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CLAREMONT McKENNA COLLEGE

**SIKHS AND COLONIALISM
A STUDY OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY ACROSS TIME FROM GURU NANAK TO THE
BRITISH RAJ**

SUBMITTED TO

PROFESSOR GASTON ESPINOSA AND PROFESSOR DANIEL MICHON

BY

SAMRATH MACHRA

FOR

SENIOR THESIS

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PREFACE

This thesis explores how a religious community shapes itself in the face of powerful external pressures. It looks at how the Sikh community located and demarcated themselves during the British Colonial period to ultimately construct religious boundaries and a new normative Sikh theology. I am grateful for the help and guidance of Professor Gastón Espinosa. His patience, persistence, and generosity in sharing his infinite store of life wisdom pushed me through the writing, structuring, and ideation process. I'm also thankful for Professor Daniel Michon whose deep knowledge of Punjab and the Sikh tradition helped me organize sources and arrange arguments for my chapters. His high energy and passion for sharing knowledge propelled me forward in the last few months of writing.

I also bear a massive debt toward Professor Chole Martinez. The exposure she provided me to Sikh Studies flipped my understanding of the Sikh tradition. It took me from an insecure and defensive place to one of comfort and curiosity. Her class on Sikhism exposed me to Harjot Oberoi's *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*. While I disagree with Professor Oberoi on several points, his work inspired me to ask tough questions about the origins of the Sikh tradition and my own practice.

TIMELINE

1469-1708: Sikh Guru period

1469: Birth of Guru Nanak

1604: Compilation of Adi Granth

1606: Martyrdom of Guru Arjan

Pre-1636: Completion of Bhai Gurdas' Vaars

1675: Martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur

1699: Birth of Khalsa

1708: Compiling of *Dasam Granth* and within in, the *Bachitar Natak*

1708-1849: Pre-Colonial period

1711: Completion of *Gursobha*

1740: Completion of *Chaupa Singh Rahaitnama*

1526-1858

Mughal rule in India

1801-1849

Sikh Empire

1858-1947

India under British rule

1873: Conversion of Sikhs at Mission High School Amritsar

1873: First Singh Sabha, the Amritsar Singh Sabha formed

1877: Publication of Ernest Trumpp's *The Adi Granth: Or, the Holy Scriptures of the Sikhs*

1879: Formation of Lahore Singh Sabha (eventually Tat Khalsa)

1898: Publication of *Ham Hindu Nahin*

1905: Removal of idols from Harimandar Sahib (Golden Temple)

1909: Anand Marriage Act

1925: Gurdwara Reform Act

1926: Bhai Vir Singh published *Puratan Janamsakhis*

1932: Publication of first draft SGPC *Sikh Rahait Maryada*

INTRODUCTION

The Sikh tradition is a new one relative to the history of humankind. Sikh thought and its first community was established by Guru Nanak during his life between 1469 and 1539.¹ Most of what scholars know today about him come from the Janam-Sakhis, stories passed down orally but written fifty years after his passing. Guru Nanak spent the early years of his life in working as a steward for a Muslim nobleman and devotional singing. One day he disappeared into the Bein river while bathing. After three days he reemerged and proclaimed “There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim.”² This statement was radical given the cultural divide between religious truth claims in Hinduism and Islam. He later wrote hymns about his divine mandate saying “I was a minstrel out of work; the Lord assigned me the task of singing the Divine Word day and night. He summoned me to his Court and bestowed on me the robe of honor for his true and holy Name.”³

For the next ten years, Guru Nanak proceeded to live a rather normal life.⁴ At thirty, he married *Matha* (mother) Sulakhani and had two children. He set out on a series of journeys to Hindu and Muslim religious sites engaging in dialogue with leaders of different religious groups. He established a following and founded the city of Kartarpur in 1519 as a center for his followers. He defined the ideal person as a “Gurmukh, one oriented towards the Guru ” and who built a relation and understanding with and of the divine, society, and oneself.⁵ He established three key institutions: *sangat*, a community

¹ Singh, Pashaura, 'An Overview of Sikh History', in Pashaura Singh, and Louis E. Fenech (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies* 21.

² Ibid.

³ Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 150.

⁴ Singh, “An Overview...” *Oxford Handbook*, 21.

⁵ Ibid.

of people united feeling they belonged to the same “spiritual fraternity,” *dharamsala*, a place of worship, and *langar*, a community kitchen open to all people within *sangat* and outside regardless of caste, race, religion, or gender.⁶ Guru Nanak then passed on the Guruship to one of his disciples. After Guru Nanak, there would be nine other successors to the Guruship lasting from 1469 till the passing of the tenth Guru in 1708.

According to the *Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, there are three key events in Sikh history: the compilation of the *Adi Granth*, the execution of Guru Arjan by the Mughal Emperor, and the founding of the Khalsa.⁷ The fifth Guru, Guru Arjan compiled the *Adi Granth* in 1604 and it acted as the primary religious text for the Sikh tradition. It is a compilation of writing from the previous Gurus, Bhakti poets, and Sufis. In 1606, Guru Arjan was tortured and executed by Mughal Emperor’s men.⁸ This prompted his son and the next Guru to establish the concept of *Miri-Piri* and the precedent of arming and defending the Sikh community. To explain *Miri-Piri*, Guru Harogobind presented the Sikhs with two swords, one representing spiritual authority and the other political authority. He also built the Akal Takht—a center for Sikhs to govern and arm themselves—at the Sikh religion’s holiest shrine to emphasize the important role of temporal authority.⁹ His arming and subsequent battles with the Mughals eventually lead to the execution of the ninth Guru by Mughal authorities.

The founding of the Khalsa in 1699 was inaugurated at Anandpur Sahib by the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh.¹⁰ According to Professor Pashura Singh, the Khalsa was

⁶ Ibid, 22.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, 23.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

“an order of loyal Sikhs bound by common identity and discipline.”¹¹ Bernard S. Cohn

recounts the creation of the Khalsa as follows:

Guru Gobind Singh issued a call for large-scale participation in the celebration of the New Year in 1699. Those Sikh males attending were enjoined to appear with their hair and beards uncut. As the festivities developed, there was no sign of the Guru, who was waiting in a tent, until he suddenly appeared brandishing a sword, and called upon the assembled Sikhs to volunteer to have their heads cut off as a sign of their devotion. One volunteered and accompanied his Guru back to the tent. A thud was heard and the Guru reappeared with a bloody sword. The apparent sacrifice was repeated with four other volunteers, and then the side of the tent was folded back to reveal the five still alive and the severed heads of goats on the ground.¹²

After this display, each of the five were fed sweetened water stirred with a double-edged sword and the whole procession was blessed with the recitation of five prayers. Those who participated in this ceremony were reborn as members of the Khalsa whose spiritual father and mother were the Guru and his wife. According to Professor Pashura Singh, the Guru then “transferred his spiritual authority to the cherished five when he himself received the nectar of the double-edged sword from their hands.”¹³ Through this act and subsequent acts, he ended the line of Guruship and bestowed the Guru role to the the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, sanctified Sikh hair, the turban, banned smoking, gave Sikhs five weapons to carry, and it is argued by some that he also gave Sikhs the five visible identifies of Khalsa Sikhs, the five *Kakars*—unshorn hair, dagger, undergarments, comb, and an iron bracelet.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Cohn, Bernard S. "Cloths, Clothes, and Colonialism: India in the Nineteenth Century." *European Intruders and Changes in Behaviour and Customs in Africa, America and Asia before 1800*. Routledge, 2017, 107-108.

¹³ Singh, “An Overview...” *Oxford Handbook*, 23.

¹⁴ Ibid, 24.

During the Guru period between 1469-1708, Punjab was the primary place of conversion into the Sikh faith.¹⁵ There were large numbers of Jats, Punjab's farmer caste, who joined the faith and eventually the Khalsa. They came into conflict with the Mughal Empire especially during the Guruship of Guru Gobind Singh. Conflict and division within the Sikh community ended up strengthening the tradition by helping form religious boundaries.

After the passing of Guru Gobind Singh, the Sikh community and emerging polities spent most of their time fighting Mughal and Afghan armies.¹⁶ Intellectually, the community's self-perception also diverged. Two lines of Sikh thought emerged early on: one articulated in Sainapati's *Gursobha* and the other in Kesar Singh Chhibbar's *Bansawali-nama*. *Gursobha*, written between 1701-1711, lays out a moral vision of the panth, one which rejects caste, removes the authority of middlemen and priests, and sees the Khalsa code of conduct as something expected of all Sikhs. In accordance with Guru Gobind Singh's teachings, it sees the Sikh "community and the Guru as one, and the death of the Guru...placing the spiritual and temporal authority within the collective body of the Khalsa, emphasizing the corporate sovereignty of the Sikh panth."¹⁷ Chhibbar's *Bansawali-nama*, written in 1769, used Puranic/Hindu literature to explain Sikh history and argue for "state patronage for Brahmins and ...often ignores Khalsa criticism of caste hierarchy."¹⁸ Texts like those of Chhibbar and Sainapati were called *Gurbillas* and provided a space for debate over the Khalsa, Guru's lives, and moral order.¹⁹

¹⁵ Ibid, 24-25.

¹⁶ Singh, "An Overview..." *Oxford Handbook*, 27; Cohn, "Cloths, Clothes..." 109.

¹⁷ Singh, "An Overview..." *Oxford Handbook*, 25.

¹⁸ Ibid, 25.

¹⁹ Ibid, 26.

The Khalsa identity became a prominent feature among many Sikhs. However, not all Sikhs were Khalsa and these Sikhs blended in with the Hindu population.²⁰ By 1799, Maharaja Ranjit Singh had founded the Sikh Empire and unified Punjab.²¹ He made a point to build relationships with the non-Khalsa Sikhs and Khalsa Sikhs declaring that non-Khalsa were Sikhs even though many of them worshiped Hindu idols and prayed using Hindu texts, both practices prohibited by the Sikh codes of conduct.²²

Initial British Perceptions

The British saw Sikhs as potential rivals as early as the 1780s and created official histories of the Sikhs.²³ They saw the Sikh people as a reformed version of Hinduism.²⁴ To the British, Sikhs were like the Protestants who sought to reform a repressive society and religious culture. According to Ballantyne the British “framed Sikhism as a simple masculine faith, defined by its martial sensibility and the visibility of the turbaned kes-dhari male [Sikhs who keep their hair unshorn and wear a turban], within a religious landscape dominated by the supposed effeminacy of Hinduism and Islam’s despotic patriarchy.”²⁵ They noted the society as one shaped by trade, migration, and war rather than the caste system.²⁶ They were hardy and well-built people unlike the south Indians

²⁰ Ibid, 27.

²¹ Ibid, 28.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid 28.

²⁴ Mandair, Navdeep S. "Colonial formations of Sikhism." *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 71.

²⁵ Ballantyne, Tony. "Between Colonialism and Diaspora." *Between Colonialism and Diaspora*. Duke University Press, 2006, 41.

²⁶ Ibid, 34.

whose feminine demeanor made them “culturally degenerate.”²⁷ After the annexation of Punjab in 1849, the British wasted no time on recruiting Sikh people into the military because of the perceived marital status of Sikhs, loyalty, and similarity in belief. During British rule, the Sikh community was forced to redefine itself in the face of British and native pressures.

Theory and Thesis

A significant portion of this thesis will revolve around Catherine Albanese’s definition of religion as presented in her work *America, Religions and Religion*. She starts by exploring what it means to define something. She quotes Webster’s Third New International Dictionary and says it is the “‘act of determining or settling...’ it comes from *finis* meaning end or limit—a boundary.”²⁸ From the beginning this establishes that religion involves boundaries which demarcate beginnings and the limits of a given thought. She continues in her exploration and argues that religion concerns itself with how one locates oneself in space.²⁹ Often religious peoples, as we will learn through this paper's study of the Sikh community, use holy places and sacred rites as their boundary markers in space.³⁰ Origin stories and/or theological traditions are used to locate individuals in time. Given a sense of space and time through theology and practice, location is not determined by the individual alone, it is social.³¹ As much as religion

²⁷ Mandair, Navdeep. "Gendered Sikhism: The iconolatry of manliness in the making of Sikh identity." *Sikh Formations* 1.1 (2005), 34.

²⁸ Albanese Catherine L. 2013. *America Religions and Religion* Fifth ed. Australia: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 11.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 5.

³⁰ *Ibid*.

³¹ *Ibid*.

helps one determine their location in space and time, Albanese says “it [also] concerns our place among other human beings, and it means staking out a claim on the landscape of identity.”³² Fundamentally, it seems, religion deals with how people create mental boundaries of self-identity connected to a religious theology that are eventually expressed externally via community. Religion concerns the process of establishing “internal landscapes of identity” and using those to affirm who we are and who we are not.³³ Given these established landscapes, one seeks others whose internal landscapes overlap with theirs because the “shared internal space [makes an individual] feel at one with them and their concerns.”³⁴ Through what Albanese calls social expressions such as community and rituals, the internal feelings and beliefs find external expression. Albanese says the boundaries created through religious thinking “are both external and internal...both social boundaries between different peoples and spiritual boundaries between this world and one thought to go beyond it.”³⁵

The social and spiritual boundaries created by religion relate to two kinds of religion, ordinary religion and extraordinary religion. Ordinary religion can be seen as culture and worldly proceedings.³⁶ It concerns itself with living well within the boundaries given by a particular society and like transcendent religion is also used to locate individuals in space, time, and among other humans. Albanese continues and says:

Ordinary religion puts its premium on the things that are deeply present and unconsciously revered here within the borders of everyday culture... it reveals itself in intuitive statements and vague sayings about the meaning

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid, 6.

³⁵ Ibid, 18.

³⁶ Ibid, 5.

of live...it reveals itself in the..expected ways of greeting people; wedding etiquette concerning clothes.³⁷

It reveals the values of people who exist in it and it acts as a social glue between members of a society.

Extraordinary religion is religion in the more traditional sense. It, like ordinary religion, provides individuals with their location and self-identity, but it also helps individuals transcend everyday culture and concerns.³⁸ Albanese makes the point that it exists “outside the circle of society.”³⁹ Whereas ordinary religion is spread throughout a culture, extraordinary religion is concentrated into “religious forms that stand out from their background.”⁴⁰ That being said, extraordinary religion is still concerned with day-to-day existence. It deals with how to cross into other realms but still places an importance on and exists within boundaries in ordinary existence.

Given this background it is now appropriate to present Catherine Albanese’s definition of religion. She defines religion as “a system of symbols (creed, code, cultus) by means of which people (a community) locate themselves in the world with reference to both ordinary and extraordinary powers, meanings and values.”⁴¹ To understand her definition, we must also understand what she means by creed, code, and cultus.

Creeds are “explanations about the meaning or meanings of human life” which take the forms of theologies, sacred stories, oral traditions and “unconscious affirmations that surface in casual conversation.”⁴² Creed is the “intellectual rationale for why people

³⁷ Ibid, 7-8.

³⁸ Ibid, 6.

³⁹ Ibid, 6.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 7.

⁴¹ Ibid, 10.

⁴² Ibid, 9.

act in the religious ways that they do.”⁴³ Creeds are expressed via codes and cultus. Codes are “rules that govern everyday behavior...they may take the form of articulated moral and ethical systems but they may also be the customs that have become acceptable in society, the ethos by which people live.”⁴⁴ Creeds are translated into codes. Codes are translated creed made acceptable and usable for ordinary existence.⁴⁵ Codes both as customs and moral systems can be written but do not need to be, they can also exist as unsaid rules. Cultus is how religion is expressed, it's the acting out of the “insights and understandings expressed in creeds and codes.”⁴⁶ The line between code and cultus can appear blurry. To prevent ambiguity, this paper will distinguish code as the moral, ethical, and cultural systems that find their roots in creed. Cultus is how the people act out the codes in real life practice.

Finally, it is important to understand what it means for a tradition to be a combinative tradition. The word combinative is not the same as syncretism. According to Tamar Frankiel, “syncretism suggests non-normal and marginal, it is to imply a loss of self and soul.”⁴⁷ It suggests that the integrity of the pure religion has cracked and devolved into the new syncretic state. However, to say something is combinative or additive is to start with a different set of assumptions.⁴⁸ For Albanese: to talk about a natural cultural process that occurs whenever and wherever contact comes, it is to own

⁴³ Ibid, 10.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 10.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 241.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 10.

⁴⁷ Albanese, Catherine, ‘Exchanging Selves, Exchanging Souls’, in Thomas Tweed (ed) *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, 224.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 224.

that unless religious systems are relics to be admired in a taxonomy of the sacred... they let go and add on; they lose; they gain; they exchange.⁴⁹

The combinative forces exchange practices, ideas, and frameworks which can add, subtract, destroy, and create. Albanese argues that syncretistic approaches towards religion “hide the social and spiritual landscapes of religious change.”⁵⁰ Intellectual, social, and cultural gifts exchanged between two contacting forces are “made, remade...mask oppression and also subvert it. They signal new narratives of contact and combination.”⁵¹ This paper will utilize Albanese’s understanding of contact and exchange in the context of combinative traditions to frame its argument. Having established a definition of religion and key theoretical concepts discussed, it is time to set up the argument.

This thesis deals with how a religious community shapes itself in the face of powerful external pressures. It explores three ways the Sikh religion (code, creed, and cultus) was influenced by its encounters with the British Empire and in process, gave birth to a new combinative tradition. This paper will look at where the Sikh people located themselves during the Colonial period, to understand how colonialism impacted Sikh creed, code, and cultus. It traces the thread of contact throughout Sikh history and argues that British contact resulted in religious and cultural exchanges which reoriented Sikh creed, code, and cultus. The resulting combinative tradition centered itself on the construction of religious boundaries and a normative Sikh theology. Colonial Era reformers' work was all in an effort to communicate what Sikhi was and what it was not

⁴⁹ Ibid, 225.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 204.

⁵¹ Ibid, 204.

while maintaining the religion's intellectual merit in the face of new religious currents taking hold in India.

CHAPTER 1

SIKH CREED: THEOLOGY FROM BHAI GURDAS TO BHAI VIR SINGH

The first chapter of this work will focus on changes in the Sikh creed between the Guru period (1469-1708) and Colonial period (1849-1947). From there, we will try to understand who is creating these changes and from what vantage point are they creating them from. Through this analysis we will argue that the British Colonial period shifted how Sikhs frame their creed. This chapter will start with a brief explanation of sources on Sikh creed from the Guru and Pre-Colonial period to the Colonial period. From there we'll analyze primary sources and secondary sources to understand Sikh creed across time periods with the goal of understanding how Sikh creed was affected by its contact with British extraordinary religion. Secondary goals will be to understand in what ways Sikh creed became a combinative endeavor and the ways a normative Sikh theology was established.

In studying the Guru period creed this chapter will look at the Bhai Gurdas' works and folktales of Guru Nanak. The Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the ultimate source of Sikh wisdom, has hymns from six of the ten Gurus and several bhagats and sufi writers.⁵² Poetry from the Sri Guru Granth Sahib are the only hymns allowed to be sung in Gurudwara with the exception of two other poets, Bhai Gurdas and Bhai Nand Lal.⁵³ Because the Gurus approved their use in Gurudwara, Bhai Gurdas and Bhai Nand Lal's texts are considered essential Sikh canon. Bhai Gurdas (1551-1636) is important in Sikh

⁵² Singh, "An Overview..." *Oxford Handbook*, 23.

⁵³ McLeod, W. H. *Textual Sources for the Study of Sikhism*. Barnes & Noble Books, 1984, 2.

history for two more reasons. One is that he was the scribe for the first version of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib compiled by the fifth Guru, Guru Arjun. And secondly, he was the first and some say greatest Sikh theologian.⁵⁴ His Punjabi works—the works this thesis will look at—have seen significant circulation among Sikhs circles, but his works in Braj Bhasha have not seen the same level of attention.⁵⁵

To understand the creed of the Guru period, it's not enough to just look at scripture or canonical texts. The oral traditions and stories written down by Sikhs and observers lend valuable information on what guides Sikh creed. For this it is useful to study Janamsakhis. Janamsakhis were orally transmitted works that were written down at varying points in history.⁵⁶ They recounted the life of the first Sikh Guru, Guru Nanak and often incorporated miraculous elements in them. Sakhis more broadly are stories of Gurus or heroic Sikh figures. Because many of these works were originally written in Punjab, the analysis of these sources will come primarily from available English translations and modern scholarly accounts and interpretations.

The Colonial period, given the rise of the Singh Sabha Movement, is ripe with theological interpretations on both scripture and *janamsakhis*. For our analysis of Sikh creed during the Colonial period, we will take a look at reformist scriptural commentaries that came out of the era. The evidence from this section will be used to show how Sikhs reinterpreted and refocused their creed in response to their interactions with the British.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 7.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 7; Because braj bhasha is a lesser known language among Sikhs, Gurdas' work in the language have been less accessible to the average reader (McLeod. *Textual sources...*, 7.)

⁵⁶ Singh, Harbans, "Janamsakhis", *Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*, accessed via thesikhencyclopedia.com, 1.

Guru Period Creed: Bhai Gurdas

The first source that we'll look at is Bhai Gurdas' Vaars. His texts have been used by scholars for centuries due to their concision, simplicity, and by nature of them being Sikhs first theological commentaries of the Guru Granth Sahib.⁵⁷ I chose Gurdas' works for analysis because of their stature in Sikh theology and because of their consistent use and revision throughout the Guru and Colonial periods.

Bhai Gurdas' works provide conceptions of God, emphasize the importance of *bani* (the word of the Gurus) and distinguishes Sikhs from other Indic traditions. In his first Vaar, he provides information on creation, the relationship between the Guru and God, and the purpose of the Guru's arrival. In *pauree* (stanza) four, he says:

All pervading Oankar through His One Word created the whole expansive cosmos Through the five elements, as the quintessence He permeated in the three worlds and their denominations. That creator could not be seen by anyone who to expand Himself created the infinite nature (prakrti). He made myriad forms of nature... He has created many a dear personality such as Vedavyas and Muhammad dear to the Vedas and the Katebas respectively. How wonderfully the one nature has been expanded into many.⁵⁸

In speaking on creation, he opens with the description of God as "*Oankar*." This is a significant theological point because the term "oankar," supreme being is usually preceded by "ik" which literally means one but as Harbans Singh explains means much more than that.⁵⁹ According to Harbans Singh's *Encyclopedia of Sikhism*,

A distinction exists philosophically between Ik-Oankar and Oankar. Ik-Oankar being the unattributed, transcendent aspect of the Supreme

⁵⁷ Gill, Rahuldeep Singh, 'The Works of Bhai Gurdas', in Pashaura Singh, and Louis E. Fenech (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, 2014, 149.

⁵⁸ Khalsa, Sant Singh (trans), *Bhai Gurdas Ji Vaaran*, sikhithemax.org, 1:4.

⁵⁹ "Besides being the opening sentence phrase of the Mul Mantra, standing at the head of the Guru Granth Sahib, Ek Oarika emphasizes the Nirguna (the unattributed) character of Brahman, the Supreme Being." (Singh, Harbans, *Encyclopaedia*, 5.)

Being, Oankar is the attributed {sagun, sargun} aspect, the Creator, to whom devotion and worship may be offered...In the Sikh creed the Supreme Being is both `attributed` and `unattributed`, no distinction being made between His two aspects...⁶⁰

Harbans Singh is saying that *Ik-Oankar* is the singular transcendent divine, the one which is formless and uncreated. The divine here is separate from creation and has no attributes that can be applied to it. As indicated by Bhai Gurdas' Vaar, however, *Oankar* is attributable. *Oankar*'s essence pervades in all of the cosmos, in all worlds, and in all nature. The one nature of *Ik Oankar*, has "been expanded into many"⁶¹ The expansion of *Oankar*, it is emphasized, is universal. Its quintessence prevades the Prophet Muhammad and the Bible as much as it is in Vedavyas, the compiler of the Vedas. From here, in *pauree* seventeen, Bhai Gurdas, continues his exegesis of Sikh theology by explaining the relationship between the Guru and *Ik-Oankar*, he says "The Guru and God are one; He is the true master and the whole world craves for Him. He rises like the sun and the darkness is dispelled."⁶² This idea of guru and God being one is reiterated several times throughout Bhai Gurdas' *vaars*.⁶³ Its mention in *vaar* 38, *pauree* 20 is particularly significant because it states, "Guru Nanak is the true Guru and is God Himself...Nothing in this world is outside the Guru and God."⁶⁴ Given that the Guru and God are one, how does Bhai Gurdas explain the coming of the Guru? In *vaar* one *pauree* twenty three he relates a mythical story:

The benefactor Lord listened to the cries (of humanity) and sent Guru Nanak to this world.... He preached in this dark age (kaliyug) that, saragun

⁶⁰ Singh, Harbans, "Ik-Oankar", *Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*, accessed via thesikhencyclopedia.com, 7-8.

⁶¹ Khalsa, *Bhai Gurdas*, 1:4.

⁶² Khalsa, *Bhai Gurdas*, 1:17.

⁶³ Khalsa, *Bhair Gurdas*, 12, 29, 37.

⁶⁴ Khalsa, *Bhai Gurdas*, 38:20.

(Brahm [attributable divine]) and nirgun (Parbrahm [unattributable divine]) are the same and identical. Dharma was now established on its four feet and all the four castes (through fraternal feeling) were converted into one caste (of humanity). Equating the poor with the prince, he spread the etiquette of humbly touching the feet. Inverse is the game of the beloved; he got the egotist high heads bowed to feet. Baba Nanak liberated this dark age (kaliyug) and recited the mantra of satnaam for one and all. Guru Nanak came to redeem the kaliyug.⁶⁵

This verse further explains Sikh theology by explaining that Guru Nanak came to earth because of the dark age humans found themselves. It emphasizes the Sikh thought that Guru Nanak preached to humanity a message on one divine being with attributable qualities diffused through creation, *sargun*, and unattributable qualities, *nirgun*. Bhai Gurdas goes further with the real world applications of his interpretation of the Divine. In understanding divinity as one entity that emanates through all creation, Bhai Gurdas also extends this understanding of creation's oneness to melt social barriers of caste and wealth presenting Sikh thought as one that is based in egalitarianism and one which values humility .

Bhai Gurdas' work also places strong emphasis on the congregation as a way to merge with the divine, he says:

From the shop of holy congregation, through the Word, the merchandise of God's name is procured. How to praise Him? The measuring criteria of the perfect Lord are perfect. The warehouse of the True King is never deficient. Cultivating the True Guru, those who earn through Him get merged into His inexhaustible Being. The company of the saints is manifestly great; one should always be in and with it. Husk in the form of maya should be separated from the rice of life. With strokes of discipline during this very life. All the five evil propensities, should be decimated. As the water of well keeps the fields green, the field of the consciousness should be kept verdant (with the help of shabad).⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Khalsa, *Bhai Gurdas*, 1:23.

⁶⁶ Khalsa, *Bhai Gurdas*, 3:6.

Here Bhai Gurdas places a significant importance on congregation, saying that from the company of the holy congregation, God's name is obtained. Through cultivation of the True Guru with congregation, discipline, and shabad (words of the guru) one is able to merge with *Ik-Oankar* becoming a state that seems similar to the state of the Sikh Gurus. In his essay presented in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies* Rahuldeep Gill pulls from Bhai Gurdas' *Kabbitt 55* to say:

Bani (the word of the Gurus) is a core aspect of the Sikh educational heritage, the source of Sikh beliefs and ethics, and each Sikh is responsible for reading, understanding, and teaching it...*bani* itself contains the seed that results in the community's full bloom. The community continues the divine revelation: the Guru is the manifestation of an invisible seed (*nirankar ekankar*), and the Sikhs are the fruits from that tree.⁶⁷

Bani is the seed and community, is akin to water. A flower cannot grow from soil without a seed nor can the flower bloom without water. The seed and the water both rely on each other to eventually bear fruit. Without the community, the seed of gurbani will be wasted in an uncared for garden.

As seen throughout the excerpts shared, Bhai Gurdas has no issue mentioning or alluding to other religious traditions in his writing he says

Muslims and Hindus set up two ways
 They belong to various law schools or castes, revere gurus or *pirs*
 The pupils are hypocrites, holding fast to teachings
 They know 'Ram' and 'Rahim' but I-me
 [*haumai*] afflicts them
 They go to worship in Mecca, Ganga, and Benares
 This fast and that one, prayer and prostration
 But they can't touch a hair on the pious, who are selfless.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Gill, 'The Works of Bhai Gurdas', *Oxford Handbook*, 153.

⁶⁸ Khalsa, *Bhai Gurdas*, 38:9.

Though Gurdas dismisses many Indian religious practices as “tantar-mantar” that is not to say he was intolerant.⁶⁹ He recognized that all religious people hold their own deity of choice in high regard and encouraged all followers to see *Ik-Oankar* and the positive aspects of others.⁷⁰

From the above verses we learn several key things about the Sikh religion’s creed during the Guru period: the Sikh divine is one entity both separate from and within creation; the Guru is God; Guru Nanak came to this world and taught radical equality, humility, and oneness of all creation; the importance of one’s community and of bani in merging with the divine; and the distinctive Sikh identity as one separate from Islam and Hinduism.

Guru Period Creed: Janamsakhis

Janamsakhis, the biographies of Guru Nanak, at a fundamental level are myth.⁷¹ Hew McLeod in his works on *janamsakhis* chooses to focus not on myth but the historical facts conveyed by the ancient folktales, in the analysis for this section on Sikh creed in the Guru period I will focus on Nikky Gurinder Kaur’s interpretation of the *janamsakhis* as a vehicle to understand Sikh identity and core beliefs.⁷² This section will analyze a *janamsakhi* concerning Guru Nanak’s disappearance in the river Bein from a source called the *Puratan Janamsakhis*, considered by some to be the oldest in existence.⁷³ The

⁶⁹ Gill, ‘The Works of Bhai Gurdas’, *Oxford Handbook*, 154.

⁷⁰ Gill, ‘The Works of Bhai Gurdas’, *Oxford Handbook*, 155.

⁷¹ McLeod, W. H. *Early Sikh Tradition : A Study of the Janam-Sākhīs*. Clarendon Press, 1980, 9.

⁷² Singh, Nikky-Gurinder Kaur. “The Myth of the Founder: The Janamsākhīs and Sikh Tradition.” *History of Religions*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1992, 331.

⁷³ The *Bala Janamsakhis* are considered by some to be older than the *Puratan Janamsakis*, however, because of serious accusations made about the intention of the

theologies articulated in this *janamsakhis* and the previously examined works of Bhai Gurdas will then be compared with those mentioned by Singh Sabha reformers to understand how Sikh creed changed during the Colonial period.

In her work “The Myth of the Founder,” Nikky Gurinder Kaur analyzes Bhai Vir Singh’s 1926 translation of *Puratan Janamsakhis*. The translation was written during the Singh Sabha era and it is not necessarily the oldest *janamsakhis* in existence. Its source material however, comes from the earliest and most reliable sources dating back to 1635 and 1690.⁷⁴ The *janamsakhi* Professor Kaur and this thesis will focus on is related to Guru Nanak’s disappearance in the River Bein.⁷⁵ To understand this story and its implications on Sikh thought, some context is necessary.

Guru Nank was born 1469 in Talwandi, a small village forty miles outside Lahore. Guru Nanak’s father was a village accountant.⁷⁶ Nanak spent time with traveling sadhus and sufis, tending cattle, and in solitary reflection. He moved to Sultanpur at the urging of his sister where he worked in the Nawab’s stores. One morning, Guru Nanak went to bathe in the river Bein but failed to return. Everyone was worried he had drowned but the *Puratan Janamsakhi* account says that during this time, Nanak was in the company of God.⁷⁷ The account of the *Puratan Janamsakhi* from Nikky Gurinder Kaur goes as follows:

As the Primal Being willed, Nanak the devotee, was ushered into the Divine Presence. Then a cup filled with amrit (nectar) was given him with the command, 'Nanak, this is the cup of Name-adoration. Drink it... I am

Bala writer, this text will not be considered. For more information see McLeod, W. H. *Early Sikh...*, 15-19.

⁷⁴ McLeod, W. H. *Early Sikh...*, 24.

⁷⁵ Singh, Nikky-Gurinder Kaur, “The Myth...”, 331.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 332.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*.

with you and I do bless and exalt you. Whoever remembers you will have my favour. Go, rejoice, in My Name and teach others to do so ... I have bestowed upon you the gift of My Name. Let this be your calling.' Nanak offered his salutations and stood up.

Nanak celebrated the favor through a song of praise:

‘Were I to live for millions of years
and could make air my food and drink,
Were I to seal myself in a cave and ceaselessly to meditate without
seeing the sun or the moon and without a wink of sleep,
I would still not be able to measure Your greatness, nor signify the
glory of Your Name!
The Formless One is the eternal, irreplaceable truth, Attempt not to
describe That by hearsay knowledge. If it pleases It, It in Its grace
will reveal Itself...
Had there been ton upon ton of paper, says Nanak,
and had I absorbed the wisdom of volumes beyond count,
If I had a supply of ink inexhaustible and I could write with the
speed of the wind,
I would still not be able to measure Your greatness, nor signify the
glory of Your Name!’

Thereupon, the Voice spoke: "Nanak, you discern My will." Nanak recited the Japu, which constituted the core of his doctrine and which became the opening text of the Sikh scripture.

The Voice was heard again: "Who is just in your eyes, Nanak, shall be so in Mine. Whoever receives your grace shall abide in Mine. My name is the Supreme God; your name is the divine Guru." Nanak then bowed in gratitude and was given the robe of honor. A sonorous melody in the Raga Dhandsari rang forth:

‘...You have a thousand eyes,
but without eyes You are, You have a thousand forms,
but without form You are, You have a thousand feet,
but without feet You are.
You have a thousand noses, but without a nose You are.
Thoroughly enchanted am I.
There is a light in all and that light is That One. From Its light, all
are illumined.
Through the Guru the light becomes visible
What pleases You, becomes Your Arati!
Like the bumble-bee, day and night I long for your lotus-feet.
Pleads Nanak, grant the thirsty bird, the nectar of Your’

Guru Nanak remained in unbroken silence after his reappearance. When he spoke the following day, the first words he uttered were: "There is no Hindu; there is no Musalman."⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Ibid, 334.

Nanak is brought into the Divine Presence which does not exist in any exact space. God provides Nanak a cup filled with nectar of name adoration, the offering and drinking of which indicates God's favor and a reason to rejoice. The only way Nanak is able to express his joy is through a poetic release. Harbans Singh interprets these outbursts as indicative that, "no other way would have been adequate to the range and depth of his mood-his fervent longing for the Infinite, his joy and wonder at the beauty and vastness of His creation."⁷⁹ It is during this experience that Japu, the foundational prayer of the Sikh scripture, is recited and the Voice bestows Guruship on Guru Nanak. Scripture is once again recited and then Guru Nanak reappears and states "There is no Hindu; there is no Musalman."⁸⁰

Nikky Gurinder Kaur believes that based on this *janamsakhi*, one can pull four key elements of Guru Nanak's vision. Element one, is that Guru Nanak's had a revelatory experience in which he did not see anything but he experiences the essence of divine presence, something which he is able to see at some level.⁸¹ Through the experience he gains complete sight and knowledge of reality. His experience of the divine indicates the idea that there may be no argument or proof for God, there is only "the primal paradox...of seeing That which is totally beyond the physical world."⁸² Importantly, this foundation of seeing and having closeness to God is reiterated in Bhai Gurdas' works. He says of Nanak, "He offered his full devotion and then he was fortunate to have proximity with God. Baba reached the region of truth where he received Naam, the storehouse of nine treasures and humility. In his meditation, Baba found the whole earth burning [with

⁷⁹ Ibid, 338.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 334.

⁸¹ Ibid, 334.

⁸² Ibid, 335.

the fire of lust and anger].”⁸³ Element two which can be pulled from this work is the element of rejoicing and feelings of intense joy as a result of interacting with *Ik-Oankar*. Guru Nanak tries to express his joy but in the first composition in the story, he himself recognizes his absolute inability to do so saying:

Had there been ton upon ton of paper, says Nanak,
and had I absorbed the wisdom of volumes beyond count,
If I had a supply of ink inexhaustible and I could write with the
speed of the wind,
I would still not be able to measure Your greatness, nor signify the
glory of Your Name!⁸⁴

He further tries to express the qualities of the Divine through the second hymn in Raag Dhanasri. The infinite nature of God makes it impossible for him to express it through any means other than poetry.⁸⁵ This infinite entity has thousands of limbs yet no limbs, its fundamental nature is formless and because of this formless it is neither immanent nor finite.⁸⁶ This infinite, transcendent nature leads into element three, the absolute oneness, the transcendent reality, God.⁸⁷ As one expression of this thought, Guru Nanak says “there is no Hindu, there is no Musalman.”⁸⁸ As a logical extension from the premise of a single divine reality, this statement is seen as an expression of the oneness of humanity, commonality among humans, and equality among humans. The final key element the *janamsakhi* provides is the foundation that Guru Nanak is the Guru of a new path on a mission given to him by God.

⁸³ Khalsa, *Bhai Gurdas*, 1:24.

⁸⁴ Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur, “The Myth...”, 334.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 338.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 338.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 334.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 340.

The poetry of Bhai Gurdas and the *Puratan Janamsakhi* of Guru Nanak entering the River Bein provide a foundation for Sikh creed during the Guru period. From here we'll look at Colonial period sources, specifically, Singh Sabha works and interpretations of those works.

Colonial Period Creed: Singh Sabha Reformers

For rest of this chapter, we'll focus on the Tat Khalsa branch of the Singh Sabha reformers because of their dominance in dictating the Sikh tradition's values. On a theological level, these reformers had to deal with serious intellectual challenges brought to the Sikh religion via colonialism. Ernest Trumpp's "What is Sikhism," published in 1877, set the stage for Sikh theology.⁸⁹ His commentary and translations of Sikh scripture came from a view of the inferiority of the Sikh tradition. He viewed Sikhs as similar to the "degenerate Hinduism" and attributed any good qualities they had to pure chance.⁹⁰ His work recentered all future discourse on Sikhi into answering questions about the existence of God as a basis for rational thinking.⁹¹ Because of this recentering, Sikh theologians were left with the job of separating themselves from the negative stereotypes of Hinduism and presenting their conception of God as appropriate and useful to their European rulers.⁹² Throughout the Colonial period you see the introduction of Western theological frameworks and practical western modes of thought in-order to systematize Sikh conceptions of God.

⁸⁹ Shackle, Christopher. "Repackaging the Ineffable: Changing Styles of Sikh Scriptural Commentary." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, vol. 71, no. 2, 2008, 253.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 258.

⁹¹ Ibid, 259.

⁹² Ibid, 263.

Teja Singh and Bhai Vir Singh were among the preeminent Sikh theologians of the early Singh Sabha movement in the 1900s.⁹³ For this chapter we'll analyze their works exploring conceptions on God's identity to understand how contact with the west may influence their language and ideas.

In his book *Sikhism, Its Ideals and Institutions*, Teja Singh says “the modern times are challenging all faiths and their institutions to justify themselves by practical utility, and Sikhism is no exception to the rule. It must also lay its cards on the table and explain its mysteries in the terms of the workaday world.”⁹⁴ This sentence frames the Singh Sabha movement well and provides its intentions with which reformers performed their work. In the first page of his work Teja Singh states that the goal of a Sikh life is not to seek heaven or salvation, but to “develop the best in us which is God.”⁹⁵ Immediately he begins defining Sikh goals in contrast to commonly understood Christian ideals. He continues with a quotation from Asa Di Var saying, “If man loves to see God, what cares he for Salvation or Paradise.”⁹⁶ For some, his use of scripture to dismiss salvation and paradise positions Sikh concerns as higher and more valuable than Christian concerns. Interestingly enough, this is not necessarily a turn away from Guru period works in which Bhai Gurdas would openly dismiss Hindu practices as “tantar-mantar.”⁹⁷ If anything, Teja Singh seems to be going soft in his criticisms potentially because Sikhs relied on British Protestant approval.⁹⁸ His discussion proceeds to speak on the nature of God.

⁹³ Ibid, 272.

⁹⁴ Singh, Teja. *Sikhism, Its Ideals and Institutions : Essays*. New and rev. ed., Orient Longmans, 1951, V.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 1.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Gill, ‘The Works of Bhai Gurdas’, *Oxford Handbook*, 154.

⁹⁸ Mandair, Arvind-pal. “Emergence of Modern...”, 259.

He says God is described as *nirgun*, absolute, and *sargun*, personal or attributable.⁹⁹ One day, God decided to become *sargun*, becoming what Sikhs refer to as the Name. Singh “to realize Himself [God], He made Nature wherein He has His seat and ‘is diffused everywhere and in all directions in the form of Love.’”¹⁰⁰ He emphasizes how this realization in Nature makes God more than an abstract moral force, he says “in a word, the Gurus have combined the Aryan idea of immanence with the Semitic idea of transcendence without taking away anything from the unity and personal character of God.”¹⁰¹ Here we see Teja Singh utilizing Christian concepts in an effort to locate the Sikh God. From his use of Christian and Hindu concepts it is evident his text was not meant for a Sikh audience, rather it was intended to explain the Sikh religion to Western audience. The creator here is both unified and dispersed, personal and separate. Despite these potentially conflicting statements, he still ascribes the term monotheism to the Sikh religion.¹⁰² He explains God as a dispersed entity does but exclude any matter, “but includes and transcends it.” He also speaks on reality. The universe he says, “is not an illusion” because it is “rooted in God who is real, it is a reality...a reality on account of God’s presence in it.”¹⁰³ Knowing the basis of reality as rooted in God is not surprising given our knowledge of the River Bein *janamsakhi* in which Guru Nanak sees reality, meaning he feels the presence of God. Teja Singh says there is one way to realize this indivisible, moral, and real God. That way is not through what are prescribed meritorious actions but through “love and faith.”¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ Singh, Teja, *Sikhism, Its..., 2.*

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 4.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 5.

While the creed provided so far by Teja Singh seems to mostly align with Guru period creed, note the singularity of message and language used. His language is exact and his message is declarative. This is a stark contrast to the poetic works of Bhai Gurdas and the open ended interpretations of the *janamsakhi*.

Teja Singh and the Singh Sabha reformers were known to be extremely cautious of *Janamsakhis*. They discounted the tales that had dominated much of Sikh creed for generations as fabrication because of their miraculous episodes such as Guru Nanak's visits with long dead sufis and siddhas.¹⁰⁵ These stories ran counter to Sikh Sabha talking points and led them to assert that “the Guru’s Word was now to be understood as autonomous utterance, not requiring supposed encounters with Siddhas or Sheikhs for proper understanding.”¹⁰⁶ In his book, Teja Singh cuts short any conceptions that the Gurus could be super powered saying:

In order, however, to be really effective in saving man, he must not be above man’s capacity to imitate, as he would be if he were a supernatural being. His humanity must be real and not feigned. He should have a nature subject to the same laws as operate in the ordinary human nature, and should have attained his perfection through the same Grace that is available to all men and through perfect obedience to God’s Will. The Sikh Gurus had fought with sin and had overcome it. Some of them have lived for a long time in error, until Grace touched them and they were perfected through a constant discipline of knowledge, love and experience in the association of their Gurus. When they had been completely attuned to the Will divine and were sanctified as Gurus, there remained no defect in them and they became perfect and holy.¹⁰⁷

The passage is a stab at narratives insinuating that the Gurus were supernatural beings. It posits that the only way to view religion and the world was via the new scientific context

¹⁰⁵ Shackle, “Repackaging...”, 270; The Singh Sabha reformers preferred the *Puratan Janamsakhis* due to what Shackle calls their “relatively restrained narrative” (Shackle, “Repackaging...”, 270).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Singh, Teja, *Sikhism, Its...*, 19.

given to Indians by modernity. Given that this Guru is governed by the same laws operating in nature, and given Gurdas says the Guru and the God are one, how do the two views interact with each other? Can an entity that is merged with God have next to none of the privileges of the *nirgun/sargun* God it is combined with? Teja Singh argues that the being who has perfected himself through discipline, love, and experience and who has been touched by grace is the one who becomes attuned to divine will. While divine grace is noted, it becomes secondary in the context of Teja Singh. Instead, an individual's actions are seen as far more important suggesting a shift in perspective from Guru period sources.

In the River Bein *janamsakhi*, Guru Nanak was spiritually inclined person but him being ushered into the divine presence is not something other people have access to nor is it something that aligns with the laws of nature. Perhaps, from the Singh Sabha perspective, an event like this was event that happened internally in the mind of Guru Nanak or perhaps it's just an illustrative tale. Regardless, as Guru Nanak is in the Divine presence, he receives amrit, something other devotees do not get. Furthermore, he is given the robes of honor and the title of Guru whose role is to teach other the gift of His Name. The story demarcates a subtle difference between the teachings of the Guru versus the teachings the Guru received. The Guru received teachings directly from God. Becoming one with God, the Guru gained full sight and both realizes and is told his is one with *Ik-oankar*. In being one with Ikonkar, the Divine presence says to the Guru, "whoever remember you will have my favor...who is just in your eyes, Nanak, shall be so in Mine. Whoever receives your grace shall abide in Mine."¹⁰⁸ This *janamsakhi*

¹⁰⁸ Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur. "The Myth...", 334.

endows the Guru with supernatural spiritual powers which can grant humans the presence of God. Furthermore, as one who is one with God, the presence of the Guru is also the presence of God. Meaning that without serious intellectual maneuvering, the River Bein *janamsakhi* is not compatible with Teja Singh's conception of God and the Guru. The Guru in Teja Singh's interpretation is not one with a supernatural being but one that presents a model of life and whose perfection offers an opportunity for "discipleship."¹⁰⁹ During the Singh Sabha period, it appears that items formerly considered creed are being interpreted as less than creed or questionable sources. The *janamsakhi* interpretation of the Guru does not exclude the possibility of Teja Singh's interpretation, but Teja Singh's interpretation excludes all but one interpretation of the *janamsakhi*. It applies Western thought on miracles and defining God to the Sikh way of thinking, a process which forces reinterpretation.

Bhai Vir Singh also seeks to apply new Colonial frameworks to Sikh thinking. Arvind Pal Mandair has called his exegesis on *Mul Mantra* a philosophical argument for the existence of god through which Singh embarks on a process of "conceptual cleaning."¹¹⁰ He finds himself in a constant struggle to make sure Sikhism does not fall into a Buddhist or Hindu fold of thought. In his discussion on *Oankar* he says:

From antiquity *om* has been a symbol for the supreme being [*parames-var*], **but in gurmat** it is pronounced as *oamkār*. It is the proper manifestation of the Supreme Being in which [his] Nirgun aspect and Sargun aspects are indiscriminately present and in which the dynamic and causal aspects are united...

¹⁰⁹ Singh, Teja. *Sikhism, Its...*, 17.

¹¹⁰ Mandair, Arvind-pal s. "The Emergence of Modern 'Sikh Theology': Reassessing the Passage of Ideas from Trumpp to Bhaī Vī r Singh." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 68, no. 2, 2005, 270.

In the Upaniṣads *om* is the basis of the Nirguṇa and Saguṇa aspects of Brahman. The Purānic writers split [the word *om*] into the letters *a u m*, indicating the threefold division of the Hindu pantheon. **But in gurmat** there is no such division. *Om* is one letter and its meaning is Supreme Being. In its written form it conveys that Nirguṇ, in becoming Sarguṇ, yet remains one.¹¹¹

Through this example we see the explanation of a fundamental Sikh theological term, *Oankar*, first in terms of its Hindu meaning and then via the phrase “but in gurmat,” we learn how Sikhs interpret it. It appears that this need to distinguish Sikh thought from Puranic thought was less so directed at degrading or differentiating itself from Hindus but more so a way to break from Sikh sects such as the Nirmalas and Udasis who explained Sikhi in terms of Hinduism.¹¹²

Interestingly enough, he also finds himself in the process of shifting attention away from the imaginative side of the divine articulated in the *janamsakhi* and Bhai Gurdas to a finite cognitive process for processing the existence of the divine.¹¹³ Here’s Mandiar speaking about the shifts:

1. BVS distinguishes between two different types of cognition: cognition that is proper to the being of God as he is perceived by our empirical senses (BVS 1997: 7), versus a cognition of God that is intrinsic to the nature of the word *sat* (being) (BVS 1997: 10).
2. In order to overcome these sensible perceptions, BVS argues, ‘we’ must cultivate a special type of cognition that stabilizes the manifold into a unity. This special cognition he attributes to the practice of meditative repetition (*jap, simran*) which overcomes time and the sensuous imagination (BVS 1997: 11).
3. There follows a third move where the notion of quality itself is divided into two types of quality: *sarup lacchan* or qualities only perceived by one’s sense faculties and therefore configured or imagined, versus *tatsath lacchan* where the description of what is perceived abstracts from or

¹¹¹ Ibid, 222.

¹¹² Ibid, 219.

¹¹³ Ibid, 227.

transcends the sensuous aspect. *Tatsath lacchan* are privileged qualities that allow one to speak about God, or allow God to be configured, but which in the act of configuring, automatically negate or overcome any relation to the sensuous.¹¹⁴

Bhai Vir Singh starts by making a distinction at the cognitive level. He is arguing that the entire *Mul Mantra*, after *Ikonkar*'s existence affirming statement, should be regarded as qualities of the Divine.¹¹⁵ These qualities ground one's cognition of the Divine. But given the many descriptions of God, Bhai Vir Singh believes that one could get confused about the duality of perception of a *Ik-Oankar* God who simultaneously has attributes such as *nirbhau* and *nirvair*.¹¹⁶ In order to overcome this sensory overload, Bhai Vir Singh states that one must "stabilize the manifold into unity." This involves removing oneself from time based empirical or sensory based thinking into meditative repetition or remembrance of the divine which go beyond time.¹¹⁷ Through this practice, one can reduce the consciousness's tendency to be dispersed and center it on the divine being. Finally, in point three, he makes the distinction between "*sarup lacchan*" and "*tatsath lacchan*." *Sarup lacchan* being configured qualities such as a "blue book" and *tatsath lacchan* being "qualities regarding which one can make direct statements not in terms of their form but in terms of their grounding principles."¹¹⁸ Here, through *tatsath lacchan*, you see Bhai Vir Singh working to remove linkages between time, world, sensuous and the

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 226-227.

¹¹⁵ Translation of the *Mul Mantr* provided via Mandair, Arvind-Pal S. *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation*. Columbia University Press, 2009, 217.

"One God exists, truth by name, creative power, without fear, without enmity, timeless form, unborn, self-existent, by the Guru's grace."

¹¹⁶ Meaning "without fear, without enmity." Mandair, Arvind-Pal. *Religion and the Specter*, 217.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 227.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 227-228.

transcendent divine. The qualities ascribed to God are simply elements which ground the principles on which a divine is imagined but not the full transcendent nature of the divine.¹¹⁹ Here it seems Bhair Vir Singh seeks to put his finger on the concept of the transcendent divine presence brought up in the River Bein *janamsakhi*. Guru Nanak in his poetry revealed throughout the *janamsakhi* avoids putting a specific label on the divine and extols the futility of doing so saying:

Had there been ton upon ton of paper, says Nanak,
and had I absorbed the wisdom of volumes beyond count,
If I had a supply of ink inexhaustible and I could write with the speed of
the wind,
I would still not be able to measure Your greatness, nor signify the glory
of Your Name!¹²⁰

So while the works of Bhai Vir Singh and Teja Singh seek to explain the Sikh tradition in a combinative manner, one that frames the Sikh tradition in terms of western theology, it feels like a forced categorization of Sikh creed because of its extensive maneuvering, foreign terminology, and at some places the countering of the Guru period Sikh writings. This is not to say their work was not valuable, rather it is to say that the writings feel created out of a desperation to locate Sikhs in a location relatable to their colonizers, separate from the colonized, and valuable to the Punjabi population in the face of modernity.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 229.

¹²⁰ Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur. "The Myth...", 334.

CHAPTER 2

SIKH CODE: CHAUPA SINGH RAHAITNAMA TO THE SIKH RAHAIT MARYADA

Codes, as we learned, are rules that govern everyday behaviors. They are the translation of creed into everyday life. This chapter will explore how Sikh code changed between the Guru and Pre-Colonial period to the Colonial period with the goal of understanding how orthodox Sikhs, the Khalsa, translated Sikh creed across time periods to locate and ground itself. It will argue that between the Guru and Colonial periods, the Sikh code of conduct changed in how it dealt with status, how it perceived women, who it defined itself against, and how it formulated Sikh identity. To accomplish this task, Chapter 2 will look at two primary sources of Sikh code: the *Chaupa Singh Rehitnama* (1740) and the SGPC's *Sikh Rahit Maryada* (1932).¹²¹

Guru and Pre-Colonial Period: *Chaupa Singh Rahaitnama*

Rahaitnamas were “codes of discipline which all members of the Khalsa [the Sikh religions baptized segment] must vow to observe.”¹²² Traditionally, they were given or approved by the Guru and by nature of their origin, their words are seen as normative practice.¹²³ The preface of the *Chaupa Singh Rahaitnama* includes a story recounted by Gurinder Singh Mann:

¹²¹ This is the date of the first complete draft according to the SGPC Reht Maryada. It is being used because much of the present document is derived from that.

¹²² McLeod, W. H. (ed. and trans.) (1987). *The Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama*. Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 9.

¹²³ Fenech, Louis E., 'The Khalsa and the Rahit', in Pashaura Singh, and Louis E. Fenech (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, 2014, 240.

The preface reports that this document resulted from a discussion between the *muktas* ('enlightened ones') and the *mussadis* ('officials') at Anandpur. The issue at stake was the Sikh norms for marriage. We are told that the *muktas*, who seemingly had the responsibility of providing advice to Sikhs visiting Anandpur, wanted the Sikhs to marry their children within the Sikh community without any consideration, to the social backgrounds of their families. The *mussadis*, however, had some doubts about its being the appropriate position and wanted to seek the Guru's confirmation on this.

In response to their request, the Guru ordered Chaupa Singh to seek the help of other *gurmukhs* ('pious ones') and draft a code of practice that would follow the "testimony of the Granth Sahib." The text reports that Chaupa Singh prepared this collaborative statement and presented it to the Guru on May 14, 1700 (*Samat 1757, Jeth din satven*). The Guru listened to 'some part of the prepared document,' found it to follow the spirit of Sikh teachings as enshrined in the Granth, gave it his formal approval, and asked for its copies to be made and distributed among Sikhs.¹²⁴

Following the preface, the *rahaitnama* continues with lists of prescriptions with the notice that the *rahaitnamas* are prescriptions meant only for Sikhs and that "the Sikh of the guru should follow any other [code] that is in accordance with the teachings of the Guru and the ideas of [enlightened] Sikhs."¹²⁵ The preference and inscriptions convey important points about the Sikh religion. According to Mann there are four main reasons the document is important:

First, it offers a detailed statement on personal and communal obligations that the Sikhs were expected to follow. Secondly, by evoking the authority of the 'Granth Ji' or 'Granth Sahib' consistently, it establishes the source that one needs to tap to find answers to questions about practice. For the authors, 'the word of the Granth Sahib Ji should be considered the Guru.' Thirdly, the drafting of the document emphasizes the centrality of communal consensus in this process. Finally, the document defines *rahit* as an open-ended concept within the Sikh community, which has full authorization to resolve any practice-related issue based on the teachings enshrined in the text of the Granth.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Mann, Gurinder Singh. "Sources for the Study of Guru Gobind Singh's Life and times." *Journal of Punjab Studies* 15 (2008): 1-2, 249-250..

¹²⁵ Ibid, 250.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

These points combined with the aforementioned origin story are important for understanding the *rahaitnamas* as authoritative documents of communal origin which explicate Sikh creed. For our analysis of the *Chaupa Singh Rahaitnama*, we will use Hew McLeod's translation of the *Chaupa Singh Rahitnama*. The *Chaupa Singh Rahaitnama* claims to have been completed in 1700 but Hew McLeod puts this date closer to 1740.¹²⁷

It opens with general principles that Sikhs should abide by including:

A gursikh must be benevolent and sympathetic, fair and impartial, patient and forgiving, compassionate, generous, never mean...every Sikh should show love towards others and express love in service...The Gursikh who sows love and affection will reap blessings a thousandfold...A Gursikh should associate with others of exemplary character in order that he assimilate their qualities of love, trust, piety and wisdom. He should never associate with the perverse.¹²⁸

In saying so, the *rahaitnama* establishes basic Sikh principles found in Bhai Gurdas' Vaars.¹²⁹ These include service, compassion, love, and the importance of sangat. While these principles can be found in Bhai Gurdas' Vaars, the explicit authoritative community's statement of them are established here. Under doctrine, devotion, and daily discipline, the *rahaitnama* places an emphasis on going to the *Dharamsala* (*Gurdwara*) and worshiping with others, liturgical prayers, and who the Gursikh should show respect towards.¹³⁰ The *Dharamsala* in this *rahaitnama* is the center of Sikh life. Sikhs should visit the *Dharamsala* in the morning after *Japji Sahib* and in the evening after *So Dar Rehraas*.¹³¹ Through this practice, the Sikh would not only be close to the Guru Granth Sahib which is housed in the *Dharamsala*, but also develop strong community ties with

¹²⁷ Mann. "Sources for the Study..." 249; McLeod. *The Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama*, 10.

¹²⁸ McLeod. *The Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama*, 32.

¹²⁹ Khalsa, *Bhai Gurdas*, 3:14.

¹³⁰ McLeod. *The Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama*, 33.

¹³¹ *Japji Sahib* and *So Dar Rehraas* are both considered liturgical prayers

others in the Dharamsala seeking to build a connection with the Guru and listen to *kirtan*. As mentioned, daily liturgical prayers include *Japji Sahib* and *So Dar Rehraas* in addition to any other *bani*'s the Sikh could remember. Interestingly, in reciting *Japji Sahib*, the text recommends rising, bathing or performing five ablutions and then reciting the prayer five times. With each time taking fifteen to thirty minutes, this means adherents could expect to recite the same prayer for anywhere between one hour and fifteen minutes to two hours and thirty minutes. This in addition to *So Dar Rehraas*, extra *bani*, *Dharamsala* visits, and *kirtan* could put a Sikh's daily practice of prayers alone at well over four and a half hours each day.

The *rahaitnama*, written around 1740, goes back and forth on the topic of caste. In one line it says, "Personal relationships amongst Sikhs should be based on the belief that there is only one caste and only one lineage" in the next it says "Sikhs should, however, observe the distinctive customs of their various castes, and they should marry according to the traditional prescriptions of caste and lineage."¹³² He continues to elevate the status of brahmins saying Sikh marriages should be done by brahmins and further says "brahmin Sikhs should receive double the deference and attention normally bestowed on a Sikh" before he tempers it saying "any Sikh who imparts the teachings of the Guru should be similarly honored."¹³³ The *rahaitnama*'s mention of caste is surprising because it is a significant divergence from ideas explicated in the *Mul Mantra* and Bhai Gurdas' Vaars. The varied views on caste presented in the *rahaitnama* could be the product of it being a composite of multiple sources but it is also worth entertaining the idea that it might be how some Sikhs actually viewed their Sikh practice. While *Chaupa*

¹³² McLeod. *The Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama*, 36.

¹³³ *Ibid*, 36-37.

Singh Rahaitnama claims to have been written shortly after the creation of the Khalsa and McLeod says it was written closer to 1740, either origin timeline puts the writing of the *rahaitnama* within one generation of the Khalsa meaning it is more than possible for new adherents to maintain their original practices, especially those as deeply entrenched as caste.¹³⁴ Alternatively, the deference to Brahmans paid by this text could be indicative of the bias given by Chibbar interests in having a *rahaitnama* which elevates their brahmin caste through asking adherents to provide them extra respect and important roles in rituals.¹³⁵

The text also stakes claims on the status of Muslims and women. On Muslims the text says, “Never associate with a Muslim nor trust his word. Never drink water from a Muslim’s hands, never eat his food, and never sleep in his company. Do not be influenced by anything which a Muslim may say.”¹³⁶ This was likely because of tensions between Muslims and Sikhs at the time particularly in the context of betrayals noted by the *Zafarnama* and the martyrdoms of many Sikhs at the hands of Mughals.¹³⁷ The text continues speaking on how one should never be unarmed in the presence of Muslims, never place his hair on anything inscribed in Arabic, nor ever touch the feet of a Mughal.¹³⁸ On women it says:

Personal Duties

- i) a Gursikhni should sustain a dutiful and placid disposition as a wife. She should regard her husband as her lord. She should serve him better food

¹³⁴ Mann. "Sources for the Study..." 249; McLeod. *The Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama*, 10.

¹³⁵ McLeod. *The Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama*, 15.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 42.

¹³⁷ Shackle, C, and Arvind-pal Singh Mandair. 2005. *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus : Selections from the Sikh Scriptures*. 1st ed. London: Routledge, 137-144.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 42.

than other members of the family and should instruct him in the principles of the Sikh faith...

ii) To avoid pollution a Gursikhni should observe the following rules while preparing food:

1. She should not speak...¹³⁹

The text goes further to draw boundaries between women and the Khalsa saying women cannot be baptized by the sword ceremony inaugurated by Guru Gobind Singh and that they should not read the Guru Granth Sahib in a Sikh assembly.¹⁴⁰ It also says that “women are the embodiment of deceit.”¹⁴¹ The distrust of women, extending into the exclusion of women from fundamental Sikh acts, is surprising given Bhair Gurdas’ teachings about oneness. Nonetheless there are some positive or neutral mentions of women in the work such as how one should not associate themselves with someone who kills female babies.¹⁴²

As mentioned, the *Chaupa Singh Rahaitnama* is a composite document composed from multiple sources written over several decades ranging from the early 1700s to the 1740s. It’s filled with *rahaitnamas*, but also stories that include *rahaitnamas* in them. One of the primary criticisms of the *Chaupa Singh Rahaitnama* is its inclusion of Puranic theology, particularly those related to the Mata Devi (Durga).¹⁴³ In one episode, Guru Gobind Singh, utilizing the assistance of brahmins, conjures the Mata Devi.¹⁴⁴ The conjuring of a Goddess marks a serious departure from Sikh theology elucidated in prior

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 36.

¹⁴² Ibid, 40.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 15; Mata Devi is a manifestation of the Hindu Mother Goddess, Durga.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 172.

Janamsakhis and Bhai Gurdas' Vaars because it introduces divine multitude into the concept of divine unity.

The Chaupa Singh text's statements on marriage also deserve a closer look. He says marriage should be conducted according to caste without dowry.¹⁴⁵ He also says Gursikh should not marry his daughter to a Sikh with cut hair unless he agrees to be accepted into the Sikh fold and that a Gursikhs son should not marry the daughter of a man who cuts his hair unless she goes through a cleansing ritual.¹⁴⁶ Interesting to the topic of religious boundaries, the *rahaitnama* says "if the bridegroom has previously worn a sacred thread he may continue to do so during the wedding ceremony, but he should subsequently remove it."¹⁴⁷ The wearing of the sacred thread, traditionally associated with Hindu practice, is an interesting note because it indicates the continuation of Hindu traditions within the Sikh faith despite the Guru's dispensation of such ideas.¹⁴⁸ It also indicates some level of comfort with Hindu practice for Sikh identifying people.

While much of this *rahaitnama's* views inaugurate a cognitive dissonance between Sikh creed and code, it is useful to compare its views on daily observances, women, status, and defining Sikh rituals such as marriage. In examining code it is

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 38.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Khalsa, Sant Singh (trans.), Sri Guru Granth Sahib,, sikhithemax.org, Ang 471.

"Make compassion the cotton, contentment the thread, modesty the knot and truth the twist.

This is the sacred thread of the soul; if you have it, then go ahead and put it on me.

It does not break, it cannot be soiled by filth, it cannot be burnt, or lost.

Blessed are those mortal beings, O Nanak, who wear such a thread around their necks.

You buy the thread for a few shells, and seated in your enclosure, you put it on.

Whispering instructions into others' ears, the Brahmin becomes a guru.

But he dies, and the sacred thread falls away, and the soul departs without it." - Guru Nanak

important to keep the perspective that code is as much a reflection of creed as it is of the people who compose the Sikh panth. So while the code may depart from creed, our focus is on the practice of the Sikh people rather than how they fit into what we perceive as normative practice. For the next section of this chapter, we'll compare the *Chaupa Singh Rahaitnama* with that of the Singh Sabha Reformers.

Colonial Period: Sikh Rahait Maryada

During the Colonial period (1849-1947), Singh Sabha Reformers had to wrestle through old and, as we've seen with Chaupa Singh's rendition, contradictory *rahitnamas*. Particularly important for them was expunging those elements that were corrupted over time by malicious forces or ignorant Sikhs.¹⁴⁹ These elements were determined by comparing their modern Sikh thought and western standards back on the writing of early Sikhs. *Sikh Rahait Maryada* created by the Singh Sabha Reformers begins by setting boundaries. It immediately diverges from the Chaupa Singh text by providing the definition of a Sikh as:

Any human being who faithfully believes in: (1) One immortal being, (2) Ten gurus from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh, (3) The Guru Granth Sahib, (4) The utterances and teachings of the ten Gurus, and (5) The baptisms bequeathed by the tenth Guru, and who does not owe allegiance to any other religion is a Sikh.¹⁵⁰

The act of providing these bounds on the Sikh religion do more than introduce a clear definition for use by the British. The *rahitnama* also does not allow for any forms of Hindu identity in the normative Sikh tradition. Practices such as wearing a red thread

¹⁴⁹ McLeod. *The Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama*, 12.

¹⁵⁰ Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC). *The Code of Conduct and Conventions*, 7.

would be frowned upon in this belief system because of its allegiance to a different belief system.

The daily prayers to be recited include the *Japji Sahib* and *So Dar* mentioned in *Chaupa Singh's Rahaitnama*, but also includes Jaapu and a few other hymns.¹⁵¹ Here we notice the lack of repeated recitation of Japji Sahib which could indicate a Singh Sabha departure from unreasonable and unpractical displays of religiosity. The recitation of a single prayer for two and a half hours likely seems unreasonable to the reformers. It is also possible that in the process of pulling from different *rahitnamas* they chose this particular order of a Sikh's daily prayers. In accordance with Bhai Gurdas' teachings and those of the *Chaupa Singh Rahaitnama*, joining the congregation is important because through the congregation "one is more easily and deeply affected by gurbani."¹⁵²

Within the Gurdwara space the Singh Sabha *rahitnama* provides guidance on how one can worship. To avoid idolatry of Guru Granth Sahib or within a Gurdwara complex they explicitly prohibit both treating Guru Granth Sahib like an idol and the installation of idols¹⁵³ (12). It says:

Such practices as the arti with burning incense and lamps, offerings of eatable to Guru Granth Sahib, burning of lights, beating of gongs, etc. is contrary to gurmat (the Guru's way). However, for the perfuming of the place, the use of flowers, incense and scent is not barred... Worship of any idol or any ritual activity should not be allowed to be conducted inside gurdwara...

pressing the legs of the cot on which Guru Granth Sahib is installed, rubbing nose against walls and on platforms held sacred, or massaging these...or bowing down before the pictures of the Sikh Gurus or elders are...contrary to gurmat.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 9.

¹⁵² Ibid, 12.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 13.

This clear distinction on how the Guru must be worshiped both sets up a normative practice for Sikh religious expression and sets Sikh religiosity separate from that of the pantheistic Hindu creed. The *Chaupa Singh Rahaitnama* has no mention of idol worship making it seem like a non-issue for early Sikhs. This could be because all Sikhs at the time understood that idol worship was contrary to *gurmat*, but it could also be indicative of a different set of concerns. The Sikhs of the Colonial period were far more concerned with being equated with Hindus rather than Muslims. Hindu's were seen as a backwards group by Colonial authorities.¹⁵⁵ Books such as *Ham Hindu Nahin Hai* (We are not Hindus) were published to assert Sikhs were a unique identity group. The Singh Sabha reformers naturally turned their attention to justifying themselves in the face of the dominant British Protestant religious space by distinguishing themselves both from Sikhs with strong Hindu influences and Hindus themselves.¹⁵⁶ This is not unlike Chaupa Singh's work whose animosity focuses itself on Muslims. This makes sense given that Sikhs were in conflict with Muslim forces at the time. The *Chaupa Singh Rahaitnama* is far more explicit about its distaste while the carefully written Singh Sabha *rahitnama* subtly expresses the differences between the Hindu and Sikh traditions, seeking to establish the correct Sikh practice in opposition to "corruptions" that entered the religion over time.

In its treatment of women, the Singh Sabha *rahitnama* makes a clear departure from the Chaupa Singh tradition. When mentioning baptism rituals, encountering the

¹⁵⁵ Ballantyne. "Between Colonialism...", 34-35.

¹⁵⁶ This wasn't as opposition to Hindu schools of thought but to counteract Sikh schools of thought such as the Udasis and Nirmalas who argue that gurbani was an modern articulation of Vedic teachings (Mandair, Arvind-Pal. *Religion and the Specter*, 219.)

Guru Granth Sahib, and marriage, the Singh Sabha reformers made sure to include women at every opportunity and emphasize that their role is equivalent to the men's role.

Related to reading the Guru Granth Sahib they say:

(b) Every Sikh, man, woman, boy, or girl, should learn Gurmukhi to be able to read the Guru Granth Sahib. (c) Every Sikh should take the Hukam (command) of the Guru Granth in the ambrosial (early) hours of the morning before taking meal. If he/she fails to do that, he/she should read or listen to reading from the Guru Granth some time during travel etc...¹⁵⁷

This explicit inclusion of women is reiterated over and over again throughout the text.

The text's treatment of marriage provides context of women, status, and Sikh relationality to the Hindu tradition.

The *rahaitnama* says that in marriage: caste should not be a consideration, Sikh women must be married to a Sikh, and that the Sikh marriage "should be solemnized by Anand marriage rites."¹⁵⁸ The disregard for caste and the introduction of Anand marriage rites are both new additions since the *Chaupa Singh Rahaitnama*. The disregard for caste once again, separates Sikhs from the Hindus. The mention of Anand marriage rites is reflective of significant political debate occurring at the time in which Sikhs were trying to enshrine in law the Sikh ritual of marriage as an assertion of Sikh uniqueness in opposition to Hindu marriage rites used by many Sikhs.¹⁵⁹ In the new Sikh ritual, the Guru Granth Sahib rather than a fire is the center of the marriage ceremony.¹⁶⁰ Sikh marriage rites are not mentioned in the *Chaupa Singh Rahaitnama* beyond what one should do if the boy or girl in the marriage have cut their hair. In the discussion of

¹⁵⁷ SGPC, 17.

¹⁵⁸ SGPC, 26.

¹⁵⁹ Mandair, Navdeep S. "Colonial formations of Sikhism." *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 7.

¹⁶⁰ SGPC, 27.

marriage vows, gendered expectations of women are revealed. Before the marriage, the *Granthi's* (Sikh religious figure) role is to explain the marital duties of the husband and wife to each other. A section from the *Maryada* follows:

The bridegroom should be told that the girl's people having chosen him as the fittest match among the whole lot, he should regard his wife as his better half, accord to her unflinching love and share with her all that he has. In all situations, he should protect her person and honour, he should be completely loyal to her and he should show as much respect and consideration for her parents and relations as for his own...

The girl should be told that she has been joined in matrimony to her man in the hallowed presence of the Guru Granth Sahib and the congregation. She should ever harbour for him deferential solicitude, regard him as the lord and master of her love and trust; she should remain firm in her loyalty to him and serve him in joy and sorrow and in every clime (native or foreign) and should show the same regard and consideration to his parents and relatives as she would to her own parents and relatives.¹⁶¹

Between the two paragraphs, one can note patriarchal attitudes towards women held by the Singh Sabha reformers. The man protects his wife, the woman in-turn regards the man as the lord of her love and trust. The woman's framing attitude toward her husband is deferential solicitude while the man's is that the wife is his better half. These attitudes were a huge change from those found in Chaupa Singh's *rahaitnama* in which he considered women deceitful by nature and polluting by speech.¹⁶² This positive change put Sikhs more in line with values of equality we learned about in the creed chapter.

Between Guru and Colonial period's we see a shift in the orientation of Sikh code. During the Guru period we see Sikh code defining against the dominant Muslim forces ruling. Sikhs create a code closer to Hindu identity. They accept caste, avoid beef, lack specific marriage rituals, and are tolerant of Hindu practices within their fold. During the

¹⁶¹ SGPC, 27-28.

¹⁶² McLeod. *The Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama*, 36.

Colonial period, the Sikhs had to relocate themselves as subjects of the British Raj. This time, the dominant force is Protestantism and a judgemental Western theology.¹⁶³ This time period forced Sikhs to show the practical and modern nature of their religion meaning they expunge caste, have unique marriage rituals, distance themselves from Puranic explanations of Sikhi, and update their expectations of women. The updates and shifts occurring in Sikh culture as a result of the Singh Sabha movement will be further explored in the next chapter on cultus.

¹⁶³ Judgmental attitudes by missionaries can be found in many places. Two examples follow. In 1851, the *Church Missionary Intelligencer* proclaimed, “The inhabitants of the Punjab are like the lands around them, which are laying waste for want of irrigation. The Sikh religion cannot benefit them. It has been tried and found worthless.” Punjab’s future without “the fertilizing stream of the gospel” was bleak. Further, Nanak’s vision was “crude and unconnected” and he was too “latitudinarian” and Ernest Trumpp not long after declared “language of the Granth was ‘incoherent and shallow in the extreme, and couched at the same time in dark and perplexing language, in order to cover these defects. It is for us Occidentals a most painful and almost stupefying task, to read only a single Rag [unit of text]” (Ballyante. “Between Colonialism...”, 51-52.)

CHAPTER 3

SIKH CULTUS: THE GURUS TO THE SINGH SABHA

Looking back at Sikh cultus during the Guru (1469-1708) and Pre-Colonial period (1708-1849), we find in the absence of the Gurus, values they taught met unrealized practice. During the Colonial period we find an effort to re-contextualize Guru period teachings into a format suitable for the British and the reorientation of Sikh cultus through the creation of a systematized normative identity. To explore Sikh cultus during the Pre-Colonial period, we will look at sources discussing the historical actions of the Sikh Gurus as well as the actions of those in the Sikh community to understand the extent to which Sikh Guru's teachings affected the cultures they interacted with.

Guru Period Cultus

Guru Nanak lived in a relatively peaceful time.¹⁶⁴ Much of his actions in life demonstrated a serious concern with everyday injustices he found around him.¹⁶⁵ He sought to get rid of these. Because of this, Fenech calls Guru Nanak's mysticism as one of this world, one of a “socially involved renunciant.”¹⁶⁶ He built cities and taught that women had equal access to the divine. Most importantly for his large numbers of adherents from the Jat traditionally farming caste, he taught that labor was a legitimate path to the liberation of the soul.¹⁶⁷ This ethos of humility and action endeared him to

¹⁶⁴ Fenech, Louis E., 'The Evolution of the Sikh Community', in Pashaura Singh, and Louis E. Fenech (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, 2014, 40.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 40.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

marginalized people.¹⁶⁸ We see at this time and the decades after, a multitude of ways in which followers of Guru Nanak were referred to including Nanak Panth, Gurmukh panth, Nirmal Panth, Gursikh, Gurmukh-marg.¹⁶⁹ Furthermore, we see Janamsakhis emerge soon after his passing telling stories of Guru Nanak being an ascetic and others of him being a householder. He claims the identities of a Muslim Pir, Hindu ascetic, and of one who ignore dietary taboos.¹⁷⁰

During the Guru period (1469-1708), we also see Gurus being involved with the Mughal monarchy.¹⁷¹ Traditional Sikh accounts tell of Guru Nanak blessing Babur with sovereignty and Guru Angad scolding Babur's son, Humayun, after losing in battle. Guru Angad kept King Humayun waiting for forty-six minutes while he sang kirtan with the congregation and played with children.¹⁷² While Sikh culture promulgated by the Gurus emphasized equality and did not care for the status of those seeking the Guru's company, culture was heavily influenced by royal courts. Fenech lays out the role of the Mughal's royal influence:

God is the *sacchā pādīśāh*, the true emperor, and meetings of the pious are held in the *darbār* or court. Yet the particular way that Sikhs today worship collectively continues this imperial emphasis and is evocative of these grand stories regarding the interaction of the Sikh Gurus with the Mughal *shāhanshāhs*: Sikhs gather together in the presence or *hazūri* of the great king of the Sikhs, the Guru Granth Sahib, in the pages of which dwells the mystical presence of the Eternal Guru; they collectively worship within the *darbar*, the most famous of which is the Darbar Sahib

¹⁶⁸ Note: during the time of the final Sikh Guru, Mughal sources describe Sikhs as prosperous, wealthy merchants, ministers, scribes, bankers (Dhavan, P. *When Sparrows Became Hawks: The Making of the Sikh Warrior Tradition, 1699–1799*. New York: Oxford University Press, 27.)

¹⁶⁹ Oberoi, Harjot. "The Construction of Religious Boundaries." The University of Chicago Press, 1994, 54.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 55.

¹⁷¹ Fenech, 'Evolution of the...' 41.

¹⁷² Ibid.

also known as the Golden Temple in Amritsar; they hear the music of the *rāgī jathā* ('Group of Sikh musicians') as they approach the kingly scripture over which the royal whisk (*chaurī sāhib*) is reverently waved and the parasol or *chhatrī* erected, both of which connote the scripture's royal status; and they touch the forehead to the ground (*mathā theknā*) in front of this, the eternal Sikh Master. A visit to any Sikh gurdwara will abundantly confirm the Sikh debt to Indo-Timurid courtly protocol, etiquette, and comportment. Even today's flying of the Khalsa flags, the Nishan Sahib, may be understood as reenacting Indo-Timurid courtly protocol in which flags and standards played their part in advertising the royal presence whether at home or in transit.¹⁷³

Fenech's example shows the range of ways Sikh religious culture was influenced by the Mughals from how they refer to God to how the Guru is shown respect. The development of Sikh culture is shown in the third Guru's introduction of pilgrimages, Sikh holidays, Sikh rituals, and collections of hymns that contain works from the first two Gurus as well as Bhagats and Sufis.¹⁷⁴ This is despite Guru Nanak's open criticism of meaningless religious rituals and pilgrimages. It is believed that the external practices introduced were used to maintain the cohesiveness of an increasingly disparate Sikh community. It was due to cohesion concerns that the Manji system was introduced.¹⁷⁵ The Manji system was a system in which representatives of the Guru were sent to different regions to help local Sikhs connect with the Guru's teachings.

In the 1590s, famine-like conditions struck India and the Jats who were in poverty turned to the Guru for guidance. The Jats were known to be "predisposed against state structures."¹⁷⁶ Because of Guru Arjan's success at community service projects, the Mughals gave grants to the fifth Guru to build large pools and wells for the people.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷³ Ibid, 42-43.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 43.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 44.

¹⁷⁶ Singh, Pashaura (2010). 'Revisiting "Evolution of the Sikh Community"'. *Journal of Punjab Studies*, 17/1-2 (Spring-Fall): 58.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 58.

Guru Arjan was eventually executed on the orders of Emperor Jahangir, Akbar's son. One explanation for his execution was Mughal fears over the growing Sikh influence and increasing Jat population. According to Pashura the changes went beyond demographics, "Sikh community's self-consciousness was further heightened by the in-group conflict created by dissenters and slanderers. The external conflict with the local Mughal authorities provided another challenge to the Sikh Panth.¹⁷⁸ Guru Hargobind, the sixth Guru took up the sword, hunting, armed retainers, and introduced the concept of *Miri-Piri*.¹⁷⁹ *Miri-Piri* asserts the Guru's sovereignty over both the spiritual and worldly affairs of the Sikh Panth.¹⁸⁰ Understandably, due to these new activities representing a new period in Mughal-Sikh relations, Guru Hargobind and the Sikhs were driven to the Punjab Hills. As Guru Hargobind left however, he took some Mughal practices with him. As someone who was acquainted with Emperor Akbar's court, the Guru was likely influenced by the martial-emperor appearance maintained by Akbar. There was also a belief in the Mughal court that serving the emperor in a martial capacity could help lead one to perfecting his soul.¹⁸¹ These ideas of a martial king likely influenced Guru Hargobind as he formally introduced the martial elements into Sikh culture and emphasized a royal image in the Sikh court.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 65.

¹⁷⁹ Dhavan, P. (2011). *When Sparrows Became Hawks: The Making of the Sikh Warrior Tradition, 1699–1799*. New York: Oxford University Press, 30; Note: Guru Hargobind was not the first Sikh Guru to take up arms. There is a rich tradition of martial readiness that can be found from stories of wrestling matches organized by the second guru to the fifth Guru, Guru Arjan, keeping an army at Amritsar (Mann. "Sources for the Study...", 234.)

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Fenech, 'Evolution of the...' 45.

Before entering into the Khalsa period, it is important to understand what the Janamsakhis, rituals introduced, and Sikh relations with the Mughal Empire tell us about the nature of Sikh cultus. The Sikh culture incorporated elements from the culture around it and in that way was combinative. It exchanged gifts with the Mughals and religious groups around it as much as Mughal courts and the Hindu tradition provided gifts in the form of vocabulary, customs, and ideologies. These gifts provided Sikhs of the period something to rally with and rally against. It provided a background on which boundaries could be drawn, boundaries that separated Sikh culture and those which showed the culture to have been a combinative endeavor. In no way does being a combinative endeavor take away from the tradition, instead it adds color to its pages in the form of details helping adherents understand the true nature of their traditions. It provides an understanding of the shifting nature of religious culture and identity, showing how religion is of man as much as it relates to God. The introduction of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh is seen by some as a way to end ambiguities and shifting boundaries, but a closer look at this will reveal how even the establishment of a normative Sikh identity did not freeze Sikh identity in time.

The Khalsa is seen by some as the Guru's efforts to end ambiguity in normative practice.¹⁸² As we saw with the *Chaupa Singh Rehitnama* and *Singh Sabha Rahait Maryada*, being a part of the Khalsa comes with rituals, codes of conduct, and changes to how one maintains their body.¹⁸³ Two sources we can use to understand Khalsa identity in

¹⁸² Oberoi, *The Construction...*, 59.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

the Pre-Colonial period are Sainapati's *Gursobha* (1711) and *Bachitra Natak* (1698), a work attributed to the court of Guru Gobind Singh.¹⁸⁴

Guru Period Cultus: *Gursobha*

Gursobha presents “anxieties about the future of the Khalsa, and the multiple challenges it would face in preserving the Guru's legacy after his death.”¹⁸⁵ For Sainapati, the Khalsa was “not an innovation, but a necessary measure to restore an older Sikh *dharam*,” which was at risk due to the corrupt masands, formerly part of the Manji system, and engrained Hindu cultural practices.¹⁸⁶ Instead of having donations and weapons given to masands, the Guru requested all Sikhs provide their donation at the annual Baisakhi celebration. It was at one of these celebrations that the Guru revealed the Khalsa identity. The identity, however, was not well received among many groups of society because joining the Khalsa meant leaving behind caste groups.¹⁸⁷ Caste, being such an important part of Indian society, dictated family ties, funeral rites, marriage and more. To leave it behind often meant estrangement from family and their caste group. For example, to have a funeral rite led by a brahmin and for one to shave their head after the funeral was important to many Hindus.¹⁸⁸ Members of the Khalsa who refused to shave and have their funeral moderated by a brahman were boycotted by their caste group.¹⁸⁹

High-caste followers of the Gurus had even more problems with the Khasla because they

¹⁸⁴ Singh, Harbans, “Gursobha”, *Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*, accessed via thesikhencyclopedia.com, 1; Singh, Harbans, “Bachitra Natak”, *Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*, accessed via thesikhencyclopedia.com, 1.

¹⁸⁵ Dhavan. *When Sparrows Became...*, 25.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 25, 42.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 42.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

had more to lose, socially and religiously, from adopting the Khalsa identity. *Gursobha* was released not long after *Bachitra Natak*. As we will see *Bachitra Natak*, directly connects with many of the concerns brought up by *Gursobha*.

Guru Period Cultus: *Bachitra Natak*

Bachitra Natak makes heavy use of Puranic mythology and pays attention to caste and its surrounding social norms. According to Dhavan:

Bachitra Natak views the warrior's *dharam* in a novel way, in the context of a new Sikh court. It engages not only Sikh moral traditions but also other martial and ethical traditions—Puranic mythology, popular narratives of Khatri caste origins, the concept of different *dharams* for different castes...*Bachitra Natak* is mainly concerned with providing testimony to the Guru's defense of *dharam* in the face of multiple rivals, both spiritual and political. The Guru is depicted as conscious of his own humanity and its limits, rejecting any claim to a divine status.¹⁹⁰

The Sikh *dharam* in the text is presented in a way that utilizes Puranic mythology and caste. This does not sit well with the vision of Sikh *dharam* laid out in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, which theologically sets itself apart from caste and Puranic mythology.¹⁹¹ For example in a description of Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom, the author says, "He protected the *tilak* (vermillion mark) and the *juneo* (sacred thread) and enacted a great sacrifice, For the saintly he accomplished this, he gave up his head without a complaint..."¹⁹² The framing of this passage is unclear and could be understood to mean the Guru saw these pieces of practice as valuable. These are not the only ambiguities. The script firmly rejects brahminical ideas of caste, but then posits the Guru as "the epitome

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 26, 35.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 37.

¹⁹² Ibid.

of Kshatriya king in ways strikingly similar to Sanskrit texts.”¹⁹³ These texts combined with that of Chaupa Singhs text we analyzed in the last chapter illuminate different aspects of Sikh practice. While there were proponents of *Gursobha* who were adamant about the dismissal of caste, other works such as Bachitar Natak and Chaupa Singh’s *rahaitnama* show a community less ready to give up caste and the cultural practices that go along with it. To further understand the change between the Guru period Sikh cultus and Colonial period Sikh cultus, we will briefly examine the twin concepts of Guru Panth and Guru Granth.

Guru Period: Guru Panth and Guru Granth

Guru Panth and Guru Granth was a twin doctrine which was strong during the 18th century. Guru Granth is the Guru Granth Sahib. As the living guru for the Sikhs guides Sikhs in their daily life. The Guru Panth doctrine is any congregation of Sikhs informed by and gathered around the Guru Granth Sahib.¹⁹⁴ Through the process of gathering together, the Guru manifests itself in the congregation. The Guru Panth doctrine also found in Bhai Gurdas’ *bani*:

Where the five persons sit together, Lord God, is there; this mystery of indescribable Lord cannot be known....But only those five meet (to sit together) who repudiating hypocrisy have merged their consciousness in the unstruck melody of the Word. Such fellow-disciples adorn the holy congregation.¹⁹⁵

The five people he speaks of, are people who control lust, anger, ego, greed and infatuation to the point where their being absorbs qualities that result in truth,

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Singh, Pashaura. ‘Revisiting “Evolution of...”’, 65-66.

¹⁹⁵ Khalsa. *Bhai Gurdas*, 38:6.

contentment, compassion.¹⁹⁶ From this dual concept of Guru Panth and Guru Granth emerged the *gurmata* tradition in which Sikhs could pass resolutions in the presence of the Guru Granth that had the “intention of the Guru.”¹⁹⁷

The Guru Panth concept carried over into the creation of the *Chaupa Singh Rahaitnama*. The *rahaitnama*, and its state as a community document, provides insight into Sikh culture of the day. Its creation is particularly illuminating. As discussed in the previous chapter, the *rahaitnama* is said to have been created by the Sikh panth and then presented to the Guru.¹⁹⁸ The document speaks of practices that revere brahmins and those which seem to hold onto some Hindu practices such as the sacred red thread (*juneo*). The *rahaitnama* encourages individuals to get rid of the red thread before marriage and promotes equality between castes. However, its mention of the need to remove a thread and its mention of the superiority or equality of brahmans indicates that caste and hindu practices were salient discussion points during the cultus of the Guru period. As further support, the *Bachitar Natak* and *Gursobha* both indicate that Khalsa identity was not as firm and distinct as will be suggested later by Singh Sahba reformers. The idea of Guru Panth, which spawned *rahaitnamas* and the radical equality seen in Sikh circles, was over time sidelined in favor of the doctrine of Guru Granth.¹⁹⁹ The start of this could be seen when Maharaja Ranjit Singh abolished the practice of political *gurmata*s in an effort to consolidate his power.²⁰⁰ In this chapter’s next section, we will

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Singh, Pashaura. ‘Revisiting “Evolution of...”’, 65.

¹⁹⁸ Mann. “Sources for the Study...” 249.

¹⁹⁹ Singh, Pashaura. ‘Revisiting “Evolution of...”’, 65.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 65.

explore how Sikh culture was systematized during the Colonial period and the concept of Guru panth diminished in favor of a Guru Granth based scriptural theory.

Colonial Period Cultus

To understand Colonial period cultus (1849-1947), this section will utilize one primary source, Teja Singh's *Sikhism, Its Ideals and Institutions* and a well known secondary source, Harjot Oberoi's *The Construction of Religious Boundaries* to argue that the Singh Sabha reformers changed the relationship dynamics between Hindus and Sikhs, the Guru, the Granth, and the Gurdwara in an effort to relocate Sikhs in modernity as a distinct identity.

In his work, Teja Singh speaks of the Guru's vision of a casteless society as if at some point, it was a realized vision²⁰¹ He says:

Before the Sikh Gurus, the leaders of thought had fixed certain grade of salvation according to the different capacities for men, whom they divided into high and low castes...teachings [of the Guru however] could not tolerate any ideas of caste or untouchability. Man rose in the estimation of man. Even those who had been considering themselves as the dregs of society, and who for generation had lived as grovelling slaves of the so-called higher classes became fired with a new hope and courage to lift themselves and to be equals of the best of humanity.²⁰²

Teja Singh's paragraph here illustrates a key argumentative point in the Singh Sabha movement. He argues that there was a point where Sikh values and ethos articulated by the Gurus manifested themselves in society. There was a time where "man rose in the estimation of man" and those who had been oppressed by higher castes rose up beyond the shackles laid upon them by society. As we learned in that last section, this vision was

²⁰¹ Singh, Teja. *Sikhism, its Ideals and...*, 9.

²⁰² Ibid, 9-10.

never truly realized. The *Chaupa Singh Rehitnama's* mention of caste in religious ritual and sacred threads is a clear indication of the caste filled and hierarchy filled Sikh society that existed after and perhaps even during the Guru period (1469-1708). The claim made by Teja Singh, however, is important because it provides context on a fundamental argument made by the Singh Sabha reformers about Colonial Sikh cultus, that is, the Singh Sabha movement sought to return religiously corrupted Sikhs to the Guru era Sikh practice.²⁰³ One in which there was a love between the Guru and his people and one in which a strong Khalsa prevented Vedant orientated Sikh sects from “backsliding [the Sikh population]...into superstition and apathy.”²⁰⁴ We see during the Singh Sabha period, an effort by the reformers to save the ailing tradition from its disappearance.²⁰⁵ The Sikh culture as viewed by the Singh Sabha is well described Major Leech’s statements prior to the complete annexation of the Sikh Empire:

It will appear extraordinary that the Sikhs, who are forbid to worship at a Hindoo Mandar [shrine], should frequent Hindoo places of pilgrimage; but such is the case. Sikh pilgrims to the Ganges at Hurdwar have for many years past been in-creasing, and nothing is more probable than the Sikhs gradually re-adopting many more Hindoo observances!²⁰⁶

In order to reconcile the British conception of the Sikh religion and text being one of progressive reform and the actual practice of Sikhs being that of Hindus, the Singh Sabha movement embarked on a mission to distinguish between modern, corrupting Hindu and folk religion influences from the “true” Sikhism as practiced by the Gurus.²⁰⁷ The

²⁰³ Oberoi. *The Construction of...*, 214.

²⁰⁴ Singh, Teja. *Sikhism, its Ideals and...*, 69; For more information on superstitions see citation 217.

²⁰⁵ In his work, Oberoi argues this Sikh decline was invented by Colonial and Sikh authorities based on faulty data (Oberoi. *The Construction of...*, 212.)

²⁰⁶ Oberoi. *The Construction of...*, 213.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

corrupting influences of the Hindus and folk religion were idol worship, turning to saints for guidance, and utilizing witchcraft.²⁰⁸ These reforms were likely motivated by desires for internal reforms and stronger Sikh identity as much as it was motivated by a desire to separate “true” Sikhs practices from Hindu practices.

At the time of the Singh Sabha reformers, Protestant missionaries were taking a dominant role in Punjab’s culture amid what both the reformers and missionaries saw as backwards practices. Church-run schools were the norm.²⁰⁹ They were valued by the population because they taught students English, a language prized for its ability to secure government jobs and economic success.²¹⁰ These mission schools taught the Bible along with messages deriding other faiths.²¹¹ Left with no option for their kids to obtain an English education relevant to the British regime they lived under, parents were forced to send their children to these schools. Missionaries also set up massive printing press operations equipped with India’s first Gurmukhi script typefaces and were able to disseminate millions of pages of literature.²¹² They also created model villages and advanced mission hospitals to attract converts.²¹³ The Church’s missionary efforts were wildly successful with the Christian population between 1881 and 1891 growing over 400 percent to nearly 20,000 adherents.²¹⁴

Sikh culture at the time was not faring well according to the reformers. Female infanticide was rampant among urban high caste Sikhs such as the Bedi’s.²¹⁵ They killed

²⁰⁸ See citation 217.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 220.

²¹⁰ Ibid, 221.

²¹¹ Ibid, 220-221.

²¹² Ibid, 220.

²¹³ Ibid, 221.

²¹⁴ Ibid, 222.

²¹⁵ Ibid, 228.

their daughters out of fear that the family honor could be tarnished by her marriage to a low caste man indicating the importance of caste in Sikh society. Sikhs were also well known to worship local saints, utilize witchcraft, seek out individuals to summon spirits, divine omens, and go on pilgrimages to holy rivers.²¹⁶ In an argument against Sikhs doing such practices, Kahn Singh Nabha says:

Paying attention to omens, the nine grahas [planets], the twelve signs of the zodiac, incantations, magic, divination by lines, and by the voice is all vanity. It is vain to draw conclusions from the cries of donkeys, dogs, cats, kites, malalis [sic] and jackals. Omens drawn from meeting a widow, a man with a bare head, from water, fire, sneezing, breaking wind, hiccups, lunar and week days, unlucky moments and conjunctions of planets are all superstition. The holy who reject such superstitions obtain happiness and salvation.²¹⁷

These polemics against superstitious practices were motivated by a desire to distance Sikh creed, code, and cultus away from that of what was perceived to be archaic Hindu practices. For the Sikh reformers, Sikhism had become a syncretistic mix of Hindu and Sikh practice in which Sikh ideals of rationality and equality had been thrown to the wayside. The Tat Khalsa's reformers (the dominant branch of Singh Sabha), were appalled by the state of the Sikh community. They sought to bring Sikhs back to the Guru's message. With motivation and theological foundation they borrowed from the British, they set forth to authoritatively identify correct Sikh practices and dismiss all other options.

The reformers targeted three areas, as identified by Oberoi. They sought systematization in the realms of Guru, Granth, and Gurdwara.²¹⁸ In discussing the Guru, they sought to establish much of what the Guru period *Chaupa Singh Rahaitnama*

²¹⁶ Ibid, 308-314.

²¹⁷ Ibid, 314.

²¹⁸ Ibid, 316.

ordered the Khalsa to do, that is, avoid certain sects of Sikhs who departed from the teaching of the Sikh Gurus.²¹⁹ Additionally they sought to separate Sikhs from local saints who were sought out by the masses to understand daily troubles, to gain spiritual enlightenment, and seek help through divine intercession.²²⁰ The Singh Sabha reformers adopted practices of Protestant missionaries and launched speaking campaigns and disseminated pamphlets to change Sikh perspectives on these saints.²²¹ The reformers, some of whom were at one point followers of local saints, understood that the public sought answers to life questions and comfort through these saints.²²² In response, Sardul Singh compiled *Sardha Puran*, a text with 270 Guru Granth Sahib verses to be recited in situations varying from nightmares and sickness to profit in business.²²³ The compilation of such works reflect the Singh Sabha desire to pull Sikhs away from practices “belonging to others,” those others being Hindus, folk religion, and Sikh sects such as the Udasis.²²⁴ The effort to create a cultus consistent with Sikh creed was useful for proving to onlookers the uniqueness of Sikh cultus among the milieu of indic religious traditions.

²¹⁹ In his work, Harjot Oberoi seems to make a point that the existence of alternate Gurus, idol worship, etc is authoritative in the tradition. This is simply false. Alternate traditions such as the Minas were frowned upon during the Guru period as evidenced by mentions in Sainpati’s *Gursobha*, Bhai Gurdas Vaars, and *Chaupa Singh’s Rahaitnamas*. Oberoi seems to gloss over these primary sources. The mere existence of alternate traditions does not make them authoritative and declaring these traditions to deviate from orthodoxy is not “abjuring” the faithful from worshipping popular saints (Oberoi. *The Construction of...*, 315). Oberoi places far too much emphasis on practice rather than theology. By this logic, whatever is done by people is right. The result is what Nikky Gurinder Kaur calls analysis with no center. While authority can originate from the masses, in the Sikh case, authority centers itself on the Gurus and emanates from there.

²²⁰ Ibid, 316-317.

²²¹ Ibid, 307-309, 317.

²²² Ibid, 307, 317.

²²³ Ibid, 318.

²²⁴ Ibid, 318.

In the efforts to reorient popular Sikh practice from saints, caste, pilgrimages, and folk religion, reformers worked to center the religion on the Guru Granth Sahib. They argued that any answer or comfort one could glean from a local sant could be found in the Guru Granth Sahib. In the process of replacing saints and folk practices with the Guru Granth Sahib, the Dasam Granth was pushed to the sidelines because of its utilization of Puranic mythology which could confuse adherents or worse be utilized to demonstrate why Sikhs are Hindus.²²⁵ The emphasis on Guru Granth made reformers take a closer look at the sacred spaces the Granth inhabited.

The gurdwara spaces of the Singh Sabha era were seen by reformers as blasphemous shows of disrespect to the Granth's teachings. At the time, Gurdwaras were centers for seasonal fairs, idol worship, and political battles. Every month at a major gurdwara at Taran Taran, a fair called *Masya da mela* would be held with trading, entertainment, and religious festivities.²²⁶ Singh Sabha reformers saw the fair differently saying:

On the appointed day of festivities drunks freely roamed around the sacred precincts making nuisance of themselves, gangs made up of bad characters and criminal elements shouted abuse and roughed up pilgrims, young men equipped with long sticks openly indulged in eve-teasing and molested innocent women....and finally, in front of the holy shrine's main gateway prostitutes freely danced and sang vulgar songs.²²⁷

They made it a mission of theirs to reform this space and were successful. In their annual report they noted "the drive for reform succeeded in purging the troublesome and

²²⁵ Ibid, 320.

²²⁶ Ibid, 321.

²²⁷ Ibid.

abhorrent Masya fairs and turned them into a useful ground for the dissemination of authentic Sikh values.’²²⁸

At Harimandar Sahib, prior to Singh Sabha reformers, one could find countless idols lining up the side of the *sarovar* and one could find shrines to non-Sikh deities.²²⁹ This practice was contested by Singh Sabha reformers at every opportunity till the idols were finally removed in 1905.²³⁰ At their removal, however, a multitude of non-Sikh groups such as the Arya Samaj and Brahma Samaj stepped in to argue that the idols should remain. Arya Samaj went so far as to file a formal petition with 13,000 signatures stating that idol worship was customary in the Sikh tradition and that Hindu-Sikh relations would be harmed by their removal.²³¹ On these points the Singh Sabha reformers firmly clapped back that other religious groups had no business interfering with Sikh shrines among other arguments. The key here being the Singh Sabha eventually prevailed in not only removing idols but in eventually, through political maneuvering, took control of Gurdwaras away from the British government and non-Sikhs.²³²

As seen, caste continues to be a major concern for Singh Sabha reformers. They sought to remedy these issues by recentering Sikhs on the Guru, their teachings, and an imagined past. Based on our understanding of Sikh creed and code, it also seems that the reformers advanced the Sikh *rahait* closer to the Gurus teachings on equality in a way that was not necessarily possible at the writing of *Chaupa Singh Rahaitnama* due to the

²²⁸ Ibid, 322.

²²⁹ Harimandiar Sahib, also known as the Golden Temple, is considered the most important Shrine in the Sikh tradition; Sarovar is a reservoir of water that is located near or around Gurdwaras.

²³⁰ Ibid, 323.

²³¹ Ibid, 324.

²³² Ibid, 327.

Guru Panth's attachment to Hindu beliefs. Between the two time periods we also see a fascinating trend in which the Sikh community tends to model itself after the ruling elites. During the Guru period this was the Mughal regime and in the Colonial period this was the British regime's intellectual tradition.

CONCLUSION

This thesis started with laying out an understanding of religion as “a system of symbols (creed, code, cultus) by means of which people (a community) locate themselves in the world with reference to both ordinary and extraordinary powers, meanings and values.”²³³

Creed being explanations about the meaning of human life and unconscious affirmation that surface in casual conversation. Code being customs and moral systems. And cultus being akin to culture, how people act out codes in practice. Through a deeper exploration of Albanese’s definition we learned of religion as an entity which locates individuals and stakes out a claim on the internal and external landscapes of an individual’s identity.²³⁴

From there we investigated what it means for those identities to be combinative and to exchange intellectual, social, and cultural gifts.²³⁵ All this was laid out with the goal to understand three ways the Sikh religion was influenced by its encounters with the British Empire and ultimately gave birth to a new combinative tradition. This paper argued that the British Colonial period resulted in a significant cultural exchange that reoriented Sikh creed, code, and cultus. The new combinative tradition was one which centered itself on religious boundaries and normative Sikh theology in the face of new religious currents taking hold in India.

The chapters arranged themselves according to Albanese’s definition with each chapter addressing the creed, code, or cultus of the Sikhs in both the Guru period and the Colonial period. In the creed chapter, we understood the Singh Sabha efforts as one

²³³ Albanese. *America Religions and Religion*, 10.

²³⁴ *Ibid*, 5.

²³⁵ Albanese. ‘Exchanging Selves...’, 204.

which rooted itself in Sikh scripture but used terminology and fierce intellectual maneuvering to force categorization on the Sikh religion. In its use of language and framing of the Sikh tradition using British theological terms, I argue that the religion became a combinative reinterpreted effort that simultaneously sought to distinguish the religion from those near it and to ally it with ideologies respectable to the British administrators. Judging from the political results, the retaking of Gurudwara administration and Anand Marriage Act, they were successful in their goal of defining Sikh theology to get political recognition.²³⁶ More importantly in my estimation, however, was how the Singh Sabha reformers relocated Sikh identity. They took Sikh theology from the Guru period and located it in a new context of modern thought. Motivated by British Protestants and a perceived decline of the Sikh tradition, Singh Sabha reformers used this opportunity to separate Sikh identity from other identities near it to ultimately establish the unique, progressive, and practical nature of the tradition. This seems to have been an effort to both show Sikhs the religion's ability to hold up to western gaze and an effort to show the western gaze that Sikh were worthy of its attention. In this way we see both the external and internal landscapes of Sikh identity being reshaped for a new context.

The next chapter on code built upon creed by showing how Sikh creed was put into rules and moral systems for Sikhs to follow. It looked at two primary sources, the *Chaupa Singh Rahaitnama* and the SGPC's *Sikh Rahit Maryada*. Through their study we see code reflective of its time period. The Chaupa Singh text show a code friendly to Hindu practices related to diet, caste, and identity while vehemently opposed to the

²³⁶ Mandair, Navdeep. "Colonial Formations...", 79.

muslim rulers of the time. The SGPC document, however, shows a code heavily influenced by Western norms. Caste is expunged, marriage rituals separated from those of Hindus, and women are generally respected. These reflect the Western distaste for caste and Hindu practices. The texts, particularly the Chaupa Singh document, show how religious group's code may not necessarily abide by their creed. This goes back to the concept of religion being a combinative endeavor. The Sikh religion absorbed practices and people from the lands it inhabited and rulers who ruled them. Through this absorption, alternate practices were brought in. Despite items such as caste being opposed to this thesis's understanding of the Sikh Guru's teachings, it does not mean caste was not an integral part of early Sikh religious experience. As fluid entities, religions change and the Singh Sabha movements additions and combinations are as valuable to understanding the Sikh tradition as are additions from earlier periods. But as careful observers of religious tradition, it's important that we do not forget the theological basis of practice as was done in Harjot Oberoi's work, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*.²³⁷

The final chapter of this thesis looked at Sikh cultus. In its exploration of cultus, we understood the Sikh culture espoused by the Gurus to be different from some of their adherents and even more different from the urban Sikhs looked at by Oberoi during the Singh Sabha movement. The Sikh culture of the Guru period framed itself along with and against the Mughal Empire and its practices. The Gurus' court and poetry reflected these influences. Generally, the Guru's culture also framed itself against caste and meaningless rituals in the time period. Towards the end and immediately after the Guru period, however, we see the emergence of texts such as *Gursobha* and *Bachitra Natak*,

²³⁷ Oberoi centers his work on Sikh practice and largely ignores Sikh theology; See footnote 219 for more.

which indicate Sikh culture was not entirely aligned with the ideals of the Guru. These texts allowed for diverse interpretations and practices. In the face of intense missionary pressure from British and Indian religious groups, Singh Sabha reformers sought to bring Sikh culture in line with both the teachings of the Guru and British expectations of Sikhs. They embarked on a mission to center Sikhs on their singular interpretations of the Guru, Granth, and Gurudwara spaces to create a mainstream Sikh culture structured around western ideologies. Given our understanding of creed, code, and cultus across times we understand Sikhs to have westernized their theological frameworks, created codes in line with both Western and their interpretation of Sikh values, and reshaped Sikh culture through public campaigns.

Through an examination of Sikh translocation during the British Colonial period, this paper argued that British contact via religion and political culture resulted in exchanges which ultimately reoriented the Sikh's creed, code, and cultus. The resulting combinative tradition centered itself on the construction of religious boundaries and a normative Sikh theology in an effort to communicate what it is and what it is not while also maintaining its merit in the face of new religious currents taking hold in India.

Beyond understanding the Sikh religion, this thesis has also illuminated the shifting nature of religion. Extraordinary religion is a human explanation to the question "what is going on?" To answer this a person looking out of their home window may tell you their kids are biking outside. A fisherman may tell you about how his traps will catch all the fish in the sea. A writer may say there's a connection between the depression youth feel and the lack of resolution on climate change. If you decide to prod further, about larger existence, they'll likely each tell you different answers. Each of these

answers will tell you about how they locate themselves in the world and their position in the universe. Similarly in this thesis, I've not sought to say which position is the best position, but I've shared how Sikhs across time viewed their religion's creed, code, and cultus in an attempt to understand how a community positions itself across time in light of external and internal forces. In positioning themselves, religions are like plants in orbit. The biggest planets have the strongest gravity and tend to alter the trajectory of the other planets orbiting the sun. But even the small bodies like Earth's moon can use their gravity to pull back to create tides on the larger planets. Religions and ideas inhabiting elevated political and social status are like the large planets which pull smaller ones along. Their calls demand a response and through the response, discourse becomes oriented around the group whose power is most pronounced. In the process of responding, however, ideas are exchanged and new thinking is introduced. The changes brought about in the Sikh tradition through colonialism are reflective of this call and response. In the face of Colonial pressure, the Sikh tradition responded and constructed boundaries through which it demonstrated what it wished to be seen as.

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