had assured the heads of princely states to continue to respect their special status when they could have made crucial difference to the geographical map of India, only to brush away all the titles of ex-maharajahs in the early 1970's by Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. Most of territories of princely states were merged into newly organized linguistic states—criterion used was linguistic uniformity but applied rather haphazardly. See V.P. Menon, *The story of the Integration of Indian States* (1955). And, of course, in the 21st century India, the ex-maharajahs and their titles are fit for jokes. In Punjab's case—almost all palaces, former residences of princes, are crumbling despite some of them marked as historic building fit for conservation.

¹⁶ Gill provides details of Vir Singh's (1872-1957) ancestry. As a child Vir Singh learned Persian and Urdu from a Muslim Maulawi in a mosque, while Giani Harbhajan Singh, a leading classical scholar, taught him Sanskrit and Sikh literature. He passed matriculation examination in 1891 from Church Mission School, Amritsar. His first writing was a historical novel, *Sundari* (1898), followed by *Bijay Singh* (1899), *Satwant Kaur* (published in 1900 [Part 1] and 1927 [Part 2]). A novel *Subhagji da Sudhar Hathin Baba Naudh Singh*, popularly known as *Baba Naudh Singh*, was first serialized in *Nirguniara* from 1907 onwards and published as a book in 1921. Similar was an epic *Rana Surat Singh*, serialized from 1905, published later in 1919. Then he wrote shorter poems and lyrics, employing short metre and blank verse—new poetical and literary forms unknown to Punjabi language. His poetry compositions are; *Dil Tarang* (1920), *Tarel Tupke* (1921), *Lahiran de Har* (1921), *Matak Hulare* (1922), *Bijlian de Har* (1927) and the last of the genre was *Mere Saian Jio* (1953). The portion of the commentary—nearly one half of the Guru Granth Sahib was published posthumously in seven volumes. Two of his well-known novel-cum-biographical sketches are: *Guru Gobind Singh, Kalgidlar Chamathār* (1925), and *Gurū Nānak Chamathār*, 2 volumes (1928).

¹⁷ *Khalsa Samachar*, vol. 1, no. 7, January 1, 1900, pp. 3-4.

¹⁸ See *Khalsa Samachar* Vol. 13, no. 1, November 9, 1911. Also see Vol. 13, no.2, pp. 3-4; Under the title, "*Lala Lajpat Rai ji ate Hindi Punjabi*" (Lala Lajpat Rai ji on the issue of Hindi and Punjabi). There follows this commentary: Lwlw lwjpp rwie jI qy ihMdi pMjwbl: Lwlw jI kihMdy hn "pMjwbl jubwn myN jo lPj AYsy hYN jo ies ko ihMdi myN qmlj krqy hYN voh AmUmn AYsy hYN ijnkW Avwj AnpVH loko ny iesqymwl sy ibgV igAw hY[mslN GI sy iGau. Awg sy A`g, Brwqw sy Brw, mwqw sy mW - Ab mwkUIIAq kw qkwzw qy Xy hY ik ikqwbI jubwn myN smJ lPj Apnl Su`D hwlq myN ilK dyvy[pr Agr logoN ky Xyh iKAwl hYN ik pMjwbl kI qr`kI ky lley hm sMsikRq kI mdd lyN qo byhqR mlUm hoqw hY ik hm ABI sy pMjwbl AOr ihMdi ko eyk bnwvyN AOr aun ky lley dyvnwgrI hrUP ilK iqAwR kryN[AsIN lwlw jI qoN puCdy hW jykr AnpVHW dy vrqn krky mwqw (Sbd) dw mW ho igAw hY jW ipqw dw ipau, jW Brwqw dw Brw jW pRIq qo GI jW iGau qW ikAw Awp mMnx nMU iqAwR hY ik AnpVHW dy vrqn nwl hI mwqw mdr (Mother) ho igAw hY...

¹⁹ An institute commemorative the memory of Vir Singh was established in New Delhi primarily through the efforts of prominent Sikh residents in India's capital. Known as Bhai Vir Singh Sadan, it was inaugurated in 1978 by the President of India with Mohinder Singh as its director. It preserves the *Khalsa Samachar* weekly as also many of Vir Singh's manuscripts. Most of Vir Singh's books are in print, there are English translations of *Sundri* and *Chamatkars*.

²⁰ Gill, in fact, starts his article with this peripheral exposition; thus, the term Bhai sahib was:

Attached to their names.... rather than deriding it, neither of the two took this attribution with even a sense of irony. Its derision would have led them to decline the artificially conjoined honorific. If open decline was not to their taste, they could have disapproved of it ironically at least. Once signifying recognition and reverence for persons of great and deep good sense, Bhai by its attachment to Sahib, suffered dilution through overuse during the period of colonial use (p. 58).

²¹ The University arranged Bhai Jodh Singh and another official to invest Vir Singh with the honorary degree at his residence in Amritsar. There were commemorative volumes too "*Bhai Vir Singh abhinandan granth*" edited by Harbans Singh and another called "*Darshan Jhalke*" published by Bhai Vir Singh, Sahit Sadan, New Delhi.

²² Soon this Punjab Vidhan Prishad (Punjab Constitutional Council) was abolished for most states as unnecessary burden on the public exchequer. Only India's parliament retains the Upper House called Rajya Sabha alongside Lok Sabha. Members to Rajya Sabha are indirectly elected from states of India through a complicated formula while a number of them are nominated.

²³ For example Sahitya Akademi award for Punjabi for the year 2016 was given for a dramatist, Sawrajbir. A sum of Rs 1 Lakh was handed to the author in a grand ceremony in New Delhi while Tejwant Gill offered a facilitating hand.

²⁴ See Harbans Singh, *Bhai Vir Singh*, (1972:96)

²⁵ Despite suffering vastly through the partition massacres accompanying the decolonization of Indian subcontinent, it may be fair to say an initial enthusiasm on the part of Sikh intelligentsia soon turned into despair for all sorts of reasons. This can be seen through some of Ghadar leaders' writings in the post-1947 period. See letters of Sohan Singh Bhakna or "notes" jotted down by Gurmukh Singh in *Desh Bhagat Yadan* and *People's Path* published from Desh Bhagat Yadgar Hall, Jalandhar. In these, they protested at the way Nehru dynasty was leading the country and how the Congress Party was being assigned the key role in anti-colonial struggle in official accounts.

²⁶ For Indian House activities and the role of Krishnavarma, see an excellent study by Harald Fischer-Tine, *Shyamji Kirshnavarma: Sanskrit, sociology and anti-imperialism* (2014). He was admitted to Balliol College, Oxford and assisted Professor Monier-Williams –professor of Sanskrit at the University in editing and translating ancient Hindu texts and was therefore part of a collaborative "brahminical" and colonial epistemic project which produced the much discussed and controversial "colonial-power" knowledge. Fischer-Tine observes, how Krishnavarma would chant Vedas lending authenticity to the lecture given by Professor Monier-Williams to the British audience. As the Prince of Wales laid the foundation stone of Indian Institute at Oxford in May in 1883, Krishnavarma was introduced to the future King Edward VII. Krishnavarma was commemorated as a great patriot when Narendra Modi, chief minister of Gujarat inaugurated a giant mausoleum and

museum in honour of Shyamji Kirshnavarma at Mandvi, Gujrarat in December 2010.

²⁷ Richard Popplewell in his book (1995). *Intelligence and imperial defence: British intelligence and the defence of the Indian Empire, 1904-1924*, on p. 143 quotes *The Indian Sociologist* as describing Wyllie and Lee Warner "as early as October 1907" as "old unrepentant foes of India who have fattened on the misery of the Indian peasant every (sic) since they began their career." Sir William Hutt Curzon Wyllie was assassinated in London on the evening of 1 July 1909 by Madan Lal Dhingra at the Imperial Institute, South Kensington, where he and his wife were attending an event organized by the National Indian Association. Dhingra was a student at the University of London and living in India House. Besides killing Curzon Wyllie, Dr Cawas Lalcaca, a Parsi physician from Shanghai was mortally wounded. Dhingra was sentenced to death in July 1909 and hanged at Pentonville Prison on 17 August 1909. His death certificate is a "precious" document among papers deposited at Desh Bhagat Yadgar Library in Jalandhar while his portrait hangs in the gallery hall of Ghadar heroes. On lobby from Desh Bhagat Yadgar Committee and in line with the rehabilitation of Hindu nationalists Madan Lal Dgingra's statue was installed in Amritsar by Punjab's ex-health minister Mrs Laxmi Kant Chawla, a member of Bharitya Janata Party (BJP). Dhingra's patron, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966) is commemorated through a portrait in Indian Parliament and Port Blair in Andaman Islands where he was jailed was renamed as Savarkar Airport, while an "eternal flame" was inaugurated there by BJP President Amit Shah in 2016.

²⁸ Har Dayal (1884-1939) joined St John's College, Oxford, in October 1905 to study Sanskrit as a Boden Sanskrit Scholar in 1907 and the Casberd Exhibitioner -awarded £30 by the trustees at St John's College. During his Oxford student days, Har Dayal would visit India House in Highgate and influenced by Shyamaji Krishnavarma he resigned from his state scholarship. His brief letter is now filed as IOL/L/P&J/6/822 3574 (907) available at British Library, London and reads: "Sir, I regret I am unable to continue my studies for the final examination. I request the favour of your allowing me to withdraw my name from the college. I am sincerely sorry that I find myself unable to finish my course of studies. I hope you will kindly excuse me. I remain, Sir, Yours obediently, Har Dayal." The letter is written from 97 Southampton Road, Oxford and dated October 11, 1907 obviously sent to Master of St John's College.

²⁹ How the Arya Samaj leaders in the 1880s mobilized against the Punjabi language as the issue of appropriate vernacular medium for school teaching became a public issue in Punjab, is discussed by Darshan S. Tatla, "The Origin of Language Controversy in the Colonial Punjab," *Panjab: Past and Present*, 2011.

³⁰ Despite much discussion on Vir Singh and Kahn Singh, both lives lack definitive biographies and we could gain much from a close reading of *Khalsa Samachar's* coverage of 1919 and 1947 to appraise Vir Singh's views of the colonial and postcolonial rule.

³¹ D. Petrie, Assistant Director, Criminal Intelligence, Government of India, "Secret memorandum on recent developments in Sikh politics, 1911." Its full text appears in *Panjab Past and Present*, October 1970, 354-55.

³² This can be gathered from other sources too. Thus for example Gurdit Singh Sarhali in his memoir talks of his grandfather as part of Khalsa armies under the Lahore Durbar, see Gurdit Singh *Zulmi Katha* (edited by Darshan S. Tatla, 2007).

³³ This refers to the Ghadar movement—a rebellion of Sikhs organized from North America. Peculiar circumstances of the Sikhs in Canada and USA meant resentment against the British administration in India. In seeking resolution of their frustrations, they got further inspiration from some educated Hindu elite, especially Lala Har Dayal, who frustrated from his London experience, reached California and found among Sikh workers a receptive audience for his "revolutionary" zeal. Thus began a fateful movement of frustrated Sikhs towards India leading to a disastrous rebellion that was brutally put down by the British administration in Punjab. The returning rebels found little sympathy among the Punjabi peasantry. Har Dayal safely deposited in Europe again wasted no time in retracting his views and regretting his actions as suits a baffled intellectual. While some of the surviving Ghadarites returned to traditional Sikh politics, others embraced a socialist vision after educational trip to the Soviet Union, while a few others became part of the newly launched Communist party of India. Altogether they slipped on to a path where challenges facing the Sikh community were subordinated to "national" or indeed "international" solidarity of the "working classes"—even as rhetoric made little purchase among the local Punjabi population.

³⁴ For a discussion of how Indian national Congress evolved in the face of competing ethnic and provincial nationalisms and how it managed to compromise in various ways see Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India: politics and ideas* (2010).

³⁵ See Benjamin Zakariah, *Playing the nation game: the ambiguities of nationalism in India* (2011)

³⁶ This is discussed in more detail taking the case of Gurdit Singh in; Darshan S. Tatla, "Incorporating regional events into the nationalist narrative: the life of Gurdit Singh and the Komagata Maru episode in postcolonial India," *South Asian Diaspora*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2016), pp. 125-146.

³⁷ Perry Anderson, *The Indian Ideology* (2012) tackles the emergence of what he just calls "Indian ideology" among the Indian (by and large Hindu) elite. He shows how its hegemonic prevalence has led almost all of them to a self-deluding celebration of the course of Indian state since 1947. For this Anderson comments upon the writings of leading Indian elite—from diverse backgrounds such as Meghnad Desai, Ramachandra Guha, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Amartya Sen and Sunil Khilani, and finds how they with all their qualifications, essentially celebrate India as an exceptional nation and a thriving democracy and how it prevents them to see beyond the beaten track.

³⁸ *The Indian Ideology*, (2012: 169-70). Anderson reprimands Amartya Sen for keeping silence on Kashmir as example of being “so common among Indian intellectuals” (p.176) citing the latter’s book, *The Argumentative Indian*. Anderson reminds the real play of Indian democracy in the Kashmir province to remind the complacent Indian elite as:

There should be little need for any reminder of the fate of Kashmir, under the longest military occupation in the world. At its height, in the sixty years since it was taken by India, some 400,000 troops have been deployed to hold down a Valley population of five million—a far higher ratio of repression than in Palestine or Tibet. Demonstrations, strikes, riots, guerrillas, risings urban and rural, have all been beaten down with armed force... The death toll, at a low reckoning, would be equivalent to the killing of four million people, were it India—more than double that, if higher estimates were accurate. Held fast by Nehru to prove that India was a secular state, Kashmir has demonstrated the exact opposite: a confessional expansionism. (2012: 174)

³⁹ Gill has discussed Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru’s attitude towards Punjab matters in several of his articles. For Anderson’s views on Nehru see his second essay entitled “Partition” (2012).

⁴⁰ See Anderson’s discussion of Arundhati Roy’s effort: “to break ranks on India’s claim to Kashmir is to risk not only popular hysteria but legal repression.” Roy was the exception among the Indian elite to speak of freedom for Kashmir, which invited the wrath not only of the Indian elite but also legal action—as in Indian law, “to question the territorial integrity of the Union is a crime punishable by law.” (2012: 176)

⁴¹ In Punjab, the Shiromani Akali Dal suitably chastened through a decade long repression in the 1980’s and 1990’s has taken the lesson home. As an Akali Dal—BJP coalition government of Punjab is building “Punjab Patriots Museum” to emphasize Punjabis role in the anti-colonial struggle, a story that will replace the embarrassing fact of a largely loyal Punjabi population during the colonial era. Correspondingly, the Punjabi elite has been busy de-emphasizing the regional setting of the Ghadar and Komagata Maru events”—thus distorting the obvious fact of a majority of its activists were from Punjab and were Sikhs and that both were essentially small Sikh rebellions due to issues relating to immigration. In the case of Komagata Maru centenary celebration in 2014, Gurdit Singh was being re-launched as an Indian patriot from a previously neglected figure variously described as a “failed businessman” or someone who chartered the doomed ship and wrote himself the tragic passage of violence at Budge Budge, Calcutta where several passengers lost their lives in clashes with police and armed soldiers.

⁴² For elaboration of this point, see, Darshan S. Tatla, *Sant Singh Sekhon: the making of a Sikh intellectual*, forthcoming.

⁴³ Sant Singh Sekhon, *Bhai Vir Singh Aqy aunHW dw Xu`g* (1962).

⁴⁴ Harbans Singh, Bhai Vir Singh (1972, p. 95).