The Sikh Panth in Recent Times

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The Sikh **Panth** (community) presently comprises twenty-five million adherents, twenty million of whom live in East Punjab**,** the Sikh homeland in northwest India, and two million reside in neighboring Indian states, which were formerly part of the Punjab.[1] The Sikhs began to fan out of this area early in their history and approximately one million of them are currently settled in other parts of the Indian subcontinent. In addition, approximately two million left the region during the twentieth century and have settled in countries across Asia and East Africa to Europe and North America. This steady and significant migration has turned an erstwhile Punjabi ethnic group into a global community.[2]

The demographic intricacies of the Sikh locations are due in part of the British arrival in the Punjab in the 1800s, its partition into East (in India) and West (in Pakistan) in 1947, and the further division of East Punjab in 1966, establishing a Punjabi/Sikh-majority state separated from Hindi/Hindu-majority areas of Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. The difficulties of partition,

Figure 1. Changing Contours of the Punjab in the Twentieth Century

coupled with years of advocacy and agitation for a Sikh majority state, and the protection of its economic interests seemingly brought to the forefront the dormant dream of a sovereign state of **Khalistan** (Country of the Khalsa/Sikhs) within a segment of the Sikh community in the early 1980s.[3]

Based in the **Darbar Sahib** (the Honorable Court), Amritsar, the center of Sikh sacred geography, Sikh separatists under the leadership of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale (1947-1984) organized one of the most potent challenges to the unity of India in its post-Independence history. In June 1984, a Sikh general, K.S. Brar, commanded **Operation Bluestar**, an Indian army assault that mobilized its full military might to subdue the separatists' threat.[4] The fierce engagement that unfolded within the precincts of the Darbar Sahib entailed considerable loss of life, including that of Bhindranwale, the destruction of the Sikh Reference Library, a Sikh national treasure holding over a thousand rare manuscripts, and severe damage to the **Akal Takhat** (Throne of the Immortal), the site from where religio-political decisions related to Sikh interests are announced.[5]

The immediate reverberations of Operation Bluestar included stray rebellions by Sikh soldiers within the Indian army, tacit celebrations of the army maneuver within a segment of the Hindu community in India, and the repairs of the Akal Takhat overseen by Santa Singh, a leader of an orthodox wing of the Sikh community (the Nihangs), with the blessings of Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India. These events were followed by Gandhi's assassination by her Sikh bodyguards in October 1984, the slaughter of Sikhs by Hindu mobs in New Delhi and few other Indian cities, the demolition of the repaired Akal Takhat and its reconstruction under the control of mainstream Sikh leadership, and the

Indian government's suppression of the Khalistan movement involving an exodus of Sikhs seeking asylum abroad.[6]

These phenomena—the death of Bhindranwale and other Sikhs (separatists) as well as those in the Indian troops under the command of a Sikh general (nationalists), the assassination of the prime minister by her Sikh bodyguards and the killings of Sikhs living outside the Punjab by Hindu mobs, the demolition of the Akal Takhat built under the stewardship of Santa Singh Nihang and its replacement with a new one—attests to the variety of perspective within the Sikh community as to its vision for the future and the importance of political reality of its relationship with the republic of India. This complexity is further underscored by the fact that at present two of the most powerful positions in India are occupied by Sikhs. Manmohan Singh (b. 1932) is the country's Prime Minister and Bikram Singh (b. 1953) is the Commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces.

Figure 2. The Akal Takhat after Operation Bluestar (June 1984)

How can we understand the present-day Sikh situation and the role of developments during the colonial period in its making? Currently, two broad narratives of Sikh history are in circulation. The "traditional" narrative presents the five centuries of Sikh history in three phases.[7] It begins with the founding of

the Panth based on the revelation of Guru Nanak (1469-1539) and its development under the guidance of a line of nine successors ending with Guru Gobind Singh (Guru 1675-1708). The second covers the rise of Sikh political power, the establishment of the Khalsa Raj (Sikh kingdom) under Ranjit Singh (1780-1839), the resulting collapse of Sikh religious values, and the loss of political power to the British in the 1840s. The third phase presents the activity of the **Singh Sabha** (associations of the Singhs/Sikhs) movement from 1870 to 1900 as geared toward reviving the golden past of the Guru period and providing the foundation for subsequent developments.[8]

In contrast to the "traditional" narrative above, the self-proclaimed "skeptical" historians' construction of the trajectory of Sikh history can be seen to fall in two broad phases. As for the opening phase, they argue that Guru Nanak's beliefs essentially evolved from his Hindu family and religio-cultural background, and that the early Sikhs saw themselves as part of the larger Hindu fold. With the coming of the British to the region, however, new modes of thinking and activity created a context in which Singh Sabha leadership reformed or, rather re-formed, Sikh self-understanding resulting in their seeing themselves as a distinct religious community for the first time in their history.[9]

Although "skeptical" historians are convinced of their methodological sophistication in comparison with their "traditional" counterparts, it is hard to miss the fact that the research of scholars belonging to *both* of these groups is built upon two shared assumptions.[10] First, they both believe that contemporary Sikhism began to be formed during the final quarter of the nineteenth century, in the context of the arrival of the British in the region. Second, their studies reflect the absence of a firm grasp of the origin and context of the primary sources of

information upon which they base their respective arguments. Since the mid-1980s, a few scholars have applied ideas arising out of post-colonial theory, subaltern studies, gender studies, etc., to this narrative of Sikh history (see Bibliography), the overall accuracy of their analysis and the precise value of their contribution to Sikh studies are yet to be adequately assessed.[11]

The only reasonable course left for a scholar interested in understanding the present-day Sikh community is to construct a fresh narrative of its early history that is firmly rooted in the primary sources and then to trace the continuities and chart the transformations that occurred with the arrival of the British into the Punjab. That is what I attempt to do in what follows. I present this discussion in four stages: an examination of the sources for understanding Sikh history; the early history of the community (1500-1800); Sikh responses to colonial rule (1800-1900); and its subsequent implications during the twentieth century. I hope that this modest effort will clarify the state of affairs of the present day Sikh community, on the one hand, and will offer some useful data for those interested in understanding and theorizing the impact of modernity on religious communities in general, on the other.

Sources and Resources

Since the Sikh Panth has emerged in the relatively "full light" of history, there is an abundance of extant sources to study its origin and historical progression. The vast majority of these sources is textual in nature and includes scriptural manuscripts and a wide range of non-scriptural writings. In addition, material artifacts, which range from Baba Nanak's cloak embellished with Quranic verses to the portraits of his successors and the later Sikh weaponry, offer an additional

layer of information that aids our understanding of Sikh history.[12] (Since Nanak preferred the epithet **Baba** [Leader] for himself in his compositions, we will refer to him as Baba rather than **Guru** [Teacher].)[13] The physical locations of early Sikh towns from Kartarpur to Anandpur also provide a window into the social and geographical expansion of the community.

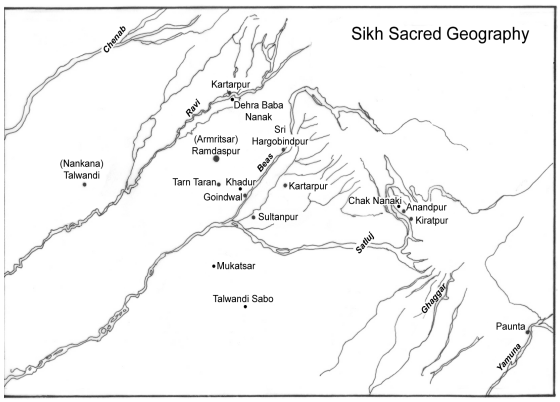

Figure 3. Sikh Sacred Geography (1520-1708)

The commonly accepted placement of the Sikh community within Indian religious traditions requires significant qualifications and recalibrations.[14] Baba Nanak was born in the area around Lahore, which was connected by active trade and military routes with both the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East. Islam came to the region in the 730s, Muslim rulers controlled it from 1000 onwards, and by 1500 Muslims comprised the majority of the local population.[15] While some have characterized Sikhism as a syncretistic blend of Hindu and Islamic traditions, it is more appropriate to contextualize Baba Nanak's articulation of the Sikh Panth within the larger cultural matrix of both Hindu and Islamic beliefs and practices.[16]

For instance, Baba Nanak organized a distinct script, **Gurmukhi** (of the Gurmukhs/Sikhs), recorded his poetic compositions in the form of a ***pothi***

(volume), and prior to his death ceremonially passed on this volume to his

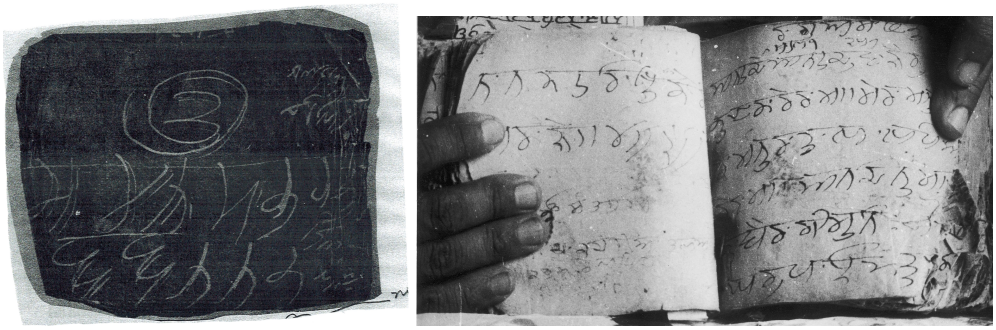

Figure 4. Baba Nanak's *pothi*, folios 1 and 251[1718]

successor, Guru Angad (Guru 1539-1551).[19] Over time, this scriptural corpus expanded through a set of *pothi*s compiled at Goindval (1570s), Kartarpur (1604), and Anandpur (1690s) to reach its canonical form in the **Guru Granth** (the book manifested as the Guru) in the 1690s.[20] This text enjoys a unique status within the Sikh community and serves as the central and uncontested source of

Figure 5. Guru Amardas' *Anandu* in the Goindval and Kartarpur *pothis*

beliefs and practice. Its contents are in three segments. The compositions of Baba Nanak and five of his successors (*gurbanhi*) constitute its core. The second segment includes the writings of the bards (*bhatbanhi*) who resided at the Sikh court and sang of the majesty of Baba Nanak and his successors.[21] The third

segment contains a set of selected writings of Hindu and Sufi saints (*bhagatbanhi*).[22] Affinity to Sikh beliefs served as the criterion for their inclusion, and the wide variety of these saints' backgrounds emphasized the catholicity of the Gurus' teachings.[23]

In addition to the Guru Granth, there is a large corpus of non-scriptural writings that command varied degree of authority. This literature can be divided into four subcategories: texts related to the Sikh code of conduct (*rahit*); the narratives of the lives of the Gurus, which include exegeses of their major compositions (*sakhis*); writings from the Sikh court at Anandpur; and, finally, texts produced by schismatic groups that emerged within the Sikh community during the seventeenth-century.

The seeds of *rahit* literature can be found in Baba Nanak's compositions, which emphasized the importance of ethical conduct and productive living.[24] Elaborate judgments on this issue appear in the poetry of his successors and in their letters to distant Sikh congregations; by 1600, there were lists of the five things a Sikh should and should not do. Guru Gobind Singh's decision to put an end to the position of the personal Guru synchronized with the rise of the formal genre of the code-of-conduct literature (*rahitnama*).[25] The documents of the period range from two to three page statements to an elaborate treatise, *Param Marag* (The Great Path).[26] This literature has three fundamental aspects: this code is addressed to the Sikhs and no one else; all Sikhs should follow it to the best of their ability; and, these rules were to be open ended—the Sikhs could add to or modify them within the spirit of Sikh teachings enshrined in the Guru Granth and the traditions of the Panth.[27]

The first narrative about the lives of the Gurus takes the life of Baba

Nanak as its subject and was written in the closing decades of the sixteenth century. The anonymous text entitled *Sakhi Babe Nanak di: Ad ton Ant tak* (Story of Baba Nanak: From Birth to Death) was most likely compiled in the 1580s and represents an authoritative account created by a Sikh who may have met Baba Nanak. Gurdas Bhalla (d. 1628), a Sikh savant of the period, wrote 40 ballads (*vars*) containing more than 800 stanzas and over 650 short poems (*kabitts*) that narrate the lives and teachings of Baba Nanak and his successors.[28] Although such stories remained largely focused on Baba Nanak, extended narratives about Guru Amardas (Guru 1551-1574) and other Gurus also emerged.[29] This literature serves as a primary source for early Sikh history.

While we have few examples of courtly literature produced during the tenure of Guru Ramdas (Guru 1574-1581) and Guru Arjan (Guru 1581-1606), the production of this literary strand reached its peak at the court of Guru Gobind Singh at Anandpur.[30] These writings fall into two broad segments. The first comprises poetic compositions that detail the Guru's life, the activities of his court, and issues related to Sikh conduct. The second contains the writings of Hindu and Muslim poets working at the Sikh court, whose poetry variously reflects their respective religious backgrounds. All these poets wrote in a variety of languages such as Braj, Farsi, and Punjabi, and used a plethora of literary forms and meters. The *Bachitar Natak* (The Wondrous Drama), *Charitro Pakhayan* (Stories and Stories), and the *Sarab Loh* (All Steel) are the best-known texts within this literature.[31]

Finally, we have a literary corpus that emerged within two seventeenth-century schismatic Sikh groups. **Miharban (1580-1638), a nephew of Guru Arjan who did not recognize the succession of Guru Hargobind (Guru 1606-1644),**

spearheaded the first group.[32] These writings originally included 575 *goshatis* (discussions about Baba Nanak's life and compositions) compiled in the form of six separate volumes by 1651. Only three of these six are presently extant. Hindal (d. 1648), a deputy (*masand*) at the early Sikh court led the second group, which came to be known as the Hindalis. The ***Bale vali Janam Sakhi*** (*Janam sakhi* by Bala) emerged from this group in the 1650s and narrates Baba Nanak's life in seventy-five or so episodes.[33] The writer of this text had a penchant for the miraculous, and the person of Baba Nanak presented therein clearly transcends the limitations of time and space.

Taken together, all of these non-scriptural sources shed significant light on the moods and motivations prevalent within the Sikh Panth at the time of their production. The nature of their origin, however, became blurred overtime and later scholars used them rather arbitrarily. An inability to distinguish the scriptural from the non-scriptural, and the mainstream from the schismatic, together with a general absence of precision in establishing a reliable chronology for these texts' production, have meant that these texts are only used tentatively in current academic scholarship on the Sikhs.[34]

The Early Sikh Panth

What do these sources reveal about the early Sikh community? With regard to Baba Nanak, we learn that he came from an educated, affluent, upper-caste, land-owning Hindu background, and his family members worked at different levels of the Afghan administration. When he was around thirty he had a revelatory experience that caused him to leave his home and begin a long journey that lasted over the next two decades. A Muslim rebec player named

Mardana accompanied him, and as they traveled they met and conversed with religious leaders and seekers alike. With the onset of the Mughal invasions in the late 1510s, Baba Nanak returned home and acquired land at a distance of about thirty miles from Lahore on the northern banks of the Bein, a tributary of the river Ravi.[35]

In this setting marked by natural beauty, plentiful subsoil water, and fertile soil, Baba Nanak established **Kartarpur** (Town of the Creator), and gathered together families drawn from various social strata. The **Jats**, nomads who had begun settled agriculture in this area around this time, constituted the largest group that took up the residence there.[36] This new community was also

Figure 6. Baba Nanak with his book, a mural at Dehradun, circa 1680s[37]

comprised of low-castes, some upper-caste **Khatris** (influential merchant groups with the Punjabi society), and a few Muslims. Kartarpur was a self-sufficient agricultural community with Baba Nanak providing guidance in both religious (*din*) and temporal (*dunia*) matters. His family constituted the core of the community, and Baba Nanak's wife and enjoyed a position of respect.

A poet of considerable merit, Baba Nanak sang in the local language (*Jataki*) about the unity of the Creator (*Kartar*) whom he saw as the Sovereign (*Sahib*/*Patishah*) of the universe (*jagat*).[38] While espousing this divine unity, his songs nonetheless celebrate creation in terms of its multiplicity. Baba Nanak was

fascinated by nature as a reflection of divine beauty (*qudarat*), and wanted humans to replicate the divine values of justice (*nian*) and grace (*bakshish*) in running the world. In practical terms, this thinking implied a deeply felt recognition of divine immanence (*nam*) and a life based on the values of social responsibility (*dan*) and personal purity (*ishnan*). The institutional life the community cohered around the volume containing Baba Nanak's compositions. It served as the repository of divine wisdom, and included daily prayers to be said at sunrise and sunset (*nitnem*); these concluded with supplication (*ardas*) and the sharing of food (*langar*).[39]

In the subsequent decades, the Sikh community flourished. Ramdaspur [Amritsar], established in the 1570s, with the Darbar Sahib built there in the 1580s, served as its center for over six decades.[40] With the expansion of Sikh numbers, the ferocity of the internal dissent increased and several figures proclaimed themselves to be Gurus. Externally, the Mughal authorities' concerns about the rise of Sikh influence in the central Punjab—the Majha—culminated in the execution of Guru Arjan in Lahore, in 1606. Forced to retreat to the Punjab hills, the Sikhs tried to re-assert their power in the southern and eastern Punjab—the Malwa, which resulted in the public beheading of the ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur (Guru 1664-1675), in Delhi at the hands of the Mughals.

Guru Tegh Bahadur's only son and successor, Guru Gobind Singh, dealt with the internal and external challenges by designating the entire community the **Khalsa Panth** (pure community) and assigning it the authority hitherto associated with the person of the Guru. It was to function under the guidance of the beliefs and practices enshrined in the Guru Granth. A ceremony called the ***khande di pahul*** (the nectar of the double-edged sword), in which Sikh sacred

compositions were recited over a bowl of water while it was stirred with a double-edged sword, was initiated. Having undergone this ceremony, a Sikh was to keep his or her body in its pristine form, which meant, among other things, uncut hair and abstention from the use of tobacco. The Khalsa Panth was

Figure 7. Preparation of *khande di pahul*, circa 1890s

understood to be an instrument of **Vahiguru** (the inscrutable Sovereign), and its mission was to establish the **Khalsa Raj** (the kingdom of the Khalsa) to ensure welfare (*deg*) and justice (*tegh*) for all.[41] The translation of this vision into reality started at Anandpur and reached a pinnacle of realization in the Khalsa Raj under the stewardship of Ranjit Singh in the early nineteenth century.[42]

Our knowledge of the Sikh community at the cusp of the colonial period finds clearest expression in a significant text entitled *Sri Guru Panth Prakash* (The Rise of the Guru Panth), written around 1810.[43] Rattan Singh Bhangu (d. 1846), its author, was a figure of considerable standing. His parents and grandparents from both sides were substantial people, and as a result, he received the best education that his times had to offer; additionally, he was well versed in contemporary events, given his family connections. He is the first Sikh historian to have established a clear prioritization of the sources he used to create his account. Bhangu's assessment of Sikh religious, social, and political concerns

thus provides an excellent conclusion to our discussion of the early Sikh community.

The title of Bhangu's text, *Sri Gur Panth Prakash*, reflects his belief that Guru Gobind Singh raised the community to the level of the **Guru Panth** (the community manifested as the Guru). Also, the Guru Panth was to work towards realizing the teachings in the Guru Granth, which Bhangu declares to be a closed text. Bhangu also reports that the text of the Guru Granth accompanied the Sikhs in battles, and that its manuscripts were thrown into wells and rivers when Sikhs were persecuted. Interestingly, Bhangu associates a Hindu official working for the Afghan administration with the destruction of the Guru Granth texts.[44]

The **gurdwara** (house of the Guru [Granth])—that is, the Sikh place of worship—provided the center for Sikh religious and public activity. Bhangu reports that Sikh devotional life comprised three layers: reciting the contents of the Guru Granth (*path*), addressing supplication to its text (*ardas*), and seeking a response from it (*vak*). We have evidence of the reading of the text—including on occasions an uninterrupted of the entire document (*akhand path*)—as a common practice of the time. Bhangu provides a sense of the text of the *ardas*, which opens with words attributed to Guru Gobind Singh and closes with the wish "to die with uncut hair intact." We have descriptions of the taking of the *vak*, as well. Bhangu refers to the **granthi,** the custodian of the Granth, whose duties included leading prayers, teaching children how to read Gurmukhi, and overseeing the gurdwara establishment. For Bhangu, the granthi was neither a substantial leadership figure nor a ritual expert of any kind, but a devout Sikh capable of executing the aforementioned responsibilities.[45]

Bhangu makes a distinction between gurdwaras serving as places of daily worship and the historic gurdwaras that were deemed sites of worship as well as of Sikh pilgrimage. Darbar Sahib in Ramdaspur—by this time known as Amritsar—held a unique status among Sikh sacred sites. Its sanctity resulted from its association with three Gurus: Guru Ramdas had started the construction of Ramdaspur; his son Guru Arjan built the Darbar Sahib in the midst of a small pool of water (*sarovar*); and his grandson Guru Hargobind erected the Akal Takhat from where he oversaw the discussions of temporal affairs of the community. The heroic sacrifices that the Sikhs had made to preserve its integrity during the Afghan invasions of the mid-eighteenth century added another sacred dimension to its history.[46]

Bhangu provides us an account of a gathering of the Guru Panth at the Darbar Sahib in 1761. The Sikh leaders arrived there, bathed in the pool, gathered in the presence of the Guru Granth, pressed their foreheads in front of it before sitting, listened to the evening prayers, and then made their supplications. After the prayer service, a Brahman from Kasur made an appeal: the local commander had taken his wife away and the Sikh leadership was his only source of help. In response to the request, the leaders returned to the presence of the Guru Granth, offered another supplication, and the Sikh sitting in attendance read the response. Its text was interpreted as a signal for the Sikhs to attack Kasur. This was precisely what was done in the following days.[47]

As for the content of Sikh religious beliefs, Bhangu is not interested in giving us a catalogue of normative beliefs but rather describes contemporary practices. Interestingly, he presents us with a model of both a Sikh male and a Sikh female to show what was expected of a Sikh. In addition, he furnishes us

with a good sense of the divisions within Sikh society.[48] He registers the continuation of the dissensions associated with personal authority that had arisen during the Guru period and also refers to the ones that came afterward.

He also describes divisions among the Sikhs of his time that were based on their pre-Sikh social backgrounds. As for the norm, Bhangu is clear that after having undergone the ceremony of *khande di pahul*, all Sikhs were placed on equal footing. He emphasizes that it was the personal qualities of a leader that mattered most, and that many prominent ones of the time had come from the lower-caste groups. It is, however, clear that one's ancestral background—Jat, Khatri, etc. continued to play a role in eighteenth century Sikh self-understanding.[49]

There were also regional divides with political overtones among the Sikhs of the period. Bhangu finds it hard to reconcile himself to the fact that the chiefs of the Malwa region had accepted the suzerainty of the British East India Company, and offers evidence to support his suggestion that these leaders were prone to such sycophancy right from the very beginning of their political ascendance. According to him, the religious center of the Sikh community was Amritsar, and its political power was based in the Khalsa Darbar at Lahore under the leadership of Ranjit Singh.[50]

For the most part, Bhangu's worldview reflects the patriarchal values of the wider society, but his attitude toward gender distinctions is complex. He refers to "Mata Ji," the wife of Guru Gobind Singh, the mother of Jassa Singh Ahluwalia (d. 1783), and his own mother, with a very high degree of respect.[51] He credits his mother as a crucial source of information for his narrative; the site of her cremation is preserved at the edge of his family lands in village Bharhi

today. He insists upon the Sikh rejection of "those who kill their daughters," and other evidence of the period portrays women and children participating in Sikh prayer services at the Darbar Sahib during this period.

Bhangu presents the political mission of the Panth as an indivisible part of its worldview from its very inception. He recalls the sixteenth century traditions that Baba Nanak was the "master of both spiritual and temporal matters, but in his grace he gave the political power to Mir Babar (1483-1530), the founder of the Mughal dynasty." He claims that three generations later, Babar's descendants began to misuse their power—the execution of Guru Arjan and Guru Tegh Bahadur were the concrete instances of this—and as a result, forfeited their right to rule.[52] Guru Gobind Singh decided to "elevate the Sikhs" to the position of rulers and assigned them a visible identity—wearing their hair uncut and bearing weaponry.

For Bhangu, sacrifice was part of the narrative of how Sikhs realized their promise to rule over the land blessed by their Gurus, and Guru Gobind Singh himself provided the model for this effort as manifested in the death of his father, mother, and four sons. He describes the scene of Sikh prisoners being paraded through the streets of Delhi in 1716, the public execution of Mani Singh in Lahore in 1738, and the killing of many others, including his own grandfather in the middle decades of the eighteenth century, to highlight the redemptive power of Sikh blood. He also underlines the ability of Sikhs to withstand physical pain while reciting compositions from the Guru Granth.[53]

At the turn of the nineteenth century, then, the Sikh community comprised people of diverse backgrounds, who followed the Guru Granth, believed in the authority of the Guru Panth, and considered the Majha region to

be their rightful inheritance. Within this scheme, the protection of the descendants of the erstwhile enemies—the Mughals, the Afghans, and Hindus like Massa Rangharh and Lakhpat Rai who worked for them—was a part and parcel of fulfilling the vision of the Khalsa Raj dispensing ***sarbat da bhala*** (welfare and justice for all). The earlier metaphor of small Sikh numbers being "a mote in the [Hindu and Muslim] eyes" (*Rahitnama Chaupa Singh* [1700]), however, turned into the Sikhs representing themselves as a "mountain standing aloft among the [Hindu and Muslim] hills" (*Sudharm Marg Granth* [1800]).[54] The Darbar Sahib, the Akal Takhat, and two **Nishan Sahibs** (Sikh flags) symbolizing Sikh spiritual and temporal concerns, respectively, were a proud announcement of their sovereign status.[55]

Colonial Rule (1800-1900)

Around 1800, Ranjit Singh, in his efforts to strengthen the Khalsa Raj, created opportunities for Europeans to join the Khalsa Fauj (army) and help train it along modern lines.[56] Ranjit Singh's plans for expanding of the Khalsa Raj beyond the Majha alarmed the Malwa Sikh chiefs, who invited the British East India Company, which had a firm base in Delhi by this time, to move its army into the area as their "protector."[57] This divided the Punjab into two geographical units: the kingdoms of Sikh chiefs in Malwa (under British "protection") and the Khalsa Raj under Ranjit Singh, the latter marking the fruition of Guru Gobind Singh's vision of Sikh sovereignty.[58] After Ranjit Singh's death, circumstances changed rapidly. The British brought the Khalsa Raj under their direct control, while the Sikh chiefs continued their rule in the Malwa.

Keeping this geographical distinction in mind, let us survey the shifts in the landscape of the Punjab that occurred under British control. The towns of Amritsar, Lahore, and Multan were interlinked by roads and connected to Karachi and the Arabian Sea, on the one hand, while the Grand Trunk road from Peshawar to Calcutta linked them with the Bay of Bengal, on the other. The British spent considerable effort on agricultural development and constructed an elaborate system of canals in the Punjab, bringing four million acres of land under cultivation. The agriculture department introduced improved varieties of maize, oats, rice, and cotton, adding to the prosperity of the region. Lahore emerged as one of the ten largest towns in the subcontinent, and the telegraph system, as well as roads, connected it with larger markets.[59]

Within the context of this overall development, a close look at the Darbar Sahib provides an entry into the complexity of the shifts that became manifest in the Sikh religio-political landscape.[60] During the previous century, Sikh leaders had built their resting quarters (*bungas*) in the precinct of the Darbar Sahib. Chief among these was the residence of Ranjit Singh. As the replacement of his authority, the British demolished his residence and constructed a clock tower there in the 1860s.[61] What could be a more poignant symbol of changed times than the presence of this 145-foot-tall Gothic structure, with a clock and a cross on top, standing at the northwestern corner of the Darbar Sahib?

Figure 8. The Darbar Sahib precincts in the late 1860s,
with the Gothic clock tower at left

How did the Sikh leadership respond to this dramatic shift in the landscape? To answer this question, the history of the family of Laihina Singh Majithia (d. 1854), the custodian (*sarbrah*) of the Darbar Sahib under Ranjit Singh, provides an interesting point of departure.[62] Laihina Singh migrated to Banaras to escape the violence that engulfed the Khalsa Darbar at Lahore in the mid-1840s, and his son, Dayal Singh (1848-1898), was born there. With Laihina Singh's death, Dayal was brought back to his village, Majitha, as a "ward of the state." A British governess was appointed to oversee his education, and he was sent to Church Missionary Society School, Amritsar, for some time. In the 1870s, he traveled to England and returned home convinced that the interests of his community lay in accepting the best of industrial and democratic modernity.

From this point on, his admiration for modernity guided his personal and public life. He invested in real estate in the fast-expanding city of Lahore, and in the process further added to his considerable wealth. Having seen the power of the media in Europe, he established an English daily named the *Tribune* in 1881. He used this tool to support the advocates of English education over and against

their opponents within the British administration who wanted to preserve indigenous forms of learning. An ardent admirer of what the British had brought to India, he was the first Sikh to speak of "Indian nationalism" in the early 1890s.[63]

Dayal Singh, however, died a sad and broken man; his fellow Sikhs remained indifferent to his modernist agenda, showed no interest in affiliating with the *Tribune*, and did not even approach him for financial help for initiatives they were developing in the 1890s.[64] True to his belief in the spread of Western education, he bequeathed his substantial assets to the Brahmo Samaj, a group of liberal Bengali Hindus, whose representatives had expanded into the Punjab during the colonial period. His bequest was used to run the *Tribune*, Dayal Singh College, and Dayal Singh Library, all of which were located in Lahore.[65]

A counterbalance to leadership of this ideological bent can be seen in the life and activities of Ram Singh (1816-1885).[66] He was born in a rural Sikh family of modest means at Bhainhi, near Ludhiana, the primary base of the British between 1805 and 1849. In 1841, he moved to Lahore, joined the Khalsa Fauj, and worked there until the defeat of his unit by the British troops in 1846. He was seemingly involved in a spiritual search during the next decade or so, and returned to his native village around the time of rebellion within the British ranks in 1857. There he cultivated a modest following, administered *khande di pahul* to both men and women within this group, and called them the Sant Khalsa (spiritual Khalsa).[67]

Ram Singh emphasized Sikh beliefs in social and gender equality, political sovereignty, and divine immanence, which resulted in this group attaining the name of the **Namdharis** (the bearers of *nam*). In the 1860s, he made pilgrimages

to historic gurdwaras at Mukatsar, Amritsar, and Anandpur, and expected to communicate his message to the Sikhs gathered there. The British interpreted his activity as a threat to law and order in the region and blocked his efforts. Tensions reached a climax when a mob of Sant Khalsa attempted to capture arms and horses from Malerkotla, the capital of a small Muslim princely state, in early 1872. The British blew up sixty-six of them by tying them to canons. Ram Singh was exiled to Burma (Myanmar), and he died there in 1885, a lonely man dreaming of returning to Punjab and working for the revival of the Khalsa Raj.[68]

Despite fundamental differences in their attitude towards the British, Dayal Singh and Ram Singh shared a sense of profound commitment to what they believed in. Unlike these two substantial figures, however, many mid-level Sikh leaders, comprised of landed gentlemen and their urban cohorts, followed the model of submission to the British adopted by the Sikh chiefs of the Malwa region. In scholarship of the past decades, they are presented as the creators of the Singh Sabha movement and their activity is assigned great importance.[69] The evidence at our disposal, however, **indicates that this received wisdom is not built on any firm understanding of the people involved, the precise nature of their agenda, and the extant of their influence on the Sikhs of the time**.[70] What we know is that in the 1870s two *sabhas* were established at Amritsar (1873) and Lahore (1879), and their number expanded in the 1880s and the 1890s. It is, however, important to underline that this activity was initiated by a small group of less than ten Sikh leaders who started together but soon parted ways and fiercely competed with each other for legitimacy as the spokespersons for the Sikh community in the eyes of the British officials.[71] While rural leaders outdid themselves in displays of loyalty to the new rulers in the hope of gaining prestige

and status, their urban counterparts wanted improved access to the jobs that had become available in the burgeoning colonial administration. With support coming basically from the Malwa Sikh chiefs, in 1892 they founded the Khalsa College in Amritsar, an educational institution to prepare younger generations to pursue opportunities in civic and colonial administration.[72] Unlike Dayal Singh (representing a nascent brand of Indian nationalism) and Ram Singh (championing Khalsa Raj), the political stance of these Sikhs revolved around professing absolute loyalty to the British and ensuring the stability of their rule.

Figure 9. The Khalsa College, Amritsar

In the midst of this activity, the hourly chimes of the clock tower continued to blend into the sacred singing of the text of the Guru Granth in the Darbar Sahib. Such a mix was indicative of other significant shifts in Sikh religious life during the period: the replacement of the manuscript of the Guru Granth with a printed version; the substitution for more traditional stringed musical instruments of the harmonium (brought by Christian missionaries to the region) and the introduction of electricity in the Darbar Sahib precincts in the mid-1880s.[73]

The British also streamlined the administration of the Darbar Sahib, which meant sorting through its large land grants, clarifying its income and expenses,

systematizing the functioning of the establishment that ran it, and deciding duties, positions, and remunerations of its employees.[74] All those who worked there were made to understand that their jobs were dependent upon their loyalty to the British, and that no matter what their authority on paper, ultimately, control remained with the local British officials. Here one needs to remember Bhangu's comment that although the Guru Granth and gurdwara constituted the center of Sikh communal activity, the position of the granthi had no special weight or influence within the Sikh community. Unaware of this detail, the British erroneously took the granthis to represent Sikh religious leadership along the lines of a church hierarchy, assigned them a high degree of respect, and in turn expected them to win the good will of the Sikh masses for the new administration. Once the granthis became accustomed to their new status, they began to compete with each other in their display of obedience to the British while also trying to wield a new semblance of authority within Sikh society. A seemingly inconsequential misperception on the part of the British changed the status of the granthis markedly and led to a significant disruption in Sikh socio-religious life.[75]

Beginning in the late eighteenth century, a group of Sikh scholars had moved to the vicinity of the Darbar Sahib and some of them had established their ***taksals*** (schools of Sikh learning) in which they taught Sikh boys and girls.[76] By and large the British maintained the state patronization for these scholars and their activity. With the hope of preparing effectively for jobs that had recently become available, however, urban Sikh children quickly switched to government and Christian mission schools.[77] This shift left a profound impact on the *taksals* that became restricted to serving only rural Sikh children who went on to work

in the gurdwaras after the completion of their studies. Slowly but steadily, changed circumstances reduced the number of *taksals* and, as a result, started the process of erosion whereby Amritsar gradually lost its status as the supreme center of Sikh learning in the course of the late nineteenth century.

This development also synchronized with an expansion of interest of the Malwa Sikh chiefs' in Sikh scholarship. They decided to go beyond patronizing individual bards/singers etc. at their courts, as they had always done.[78] Their new initiatives included the establishment of a center for Sikh learning named "The Banner of [Sikh] Community" (*Dharam Dhuja*) at Patiala in the 1860s; the sponsorship on a commentary of the Guru Granth that was created at Fardikot in the 1870s; and the publication of a large text of the *Dasam Patishah da Granth* (*Dasam Granth*, Book of the Tenth Guru) at Sangrur in the 1880s. The Patiala chief invited Tara Singh Narotam (1822-1891) and Gian Singh Dulat (1822-1921) to work at the *Dharam Dhuja*, and in the process bestowed upon them a high degree of prestige.[79] Interestingly, they both were trained as **Nirmalas**, a line of Sikh scholars who believed the Guru Granth to be the latest and best among the Hindu scriptural texts. In 1877, Narotam's unprecedented attribution of the *Bachitar Natak Granth* and the *Charitro Pakhayan Granth* to Guru Gobind Singh created a context in which this text was published under the patronage of the Sikh chief at Sangrur.[80]

The coming of the printing press to the Punjab had a complicated impact on Sikh scholarship and the larger Sikh community.[81] We know that a Gurmukhi font was created in the 1830s and that commercial presses rose in Lahore from the 1860s onward and moved to Amritsar in 1900. The first printed text of the Guru Granth appeared in the mid-1860s. This resulted entirely from the decision

of a commercial press: we know of no discussion within the Sikh community regarding this development. In 1877, a dictionary (*prayaya*) of the Guru Granth was published giving a new face to a literary genre that can be traced back to the time of Guru Gobind Singh.[82]

The increasing availability of commercial printing also brought forth a plethora of non-scriptural literature. *Bale vali Janam Sakhi,* the most miraculous and dramatic narrative of Baba Nanak's life, became a favorite of the commercial presses at Lahore.[83] By the mid-1890, six different versions of the *Dasam Granth* were available in the market.[84] Avtar Singh Vahiria (1848-1916), who was a protégé of Khem Singh Bedi (1832-1905), a descendant of Baba Nanak based in the northwestern Punjab, published a book he named *Sikh Dharam Shashtar* (Sikh Religious Law) in 1894.[85]

Especially because it has gone completely unnoticed in current scholarship, one need to underline the fact that Sikh texts printed during the last quarter of the nineteenth century were produced exclusively because of decisions made by the owners of commercial presses. Once published, however, these texts attained an authority of their own and left a deep imprint on subsequent Sikh thinking. For instance, while Bhangu had denounced *Bale vali Janam Sakhi* for being a schismatic document around 1800, it nonetheless became the most popular Sikh text in print text beginning in the 1880s, and from that point forward its narrative was assigned high authority and considered to be the most comprehensive and historically accurate version of Baba Nanak's life. Narotam's attribution of the *Dasam Granth* to Guru Gobind Singh and the rise of its printed versions had a similar effect, giving rise to the impression that it was a scriptural text of some sort. In addition, Narotam's colleague Dulat produced two tomes on

Sikh history that over time arrived in the gurdwaras and indelibly shaped the perceptions held of the granthis and the generations of Sikhs brought up on their discourses, despite their overt Nirmala slant.[86]

Returning to the clock tower for a final time, we can observe that its presence at the edge of the Darbar Sahib helped the area evolve from being a Sikh sacred place to being the civic center of the town of Amritsar. The reasons for non-Sikhs to gather there ranged from the need to be out of their houses on hot summer evenings to the desire to bring their wares and sell them to Sikh pilgrims and other local residents. We have references to Hindu icons appearing at the edges of the Darbar Sahib precinct with their custodians seeking donations, the roadside selling of Sikh memorabilia including the pictures of the Gurus etc., and the presence of women of easy virtue who roamed the vicinity in search of clients and had access to spaces to take them if they succeeded. Later scholars associated these vendors with the times of Ranjit Singh and the degeneration of Sikh values, but this development makes better sense when related to the civic/commercial space created by clock tower and all it signified.[87]

The public nature of the area also provided a venue for the granthis to buttress their newly minted status. There is firm evidence that their effort to establish leadership did not go far within the Sikh community, particularly among those from a rural background, but it seemingly worked with the Sikhs and Hindus living in Amritsar itself. In an interesting complaint in 1877, the granthis and the manager of Darbar Sahib made a submission to British authorities on behalf of "many local Sikhs and Hindus," who were "upset" because Sikh soldiers from erstwhile untouchable backgrounds had taken a dip in the sacred pool away from the area marked for their bath.[88] The granthis came

to believe that the views of the Hindus, who were part of their personal following, should have a say in the running of the activity at the Darbar Sahib.

To sum up, with the exception of a very few committed voices such as those of Ram Singh and Dayal Singh, the mid-level rural Sikh leadership of the erstwhile Khalsa Raj followed the model of the Malwa Sikh chiefs, seeking personal gain in turn for public silence on the issue of Sikh sovereignty, so central in Bhangu's and Ranjit Singh's thinking. In the area of Sikh religious life, the British misunderstanding of the granthis resulted in bestowing authority to a new group of Sikhs. The granthis' frantic efforts to create a following attained a degree of success with urban Sikhs, who brought some of their Hindu caste counterparts along with them. The self-serving agenda of Sikh leadership in the Singh Sabhas co-opted the granthis bringing further legitimacy to both concerned parties. The commercial presses shaped the contours of Sikh scholarship of the period, and unwittingly created a revised canon of textual authority that had little or no basis at all in Sikh history or tradition. **Finally, from the two hundred odd works ranging from a few-paged pamphlet to a tome of few-hundred pages published during this so called the Singh Sabha period (1873-1900), one cannot point even to a single work whose scholarly credentials had withstood the test of time.[89] Readers can judge for themselves what this did or did not** have to do with the supposed centrality of the Singh Sabha movement during this period.

From 1900 Onward

Leaving that paradigm behind, our story of the twentieth century should perhaps begin with a leader who has been both marginalized and misunderstood

in current scholarship, Teja Singh Bhasaurh (1867-1933).[90] Hailing from the Malwa, Bhasaurh's family association with the Sikh Panth went back to the times of Guru Gobind Singh. His education began with study of the Guru Granth and the use of weaponry at the village gurdwara, and went on to involve a basic knowledge of Farsi, Urdu, Sanskrit, and accounting. He then matriculated at the Central High School, Patiala, and obtained a diploma from Technical College at Roorki. He found employment as an overseer in the Canal Department of the Sikh state of Patiala. Here is one of the first Sikh leaders who had acquired both traditional educational and its modern/technical counterpart.

Soon after getting the job, Bhasaurh became committed to serving the Panth. He made a pilgrimage on foot to Nanderh, the place of Guru Gobind Singh's death, over a thousand miles away from his home. There he undertook the *khande di pahul* a second time, received a new name, Teja Singh, and re-dedicated his life to the welfare of the Sikh Panth. A prolific writer, a powerful orator, and a social activist of considerable energy, he emerged as the core Sikh leader in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Scholars such as Kahn Singh Nabha (1861-1938) and Lal Singh Sangrur (1887-1975) were part of his close circle, and his writings and public addresses dealt with almost all the key issues facing the Sikhs.[91]

For Bhasaurh, the Guru Granth constituted the center of Sikh beliefs and practice. To make its reading and understanding easier, he worked with Kahn Singh Nabha in the mid-1910s and prepared a text in which the words were separated from each other (*padchhed*, for the original connected writing that continued in the printed editions until the 1970s, see Figure 3). A purist by temperament, he believed that the core of the Guru Granth comprised the

writings of the Gurus, and that the sections belonging to the Sikh *bhats* and non-Sikh saints could not to be treated at par with them. Bhasaurh's discomfort with a reading of the Guru Granth that seemed to underplay the distinctive superiority of the writings of the Gurus was not solely of his making. It is referred to in the writings of early Sikhs such as Gurdas Bhalla but had faded over time, with the canonical status of the text as a whole overriding its internal distinctions.[92] In the late 1910s, Bhasaurh responded to what he thought to be the need of his times by publishing a pure version of the Guru Granth by introducing into its contents "the compositions of Guru Gobind Singh," on the one hand, and quietly excising the writings of the Sikh bards, on the other.[93]

In addition, Bhasaurh worked hard to revive the concept of Guru Panth by arranging meetings at historical sites such as Talwandi Sabo, and calling them the "Khalsa Parliament." Large numbers of Sikhs were invited and efforts were made to develop consensus on the issues facing the Panth. From these discussions emerged his *Khalsa Rahit Prakash* (Rise of the Khalsa Code of Conduct) in 1907.[94] This document fully endorsed social and gender equality within the Panth, and encouraged the administration of *khande di pahul* to women, low-caste people, and Muslims. Bhasaurh also took considerable interest in female education. He was the key sponsor of the first school for Sikh women started in Ferozepur in the 1890s by Takhat Singh (1870-1937) and he brought a group of women to perform the singing at the Darbar Sahib, an initiative that was blocked by the local granthis.

As for Bhasaurh's position on Sikh politics, the sovereignty of the Guru Panth was nonnegotiable. He denounced in no uncertain terms both the Malwa Sikh chiefs for having accepted British suzerainty and mid-level Sikh leaders for

the public claims of loyalty to the British. Having challenged a large number of people both within the Sikh community and without by forcing them to address thorny issues, he eventually became a target of a multi-level smear campaign, and was forced out of the public eye in the late 1920s.[95]

In any case, his efforts brought the gurdwaras and the Guru Panth back to the center of discussion in the 1910s. This also provided the context for a new generation of Sikh leadership to confront the remnants of the Singh Sabhas at Amritsar and Lahore, including the granthis, whose sustenance depended upon the British patronage. From this protracted conflict emerged a new institution called the **Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee** (SGPC, the Supreme Gurdwara Management Committee), which was created to oversee the activities at historic Sikh sites.[96] From 1925 onward, the SGPC became the modern version of the Guru Panth whose over one hundred fifty odd members were elected by Sikh men and women. Since its inception, this institution has played a crucial role in the consolidation of Sikh religious, social, and political life.[97]

The formal structure of the SGPC provided no authority for the granthis, thus rectifying the earlier British misunderstanding of their position; they simply became the paid employees of the SGPC and oversaw the activity at the Darbar Sahib and other places. It may be useful to underline that with the exception of Gurmukh Singh Musafir (1899-1976), who started as a granthi at the Darbar Sahib and went on to emerge as a political leader in his own right, no one from this hierarchy has left any significant mark on Sikh history in the course of the past century.[98] The SGPC created the "Propagation of Religion Committee" (Dharam Prachar) to help disseminate Sikh beliefs and invited Sikh scholars to

join it. This committee made recommendations regarding Sikh religious issues and SGPC leadership translated their advice into concrete measures.[99]

In the process, the SGPC developed an elaborate program of publications. The Guru Granth constituted the center of their agenda. Its authoritative text was prepared in the middle decades of the twentieth century, and a new version with separated words, the prototype of which was created by Bhasaurh, was published in the early 1970s.[100] This is now the standard text available in gurdwaras around the globe. Building on materials compiled by Bhagwan Singh (1870s), Avtar Singh Vahiria (1890s [reprint 1914]), and Bhasaurh (1900s), the committee took twenty years to compile a text entitled ***Sikh Rahit Maryada*** (Code of Sikh Belief and Conduct) and published it in 1951.[101] This document has successfully served as the standard statement on this important subject ever since.[102] In addition, the SGPC produced texts to teach Sikh history in schools and colleges.[103] It also collected early Sikh manuscripts and artifacts for the museum established in the Darbar Sahib precinct.[104] Notably, that the SGPC has refrained from publishing the *Dasam Granth*, which by **now enjoys the scriptural status within a miniscule segment of the community and a large number of scholars writing in English tend to label it as the secondary scripture of the Sikhs**.[105]

In recent years, Sikh openness to new things have found expression in the SGPC's establishment of a bread-making plant in the *langar* of the Darbar Sahib, the use of solar energy to complement its electric supply, and the establishment of a water-purifying plant at the pool. The SGPC has also solicited help from Punjab Agriculture University, Ludhiana, to preserve and maintain the sixteenth-century Jujube trees that stand in its precinct.[106] The approximately eighteen hours of the singing of Sikh sacred compositions in the Darbar Sahib are

broadcasted, and morning and evening services are televised for the benefit of Sikh devotees around the globe.[107] A visit to the Darbar Sahib amply demonstrates that present-day Sikh religious life is thriving, as does the rise of numerous new gurdwaras both in the Punjab and overseas.

The political stresses of the early 1980s on Sikh leadership resulted in the senior most granthi (Jathedar/leader at the Akal Takhat) assuming the role of a community spokesperson, on the one hand, and the steady replacement of scholars on the Dharam Prachar committee by low-level Sikh political figures, on the other.[108] In this broad reconfiguration, the "Jathedar" at the Akal Takhat, along with his counterparts at the four other Takhats (Patna, Anandpur, Damdama, and Nanderh), began to make recommendations pertaining to religious matters. Some of these decisions include eliminating the use of chairs when *langar* is served in overseas gurdwaras (1998), barring any private publisher from printing the text of the Guru Granth (1998), specifying the way in which the text of the Guru Granth should be kept in a private home (2013), and removing the chairs from the congregation hall used by the elderly who cannot sit on the floor (2013).[109]

As for addressing the issue of social divisions, the late 1940s presented the Sikh community with a significant new challenge. Given the substantial benefits granted to low-castes by the Indian constitution, Sikh leadership sought the same for Sikhs of comparable background lest they return to the Hindu fold.[110] The pragmatic needs of maintaining a unified Sikh vote bank overrode the Sikh resistance to acting in the name of social inequalities even if such action was pursued for progressive ends. The reversal of this position seems insurmountable at present. These social distinctions, however, do not play any

role within the everyday Sikh religious activity. Any and every Sikh devotee can bathe at Amritsar and in the pools at other sacred sites, participate in the prayers, and share food in the *langar*. Marriage patterns continue to be largely restricted to the pre-Sikh affiliations of different groups within the community, but even that is beginning to change slowly.

Similar issues relate to Sikh women. Their relatively high public profiles—relative to other Indian and Pakistani women, can be seen emblematically in Amrita Shergill (1913-1941), a major figure in the history of Indian painting; Amrita Pritam (1919-2005), a powerful literary presence; Rajinder Kaur Bhattal (1945-), the former chief minister of the Punjab; and Jagir Kaur (1954-), the first and so far the only female president of the SGPC.[111] A number of women have made significant contributions to Sikh history in the twentieth century.[112] One must not, however, exaggerate Sikh claims for gender parity. Bhasaurh's attempts to have a group of women perform the sacred singing in the Darbar Sahib did not succeed in the 1910s, and the situation remains the same with female voices absent there. A group of Sikh women from overseas put in a formal request in the 1990s to wash the floors of the Darbar Sahib, but their request was summarily denied. And the SGPC enumerates women as less than twenty percent of its members. Clearly, concerted thinking in regard to these issues is urgently needed.

Given the realities of the past century, the issue of Sikh sovereignty has turned into a complex tangle for Sikh leadership. Within the Sikh community at large, there is a continuous dream to revive some sort of political authority along the lines of leadership of Ranjit Singh. For instance, some Sikhs called their leader Kharak Singh (1868-1963), the uncrowned king (*betaj badshah*) in the 1910s;

they raised the call to "wake up and stop the British from reducing the king [of Nabha] into a pauper" (*uth qaum tu jag hoshiar ho ja tera raja faqir ho chalia i*) in the 1920s; and the main character in *Baba Tegha Singh*, a 1930s novel by Master Tara Singh (1885-1967), a powerful political figure of his times, urged that the Sikhs had to revive the Khalsa Raj to live respectably.[113] Simultaneously, Sikh leadership was aware of their demographic disadvantage—the community constituted less than 10 percent of the population of the area that came to be east and west Punjab—and this had a drastic impact on the nature of political power that it could wield.

In the 1940s, the Sikhs demolished the clock tower built by the British, and the two Sikh flags symbolizing Sikh spiritual and temporal concerns, respectively, once again became the highest and most visible markers on the Darbar Sahib landscape. But many Sikhs' hopes of attaining a separate country for Sikhs (Sikhistan/Khalistan), however, could not materialize, given the demographic and political realities at the time of British departure from the subcontinent.[114] The Malwa Sikh states effortlessly transferred their loyalty from the British to the Indian government in New Delhi.[115] A large majority of Sikh political leaders followed this stance. The tensions between the Indian government and the Sikh leadership, however, emerged soon after partition and Master Tara Singh's activity was interpreted as a threat to the state's law and order and he was briefly imprisoned in early 1949. While this conflict took different forms in the subsequent decades, the historically ingrained promise of Sikh sovereignty that Ram Singh and Bhasuarh so emphatically evoked resurfaced with Bhindranwale in the early 1980s. The response of the Indian government in New Delhi was not different from its predecessors such as the

Mughals—any Sikh aspiration for territorial independence within the country was to be forcibly crushed.

With Manmohan Singh and Bikram Singh occupying the highest positions of power in India's central government, and Prakash Singh Badal's (b. 1927) Akali Dal aligning itself with the right-wing Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) so as to rule Punjab at the state level, it seems reasonable to claim that the Sikh community is at peace with its destiny as one of the many communities within the contemporary Indian state.[116] Yet one has to notice the inauguration of a memorial dedicated to "Martyr Sant Giani Jarnail Singh Ji Khalsa Bhindranwale, and all other martyrs of the 1984 massacre" next to the Akal Takhat in 2012.[117] There is no doubt that both Manmohan Singh and Badal did their level best to resist its construction and dedication, but clearly they did not succeed. Circumambulation of the sacred precinct of the Darbar Sahib now makes a visit to this new landmark obligatory for any ordinary Sikh pilgrim.

Figure 10. In memory of the martyrs of June 1984

The most significant new reality for Sikhs as a whole, however, is the fact that approximately 15% percent of them now reside outside the Punjab. Three observations are in order. First, a new ceremonial edition of the Guru Granth that has the text in Gurmukhi along with a transliteration in roman and translation in

English has been prepared for the use of generations of Sikhs born outside of the Punjab. The same text is now available on the Internet with provisions for searches of various kinds.[118]

Figure 11. The text of the Guru Granth published in 1993

Second, concerns in the overseas gurdwaras range from the cosmetic—buildings reflecting varied architectural designs, displaying pictures of different sets of Sikh leaders—to issues of their ownership. For the first time in Sikh history, we have cases of gurdwara buildings that are owned privately by individuals.[119] As a result, the owners have the right to decide what happens there, who can attend, or even if it should remain open. This practice is now prevalent among Sikhs of British Columbia, Canada, and seems to be spreading to other places where Sikhs live.[120]

Finally, there is a range of changes symbolized by "Happy, Healthy, and Holy Organization (3HO). A mid-level Sikh official in the Indian civil services, Harbhajan Singh Puri (1929-2004), came to Toronto in the fall of 1968 and reinvented himself as a yoga teacher (Yogi Bhajan) in Los Angeles in early 1969.[121] His young students soon became interested in his Sikh beliefs, and two of them partook in the *khande di pahul* in April 1970. Others joined this path, and by the end of the year, their leader took eighty-four of them to the Darbar Sahib. In

the subsequent decades, their numbers expanded. Known as the American Sikhs, this miniscule group of people holds a position within the larger Sikh community that is still unclear. With the passing of Yogi Bhajan, these people are in a state of transition. Perhaps the future of this group will prove to be a test case for the promises and challenges of joining the Sikh community in the twenty-first century.

Looking ahead

As we conclude, let us imagine that Bhangu makes a pilgrimage to the Darbar Sahib in 2014. The large clocks at the main entrances—indirect progeny of the British clock tower, the sound of a harmonium accompanying the sacred singing on the public broadcasting system, the huge television screens in the four corners showing the text being sung, the pipe at the edge of the pool supplying clean water, and the solar heaters on the roofs would in all probability thoroughly confuse him at first sight. Apart from these cosmetic and structural changes, the

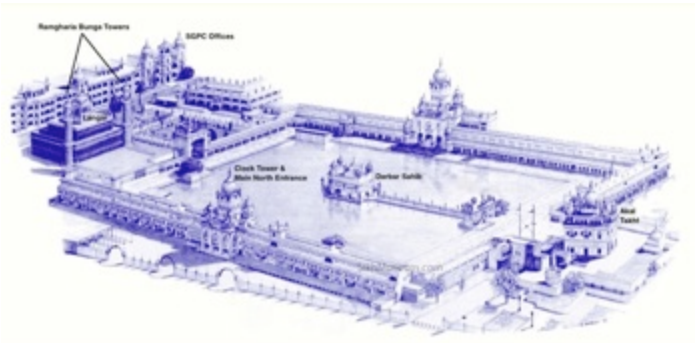

Figure 12. The Darbar Sahib (courtesy SikhMuseum.com)

rest of it would be comfortably familiar—people entering the precinct and taking their ritual baths, the patterns of devotion around the Guru Granth, the display

of weaponry and the beating of the drum at the Akal Takhat, the Sikh flags at its side, and the *langar* busy feeding people. Seeing the number of Sikhs present in the Darbar Sahib complex, their overall devotional fervor, and the maintenance of the early Sikh traditions would be compelling and reassuring for Bhangu.

Knowing Bhangu's inclinations, we can be sure that he would look for some information on the Sikhs. Arriving at the bookstore run by the SGPC, he would be dazzled by the sheer quantity of the titles on display there. Without question, he would carry away a large pile for himself, including an edition of his own *Sri Gur Panth Prakash* published under the SGPC's imprint.[122] It is fair to assume that he might start examining this pile by looking at his own book, and it is not difficult to imagine his shock at reading its introduction and finding out that the editor places the text's completion in 1841, which is 30 odd years after its actual production. Furthermore, Bhangu would surely find the editor's claim that the text emerged out of the context of anxiety about the inevitable British take over of the Khalsa Raj as downright disconcerting.

Having had this strange glimpse into the present-day understanding of his text, Bhangu would find it hard to assess the state of Sikh studies. We can, however, help him find his way by going back to the two scholarly positions that we referred to at the beginning of this essay. If he were to join the skeptical historians, he would learn to cull ideas from Biblical studies, culture studies, feminist studies, whatever is the latest mantra, and apply them to selected, sometimes even imagined data from Sikh history. The effort here is largely to prove or disprove the efficacy of current ideas in the academy as they apply to things Sikh and thereby to bring Sikh studies within the orbit of what counts as significant within the broader academy at a particular moment in its ongoing

evolution—often with little concern for the veracity of the history that is being used to make those connections or the sentiments of the Sikh community as the process advances.

Or, alternatively, Bhangu could leave all that aside. He could stake out his position by looking for information from early sources, attempting to interpret the relevant details in terms of the categories that emerge from within the Sikh context, and generating a historically accurate narrative of Sikh past. I have a feeling which direction he would go—the latter—and as his own scholarship shows, the chances are good that what emerged from his investigations would be more than antiquarian interest. A fresh engagement with history—attempting to understand how that history was actually lived—should provide deep resources for reflecting on problems that confront the Sikh community in the present day, perhaps even presenting plausible solutions for problems that at first glance seem so modern that the past cannot be a guide in learning how to face them.

Our time, no less than Bhangu's own, is a very exciting time for a scholar to be working in Sikh studies. Working closely with the **early manuscripts,** the digital photography and **computer technology** have **created the opportunity to advance scholarship in significant way. The expansion could range from grasping the writing techniques used by the early scribes of the Sikh scriptural texts, and advancing the text of the Guru Granth to a new level of accuracy with its language firmly standardization to preparing critical editions of other important texts.**[123]

The Guru Panth has its own challenges and opportunity. The Panth also needs to learn to live with the new historical reality in which Ranjit Singh's Lahore, the Sikh center of power in Majha, is replaced by Badal's Chandigarh

in Malwa. Bhangu profoundly admired Ranjit Singh's belief in Sikh sovereignty and denounced the Malwa chiefs' tradition of subservience to protect their personal interests. From the Malwa area, Badal seems to be naturally prone to follow the traditions of his descendants, and it remains to be seen how far he would go with this strategy. Simultaneously, a reasonably large segment of the Sikh community has moved overseas and is open to the global winds blowing over the rest of the world. How this small but powerful segment is able to contribute toward the debates about the future of the community might define the direction that the Sikhs will take as they usher into the second-half of the first millennium of their history.[124]

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