The House of Bagrian: Uncovering Four Centuries of Hidden Contribution to Sikh History

Jaivir Singh
Independent Student Researcher, New York

This paper traces the history of the House of Bagrian, an aristocratic Sikh family, from the 17th to the 20th century. The Bagrian family was central to several defining events in Sikh history and has been referenced extensively in literature. Details and accounts from existing scholarship and primary source documents offer insights into this family's history, having implications for the broader context of Sikh and Punjabi studies. This paper periodizes the timelines into four key eras: the formation of the Khalsa, the Sikh Confederacy and Empire, the British Raj, and the Singh Sabha and Indian nationalist movements. Tasked with the 'spiritual guidance' of the Malwa Sikhs since the 1630s, the Bagrian family has influenced and experienced the ebb and flow of these historical periods. Despite its persistent mention in British official documents, no previous academic effort has produced a comprehensive narrative of the Bagrian family and its role in this history.

This paper discusses family anecdotes and vignettes, ranging over 400 years, that offer a unique perspective on aspects of Sikh history. It situates these stories within a survey of Sikh history while reviewing pertinent research findings and offering historiographical commentary where relevant. This research process drew upon primary-source letters, British archives, and a significant body of academic literature.

Examining the religious, political, and social dimensions of the House of Bagrian's history, this study represents the most authoritative report on the family and an example for future scholarship to offer insight and perspective using narrative histories.

Introduction

This paper seeks to place Bagrian family's history within a broader historical context of Sikhism and Sikh aristocracy, with particular emphasis on key events and trends between 1630 and 1946, to examine how the Sikh elite maneuvered through major transitions of power in

Punjab. The patriarchs of Bagrian were of immense importance within the Sikh community as foremost religious leaders of southwest Punjab. For 400 years, the family served the *Khalsa Panth* (Sikh community) by running *langars* (free community kitchens), establishing schools and *gurdwaras* (Sikh temples), and advising rulers and government officials on religious matters and policy choices. The House of Bagrian is one of the oldest landed gentries in Sikh history, with a *jagir* (rights to land revenue) that at one point spanned 29 villages.[1] In pre-British times, the Bagrian estate included an armory, band, and a constabulary.

Many historians – Lepel Griffin, Kahn Singh Nabha, Sangat Singh, and Dr. Paramvir Singh – have tangentially reflected on one particular family's influence in Punjab: the House of Bagrian. Since 1630, pivotal figures such as Guru Hargobind, Guru Gobind Singh, Banda Singh Bahadur, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Viceroy Chelmsford, Sardul Singh Kavishar, and Lal Bahadur Shastri have sought out the Bagrian clan for guidance and support. The Bagrian family has, however, been understudied relative to its striking centrality in Sikh history.

This study uses secondary sources extensively to contextualize the history of the family, which is informed by 19th and 20th-century letters, British archives, and a significant body of academic literature. The first and most frequent citation of the paper is from Sardul Singh Kavishar's effort to chronicle the family history in 1939; this primary source document is in the exclusive possession of the House of Bagrian. A series of brief historiographical commentaries supplement the latter part of this narrative history, with reflections on the status of women in Sikh society, the rise of Sikh Studies as an academic field, and the nature of the colonial consciousness. As a note, the term 'House of Bagrian' is a 19th-century colonial construction that retains its descriptive quality for Western audiences and is thus used interchangeably with the 'Bagrian family' or simply 'Bagrian.'

Today, the fort at Bagrian is home to priceless historical artifacts and a library of 3,000 rare books and manuscripts. Future efforts to catalog this library will provide a wealth of primary-source material and enrich further scholarship within the field.

The Rise of Bagrian

Lepel Griffin traces the family's origin to the Marwar region of present-day Rajasthan.[2] The medieval ancestors of the House of Bagrian belonged

to a prominent tribe of Khokhar Rajputs. The territorial expansion of the 13th-century Delhi Sultanate drove the clan north to Bhatinda in southwest Punjab. Eleven generations later, a devout Sikh woman married into the family. She introduced her husband, Sidhu, to the Sikh faith. Consequently, the rest of the family, worshippers of *Sakhi Sarwar* (a 12th-century Sufi saint), alienated them.[3]

In 1614, Sidhu's son, Roop Chand, was baptized by Guru Hargobind, the sixth Sikh guru.[4] Sixteen years later, the father and son achieved enduring renown in the Sikh community for one particular act of devotion. Harvesting their fields in the sweltering heat, the men took refuge under the shade of a *Jand* tree. Lifting a goatskin water bottle to his lips, Sidhu resolved that the water was too cool and refreshing for his personal use and dedicated it to the Guru. As a result, Sidhu and Roop Chand suffered under the infernal heat of the midday April sun. Eventually, both men collapsed from exhaustion. The story goes that Guru Hargobind was at Daroli that day and sensed the plight of his followers. He rushed to the fields, where he found the father and son unconscious. Waking them, he sipped the water from the goatskin bottle and shared it with Sidhu and Roop Chand. Touched by their devotion, Guru Hargobind gifted the father and son his sword, horse, and robes of honor.[5]

In 1631, he conferred the title of *Bhai* upon Sidhu and his son – recognizing them as his own brothers – and placed them in charge of the spiritual guidance of the Malwa region. He gave Bhai Roop Chand a *karchha* (ladle) and instructed him to establish a *langar*, which the Bagrian family has operated for over 400 years.[6] The *langars*, open to all, are a point of pride for the Sikhs, relieving the hunger of the poor, feeding the homeless, and dismantling the ever-pervasive caste barriers in Indian society.

Birth of the Khalsa

As the balance of regional power shifted from the Mughal Empire to Sikh leaders, the Bagrian family took an increasingly active role in armed conflict. At the turn of the 18th century, in the month of *Poh* (month of sorrow), the Khalsa army suffered heavy casualties from Mughal forces. All four of the tenth Guru's sons were martyred, along with his mother. During this time, the Battle of Chamkaur became a point of specific cultural significance for the Khalsa. In December 1704, 40 Sikhs held off a

thousand-strong Mughal force so that Guru Gobind Singh could avoid capture and certain death. Disguised in black clothes, he escaped in the night from Chamkaur and came to Dina, near Kangar. At Bhai Roop Chand's house, the Guru received the sword and robes of honor of his grandfather, Guru Hargobind.[7]

Around this same time, in the aftermath of the Battle of Chamkaur, the Guru composed the *Zafarnama* (epistle of victory). The letter included 111 verses praising God, condemning the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, and describing the battle. Penned in Persian, it discusses the essential doctrine of *dharamyudh*: 'as all modes of redressing the wrong have failed, the raising of the sword is pious and just.' Rather than entrusting it in the hands of Mughal envoys, Guru Gobind Singh sent five of his most trusted disciples to deliver the *Zafarnama.* Bhai Dharam Singh, son of Roop Chand and long-time aide to the Guru, was one of these five.[8, 9] Some historians believe that it was Dharam Singh of the Panj Pyare, however, it is more plausible that Dharam Singh of Bagrian carried out this momentous task for several reasons. First, the *Zafarnama* was composed at Dina, where the Bagrian family received Guru Gobind Singh after Chamkaur. As discussed above, the Guru gave the family several items including the black robes with which he escaped the battle. Second, Bhai Dharam Singh of Bagrian had already accompanied the Guru for the better part of a decade, making him a trusted advisor. Third, the other Bhai Dharam Singh, of the Panj Pyare fame, died in Nanded the following year, physically separate from these events. Therefore, both geographic and temporal proximity would suggest that Bhai Dharam Singh of Bagrian delivered the *Zafarnama* to Aurangzeb.

The death of Guru Gobind Singh in 1708 did not mark the end of the struggle against the Mughals. When Banda Singh Bahadur, commander of the Khalsa, came to Punjab to avenge the Guru, he called upon the powerful Sikh families to join him in battle. Bhai Dharam Singh was among the first to join Banda's army, supplying weapons, soldiers, and money. His brother Karam Singh and he, having trained in battle under the late Guru, led a *jatha* (unit) of Banda's army.[10] The Khalsa killed tens of thousands of Mughal soldiers at the Battles of Samana, Kapuri, Sadhaura, Ropar, and Chappar-Chiri.[11] The culmination of Banda's offensive was the destruction of Sirhind, the capital of Wazir Khan, in 1710, representing a total rout of the numerically superior Mughal forces. In this way, the family, later known as the House of Bagrian, facilitated Banda Singh Bahadur's remarkable success.

Misls and Maharajas

The next significant period within the transfer of power in Punjab, the mid-to-late 18th century, was characterized by a fractured system of *misls* that made up the Sikh confederacy. Scholars have reflected on the role of Sikh spiritual leaders in forging these misls; the support of religious leaders was critical in the territorial expansion of Punjabi chiefs. This support took the form of raising troops for military campaigns or even fighting alongside a given ruler.[12] These alliances also provided local chiefs with legitimacy along with spiritual guidance. Bhai Guddar Singh of Bagrian, son of Dharam Singh, handled all religious ceremonies as the royal priest of the Phulkian chiefs.[13] He even re-initiated Raja Gajpat Singh, the first ruler of Jind, back into the Sikh faith. Most notably, in 1758, when Bhai Guddar Singh received word that Raja Gajpat intended to kill his newborn daughter, as per a custom of the time, he rushed to the site where the child was buried and dug her out alive. Guddar Singh reprimanded the parents and made them swear to care for all their children, regardless of gender.[14]

The status of women has been the subject of consequential debate within Sikh studies, with two dominant viewpoints articulated by W. H. McLeod and J. S. Grewal. McLeod explains that there has been a continuous disparity between the ideals of Sikhism, which promotes equal rights for men and women, and the enduring practices of the patriarchal apparatus that persist in Sikh society.[15] Grewal concedes the mistreatment of women but argues, first, that, at different times, Sikh women have had near-equality and, second, that Sikh women were better off relative to women within the traditional social order of the time.[16] Both points are strictly mitigatory, and though Sikh ideology is explicitly egalitarian, scholars must be critical of the efficacy of this ideology, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The girl's name was Raj Kaur, and she would later marry Maha Singh, Chief of the Sukerchakia Misl. In 1780, they had a son, Ranjit. Nineteen years later, he captured Lahore; in 1801, he proclaimed himself the 'Maharaja of Punjab.'[17]

Maharaja Ranjit Singh united the misls and brought various states and local rulers under his command. To that end, Bhai Mohar Singh of Bagrian, son of Guddar Singh, handled significant diplomatic undertakings for the Sikh Empire. These efforts included brokering peace

between Ranjit Singh and the Maharaja of Patiala. He also negotiated an arrangement wherein the Nawab of Malerkotla would pay tribute to Ranjit Singh while maintaining independent status.[18] Both accommodations minimized casualties from battle while contributing to Maharaja Ranjit Singh's swift rise and consolidation of the Punjab region. The Maharaja honored Bhai Mohar Singh with a visit to Bagrian in 1807 and made substantial annual donations to *langars* in the family's upkeep. He also gifted the proprietary rights of several villages, including Sadhowala, Sujana, and Ghungrali, to the House of Bagrian to help fund the *langars*.[19]

Ranjit Singh died of health complications in 1839, thrusting his kingdom into chaos. The British seized this opportunity, launching the First Anglo-Sikh War in 1845. Though the Khalsa army fought gallantly, they were ultimately defeated in both this conflict and the Second Anglo-Sikh War in 1849, leading to the dismemberment of the Sikh Empire and the annexation of Punjab. The House of Bagrian became the subject of punitive colonial post-war measures, forfeiting its independent status, armory, military units, and significant territory.[20] The Bagrian example epitomizes the systematic deconstruction and subordination of the local gentry in Punjab shortly after the Anglo-Sikh Wars. More broadly, Governor-General Dalhousie adopted a policy of abrogation towards the *jagirdars* (feudal landowners) who fought against the British. Not only were they punished with the confiscation of their *jagirs*, but, in some cases, the confiscation of all their property.[21] Studies of similar royal houses in Kangra might offer additional insight into the precise nature of British Raj oversight of these houses. British directives were more organized, specific, and targeted than their Sikh imperial predecessors. Local leaders had to promote British military efforts, support infrastructure plans, levy taxes, and pay tribute in cash rather than in kind.[22]

During the Raj

1857 represented a turning point in British relations with the Sikh gentry. The Rebellion of 1857, a reaction to increased exertion of British authority, spread quickly from Bengal across northern India. While there were small uprisings in Ferozepur, British preemptive security measures and 'exhaustion' of the recently conquered Punjabis led to their conspicuous absence from the rebellion. Instead, Sikh soldiers were instrumental in putting down the rebellion, harboring little sympathy for the Mughal

Emperor or Bengali soldiers, who had fought alongside the British in the Anglo-Sikh wars just a decade earlier. The Phulkian states in particular rendered considerable support to the British army.[23] In addition, Bhai Sampuran Singh of Bagrian led his personal force of cavalry, elephants, and footsoldiers to Ludhiana, where they defended the *tehsil* (administrative district) and the treasury. He also helped raise Sikh regiments for the recovery of Delhi in the summer of 1857.[24] In 1858, the Bhai Sahib received the following letter from a British government official:

> My kind friend Bhaee Sampooran Singh Sahib, Bagrianwallah, may you have peace. After expressing to you my desire of seeing you, I write to say that in consideration of your valuable services rendered to the State against the ungrateful mutineers of the year 1857. I submitted a report to the Chief Commissioner of the Punjab as per letter of this office, No. 162 dated 31st May 1858, recommending in your favor the remission of your commission money for one year commencing from 1st May 1857 to the end of April 1858, and a further remission of one anna in your quota of the said commission money, thus limiting the said payment to the remaining one anna only for the future.[25]

As spiritual head of the Malwa Sikhs and religious guide of the Phulkian chiefs, Sampuran Singh's active support of the British during the Rebellion shaped loyalist perceptions of the Khalsa, contributing to the designation of Sikhs as a 'martial race.' His efforts reflected those of the broader Sikh aristocracy, many of whom were renumerated by the British government and had their estates restored.[26] In addition, as noted by recent studies, the Khalsa involvement in 1857 compelled British scholarly engagement with the Sikh faith.[27] In turn, this wave of scholarship prompted the English-educated class of Sikhs to contest British characterizations and pursue a Sikh-led academic investigation of their history, literature, and religion.[28]

In the 1860s, the Punjab region suffered several droughts. In 1862, scant winter rains ruined the *rabi* (spring harvest), leading to crop scarcity and widespread famine.[29] In 1868, a similar scenario led again to famine, exacerbated by loss of cattle and significant increase in indebtedness.[30] British officials, who were poorly equipped to address the catastrophe, generally tended to avoid intervention in famine, relying heavily on the

Sikh *langar* system to provide relief. However, many of them had closed due to the famines, and 19th-century British reports make special mention of the Bagrian *langars*, maintained by Bhai Narayan Singh. They estimate that 1,000 maunds (over 80,000 lbs) of grain were distributed annually by the House of Bagrian.[31] Consequently, Henry Davies, Lt. Governor of Punjab, visited Narayan Singh and described him in 1877 as 'an excellent example to the rising generation of the Sikh aristocracy.[32] This comment is curious considering the usual practice of colonial neglect during times of famine. British governments preferred inaction, letting calamity run its course and eliminate the poor. Davies' words might then represent either personal compassion or a political interest in strengthening ties with the Sikh elite as the 19th century wore on.

Bhai Narayan's successor, Bhai Arjan Singh OBE, born in 1875, was highly venerated for his service to the Crown at the beginning of the 20th century. Following the 1857 rebellion and the conceptual development of the 'martial races' theory, the British military focused its recruitment on Punjab.[33] Another frequently neglected reason for this recruitment strategy was the 'Great Game' rivalry in which the British and Russian Empires sought to influence Central Asia.[34] According to estimates, the Punjabi share of the Indian Armed Forces was 54% by the outbreak of the First World War.[35] A significant contributor to the war effort, Bhai Arjan Singh of Bagrian recruited an estimated 25,000 Sikhs to the British army through his extensive touring of Ludhiana, Firozpur, and the princely states. A letter from the Viceroy's Camp addressed to Bhai Arjan Singh in 1915 states:

> His Excellency [the Viceroy] has, since the beginning of the war, watched, with the closest interest, the gallant performance of the Indian Army, and it has filled him with pride to see how splendidly it has maintained its great traditions. Among them the Sikhs, in whom his Excellency feels that he has through his grandfather a special interest, have once more shewn themselves to be brave and as faithful to the death as ever in the past…It has, I am to add, given the Viceroy much pleasure to read the message that you have issued and to hear from local authorities of the prominent part that you have taken in promoting a loyal and healthy spirit among the Malwa Sikhs.[36]

Bhai Arjan Singh also subscribed over 50,000 rupees to British war bonds between 1914 and 1918.[37] This number represents approximately 1% of the total Punjabi contribution to the British War Fund and 7% of that from the 'Amballa Division'.[38] Subsequently, the Bhai Sahib was awarded the title of Sardar Bahadur in 1916 and the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in 1919.[39] As a foremost leader of the Sikh community, Lord Chelmsford, Viceroy of India, Field Marshall Birdwood, Commander-in-Chief of the British-Indian Army, and several Governors of Punjab paid him visits. In 1919, Lt.-Governor Michael O'Dwyer came to Bagrian and gave a speech in Bhai Arjan's honor. Here, he referenced the House of Bagrian's illustrious history and service to the Khalsa Panth and, ironically, promised to safeguard the interests of the Sikh community.[40] This assurance came two months before Brigadier Reginald Dyer ordered his soldiers to fire upon a peaceful crowd of Punjabi civilians, killing around a thousand people. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre sparked outrage across the country and fueled calls for independence. Despite this, Bhai Arjan Singh OBE expressed the loyalist sentiments of the Sikh community to Viceroy Chelmsford at Bagrian later that same year.[41] Covertly, however, he was maneuvering to assert Sikh interests within the political domain.

Here we need to attend to the colonial-psychological context that likely shaped Bhai Arjan Singh, along with many fellow Sikhs, Punjabis, Indians, and British subjects. The British process of colonial legitimization has been well-documented, with scholars generally agreeing that even though 'coercive domination' established British rule, 'hegemonic consent' was crucial in maintaining it.[42] Simply put, British officials sourced their political legitimacy from exercising both hard and soft power; the latter thus necessitated the development of a 'colonized psyche.'[43] In the 19th century, this psychological colonialism sought to highlight native 'backwardness' and install British social institutions. Though Western-educated Indians like Bhai Arjan Singh may have possessed a heightened awareness of this mental subjugation, it was a wave of public backlash that fueled the Indian independence movement of the 20th century.[44] Jallianwala Bagh was a widely accepted tipping point in developing anti-colonial sentiment. However, research has identified earlier sources of mass discontent within colonial Punjab: famine, greater taxation, and commercial scarcity galvanized Punjabis to protest draconian measures such as the Rowlatt Acts.[45] British officials met the ensuing agitation movement with violence, most notably the

Jallianwala Bagh massacre and the imposition of martial law.[46] Thereby and steeped in tragedy, the nationalist movement took hold in Punjab. This brings us to Bhai Arjan Singh's secret resistance.

Despite his ostensibly loyalist positioning, Bhai Arjan Singh's place in communal politics and even the independence movement was more nuanced. He led the Singh Sabha, the Sikh revivalist movement of the late 19th century.[47] The movement chiefly reacted to increases in Sikh apostates and the deterioration of the distinct Khalsa identity, caused in part by the proselytizing efforts of the British. The movement also sought to protect Sikh interests legislatively, given the rise of sectarian politics. Following on from his predecessors, as spiritual leader of the Malwa Sikhs, Bhai Arjan Singh held sway amongst each substratum of Punjabi society. He performed all religious functions for the Maharajas of Nabha, Patiala, Jind, Kapurthala, and Faridkot; he toured Punjab to spread the word of the Gurus and baptize new Sikhs; and he established several schools and supported *langars* which provided daily relief for the poor. The Singh Sabha movement was successful in drastically increasing the Sikh population. Bhai Arjan Singh was directly responsible for bringing 100,000 people into the Sikh fold and establishing several *gurudwaras*.[48] Additionally, this period coincided with significant academic developments in Sikh studies, as access to Western education and the threat of Christian missionaries roused Sikh intellectuals to a scholarly defense of their faith.[49]

The second objective, achieving suitable political representation for Sikhs, proved more difficult. This imperative led to the foundation of the Chief Khalsa Diwan, a political organization intent on securing 33% of seats on the Legislative Council in Punjab. Bhai Arjan Singh supported the ambitions of the Diwan and a moderate approach to political representation. He was made the inaugural president of the Chief Khalsa Diwan in 1902, a position he retained for 15 years. However, a couple of years after he left this role, the Diwan was criticized for failing to deliver on its political objectives.[50] When the 1919 Government of India Act was passed, there was outrage amongst Sikhs, who felt robbed of their legislative voice. They believed their disproportionate service in the war and overall productivity in the region merited a one-third stake in the Legislative Council, and many lamented that the Sikhs had less representation in Punjab than Muslims in states where they constituted much smaller minorities. The majority of Sikhs held the Chief Khalsa Diwan responsible, citing their loyalist attitude as a reason for failure.[51]

The Diwan had been out of step with public sentiment on several other issues, including the agrarian agitation, resulting from the famine of 1907, and the incorporation of Khalsa College under British management in 1908.[52] Studies suggest that 80% of the Sikh population was affected by the famine, with Punjab experiencing spiked rates of poverty, land alienation, and economic exploitation by government officials. The crisis catalyzed a political awakening amongst the Sikh peasantry and a broader distrust for their 'alien rulers.'[53]

As public perception of the Diwan declined steeply, a new party arose to defend the social, economic, and political interests of the Sikh population. Proponents of the Central Sikh League felt they could effectively mesh communitarian concerns with the nationalist imperative. In so doing, they could make Sikhs politically relevant and amplify Sikh concerns within the political mainstream.[54] To that end, the Akali branch of the Central Sikh League aligned itself with Gandhi and Congress to coordinate non-cooperation campaigns in Punjab.[55] Some historians have offered a simplistic narrative that overstates the friction between the Chief Khalsa Diwan and the Central Sikh League. They describe the conflict between the two parties as one between the aristocracy – out of touch and dogmatically loyalist – and the middle class – politically pragmatic and anti-imperial.[56] Tuteja's depiction falls flat upon the recognition that magazines and journals, propped up by the landed gentry, mobilized the Sikh middle and working classes. In other words, these newspapers – these vehicles of anti-colonial discourse – belonged to an elite class of supposed loyalists.[57] This analysis complicates earlier understandings of Sikh aristocrats in the early 20th century.

As an example, by 1919, Bhai Arjan Singh had not only left the Diwan but was setting in motion its radical successor, the Central Sikh League. It had become clear that a moderate approach would fail, and he began to take a more active role in shaping a more direct approach to obtaining political representation. Sikh magazines sidelined the Diwan, attacking the loyalist thinking that underlay its advocacy. Bhai Arjan was the patron of one such journal, the *Sikh Review*, which criticized the Rowlatt Act, discussed communitarian interests, and promoted non-cooperative measures of political resistance.[58] Its editor was Sardul Singh Kavishar, a founder of the Central Sikh League and acting president of the INC in 1933. The League's alignment with Congress led to the adoption of programs of civil disobedience in the 1920s. In these cases, the British government resorted to political suppression and imprisonment. Sardul

Singh Kavishar, disguised as a *sadhu* (ascetic), avoided arrest by staying at Bagrian with his close friend Bhai Arjan Singh for a while.[59] Later, the Bagrian house at Shimla became a forum of the foremost Sikh scholars and statesmen associated with the movement. In the summer months, Bawa Harkrishan Singh, Teja Singh, Kahn Singh Nabha, Giani Gian Singh, Prem Singh Hotimardan, and Sardul Singh Kavishar all stayed with Bhai Arjan at the foothills of the Himalayas, engaging in dialogue on the state of the Khalsa Panth and the question of independence.[60] Though Bhai Arjan Singh's positioning within the freedom struggle was less visible, it is clear that he, along with many other Sikh aristocrats, was committed to the independence movement as a vehicle for achieving legislative representation.

Conclusion

Bhai Arjan Singh did not live to see a free India. Passing away in 1946, he was succeeded as the Bhai Sahib of Bagrian by his son, Ardaman Singh. Bhai Ardaman Singh was an eminent scholar of Sikh religion and Punjabi culture. Instead of being involved in politics, he focused on relevant socio-religious issues in Punjab. He was a well-respected religious leader and entertained visits at Bagrian from Rajendra Prasad, the first President of India, and Lal Bahadur Shastri, the second Prime Minister of India.[61] The Bargain estate is now in the upkeep of his sons and grandson, Bhai Ashok Singh, Bhai Sikandar Singh, and Bhai Jujhar Singh, respectively. They are the present heads of the family and continue their forefathers' legacy of service to the Khalsa Panth.

The House of Bagrian was relevant to virtually every juncture of Sikh history: the creation of the Khalsa; the Sikh confederacy and later Empire; the 1857 rebellion and the First World War; and, finally, the Singh Sabha and Indian nationalist movements. In many ways, this family history chronicles the epochs of Sikh history itself. For example, in 1710, Banda Singh Bahadur's victory over Wazir Khan was made possible by Bhai Dharam Singh and other Sikh leaders who took up arms. Fifty years later, Maharaja Ranjit Singh's mother would have died as an infant were it not for Bhai Guddar Singh, the head of family at the time. Bhai Sampuran Singh was pivotal in suppressing the 1857 insurgency, thereby informing the notion of Sikhs as a 'martial race'. Such categorizations were borne out in broader policy and future military recruitment decisions. Finally, the peculiar case of Bhai Arjan Singh, awarded an OBE for his contribution to

the war effort while covertly encouraging non-cooperation and housing fugitives of British justice, exemplifies the resolve of Sikh aristocrats during the 20th-century Indian independence movement. This study helps to document the navigation of Sikh gentry through the dynamic political landscape of modern Punjab.

While this narrative history cannot represent the collective Sikh experience, 400 years of records retain tremendous academic value; they offer a kaleidoscope of anecdotes and vignettes at the core of Sikh history. Family histories complement survey scholarship with an added layer of depth. Specifically, this family history supplements the field of Sikh Studies by exploring the social, cultural, and political developments of modern Punjab, emphasizing individual experience and agency. Micro history narratives like that of Bagrian enrich the body of historical understanding and contribute to a more nuanced study of the past.

Notes

[1] Sardul Singh Kavishar and Bhai Arjan Singh OBE, *The House of Bagrian* (Lahore: Lion Press, 1939), 7. Book. From the Bagrian Fort.
[2] Charles Francis Massy and Lepel Henry Griffin, *Chiefs and Families of Note: In the Dehli, Jalandhar, Peshawar and Derajat Divisions of the Panjab* (Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1890), 245.
[3] Sikandar Singh and Roopinder Singh, *Sikh Heritage: Ethos and Relics* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2012), 102.
[4] Paramveer Singh, *Bhai Roop Chand: Virasat Ate Vansh Parampara*, ed. Harpal Singh Pannu (Patiala: Publication Bureau Punjabi University Patiala, 2009), 20.
[5] Singh, *Bhai Roop Chand*, 24-26.
[6] Kavishar and Singh, *The House of Bagrian*, 2.
[7] Singh, *Bhai Roop Chand*, 36.
[8] Sangat Singh, *The Sikhs in History* (Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 2010), 74.
[9] Kavishar and Singh, *The House of Bagrian*, 22.
[10] Teja Singh and Ganda Singh, *A Short History of the Sikhs* (Patiala: Publication Bureau Punjabi University Patiala, 2006), 79.
[11] Singh, *The Sikhs in History*, 85.
[12] Purnima Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks: The Making of the Sikh Warrior Tradition, 1699-1799*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 107.
[13] Sewa Singh Kalsi, *The Sikhs and Caste: A Study of the Sikh Community in Leeds and Bradford* (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1989), 180.
[14] Kavishar and Singh, *The House of Bagrian*, 4.
[15] JS Grewal, 'W.H. McLeod and Sikh Studies,' Journal of Punjab Studies 17 (2010): 132.

[16] Indu Banga, 'J.S. Grewal on Sikh History, Historiography and Recent Debates,' *Journal of Punjab Studies* 20 (2013): 321.
[17] Singh, *The Sikhs in History*, 94.
[18] Kavishar and Singh, *The House of Bagrian*, 5.
[19] Massy and Griffin, *Chiefs and Families of Note*, 248
[20] Kahn Singh Nabha, *Sankhep Itihas Khandan Bhai Sahib Raees Bagrian*, ed. Ravinder Kaur Ravi (New Delhi: Navyug Publishers, 2011), 182.
[21] Harish C. Sharma, 'British Policy Towards Aristocracy in the Punjab,' *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 59 (1998): 706.
[22] Ankush Bhardwaj and Shivam Sharma, 'Paramountcy and the Princes - A Case Study of Political Influence of Royal Houses of District Kangra: 1846-1947,' *Panjab Journal of Sikh Studies IX* (2022): 10.
[23] Shiv Gajrani, 'The Sikhs: The Revolt of 1857 in Punjab,' *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 61 (2000): 679.
[24] Kavishar and Singh, *The House of Bagrian*, 6.
[25] G. C. Barnes, Esqr. *Office of the Commissioner of the Cis-Stulege States to Bhai Sampuran Singh, August 28, 1858*. Letter. From the Bagrian Fort, *Some Sanads and Certificates*.
[26] Sharma, 'British Policy,' 706.
[27] Jiwant Kaur, 'Orientalist Historiography of the Sikhs and Beginnings of Sikh Studies in Punjab,' *Journal of Sikh and Punjabi Studies* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 58.
[28] Kaur, 'Orientalist Historiography,' 59.
[29] Anil K. Gupta, Pallavee Tyagi, and Vinay K. Sehgal, 'Drought Disaster Challenges and Mitigation in India: Strategic Appraisal,' *Current Science* 100, no. 12 (2011): 1798.
[30] Thomas Gordon Walker, *Final Report on the Revision of Settlement (1878-83) of the Ludhiana District in the Panjab* (Calcutta: Calcutta Central Press, 1884), 119-121.
[31] Walker, *Final Report*, 61.
[32] Massy and Griffin, *Chiefs and Families of Note*, 250
[33] Bhupinder Singh and Bawa Singh, 'British Indian Army: Role of Punjab in the World War I ,' *Journal of Sikh and Punjabi Studies* 25, no. 1 (2018): 203.
[34] Singh and Singh, 'British Indian Army,' 204.
[35] Singh and Singh, 'British Indian Army,' 210.
[36] I. D. du-Boulay. *Viceroy's Camp, India to Bhai Arjan Singh, November 19, 1915*. Letter. From the Bagrian Fort, *Some Sanads and Certificates*.
[37] Kavishar and Singh, *The House of Bagrian*, 6.
[38] Singh and Singh, 'British Indian Army,' 216.
[39] London Gazette, 'Birthday Honours List,' *Published by Authority*, May 30, 1919, Issue 31379, 7053.
[40] Kavishar and Singh, *The House of Bagrian*, 10.
[41] Kavishar and Singh, *The House of Bagrian*, 7.
[42] Kamlesh Mohan, 'The Jallianwala Bagh Tragedy and Its Impact as a Catalyst of the Indian National Consciousness,' *International Journal of Punjab Studies* 3, no. 2 (December 1996): 154.

[43] Mohan, 'Jallianwala Bagh Tragedy,' 156.
[44] Mohan, 'Jallianwala Bagh Tragedy,' 157.
[45] Mohan, 'Jallianwala Bagh Tragedy,' 160.
[46] Mohan, 'Jallianwala Bagh Tragedy,' 165.
[47] Ardaman Singh and Ashok Singh, *Thoughts of Bhai Ardaman Singh* (Chandigarh: Institute of Sikh Studies, 1999), 7.
[48] Kavishar and Singh, *The House of Bagrian*, 7.
[49] Kaur, 'Orientalist Historiography,' 63.
[50] Joginder Singh, 'The Sikh Gentry and Its Politics in the Post-World War I Period,' *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 53 (1992): 444.
[51] Singh, 'The Sikh Gentry,' 441.
[52] Joginder Singh, 'Formative Phase of National Movement Among the Sikhs,' *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 54 (1993): 425.
[53] Singh, 'Formative Phase,' 424.
[54] K. L. Tuteja, 'Politicization of the Sikhs in Punjab (1919—1925),' *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 45 (1984): 565.
[55] Tuteja, 'Politicization of the Sikhs,' 567.
[56] Tuteja, 'Politicization of the Sikhs,' 565.
[57] Singh, 'The Sikh Gentry,' 442.
[58] Singh, 'The Sikh Gentry,' 441.
[59] Singh and Singh, *Thoughts of Bhai Ardaman*, 5.
[60] Singh and Singh, *Thoughts of Bhai Ardaman*, 5.
[61] Singh and Singh, *Thoughts of Bhai Ardaman*, 6.

References

Banga, Indu. 'J.S. Grewal on Sikh History, Historiography and Recent Debates.' *Journal of Punjab Studies* 20 (2013): 301–26. https://punjab.global.ucsb.edu/sites/default/files/sitefiles/journals/volume20/13-Indu%20Banga%2020.pdf.

Barnes, G. C. 'Office of the Commissioner of the Cis-Stulege States to Bhai Sampuran Singh, August 28, 1858.' Letter. From the Bagrian Fort, *Some Sanads and Certificates*.

Bhardwaj, Ankush, and Shivam Sharma. 'Paramountcy and the Princes - A Case Study of Political Influence of Royal Houses of District Kangra: 1846-1947.' *Panjab Journal of Sikh Studies* IX (2022): 1–15. https://pjss.puchd.ac.in/issues/pjss-vol-ix-2022.pdf?260424072954.

Dhavan, Purnima. *When Sparrows Became Hawks: The Making of the Sikh Warrior Tradition, 1699-1799*. 1st ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Du-Boulay, I. D. 'Viceroy's Camp, India to Bhai Sampuran Singh, November 19, 1915.' Letter. From the Bagrian Fort, *Some Sanads and Certificates*.

Gajrani, Shiv. 'The Sikhs: The Revolt of 1857 in Punjab.' *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 61 (2000): 679–85. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44148141.

Grewal, JS. 'W.H. McLeod and Sikh Studies.' *Journal of Punjab Studies* 17 (2010): 115–44. https://punjab.global.ucsb.edu/sites/default/files/sitefiles/journals/volume17/JPS_17_nos_1-2_Grewal.pdf.

Grewal, J.S., and Harish C. Sharma. 'Political Change and Social Readjustment : The Case of Sikh Aristocracy under Colonial Rule in the Punjab.' *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 48 (1987): 377–82. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44141712.

Gupta, Anil K., Pallavee Tyagi, and Vinay K. Sehgal. 'Drought Disaster Challenges and Mitigation in India: Strategic Appraisal.' *Current Science* 100, no. 12 (2011): 1795–1806. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24077550.

Kalsi, Sewa Singh. *The Sikhs and Caste: A study of the Sikh community in Leeds and Bradford*. Leeds, West Yorkshire: University of Leeds, 1989.

Kaur, Jiwant. 'Orientalist Historiography of the Sikhs and Beginnings of Sikh Studies in Punjab.' *Journal of Sikh and Punjabi Studies* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 53–65. http://giss.org/jsps_vol_28/04-jiwant_kaur.pdf.

Kavishar, Sardul Singh, and Bhai Arjan Singh. *The House of Bagrian*. Lahore: Lion Press, 1939. Book. From the Bagrian Fort.

London Gazette. 'Fourteenth Supplement To The London Gazette Of Friday, the 30th of May, 1919.' London Gazette Issue 31379. Accessed January 6, 2024. https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/31379/supplement/7053.

Massy, Charles Francis, and Lepel Henry Griffin. *Chiefs and families of note: In the Dehli, Jalandhar, Peshawar and Derajat Divisions of the Panjab*. Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh: Pioneer Press, 1890.

Mohan, Kamlesh. 'The Jallianwala Bagh Tragedy and Its Impact as a Catalyst of the Indian National Consciousness.' *International Journal of Punjab Studies* 3, no. 2 (December 1996): 151–80. http://giss.org/pdf/3_2_Punjab_F.pdf.

Nabha, Kahn Singh. *Sankhep Itihas Khandan Bhai Sahib Raees Bagrian*. Edited by Ravinder Kaur Ravi. New Delhi: Navyug Publishers, 2011.

Sharma, Harish C. 'British Policy Towards Aristocracy in the Punjab.' *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 59 (1998): 705–12. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44147041.

Singh, Ardaman, and Ashok Singh. *Thoughts of Bhai Ardaman Singh*. Chandigarh: Institute of Sikh Studies, 1999.

Singh, Bhupinder, and Bawa Singh. 'British Indian Army: Role of Punjab in the World War I .' *Journal of Sikh and Punjabi Studies* 25, no. 1 (2018): 201–24. http://giss.org/jsps_vol_25/singh_and_singh.pdf.

Singh, Joginder. 'Formative Phase of National Movement Among the Sikhs.' *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 54 (1993): 423–27. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44142995.

Singh, Joginder. 'The Sikh Gentry and its Politics in the Post-World War I Period.' *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 53 (1992): 440–48. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44142823.

Singh, Paramveer. *Bhai Roop Chand: Virasat ate Vansh Parampara*. Edited by Harpal Singh Pannu. Patiala, Punjab: Punjabi University, Patiala Publication Bureau, 2009.

Singh, Sangat. *The Sikhs in History*. Amritsar, Punjab: Singh Brothers, 2010.

Singh, Teja, and Ganda Singh. *A Short History of the Sikhs*. Patiala, Punjab: Punjabi University, Patiala Publication Bureau, 2006.

Tuteja, K. L. 'Politicization of the Sikhs in Punjab (1919—1925).' *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 45 (1984): 564–70. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44140245.

Walker, Thomas Gordon. *Final report on the revision of settlement (1878-83) of the Ludhiana District in the Panjab*. Calcutta, West Bengal: Calcut.