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**A World Reconstructed: Religion, Ritual And Community
Among the Sikhs, 1850-1909.**

A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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E. S. ~~CRIBER~~

Abstract

The pluralistic paradigm of the Sikh faith for much of the nineteenth century allowed its adherents to belong to any one of the following traditions: Udasi, Nirmala, Suthresashi, Khalsa, Sangatsaihibie, Jitmalie, Bakhtatmlie, Mihansahie, Sahajdhari, Kuka and Sarvaria. Many of these Sikhs shaved their heads, freely smoked tobacco and hashish and were not particular about maintaining the five external symbols of the faith. In the absence of a centralized church and an attendant religious hierarchy, heterogeneity in religious beliefs, plurality of rituals, and diversity of life styles, were freely acknowledged. A pilgrimage to the Golden Temple could be supplemented with similar undertakings to the Ganges at Hardwar or the shrine of a Muslim saint. Attending seasonal festivals at Benares or Hardwar was in no way considered a transgression of prevailing Sikh doctrines, whatever teleological studies may like to assert today. Contemporary vehicles of knowledge - myths, texts, narratives, folklore and plays produced by non-Sikh authors - were accorded a firm place within the Sikh cosmology. Far from there being a 'single' Sikh identity, most Sikhs moved in and out of multiple identities, defining themselves at one moment as residents of this village, at another as members of that cult, at one moment as part of this lineage, at another as part of that caste, and at yet another moment as belonging to a 'sect'. The boundaries between what could be seen as the centre of the Sikh tradition and its periphery were highly blurred and several competing definitions of what constituted a 'Sikh' were possible.

By the closing decades of the nineteenth century, successive waves of Sikh reform movements like the Singh Sabha, its inheritor the Chief Khalsa Diwan, and the Akali combatants in the 1920s, had succeeded in purging the house of Sikhism of most of the older conventions and practices. In a Nietzschean vein they established a new vision of what it meant to be a Sikh: one who fully subscribed to the five K's; visited only what were exclusively Sikh shrines, considered Punjabi as the sacred language of the Sikhs, conducted his *rites de passage* according to the prescribed rituals, and abjured prohibited foods. A new cultural elite aggressively usurped the right to represent others within the community. Their ethnocentric logic subsumed other identities and dissolved alternate ideals like asceticism, under a monolithic, codified and closed culture. It gained currency because its dominant

characteristics represented an unchanging idiom in a period of flux and change. Henceforth, Sikhs would be required to conceive and speak through one language, that of the cultural elites. Those who deviated or refused to mould themselves according to the standards of this great tradition, were gradually displaced and consigned to the margins of the community. After considerable resistance, these marginalised groups finally turned their backs on Sikhism and went their own way. The older Sanatanist paradigm of Sikhism was displaced for ever and replaced by what came to be known as the Tat Khalsa. In between the two cultures of the Sanatan Sikhs and the Tat Khalsa were the Kuka Sikhs. The image-breaking, cow-protecting and purity-obsessed Kukas exemplified many axioms of Sanatan Sikhism (e.g. veneration of the cow), but simultaneously gave a foretaste of what was to follow (e.g. rejection of idol worship).

This thesis is a study of this transitional process: of how one paradigm or vision of the world was replaced by another. In studying this transition this work also raises fundamental issues in the analysis of culture and religion in South Asia: what influences self-perceptions, who defines them and how they gain ground. The theoretical concerns of this thesis are influenced by the intersection of anthropology and history.

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Acknowledgements

This study examines the relationship of consciousness, experience and human practice in nineteenth century north India. It endeavours to do so by examining how the notion of a homogeneous religious community emerged among the Sikhs and how at the level of everyday life it was put into practice. My concern is not merely with the relationship between a religious community and society but also the semiotic and affective processes through which ethnic identity gets formulated. Although I embarked on this study long before the subject of the Sikhs and their ethnonationalism became topical, I hope it will throw some light on their present predicaments and politics.

I owe many thanks to many people and institutions that helped me in researching and writing this thesis. My deepest appreciation and gratitude go to my supervisor Dr. J.T.F. Jordens, who despite the heavy demands on his time, generously shared his thoughts and observations on Indian religions with me. I was extremely fortunate in having Professor Hew McLeod agreeing to be my additional supervisor. His countless letters from Otago and Toronto in response to my drafts have been a constant source of encouragement and words alone cannot express my indebtedness to him. Dr. Miles my adviser never failed me when it came to integrating history and social anthropology.

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Note on Transliteration

In transliterating Gurmukhi words I have followed the format established by the *Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*, Punjabi University, Patiala. Names of persons and places have been spelled in the text without any diacritical marks. To conform to the manner in which the place names were written during the period I have spelled them according to a work by Sir James Douie: *The Panjab, North-West Frontier Province and Kashmir* (Cambridge, 1916). Gurmukhi words that have been used constantly have not been italicised in the text.

Introduction

Religion? What a crude word you are using there! Are you going to get tangled up in faith, belief and all that?

Lucien Febvre, "Religious Practices and History of France".

There are no religions which are false. All are true in their own fashion - all answer, though in different ways, to the given conditions of human existence.

E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

It is all very well for historians to think, speak and write about Islam, Hinduism or Sikhism, but they rarely pause to consider if such clear-cut categories actually found expression in the consciousness, actions and cultural performances of the human actors they are describing. Reading ethnographic materials from nineteenth-century Punjab I was constantly stuck by the brittleness of our text-book classifications. There simply was no one-to-one correspondence between what I discovered and what I had been tutored in. Hundreds of thousands of Hindus regularly undertook pilgrimages to what were apparently Muslim shrines; vast numbers of Muslims conducted part of their life-cycle rituals as if they were Hindus and equally the Sikhs attended Muslim saints and Hindu sacred spots. How could these facts be represented and reconciled with the belief systems of the three grand religions of the Punjab? Was it possible that our taxonomies were excluding people from their own history and preventing them from making the statements they wished to make? This thesis initiates inquiry into these and related questions by looking at the construction of pan-Indian religious communities in Indian society during the colonial period.

While monographs on village, caste and sect-like local religious communities in India are legion, there is a paucity of literature on universal religious communities as distinct from all sorts of parochial communities. By universal religious communities I do not imply merely the formal beliefs that distinguish such collectivities and lead their adherents to conceive of themselves as distinct from the rest of the population, but also the whole historical process of how a cohesive community of believers comes to be consolidated and reproduced through a cultural fusion of texts, myths, symbols and rituals with human bodies and sentiments, often under the aegis of

religious personnel. Any work that commits itself exclusively to any one of these indices runs the risk of being somewhat myopic in outlook and could lead to questionable conclusions. For instance, if one were to explore say only rituals and texts, it would be fairly easy and quite correct to conclude from such study of the pervasiveness of religion and religious communities in Indian society, particularly in the sense Durkheim defined the term as a dichotomy between the sacred and the profane.¹ But from this it does not logically follow that because there are these communities, there are also uniform pan-local religious communities. The two are rather distinct phenomena and quite often the presence of the former has been mistaken for the latter. A series of little traditions piled on top of each other does not make for a great tradition. To put it in another way, the presence of religions *per se* does not underwrite a religion.

A prominent instance of representing these two levels in unison are the influential writings of Louis Dumont. From his extensive readings on Indian society, particularly sacred texts, he concludes that the subcontinent was deeply divided on the basis of antagonistic religious communities.² Through an uncritical usage of the term communities - 'a group of adherents to the same religion' - he appears to be presupposing that the categories Hindu and Muslim are totally unproblematic and have possessed historically distinct entities.³ Unfortunately, because Dumont does not define what religion means for him it is hard to know what exactly he means by adherence to the same religion. Where do the boundaries of this same religion begin and end? More importantly, does each religious performance, say an act of pilgrimage to a shrine, even when it is aimed at voicing dissent by subordinate groups through the medium of an intrusive spirit and has nothing to do with reinforcing the idiom of community, become a reflection of Islam or Hinduism? Cannot some of these phenomena be considered just cultural without further qualifying it with the adjective religion? In fact, Peter Burke in his study of popular culture in early modern Europe includes rituals and beliefs, the use of charms and spells, visits to the shrines of saints as instances of culture and not always of

¹E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, New York, 1961, p. 62.

²L. Dumont, *Nationalism and Communalism, Religion/Politics And History in India*, Paris, 1970, pp.89-110.

³Ibid., p. 90.

religion.⁴ Why should the same set of practices in the case of Europe be considered cultural and in the case of India religious? Religion is only one genus in the totality of culture. The two may be intertwined, but if no analytical difference were to be maintained between the two domains, a variety of human experiences would be hard to examine: kinship, unbelief and literature, to name only three prominent instances. These problems are only surface issues. There are deeper and more distinct issues which strike at the heart of any enterprise concerned with the study of religion and society in India.

By importing a Judeo-Christian definition of the term community into his analysis Dumont runs into the same problems that were first confronted by Orientalist scholarship on India and later by the colonial administrators. They too naively believed that because in India one confronts religiousness at every corner, indigenous society could be best understood, administered and manipulated on the basis of 'groups of adherents to the same religion'. However, when they began to apply this epistemology to the realities of India they gradually became conscious of how hard it was to do so. The best illustration of these tortuous self-doubts are the proceedings of the Indian census. Ibbetson, the commissioner of the 1881 census in the Punjab, was keenly aware of the limitations of the exercise he had undertaken to supervise. Writing on the difficulties encountered in recording religious statistics he noted: 'Yet, with the single exception of caste, no other one of the details which we have recorded is so difficult to fix with exactness [as religion], or needs so much explanation and limitation before the real value of the figures can be appreciated'.⁵ He continued in the same report with this cautionary advice:

But on the border lands where these great faiths meet, and especially among the ignorant peasantry whose creed, by whatever name it may be known, is seldom more than a superstition and a ritual, the various observances and beliefs which distinguish the followers of the several faiths in their purity are so strangely blended and intermingled, that *it is often*

⁴P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, London, 1978, see particularly pp. 207-243. For a similar characterization that treats what is commonly called folk religion as popular culture see James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, Yale, 1985, p. 332.

⁵*Report on the Census of the Panjab, 1881 Vol. I*, by D.C.J. Ibbetson, Calcutta, 1883, p. 101

*impossible to say that one prevails rather than other, or to decide in what category the people shall be classed (emphasis added).*⁶

Subsequent census officers also reported that something was amiss when it came to record statistics on religion. From one decennial census to another, the figures of a single religious community in the same locality could increase or decrease, without any visible correlation to the average birth rate or mortality. In the official eyes this would happen because people who ought to have recorded themselves as Sikhs were, either because of the enumerator or the respondent, entered as Hindus and the Hindus put under the denominational table for the Sikhs. Unable to correct these skewed data it gradually dawned on the census bureaucracy that it was not its subordinates or the common people who were making the mistakes; the social and philosophical bases of its construction was flawed. For the census of 1941, the census commissioner for India stopped recording the religious figures of the Hindus.⁷ By then it was too late; for all purposes the damage had been done. The decennial census by refusing to recognise the inherent ambiguity on the issue of religious affiliation, ended up by making these categories so concrete that in 1947 Cyril Radcliffe drew a cartographic line across the subcontinent relying on the data generated by the censuses.

Ironically, the post-colonial state has continued employing the census strategies of the colonial state. But even after the question: What is your religion? has been repeatedly raised now for several generations, there are people in the country who are unable to conceptualise their beliefs and rites in terms of a monolithic universal community. A prominent instance of this refusal to stick to one great tradition are the Meherat Rajputs, the majority of

⁶Ibid.

⁷His reasons for doing so are highly revealing: 'The religious question itself was unsatisfactory. If the results of the question had been used only as indicating the elements in the population professing a particular approach to unseen things the unsatisfactory nature of the parts of the record would not have mattered so much. Unfortunately however as I said above the answers given or attributed to a question on religion were being used unconsciously as the answers to a question on community or origin, a most unscientific position which it was desirable to end'. *Census of India 1941, Vol.1*, India, by M.W.M. Yeatts, Delhi, 1943, p. 28.

whom live in the Udaipur and Ajmer districts of Rajasthan.⁸ According to their oral histories they are the descendants of Prithviraj Chauhan, a great folk hero of the region, whom many see as a defender of Hinduism against encroaching Islam. One would expect the prodigy of Chauhan to be Hindus, even if it is only a fictive kinship. But the Meherat do not correspond to the modern category Hindu. Many among them identify with Islam, the male Meherats undergo circumcision, their marriage rituals are mostly based on the Muslim practice of *nikah*, and the dead are buried. However, at the same time the Meherat know little about Qu'ranic injunctions, or the centrality of saying prayers at the mosque. Instead they pray to saints Tejaji and Baba Ram Deoji. It is not uncommon for them to marry into Rajput clans, that are Hindu, in which case the choice of marriage rituals is left to the households concerned.

When during the 1971 and 1981 censuses the Meherat were queried on their religion, the answer was rarely Islam, but mostly Meherat. As a result many observers believe that the Meherat are confused about their religion and are undergoing an identity crisis. It does not strike these observers that it is they who are confused in their pursuit to paint everybody in the colours of Islam or Hinduism. The Meherat may be unique in their religious 'confusion' today, but once much of the country lived under the same 'confusion'. The *either/or* dichotomy is of recent origin.

It is not without reason that Indian languages do not possess a noun for religion as signifying a single uniform and centralized community of believers. If the work carried out in linguistic cognition is correct, the absence of such a term is most revealing and supportive of the argument I am advancing here. From the time of the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis it has been widely acknowledged that language plays a pivotal role in our construction of reality and the way we act on that reality.⁹ This ingenious insight of Sapir and Whorf has been further consolidated in the field of ethnosemantics, whose proponents assert that all culturally significant phenomena tend to be reflected in lexical,

⁸The following is based on an extensive report in the *India Today*, 30 June, 1986, pp. 78-80.

⁹ For this argument see B.L. Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality*, J.B. Carroll ed., Massachusetts, 1956.

grammatical or syntactic structures.¹⁰ If one were to follow these propositions, then it is hard to conceive of an organized religion in the absence of an indigenous taxon confirming its existence, for the more central a cultural form is to a people, the more reason for it to find concordance in an overt category of their language. While the lack of a religious label for religion in the Indian languages may not be definite proof against its organized existence, for all social perceptions may not find expression in communication, at least it lays bare the problem of classification. If other contextual evidence supports the thrust of the linguistic analysis, we have to treat it seriously.

For much of their history the people in the sub-continent went on with their rituals, pilgrimages and acts of religious piety without objectifying religion into an exclusive entity. As a consequence there are indeed words for faith, rites, piety, beliefs and gods but not for an overarching community of believers. At the most, Indian languages yield the word *panth*, a sort of moral collectivity of believers, but then any tradition could be made up of several conflicting panths, therefore the word does not exactly fit for a pan-local religious community. In an essay demonstrating how there are no differences between Hindus and Buddhists in the Himalayas, Staal argues on the futility of looking for religious communities in the Indian context :

Many differences are only due to the differences of the label Hindu and Buddhist. For the followers of any of these traditions, the issue is not such labels, but where he received his teaching and through what kind of immediate transmission (*paramparā*). The teachings may originate from his natural surroundings (i.e., family, community, or village) or from a teacher (*guru paramparā*). Such immediate transmission is the only identifiable feature of what we tend to call religious affiliation. However, many such transmissions taken together may not constitute a meaningful unit. The term religious

¹⁰Culturally significant cognitive features must be communicable between persons in one of the standard symbolic systems of the culture. A major share of these features will undoubtedly be codable in a society's most flexible and productive communication device, language. Evidence also seems to indicate that those cognitive features requiring most frequent communication will tend to have standard and relatively short linguistic labels.'C.O.Frake, "The Ethnographic Study of Cognitive Systems", in T. Gladwin and W.C.Sturtevant eds., *Anthropology and Human Behaviour*, Washington D.C., 1971, p. 75.

affiliation is therefore a misnomer. It reflects labels that are primarily attached by outsiders.¹¹

Religion was basically a highly localized affair, often even a matter of individual conduct and individual salvation. It would be based as Staal argues on local traditions but not on a pan-local organization of communities. Islam may have been the only exception to this, but then Indian Islam, heavily coloured by Sufism, is of a radically different genre from its counterparts elsewhere. The fact that religion was highly localized is not particularly surprising for a peasant society. The numerous monographs on village communities in South Asia have made us conscious of the autonomy of religious thinking and practices in the Indian countryside, conceptualised in such diverse terms as folk beliefs, popular religion and little traditions. Peasant settlements spatially removed from urban centres and geared to a production system predominantly based on household production and consumption, had an inbuilt centripetal force. Among other things this contributed to an amorphous growth of local gods, deities and spirits.

It can also be argued that the peasantry was unwilling to surrender its cultural autonomy to other social groups and often fiercely resisted any outside efforts at incorporation, particularly when such exercises were led by those who were also responsible for the extraction of revenues and services from it. Each village in northern India would generally have a protective deity on the boundaries of the hamlet, that among other functions safeguard its inhabitants from the pernicious influence of outsiders: be it people from other villages, malevolent spirits or the State. In order to cure sick cattle, face the vagaries of weather or obtain fecundity, the peasantry was willing to bargain with the most powerful sacred resource without bothering with religious labels. Such liberties with the sacred, as we will see in the body of this thesis, vexed the urban reformers and prompted their frequent jibes and moral campaigns against what they considered to be the superstition, ignorance and irrationality of the common folk. For the peasantry these cultural features often became an idiom of resistance.

¹¹F. Staal, "The Himalayas and the Fall of Religion", in Deborah E. Klimburg-Salter ed., *The Silk Route and the Diamond Path*, Los Angeles, 1982, p. 41.

Religion as a systematized sociological unit claiming unbridled loyalty from its adherents is a relatively recent development in the history of the Indian peoples. Once such a trope surfaced, probably sometimes in the nineteenth century, it rapidly evolved, gained wide support and became reified in history. Out of this reification process it easily turned into something separate, distinct and concrete: what we today recognise as Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism.¹² It is often overlooked that the naming of religious communities - Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Sikhism - only took place in the nineteenth century. As Smith notes, 'this process normally took the form of adding the suffix '-ism' to a word used to designate the persons who are members of the religious community or followers of a given tradition'.¹³

At this point a brief reflection on the categories Hindu and Hinduism may be worthwhile, particularly to add some flesh to the abstractions. It is most striking that the people whom today we call the Hindus never used that term to describe themselves. The Vedas, Ramayana and Gita, which today are seen by many as the religious texts of the Hindus, do not employ the word Hindu. The term was first used by the Achaemenid Persians to describe all those people who lived on or beyond the banks of river Sindhu, or Indus. Therefore at one stage the word Hindu as an ethnogeographic category came to englobe all those people who lived in India without any ethnic distinction. It was only under the Muslim rulers of India that the term began to gain a religious connotation. But it was not until the colonial epoch that the term Hinduism acquired a wide currency to collectively refer to a wide variety of communities, some of them with distinct traditions and opposed practices. Communities like the Shaivites, Vaishnavites and Lingayats, each with their own history and specific view of the world, were tied together under the blanket category Hinduism. Simultaneously, cultural, administrative and political changes, particularly social mobility, the census operations, missionary activities and the

¹²For a persuasive argument on these lines see W.C.Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, New York, 1978. In this seminal work Smith illustrates with ample historical evidence how the concept of religions as contraposed ideological communities is a western invention that over a period of two centuries soaked the rest of the world, prompting people the world over to conceive of themselves as members of an exclusive religion. For a similar perspective see also Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion as Social Vision*, Berkeley, 1982, p. 93.

¹³W.C.Smith, *Ibid.*, p. 62.

rise of new groups like the Arya Samaj, endowed the term with meanings that we have come to associate with it today. Whatever its reality at the present juncture, historically the term is erroneous because the sects or communities that constituted it do not possess a single historical founder, any unifying principles and rituals or a shared ecclesiastical authority - elements that are usually taken to be the hallmarks of a universal community. Even their notion of what constitutes the sacred and the profane remained extremely varied. There is little that can be seen to be common between Tantrism and Brahmanism. An extralocal religious community of Hindus is therefore a modern panglossia; linguistic and historical evidence indicates that it had never existed in the past. In the course of this study a similar process in case of the Sikhs will be documented.

Despite these theoretical and empirical lacunae, it has been hard both in the works of serious scholarship and lay talk to maintain a rigorous distinction between religiosity/ local communities and pan-regional communities. The reason no hiatus has been commonly observed between the two grids are long and complex and have much to do with disciplinary specialisation as well. Social anthropologists researching on India became conscious of these differences much earlier than their other colleagues in the social sciences, probably because they were less burdened by hoary texts and theological finesse. In the case of history, the distinction still needs to take firm roots and the chances for that look fairly slim because of the way historians continue to conceive of the problematic of religion.

Religion and Indian historiography

The proliferation of socioreligious movements in nineteenth century India, the frantic conversion campaigns undertaken by the Christian missionaries, the abundant use of the sacred idiom and symbolism by the nationalist activists, the communal rioting in the bazaars and the tragedy of the partition demanded that historians pay some attention to the religious factor. The result has been a perfunctory interest in religion, largely in order to explain other social developments, particularly elite politics during the colonial period. Religion in the colonial period, it has often been argued, was a smoke screen for the power hungry elites who successfully employed it to further their interests. Although this cryptic statement is an oversimplification on my part of

a much more complex argument which in its details unfolds many crucial connections among politics, religion and social interests, it remains true that religious traditions have rarely been placed at the centre of social analysis in the histories of modern India.

Without casting aspersions or doubting the correctness of such studies, it has to be acknowledged that the bulk of the existing works incessantly reiterate either of the following two propositions on the role of religion: it was an ideology of false consciousness *par excellence* or it was used as an ideology for attaining social goals for certain privileged social groups. However, the interconnections between politics, ideology and religion, do not by themselves exhaust the phenomenon of religion. Historians, sociologists and political commentators have since long written on the Machiavellian usage of religion by established elites or upwardly mobile social groups in other areas and historical epochs.¹⁴ While the instrumental approach to religion certainly tears away the mystic halo around religion, and often rightly so, it still quite often ends up in blind alleys, leaving far too many questions concerning the territoriality of religion unanswered. I shall mention only three here in the context of colonial India.

1. How could people pay for their religious convictions by laying down their lives? The standard answer to this question: that people were betrayed, hoodwinked or suffered from false consciousness, is not only too simplistic but also has an inherent anti-people and urban bias. With such an approach we regress to a conventional perspective of history, in which people play no role in the making of their own history: all decisive and momentous change filters from the top to the bottom. The masses only existed for others to rule and manipulate; at best, when they were shown to act, they did so spontaneously without realizing the import of their actions. Reductionism of this sort can hardly tell us why the dominated social groups were open to manipulation by

¹⁴For the use of religion by new elites during the reformation see N. Birnbaum, "The Zwinglian Reformation in Zurich", *Past and Present*, 15, 1959, pp. 27-47. The sociologist Lucien Goldman in his famous work, *The Hidden God*, London, 1964, identified seventeenth century French Jansenists with a declining state nobility. For a study that entails a similar induction of religious consciousness by the Malay elites in a period of transition to capitalism see C. Warren, "Consciousness in Social Transformation: The Bajau Laut of East Malaysia", *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol. 5, 1980, pp. 227-238.

the superordinate classes. Moreover, we get to know nothing about attitudes to sacred authorities, ritual specialists, spirit mediums, spirit possession, beliefs in divination, ghosts, souls of the dead, magic, witchcraft, divine intervention, the transactions between the living and the dead and attitudes towards death. Too often, generalizations have been put forward concerning religion in nineteenth century India on the basis of what were largely urban sectarian developments like the Arya Samaj, the Singh Sabha or the Aligarh movement. It is for instance forgotten that even as late as 1931 out of a total Hindu population of 8,599,720 in the Punjab, only 478,456 were Arya Samajists.¹⁵ Thus the Arya Samaj can by no means be equated to nineteenth century Hindu consciousness.

Much like in other spheres of society - technological, intellectual or political - the common people did often contribute to and innovate in religious matters as well: by founding religious pilgrimage centres, recognizing the sanctity of holy men, funding religious charity, developing and illustrating religious literature, participating in religious riots, choosing martyrs from among those who laid down their lives protecting the sacred, and cultivating unorthodox readings of sacred scriptures which could question the legitimacy of the social order. It is time the canvas of nineteenth century religion included these practices. For the study of religion it is paramount to disaggregate the practice of religion and its manipulation: the two may be related but are by no means identical.¹⁶

2. How can a religious tradition legitimize authority and also act as a source of rebellion against that authority? In the face of mounting evidence it is difficult to sustain the view that religion only served the purpose of social control.¹⁷ Religious texts like the *Ādi Granth* are so amorphous that those in favour of the status quo, reformists and insurrectionists, could all with ease quote chapter and verse in favour of their cause. This often happened during

¹⁵ *Census Of India, 1931 Volume XVII Punjab Part I. Report*, by Khan Ahmad Hasan Khan, Lahore, 1933, p. 301.

¹⁶ M.E. Spiro, "Religion, Problems of Definition and Explanation", in M. Banton ed., *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, London, 1966, p. 105.

¹⁷ Susana B.C. Devalle and I have schematically outlined the religious sources of rebellion in our essay, "Soldiers, Immigrants and Bandits: The Making of Peasant Protest in Early Twentieth Century Punjab" *The Panjab Past and Present*, vol. 17, 1983, pp. 145-178.

the colonial period, when one social group wanting to collaborate with the Empire would read the scriptures in one way; the opponents would interpret the same set of verse in another mode. We need to know the reasons and mechanisms through which widely divergent religious views supported by the same scriptural or sacred authority could be held within the same tradition. A consideration of these issues is germane for any understanding of universal religious communities.

3. Did people comprehend profane realities through the sacred or vice versa? Either way, what were the cognitive and linguistic processes of such apprehension? This question can be best addressed by looking at language, poesis, metaphors and rituals, elements that were once completely neglected, but of late have received some attention.¹⁸ Also, we need to know if there were any similarities or dissimilarities between the religious perceptions of the elites and those of the popular classes. This question ultimately leads us into the theoretical problems concerning the two-tier model of religion: elite and popular and its intersection with culture.¹⁹ How useful are these dichotomies between elite and popular in the case of north India in the nineteenth century? Only by searching for answers to these questions may we hope to know to what extent socio-economic interests were cloaked in the mantle of religion. How many of the religious riots express economic grievances to what extent were they religious? Which sections of the society wanted to conceive and project themselves as Sikhs, Hindus or Muslims? Above all, what kind of spatial and temporal boundaries did they establish to create pan-local communities and how exactly were these defined, perceived and activated?

Method and Organization

This study seeks to answer these interrelated questions by looking generally at the central areas of the Punjab in the second half of the nineteenth century and more specifically by seeking to write a social history on the making of the Sikh community. It is aimed neither to detail nor to explain the

¹⁸For instance see W. Fustfeld, "Communal Conflict in Delhi: 1803-1930", *The Indian Economic Social History Review*, vol. 19, 1982, pp. 181-200.

¹⁹Part of recent social historical writings on religion have tended to polarise elite and popular religion. Two works which make such a distinction are, R. Muchembled, *Culture Populaire et Culture des elites dans la France moderne*, Paris, 1978 and J. Obelkevich, *Religion and the People*, Chapel Hill, 1979.

metaphysics of Sikhism but rather to consider religion as a social and cultural process, a task most lucidly outlined by Davis:

For ourselves, we examine the range of people's relation with the sacred and the supernatural, so as not to fragment those rites, practices, symbols, beliefs and institutions which to villagers or city dwellers constitute a whole. We consider how all of these may provide groups and individuals some sense of ordering their world, some explanation for baffling events or injustice, and some notion of who and where they are. We ask what feelings, moods and motives they encourage or try to repress. We look to see what means are offered to move people through the stages of their lives, to prepare for their future, and to cope with suffering and catastrophe ... Finally, as historians we are ever concerned about the context of popular religious life and for religious change.²⁰

By concerning ourselves with the thematic that Davis has so brilliantly drawn one can hope to steer away from the disproportional concentration on doctrinal religion, the institutional framework of socioreligious movements and the 'heroic' intellectuals in the 'age of reform' in nineteenth century India. Besides Davis' work, the approach adopted here has particularly benefitted from the works of Keith Thomas, Peter Burke and Michel Foucault.²¹ While I am aware that the works by these authors are addressed to specific locales and the explanations and categories developed by them are not always for export, the primary significance of their work, I believe, lies in their overall concerns: particularly the need to recover the beliefs, visions and the world view of popular classes, how these change over time and with what consequences. Sharing their insights, the body of this work marks a somewhat heretical departure, for it seeks to understand history by both looking from the top and below. Also, I am wary of Thomas' mutually exclusive distinction between magic and religion as if these two were separate cultural worlds with their independent logic and functioning. Equally debatable are his judgements on the 'incoherent beliefs' and 'popular ignorance' of the lower classes.

²⁰N.Z.Davis, "Some Tasks and Themes in the Study of Popular Religion", in C.Trinkhaus and H.A.Oberman, eds., *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, Leiden, 1974, pp. 312-313.

²¹K.Thomas, *Religion And the Decline of Magic*, London, 1971; P.Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, London, 1978 and M.Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, New York, 1972 and *Discipline and Punish*, New York, 1979.

Sources and their consequences for Sikh Studies

For a long time it was presumed that the history of the Sikhs in the second half of the nineteenth century, our period of study here, could not be reconstructed because of a great paucity of sources. This assumption had to be set aside in the early seventies with the appearance of a pathbreaking annotated bibliography by Barrier, with 1240 entries on the Sikhs, covering the period 1849-1919.²² In this influential study, Barrier revealed a plethora of sources, largely untapped, which could be employed in any study of the Sikhs in mid-century Punjab. These sources include books, tracts, organizational reports, memorials, vernacular newspapers and journals, scattered in provincial and private libraries. These are complemented by British government records - reports and minutes by the bureaucracy, settlement reports, district gazetteers, censuses, and parliamentary reports ; the historians of the Punjab and those interested in studying the past of the Sikhs appear to be in an enviable position.

While these sources inform us a great deal about the literate population, the bulk of them however yield very little when it comes to the lives of the common people. Generally produced by a literate minority, they are obviously far more concerned with the priorities, practices, fears and needs of the elites. When they do write about the folk it is often from a great distance, without much sympathy with their ways and modes. In nineteenth century the Punjab basically had an oral culture and for much of the century verbal and visual communications predominated. The printed sources tell us almost nothing about these channels of indigenous communication. For instance, we have very little to fall back on in order to understand how prophecies arose and spread.

Despite these shortcomings of printed sources, virtually built into them, the historian of nineteenth century Punjab has very few alternative options. He may look at folk-songs, ballads, legends, proverbs and certain other oral forms which have been recorded, but in the end he has to turn back to the printed sources. By exercising caution and constantly scrutinising elite prejudices, hopefully a more open history can be written. When terms like ignorant, superstitious and backward are used we have to be wary of their use and

²²N.G.Barrier, *The Sikhs and their Literature*, Delhi, 1970

possibly deconstruct them to see what they imply, and who is using them for whom in what context.

One further consideration arises out of this discussion. Many scholars working on the Sikhs in mid-century Punjab have not succeeded in distancing their own conclusions from the ideology being put forward in the printed sources. For instance G.S. Dhillon has recently written a Ph.D thesis on the Singh Sabha movement. Largely based on contemporary sources, it simultaneously examines the intellectual, educational, religious and reformatory facets of the movement. Unfortunately Dhillon's acceptance of the Sabha's records at their face value has distinctly imprinted his work with the ideology of the movement. He has not drawn a clear line between the statements forwarded by the leadership of the Sabha and the conclusions of his own work. In the final chapter of his thesis, Dhillon states: 'The Singh Sabha movement, which enjoyed the leadership of the Sikhs for nearly half a century, will go down in the history of modern Panjab as the greatest socio-religious reform movement of the Sikhs'.²³ This statement seems to me to be misleading because of the undifferentiated way in which the notions of 'Sikhs' and 'greatest reform movement' are employed. It is misleading in particular in four ways. Firstly, it fails to pursue the implication of the fact that the Sikhs were not a homogenous social group. It may have been a desirable goal for some but was not the reality of the Punjabi society. The category Sikh can not be applied indiscriminately to all situations - social, economic, political and even religious - as if the Sikhs were hermetically sealed off from the rest of the people and contexts in Punjab or elsewhere. Secondly, it is conveniently assumed that the Sabha was the 'greatest reform movement' among the Sikhs. One needs to know why the Nirankaris or the Kukas were so unimportant. The close identification with the Sabha's thinking in Dhillon's thesis conveys the impression that only the Sabha possessed the correct religious doctrine and what was outside its official dogma was incorrect. This assumption results in a partisan judgement on what was religion and what was unreligion and what was pious and what was impious. Thirdly, the question whether the Sabha drew its adherents disproportionately from any social group or groups is ignored. Fourthly, it does not examine what

²³G.S.Dhillon, "Character and Impact of the Singh Sabha Movement on the History of the Panjab", unpublished Ph.D thesis, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1973, p. 39.

variations in appeal it had to different social groups and how these varying interpretations of the Sabha's creed led to several break-away groups.

Apparently these shortcomings are from only one small though significant statement from the thesis. But similar representations consistently appear in other works too. In that sense Dhillon's work is rooted in a leading current within Sikh studies and is not an isolated example.²⁴ Much of the work in Sikh studies has been based on a principle of exclusion. A norm is constructed and all that falls outside this norm is viewed as deviant, marginal and threatening, if not completely unimportant. For instance the Singh Sabha in the last quarter of the nineteenth century is seen as a norm and the Kukas as deviant. By excluding them from mainstream Sikh studies, an effort is then made to negate differences and applaud unities, hoping to generate homogeneity and a representation of the Sikhs as a collectivity, that shared the same values and movements. A community is invented where none existed in the first place. Such literature prevents us from seeing the Sikhs the way they were, *sui generis* in a world constantly constructed and reconstructed by them.

The Argument

The notion of pan-regional self-conscious religious communities was new for nineteenth century India. Except for Islam, that option had not been available to the practitioners of Indian sacred traditions. However, in the case of Islam the strong influence of Sufism and its amalgam with local practices considerably watered down the idiom of the *ummah*. The gradual emergence of the idea of a well-demarcated community of believers in the nineteenth century had a revolutionary impact on the consciousness of the people. The fact that this discourse on community had to compete with loyalties springing from kinship, village, language, regional and class sentiments did not render its impact any weaker.

The point this thesis is seeking to elaborate is that irrespective of the fact that particular definitions of the community were supported or challenged, what first needs to be appreciated is that a new trope was launched that was to

²⁴For an extensive discussion of these issues see my, "A Historiographical and Bibliographical Reconstruction of the Singh Sabha in Nineteenth Century Punjab", *Journal of Sikh Studies*, vol. 10, 1983, pp. 108-130.

redefine not only the relationships between man and god but also between man and man.

Put in another way, there is no natural reality outside human concepts. It is concepts that order a society's vision of reality and what its members do in support or against that reality. In nineteenth century India, community became one such concept alongside other abstractions available to people. Politics, economy, education, history, culture, kinship, gender, territory, came to be measured through it. For the first time in the subcontinent's history all human experience became potentially amenable to the yardsticks of community. Unless we can come to grips with this change in thinking, raw historical data will make little sense. Language provides a good analogy to comprehend what was taking place. Communities of religion, like language, created a discourse in whose terms the entirety of human life could be formulated and narrated. The authority of this new trope was greatly enhanced by three factors. Firstly, the State conferred recognition on it through its administrative policies, particularly in the employment of subordinate officials and in the conduct of the census. Secondly, the power of print culture made the bonds of community extend to any desirable frontier. Thirdly, the needs of the new elites for a new culture under colonial rule were in great measure fulfilled by the construction of a universal community.

Needless to say that like any other human abstraction the pan-local religious community did not constitute a text to the meaning of which all the social agents unanimously subscribed. There was divergence, conflict and manipulation over its meanings in day-to-day life. In this sense it becomes possible to speak of official and unofficial, elite and popular notions of community. But in their sum total they were not incompatible with the new systematization of community.

Efforts to explain this transformation purely as a continuity of what had taken place before are misleading. They end up by mystifying the social history of the major religious communities in India and legitimize claims of nineteenth century propagandists who sought to match the change with ancient genealogies. Just as Indian nationalism cannot be explained by reference to an historical essence that came to efflorescence in the colonial period, similarly

studies that build connections between the new community idiom and what existed in the past are taking ideology for historical reality.

Therefore in India, as Nietzsche thought from his study of the European historical trajectory and recently Ben Anderson glossed, religious communities were not supplanted by nationalism.²⁵ The two idioms engendered simultaneously and this is what in part may explain the tensions and conflicts between 'communities' and 'nation' in the Indian sub-continent.

²⁵On F. Nietzsche's belief that with the death of God in Europe, nationalism became the new idol see his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, London, 1933. A more far reaching argument on similar lines, whereby the religious cosmology of a transcontinental community is replaced by nationalism, is advanced in B.Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London, 1983.

Chapter One

Sikhs of the Punjab: The Punjab of the Sikhs

A peculiar race of people, they flourished in a peculiar country.

S.M.Latif, *History of the Punjab*, p.11.

Located on the margins of Hindustan, the Punjab region throughout its history has tended towards both unity with, and division from the rest of the Indian Sub-continent. One knowledgeable writer on the Punjab commented, 'Even the climate smacks of Central Asia as well as India'.¹ Often used as a channel by the nomadic peoples of Central Asia to reach the Indian hinterland, its fluctuating political geography made it a region of social and cultural uncertainty. Over the last three millennia almost all invaders of India, except the sea-borne Europeans, first passed through the Punjab, imprinting the land and its people with diverse cultural patterns ranging from Hellenism to Islam. In the mid-eighteenth century the Afghan freebooter Ahmad Shah Abdali succeeded in detaching the Punjab province from the rest of India; in the middle of the next century the British annexed it to make it the barracks of the Raj. In between these two conquests, the Sikh people transformed the territories into a 'Sikh kingdom' that once threatened to engulf the surrounding states.

The vast Himalayan mountains in the north constitute a distinct geographical border separating the Punjab province from the Tibetan plateau and Kashmir. The river Indus marks the western boundary of the province and the Jamuna on the east was often used to demarcate the area from the Gangetic plains. Beyond the Indus lies the Hindukush and Sulaiman mountain ranges, with natural passes like the Gomal and Khyber, wide and low enough to allow the invading hordes virtually unobstructed passage to the dusty plains below. The eastern boundary of the province, especially the political frontier, has always been fluid, constantly expanding and contracting; it brought the Punjab close to the heartland of northern India.²

¹ H.K. Trevaskis, *The Punjab of Today*, Lahore, 1931, p.1.

² O.H.K. Spate and A.T.A. Learmouth, *India and Pakistan: A General and Regional Geography*, 3rd edition, London, 1967, pp.494-530.

A land of remarkable extremities, the snow clad mountains in the north are in stark contrast to the scorching deserts in the south. 'Extending from the foothills of the Himalayas a major portion of the Punjab roughly appearing like a triangle consists of monotonous plains, sloping towards the south-west very gradually, rarely more than two feet in a mile. The five feeder rivers - Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas and Sutlej- collectively pour into the Indus and give the country its name Punjab, meaning the 'land of five waters'. Flowing from the north-east to the south-west, the Punjab rivers have created intra-fluvial tracts locally called the doābs, etching internal physiographic zones. Punjab's political rulers often employed these compact natural divisions to delineate administrative units.³

While the Sikhs, in their recent history have tended to treat the Punjab as their homeland, they did not exclusively belong to the Punjab, nor does the Punjab exclusively belong to them. According to the 1868 census, the second official enumeration under the British administration, the Sikhs were a minority everywhere in the province, numbering less than 800,000 (8% of the total population); the Muslims numbered six million (55%), and the Hindus around two millions (22%). The total population of the province was just under 9.5 million.⁴ The bulk of the Sikh population was concentrated in what is often described as the 'real Punjab' or central Punjab, a fertile belt extending from the Jhelum in the north to the Sutlej, but for the purpose of this study the intra-fluvial tracts locally called the doābs (two waters) between the Chenab and south of the river Sutlej. The topography of central Punjab is etched by three of the five major Punjab doābs, still known by the names given them during the Mughal times: the Rechna doāb between the Ravi and the Chenab, the Bari doāb between the Beas and the Ravi, the Bist-Jalandhar doāb between the Beas and the Sutlej. Many of the religious, linguistic, cultural and regional cleavages among the Sikhs were influenced by their settlement across the doābs. The Sikh adherents in the Bari doāb, especially in the neighbourhood of Amritsar and Lahore were called after the name of the territories, the Majha Sikhs. Similarly

³*Census of India, 1911, Punjab and Delhi, Report Part I*, by L. Middleton and S.M. Jacob, Lahore, 1923, p.2.

⁴*Punjab Census 1868*, Statement no.7.

those living in the Bist-Jalandhar doāb were called the Doaba Sikhs, and the faithful across the Sutlej were titled the Malwa Sikhs.⁵

The Majha may be rightly considered as the 'cradle of Sikhism'. The Sikh movement in the eighteenth century faced some of its darkest hours in these territories - triumphant it sought to make the Majha resplendent in its own corporate image. Dotted with several cities founded by the Sikhs Gurus, major Sikh shrines and innumerable pilgrimage centres associated both with the Sikh Gurus and their disciples, the middle areas of the region are a constant reminder of Sikh presence.⁶ With nearly half of the Sikh population living in this area it is not surprising that many of the important socio-political movements associated with the Sikhs originated here. It was not uncommon for the Majha Sikhs to consider themselves superior to the rest of the Sikhs: they could boast of Lahore the 'political capital of the Punjab' and Amritsar 'the sacred city of the Sikhs'. To this inventory they could add their stiff resistance to the British imperial expansion, during the two Anglo-Sikh wars, unlike the Malwa Sikhs who collaborated with the forces of the British empire.

While the Doaba Sikhs had the advantage of inhabiting a narrow fertile tract, with neat geographical markers, a beautiful country half hill and half plains, they were clearly disadvantaged in their relationships with their co-religionists. Occupying a middle zone between the Majha and the Malwa, the Doaba Sikhs never managed to foster as distinct an identity as their alert neighbours. Once a hospitable camping ground for roving Sikh misls with convenient escape routes to the hills, the Bist-Jalandhar was, prior to British annexation, a part of the Lahore state under Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Rich in agricultural production, densely populated, without any major urban centres, it was known as the garden of the Punjab. The Jat-Sikh peasantry in the locality was famous for its agricultural skills. V. Jacquemont, a perceptive French scientist touring the Punjab in 1831, has left behind a graphic description of the Doaba Sikhs in his journal:

The people are the same in appearance as those on the south of the Sutlej, and their manners and customs are similar. It is easy

⁵ R.E. Parry, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, London, n.d., pp.84-85.

⁶ For a remarkable contemporary account of the region see Ganesh Das's *Char Bagh-i-Punjab*, translated and edited by J.S. Grewal and Indu Banga as, *Early Nineteenth Century Punjab*, Amritsar, 1975, pp.113-140.

to distinguish a Sikh from a Muhammadan or Hindu, although one may find that they are descended from a common ancestor not many generations back ... The enormous baggy breeches, tight at the knee and fastened around the waist with a cord, are peculiar to the Sikh. Their turban, under which they do not wear a skull cap as do the Muhammadans, is usually very small and very neatly tied. Its shape is like that of a Phrygian cap or a cap with a very low crest, leaving the ears uncovered. Their tunic, or sleeved vest, is very tight and fits their shoulders, which unlike the Muhammadans, they usually carry in a forward position. The Sikhs also grow their beards to a point projecting beyond the line of their profile.⁷

'In Malwa alone', wrote the British historian Joseph Davey Cunningham, often reproached for his pro-Sikh perspective, 'that is about Bhatinda and Sunam, can the Sikh population be found unmixed, and there it has passed into a saying, that the priest, the soldier, the mechanic, the shopkeeper, and the ploughman are all equally Sikh'.⁸ The Malwa Sikhs living in the largest of the Punjab doābs, extending from the banks of river Sutlej to the Yamuna, both made and unmade the Sikh Panth. In the eighteenth century they richly contributed in men, resources and legendary bravery to the ascendant Sikh movement. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, they turned their back on the 'Sikh kingdom' and embraced the English to stall Ranjit Singh's expansionist state. Under British suzerainty the Malwa Sikh rulers by an ironic twist of fate could only retain the shadow of their former power, the substance quickly passed to the new empire builders.⁹ Under the British policy of escheat several of the Sikh ruling families had to cede their dominions to the British, while others were severely restricted in the exercise of their powers for having shown sympathy for the Sikh cause during the first Anglo-Sikh war. A Commissioner was posted at Ambala to administer the affairs of the Malwa chiefs and districts were formed at Thanesar, Ludhiana, Ferozepore and Ambala out of the lapsed and confiscated territories.¹⁰

⁷ V. Jacquemont (1831) and A. Soltykoff (1842), *The Punjab a Hundred Years Ago*, translated and edited by H.L.O. Garrett, Lahore, 1935, pp.24-25.

⁸ J.D. Cunningham, *A History of the Sikhs*, Delhi, 1955, first published in London, 1848, p.9.

⁹ For a descriptive background see, Mian Bashir Ahned Farooqi, *British Relations With The Cis-Sutlej States, 1809-1823*, Lahore, 1941.

¹⁰ H.K. Trevaskis, *The Land of the Five Rivers*, Oxford 1928, pp. 206-208.

Fortunately for the remaining Sikh chiefs of Patiala, Nabha, Jind, Faridkot and Kalsia, the post-1857 changes in British policy and their own rallying to the cause of the Empire, led to their being embraced as allies and they were with great pains assured of their powers and privileges. In the second half of the nineteenth century these semi-feudal rulers, however reduced in stature, were the most visible signs of past Sikh glories and political triumphs.

While the British administrators were to ably employ the old territorial divisions, especially for recruitment to the imperial army, for the purpose of administration they divided the Punjab into ten divisions and thirty-two districts.¹¹ In less than half a century the rapid introduction of railways, metalled roads, electric telegraph, postage facilities, the printing press, migration in thousands to the canal colonies and the establishment of new market towns, further eroded the significance of the old divisions. The transformation in communication made possible a new phase in the Sikh Panth: as old divisions slackened, new ties within the Panth were effected through innovations like the printing press. A Sikh writer in Amritsar could through his writings now reach Sikh opinion in distant Rawalpindi. The new print culture brought the Sikhs much more together, than they were ever before. A major part of this work will examine the nature of this cohesion, but before doing so I would like to re-evaluate the basis of social cleavages within the Sikh Panth.

Social Stratification within the Sikh Panth

Any study of the Sikh religious consciousness cannot preclude the age-old question: to what extent did Sikhism shape the social structure within the Sikh Panth? What impact did the Sikh beliefs have on their social organization? The issue has been debated emotionally in the past, without any sound consensus. There are two distinct positions: one that hotly denies the existence of social cleavages, especially those based on the hierarchy of the caste system.¹² and the second that asserts that the Sikhs are organized on caste

¹¹Ibid., p. 356. In 1884 new administrative changes were introduced.

¹² Among those who deny the existence of caste among the Sikhs are: Jodh Singh, "Structure and character of Indian society, " in *Sikhism and Indian Society* (Transactions of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Vol.4), Simla 1967, pp.25-46; J. Pettigrew, *Robber Noblemen*, New Delhi, 1978, pp.45-47.

lines.¹³ While both these stands have advanced our knowledge of hierarchy among the Sikhs, they are essentially ahistorical. Only through a diachronic analysis may we know how the Sikh Panth evolved and continues to function.

In my view Sikhism never effectively determined the modalities of social structure among the Sikhs, it only determined the anti-structure. In what follows, I will seek to illustrate this argument. I take as my point of departure two works of Victor Turner concerned with hierarchy within religious communities in particular and societies in general.¹⁴ He argues that all human societies operate at some level, implicitly or explicitly, in terms of 'two contrasting social models', structure and anti-structure. One model according to Victor Turner is 'of society as a structure of jurial, political, and economic positions, offices, statuses, and roles, in which the individual is only ambiguously grasped behind the social persona. The other is of society as a *communitas* of concrete idiosyncratic individuals, who, though differing in physical and mental endowment, are nevertheless regarded as equal in terms of shared humanity. The first is of a differentiated, culturally structured, segmented, and often hierarchical system of institutionalized positions. The second presents society as an undifferentiated, homogeneous whole, in which individuals confront one another integrally, and not as 'segmentalized' into statuses and roles.'¹⁵

There is a constant dialectic between the forces of structure and anti-structure.¹⁶ While the structure determines the order and hierarchy of a society, the anti-structure provides elements for partially reversing that social order and for questioning its exploitative taxonomies. The former persists in differences and segmentation, the latter posits an undifferentiated homogeneous whole. 'Structure', writes Turner 'depends upon binary opposition in the last

¹³The existence of caste hierarchy among the Sikhs has recently been forcefully argued by Ethne K. Marengo, *The Transformation of Sikh Society*, New Delhi, 1976. This work also mentions other authors who believe that the Sikhs are organized on caste lines, p.63.

¹⁴Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Chicago, 1969 and *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, Cornell, 1974, especially the essay, "Metaphors and Anti-Structure in Religious Culture". pp.272-299.

¹⁵Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 177.

¹⁶Victor W. Tumor, "Metaphors of Anti-Structure in Religious Culture", pp. 279-280.

analysis ... but anti-structure abolishes all divisiveness, all discriminations, binary, serial or graduated.¹⁷ The second stage is particularly conspicuous in the genesis and growth of religious movements with a millenarian content. These two models do not essentially exist in a pure form and may often co-exist. Victor Turner comments: 'These contrary processes go on in the *same* religious field, modifying, opposing, and being transformed into one another as time goes on.'¹⁸ The history of the Sikh movement very well exemplifies these transformative processes and the correlations binding them.

The Sikh movement from the time of Guru Nanak (1469-1539), in the mid-fifteenth century questioned some of the structural assumptions of medieval Indian society. It sought with certain reservations the establishment of an egalitarian society where all men and women would be equal and share the ritual, sacred, profane, economic and social resources collectively. Guru Nanak, a sensitive poet quick to spot social injustices, wrote:

Among the low, let my caste be the meanest,
Of the lowly, let me the lowliest be.
O Nanak, let such be the men I know
With such men let me keep company.
Why should I try to emulate the great?
Where the fallen have protected been
In your Grace and your Goodness seen.¹⁹

The third Sikh Guru, Amar Dar (1479-1574) wrote on the issue of caste:

All say that there are four castes,
But all are of the seed of Brahma
The world is but clay,
And of similar clay many pots are made,
Nanak says man will be judged by his actions,
Without finding God there will be no solution,
The body of man is composed of the five elements,
Who can say that one is high and another low?²⁰

The appeal of such teachings was considerable in a society, where the organizing ideology gave open recognition to principles of human hierarchy as expressed in the varṇa classifications. The Sikh movement for a period of over

¹⁷Ibid., p.288.

¹⁸Ibid., p.275.

¹⁹*Adi Granth*, p. 15.

²⁰Ibid., p. 1128.

two centuries launched with varied intensity an offensive against the theory and practice of the Hindu social structure. It set up the institution of saṅgat (congregation) and laṅgar (communal consumption) to combat social distinction, and moulded a collectivity called the Sikh Panth (communitas). Moreover, the practitioners of the faith had an equal access to the holy scripture and there was no institutional priesthood that could act as the sole custodian of the Ādi-Granth, the Sikh holy book. In the initiation ritual established by the tenth Guru of the Sikhs, Gobind Singh, the new initiates had to partake of food from a common vessel signifying the end of the caste rituals which prohibited commensality.

However, in its early phase the anti-structuralist pole within the Sikh movement did not represent a major rupture from the contemporary socio-economic framework. For one Nanak himself was part of the on-going Sant tradition in Northern India. In this sense he was one of its representatives, undoubtedly the most original and compelling among them. After the death of the first master the continuation of the tradition required elaboration of institutions which would hold the growing numbers of Sikhs together. The first step in this direction was the nomination by Nanak of a successor from amongst his disciples leading to a succession of nine Gurus, until the tenth, Gobind Singh stopped the practice in 1708. The gurus who succeeded Nanak organized the Sikh movement by setting up pilgrimage centres, compiling the sacred writings of the six Gurus and others into a sacred scripture and above all appointing representatives to take care of far-off congregations. The new innovations were to ensure the firm establishment of the Sikh tradition.

Contrary to the formation of an embryonic Sikh structure under the early successors of Guru Nanak the anti-structuralist tendency within the Sikh movement again started surfacing under Guru Gobind Singh and reached an apogee in early eighteenth century under Banda Bahadur, when a bloody offensive was launched to uproot the remnants of the Mughal state in the Punjab.²¹ The rural poor, the urban underprivileged and others who persisted on the margins of the Punjabi society readily responded to Banda's campaign to

²¹For an account of Banda Bahadur and his campaigns based on primary materials see Ganda Singh, *Life of Banda Singh Bahadur*, Amritsar, 1935.

turn the existing world upside down. Reflecting on the nature of peasant insurrection under Banda, Chetan Singh in a major study of the period notes:

Whatever else may have been, the rebellions of the early eighteenth century were also very obviously an expression of the wrath of the lower classes. In so far as the Sikhs were concerned, the rejection of the caste differentiation by the Gurus had attracted a very large number of low caste followers. In their challenge to the established social hierarchy, the Sikhs under Banda, apparently welcomed in their ranks any and every section of society that chose to join them, though these invariably belonged to the lower social orders.²²

For seven eventful years no efforts were spared by the peasant armies of Banda to obliterate all vestiges of authority, order and mechanisms of social control. Armed with hardly anything, except the messianic teachings of the Sikh Gurus and an ordained sense of brotherhood, they wrote a new chapter in the agrarian history of the Punjab. They dismembered a whole range of intermediaries, who extracted the much hated land revenues for the state and often acted as instruments of oppression. Large estates were dissolved and their lands parcelled out to the peasantry.²³ It is to this period that we may trace what Clive Dewey calls the 'flatness of the Punjabi society.'²⁴

The newly attained liberties under Banda did not last for long. By 1716 the Mughal state managed to regain its hegemony in the Punjab. The Sikh movement suffered a serious set-back with the execution of Banda and his major collaborators. As Turner argues no society can be permanently

²²Chetan Singh, "Socio-Economic Conditions in Punjab During the 17th Century", Unpublished Ph.D thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 1984, p. 572. C.f. Muzaffar Alam, "Sikh Uprisings Under Banda Bahadur 1708-1715", *The Panjab Past and Present*, vol. 16, 1982, pp. 95-107.

²³ W. Irvine a English historian, wrote of Banda and his times: 'A low scavenger or leather dresser, the lowest of the low in Indian estimation, had only to leave home and join the Guru (Banda), when in a short time he would return to his birth-place as its ruler with his order of appointment in his hand. As soon as he set foot within the boundaries, the well born and wealthy went out to greet him and escort him home. Arrived there, they stood before him with joined palms, awaiting his orders. Not a soul dared a disobey an order, and men who had often risked themselves in battlefields became so cowed down that they were even afraid to remonstrate.' *The Latter Mughals*, Calcutta, 1922, pp.98-99.

²⁴Clive Dewey, "Social mobility and social stratification amongst the Punjab Peasantry: Some hypotheses " Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London, seminar paper, 2 March, 1976, pp. 5-6.

embedded in an anti-structuralist drive. In its post-Banda phase the Sikh movement sought a counter-structure by regrouping into misls.

The word misl is from an Arabic word connoting equality or likeness.²⁵ Sikh adherents who grouped into a misl in the second quarter of the eighteenth century considered each other to be equal but elected to have a nominal chief or Sirdar. The Sirdar was responsible for strategies of peace and war; respected for his wisdom and courage; he could not compel the members of his misl to obey him. Probably the commands of a Sirdar were accorded the greatest respect during time of war. Any cooperation by the misl members was purely voluntary, they were free to leave or join another misl. Initially the chiefship of a misl was not a hereditary office. For instance, the founder of the Krora Singhia Misl was succeeded by his nephew, who in turn left his position to Krora Singh a petty personal follower, who bequeathed the command to Baghel Singh, his own menial servant.²⁶

By the mid-eighteenth century there were according to popular tradition twelve Sikh misls, of which eleven were concentrated to the north of river Sutlej and only one - the Phulkain - to the South in the Malwa. Unequal in size and resources, each misl sought to maximize territorial possessions. Whenever a misl acquired territories, the towns, villages and lands were divided among those who had aided in the conquest. First to be rewarded was the chief, subsequently each man in proportion to his efforts, especially the number of cavalry troops gathered, was given a *patti* or parcel of land. Each member of the misl took his *patti* as a co-sharer and held it in absolute freedom.²⁷

Normally each misl acted on its own: when faced with a common danger they acted in unison. Twice a year the leading representatives of all the

²⁵J.D. Cunningham, *History of the Sikhs*, p.96.

²⁶Ibid., p.97. For some other examples see Bhagat Singh, *Sikh Polity*, New-Delhi, 1978, pp.94-95.

²⁷H.T. Prinsep, *Origin of the Sikh Power in the Punjab and Political Life of Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, Patiala, 1970 first published Calcutta, 1834, p.26. In this same work Prinsep wrote, 'The Shah [reference to Ahmad Shah] having thus quitted the field the Sikhs remained the undisputed masters of the Punjab, and spreading over the country occupied it as permanent inheritance, every Sardar according to his strength, seizing what fell in his way, and acknowledging no superior, nor submitting to the control of anybody, nor to any constitutional authority whatsoever.' p.22.

misls gathered at Amritsar, on the occasion of the Baisakhi and Diwali festivals. Assembled in the holy city they deliberated collective action or found solutions to the problems faced by the Sikh Panth. Sikhs who assembled on the occasion of the bi-annual gatherings passed resolutions called gurmattās, literally meaning 'a resolution endorsed by the Guru', for the Guru was thought to be present among the faithful when they deliberated in the presence of the Ādi Granth.²⁸ The sacredness of the site where the meetings were held, combined with the presence of the Granth endowed the gurmattās with a sacred character. The proceedings at Amritsar were seen to be those of the Sarbat-Khālsā or the corporate body of the Sikhs. Clearly all the Sikhs did not congregate at one point; the meaning of the Sarbat-Khālsā must be found in its ritual significance.

It is essential that historians do not drain ritual practices of all their symbolic content and interpret them only as technical modes to legitimise the fortunes of the Sikh chiefs or charters of aggrandisement.²⁹ While the gurmattās may have served these aims, they also generated through their practice, vision and sacred nature the conditions for the existence of the Sikh Panth. People do not organize all their lives around self-interest alone, as some historians influenced by Namierism would assert, often individuals seek a purpose and meaning for their lives. The Sikh movement is rich in both instances: we need to proceed with caution when we translate the key ideas or practices of one historical epoch into another. It is easy to assume modern bourgeois values to be natural and therefore eternally applicable. The deep meanings generated by the practices of the gurmattā and Sarbat-Khālsā contributed to the establishment of a counter-structure under the Sikh movement. By 1770's the Sikhs controlled the Mughal sūbā of Punjab and large portions of the provinces of Multan and Shahjahanabad. The solidarity infused through the rituals of Gurmattā's and the Sarbat-Khalsa was a crucial ingredient in the making of the Sikhs of the Punjab.

The counter-structure established by the misls only functioned while they could eat into the remains of the Mughal empire or raid the pillaging armies of Ahmad Shah Durrani. Opposed by a common enemy the misls often came to

²⁸Ganda Singh ed., *Early European Accounts of the Sikhs*, Calcutta 1962, p. 16.

²⁹ A recent interpretation on these lines is Indu Banga, *Agrarian System of the Sikhs*, New Delhi, 1978, pp.29-30.

the defence of their fellow brethren; unopposed, they squandered their energies in fighting against each other. One Sirdar would align with another to eject a third from his dominions; their fellow soldiers were equally restive for greater holdings and wealth. The alignments of the Sikh misls in the last quarter of the eighteenth century illustrate their bitter discords and bloody vendettas. A conflict between Raja Ranjit Dev of Jammu and his son Braj Raj Dev lined up the Sukerchakia and the Kanhaya misl behind his son, and the Bhangi misl advocated the rights of the father. In the ensuing fight, a Sukerchakia chief was killed in an accident; Jhanda Singh Bhangi was assassinated by a henchman of Jai Singh Kanhaya. In 1775 the Bhangi and Ramagarhia misls fought over the same issue against a tripartite alliance of Kanhaya, Sukerchakia and Ahluwalia misls. The conflict over Jammu constantly brought the Sikh misls to war against one another.³⁰

'In the country of the Punjab,' a Muslim chronicler wrote, 'from the Indus to the banks of the Jumna there are thousands of chiefs in the Sikh community. None obeys the other. If a person owns two or three horses he boasts of being a chief, and gets ready to fight against thousands. When a village is besieged by the Sikhs to realise tribute which the zamindars cannot afford, they intrigue with other Sikhs and the Sikhs begin to fight between themselves.'³¹

The misldari counter-structure established in the post-Banda phase, with all its success in territorial expansion, required reshaping for a firm political system to emerge. The misls provided significant direction to the Sikh movement without sufficient consideration to how the movement was to relate to the local society. The Sikhs were only an insignificant minority in the Punjab. If they did not come up with radically new alternatives of socio-economic organization they had to gradually fall back on whatever was available. This task of restructuring was faced by Ranjit Singh of the Sukerchakia Misl who played a major role in the founding of the Lahore state.

³⁰Khushwant Singh, *A History of The Sikhs*, vol 1, Princeton, 1963, p.182.

³¹Imamuddln, Husain Shahi, pp.242-243, quoted by H.R. Gupta, *Cis-Sutlej Sikhs*, vol. 1, Lahore, 1944, pp. 19-20.

Ranjit Singh was born in 1780 in Gujranwala, the centre of Sukerchakia Misl.³² Barely twelve years old he succeeded his father as the new chief. He bared his ambitions when in 1799 he occupied Lahore and a few years later Amritsar, the holy city of the Sikhs. His control of the former political capital of the Mughal sūbā of Lahore and of Amritsar, the religious capital of the Sikhs, made him the leading Sikh chief. Quickly realising that his firm control of these territories was only possible through further expansion and subjugation, Ranjit Singh annexed the Jalandhar doāb, and took control of territories under the Ramgarhia, the Nakka, the Bhangi and the Kanhaya misls. Not content, he conquered Multan in 1818 and next year the Afghan province of Kashmir which yielded more than 25 lakhs of rupees a year in revenue. Simultaneously, the Rajput principalities in the Himalayas were made to submit to the Lahore state. By 1823 Ranjit Singh was in firm control of all territories between the Indus and the Sutlej rivers. In the next decade he brought areas across the Indus under his direct control.

The virtual dissolution of the Sikh misls certainly made Ranjit Singh the most powerful chief but his incipient kingdom and fresh conquests would have been unviable without a proper system to extract revenue and the enmeshing of the Sikh movement. Congruent with the processes of state formation it was equally essential that the Sikh movement was restructured so that its spiritual and social resources would contribute to the establishment of Ranjit Singh's sovereignty. The Maharaja aimed to rule the Punjab without allowing any religious visionaries to thwart his plans. Egalitarian Sikh principles which had never been fully articulated were gradually defused. The restructuring process had begun during the misldari phase itself. Social distinctions, especially those based on the control over land, became entrenched within the misls and also influenced inter-misl relations. The heirs of a misl chief succeeded to the chieftainship renouncing the earlier principle of a more open choice.³³ The misl

³² The following account of Ranjit Singh is based on, Khushwant Singh, *Ranjit Singh, Maharaja of the Punjab*, London, 1962, Gulshan Lall Chopra, *The Panjab as a Sovereign State (1799-1839)*, Hoshiarpur, second edition, 1960.

³³ J.S. Grewal "Ahmad Shah of Batala on Sikh polity" in his, *From Guru Nanak to Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Essays in Sikh History*, Amritsar, 1972, p.90. Also see the same authors condensed version of Sikh history in "The Sikh movement - A historical note" S.C. Malik ed., *Dissent Protest and Reform in Indian Civilisation*, Simla 1977, pp.159-163.

chiefs adopted all the trappings of royal power: the use of titles, *khilats* (costumes of honour), kettle drums and banners, the minting of coins, appointment of subordinate administrative and military officials and patronising former court painters.³⁴ The functionaries were rewarded with *jāgīrs*; similar grants were also made to religious leaders, sacred institutions and the much dreaded Akalis.³⁵

Marriage customs and commensality amongst the Sikhs continued to be governed by pre-existing procedures. Marriage exchanges tended to be restricted by endogamy and, besides the dietary restrictions which prohibited Sikhs from consuming beef, they possibly also followed rules on the consumption and exchange of food. In 1812 Sir John Malcolm in an influential essay noted:

The Sikh converts, it has been before stated, continue, after they have quitted their original religion, all those civil usages and customs of the tribes to which they belonged, that they can practice, without infringing the tenets of Nanak, or the institutions of Guru Govind. They are most particular with regard to their intermarriages; and, on this point, Sikhs descended from Hindus, almost invariably conform to Hindu customs, every tribe intermarrying within itself. The Hindu usage, regarding diet, is also held equally sacred; no Sikh descended from a Hindu family, ever violating it, except on particular occasions, such as Gurumata, when they are obliged by their tenets and institutions, to eat promiscuously. The strict observance of these usages has enabled many of the Sikhs, those settled to the south of the Satlej, to preserve an intimate intercourse with their original tribes; who, considering the Sikhs, not as having lost caste, but as Hindus that have joined a political association, which obliges them to conform to general rules established for its preservation, neither refuse to intermarry nor to eat with them.³⁶

So far there is no substantial body of evidence, except certain advocates of a pure Sikh tradition who would like to disown any Sikh connection with

³⁴ Background in Andrew J., Major, "Return to Empire: The Sikhs and the British in the Punjab, 1839-1872", unpublished Ph.D thesis; The Australian National University, Canberra, 1981, pp.32-39.

³⁵ For the nature of some of the religious grants see B.N. Goswamy and J.S. Grewal (translated and edited), *The Mughals and the Jogis of Jakhbar*, Simla 1967.

³⁶ John Malcolm, "Sketch of the Sikhs" (first published in 1812) in *The Sikh Religion A Symposium* by M. Macauliffe et. al., p.126.

current practices, and to dispute Malcolm's comments. Many of the social practices within the Sikh Panth, as we will see below continued to be influenced by the society in which they lived. Any possibility of radically altering them was lost, if not earlier, certainly by the time the Lahore state was founded. Why this happened, needs to be spelt out.

The pre-existing social hierarchy came in handy when the young Maharaja soon after the first wave of conquests realized that he urgently needed a reliable network of intermediaries to impress the new command and collect revenue for the state coffers. The in-fighting among the Sikhs needed to be constrained, if not stopped, and means found to govern a heterogeneous society. The degree to which the Lahore state borrowed from the Mughal epistemology of authority and innovated on the basis of the experiences of the Sikh movement is still a matter of debate among historians of the period;³⁷ however, the mechanisms of social control are becoming increasingly clearer.

Without entering into a detailed description of how the Lahore state consolidated its authority and how the courtiers of Ranjit Singh put the piecemeal arrangements together, a process well known by now, in what follows I look at how the state sponsored a dual socio-political framework, a 'central' and a 'local' one, which legitimised its power and enabled it to extract revenues.

The central position in the Lahore state was occupied by the Maharaja; at some distance were his close relatives and not far removed from them were the principal civil and military functionaries of the state.³⁸ Together they

³⁷Indu Banga in her book, *Agrarian System of the Sikhs*, Delhi, 1978, based on a doctoral thesis and following her Andrew Major, *op. cit.*, are of the view that the Lahore state was a version of its predecessor the Mughal state. Andrew Major views the Lahore state as '... a continuation of the administrative format that had existed in the misl and before that, the Mughal periods, even though the nomenclature and number of operational units and administrative offices had often changed'. p.43. Charles Joseph Hall Jr. after an extensive survey of the Khalsa Darbar records disputes of these findings and concludes in his highly stimulating thesis that '... the Sikh kingdom was by no means a miniature version of its Mughal predecessor', "The Maharaja's Account Books. State and Society Under the Sikhs", unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana - Champaign, 1981, p. 122. This disagreement will hopefully lead to promising new research on the nature of the Lahore state.

³⁸Charles Joseph Hall Jr., *Ibid.*, p.120.

constituted the *darbār* (court) at Lahore. The chief officers appointed by the Maharaja constituted the *wazīr* (chief minister), *diwān* (head of finance department), *adālatī* (chief judge), *deorhiwālā* (royal chamberlain), paymaster, superintendant of customs, superintendant of royal seal, postmaster and several others. Most functionaries received a combination of cash salaries and *jāgīrs*.

A *jāgīr* was an award of the state revenues from a specific tract for a period of time. A wide variety of state functionaries and individuals were granted a *jāgīr* in lieu of or in addition to cash salaries, or as charitable grants. The immense variation in the social composition of the grantees and the varied socio-economic value of a *jāgīr* has precluded historians from making any sound generalisations on the working of the *jāgīrdārī* system. Statements like those of a contemporary traveller, Masson: 'there was scarcely a Sikh who was not a jagirdar'³⁹ understandably, are not helpful. A recent study by Andrew Major has made a most useful distinction between two types of *jāgīrdārs*, the 'superior' *jāgīrdārs* and 'inferior' *jāgīrdārs*.⁴⁰

The ranks of the 'superior' *jāgīrdārs* included royal princes, chiefs subordinated by the Lahore state and elevated to the status of nobility by Ranjit Singh. The value of their *jāgīrs* ranged from several thousand to several lakhs of rupees per annum.⁴¹ The 'superior' *jāgīrdār* was virtually a miniature version of the Maharaja at Lahore. He collected the revenues in his territory or appointed subordinate officials to do so. A combination of police and judicial powers greatly enhanced his coercive powers. The right of a *jāgīrdār* to grant *jāgīrs* from his own possessions made him a powerful patron in the locality. Most 'superior' *jāgīrdārs* in exchange for their privileges had to perform several services for the state: maintain a specified number of cavalrymen, attend the

³⁹ Charles Masson, *Narrative of Various Journeys in Baluchistan, Afghanistan and the Punjab*, 3 vols., R. Bentley, 1842, quoted by Indu Banga, *Agrarian System of the Sikhs*, p.147.

⁴⁰ Andrew Major, "Return to Empire" p.49.

⁴¹ For instance Sardar Nihal Singh Ahluwalia was awarded a *jāgīr* worth rupees 9,00,000, Sardar Lahna Singh Majithia rupees 3,50,000, Sardar Tej Singh rupees 1,20,000, Sardar Jamal-ud-din Khan rupees 1, 10,000, Fakir Aziz-ud-din and his brothers 1,00,000. J.D. Cunningham, *History of the Sikhs*, p.386. Very rich information on the *jāgīr*'s awarded by the Lahore state is available in the Khalsa Darbar Records and the Foreign/Political files from the British administration held at the National Archives of India, New Delhi.

court at Lahore when required, lead punitive or expansionist expeditions when ordered, and discharge duties attached to a particular civil or military office.⁴²

The conceptual category of the 'inferior' jāgīrdār may be used for all the minor employees of the Lahore state - soldiers, household servants of the royal family, musicians, dancers, painters, gardeners, falconers, ironsmiths, kennel keepers and several others - who received their salary in a jāgīr or other grants like *ma'afis* or *inams*. The value of revenues from these jāgīrs ranged from a several hundred rupees to a few rupees per annum. In most cases the 'inferior' jāgīrdārs collected the due revenues from the local treasury in cash, though occasionally they were allowed to collect the revenue directly. They enjoyed very little or no extra power except through their links to the power structure established by the Lahore state. Contemporary observers estimated that anything between 35 to 45 per cent of the state's fiscal resources were taken up by the jāgīrdārs.⁴³

The jāgīrdārs are only one, though a prominent illustration of the socio-political framework established by the state. Much more complex social divisions and administrative arrangements were needed to legitimize the transformations in the Sikh movement and the efficient mobilization of resources. Even a militaristic state does not survive on garrisons alone.

The Lahore kingdom was carved into seven sūbās or provinces each headed by a *nāzim*, who was quite often a prince or a leading courtier. The *nāzim* appointed his own set of officials who helped him perform his duties and enhance his private fortune. A further political-administrative sub-division was that of the pargana (district), where the chain of command consisted of a *kārdār* or an *ijāradār* assisted by a *kotwāl* (police chief) and a *qāzī* (Islamic judge). At the pargana level the office of the *kārdār* appears to have been the most important one.

The term *kārdār* was used to designate a wide variety of officials ranging from the administrator of salt markets to functionaries who managed a

⁴² For details see Indu Banga *op. cit.*, pp.118-147.

⁴³ For a list of estimates from Captian Murray, Cunningham, John Lawrence and several British government district gazetteers see Andrew Major, *op. cit.*, pp.48-49.

town.⁴⁴ Their major function, however, was to govern an administrative unit under the direct assignment of the Maharaja. As a representative of an indigenous state a *kārdār* executed a wide variety of businesses: primary among which was the local enforcement of all the state dictates, assessment, collection and remittance of land revenue, resolution of local disputes, manning outposts like forts, accounting for all money spent or collected on behalf of the state. Mediating between the centre and the locality, a *kārdār* had the uneasy task of maximizing the power of the state without suppressing the local ruling elites. If he pressed too hard on the behalf of the state he would get very little local support, and in case he was too soft he could not fulfil the high expectations of the state, which always wanted an increase in the revenues remitted to the treasury at Lahore. The rewards for a good performance were very handsome; a *kārdār* received a salary of between 300 to 1500 rupees per annum. The salary of a *kārdār* was supplemented by other perquisites: an official residence, a travelling allowance, occasionally a *khilat* or robe of honour. Much more substantial may have been the gifts a *kārdār* received from those effected by his revenue or judicial '*elans*'.⁴⁵

The office of the *kārdār* was only one among many layers of functionaries appointed by the state. Together they represented an effective image of what the Lahore state was like and how its ruling elites conceived of their society. The view from the top was certainly not egalitarian; the Lahore state actively enhanced the power and resources of a minority. To do so at what we have called the 'central' level it sponsored its own system of stratification; at the 'local' level it allowed the conservation of the existing modes of social stratification. The coalescing of the 'central' and the 'local' levels largely explains the working of Ranjit Singh's kingdom. Having briefly surveyed the 'central' level, I would now like to delineate the configurations of the 'local' one.

Any description of the local social organization in the Punjab runs the risk of oversimplification given the immense ecological differentiation in the

⁴⁴ The various connotations of the term *kārdār* are mentioned in Indu Banga, *Agrarian System of the Sikhs*, p.76.

⁴⁵ Some interesting sketches of *kārdār*s under the Lahore state are to be found in Charles Joseph Hall Jr. , "The Maharaja's Account Books ", p. 10

region and the specific historical developments within the various tracts. Further complications are added when one considers the spread of Islam and the emergence of the Sikh movement which made the social matrix even more fuzzy and complex. The co-existence of a fairly well developed agrarian peasant economy boosted by the use of the Persian well and generous rainfall in the central Punjab, and the sparse cultivation unaided by natural bounties in the dry outer rims, encouraged on one hand densely populated settlements with developed social divisions and on the other, pastoral nomadism with much weaker social stratification. Denzil Ibbetson, a pioneering ethnographer of the Punjab, conscious of the pitfalls while mapping the social boundaries of the region, noted in his report on the 1881 census:

My experience is that it is almost impossible to make any statement whatever regarding any one of the castes we have to deal with, absolutely true as it may be as regards one part of the Province, which shall not presently be contradicted with equal truth as regards the same people in some other district.⁴⁶

Part of Ibbetson's problem was that he desperately tried to reconcile his evidence by seeking to compress it into the fourfold varnic categories inherited from orientalist scholarship. Successive generations of British administrators were so taken up by the orientalist discourse constructed from Sanskrit texts that they easily despaired when they did not find the society under their command divided into neat varṇa categories. Ibbetson initiated his investigations of the Punjabi social organization immersed in similar fears born out of a powerful discourse, but gradually he came to recognize the peculiarities of the social organization in the Punjab.⁴⁷ Despite his ample reservations and qualifications, Ibbetson ultimately identified Punjabi society in caste terms. This may account for the contradictions which Ibbetson so frankly alluded to. Most subsequent scholarship on the Punjab has been locked in a similar predicament between the Brahmanical caste-based paradigm and the conflicting evidence on the ground. The two do not easily blend.

⁴⁶ Sir Denzil Ibbetson, *Punjab Castes. Being a reprint of the chapter of 'The Races, Castes and Tribes of the People' in Report on the Census of the Punjab Published in 1883*, Lahore, 1916, p.1.

⁴⁷ See his series of qualification on the application of caste ranking in the Punjab, *Ibid.*, pp.2-3.

Clive Dewey's maxim 'caste ranking has been at once a godsend and curse' signals the difficulties inherent in the construction of caste hierarchies. He further points out the problems present in caste studies: 'witnesses inflate their own rank and denigrate their rivals; several castes overlap around the middle of the spectrum; it is difficult to ascribe the correct weight to conflicting criteria when the ritual and economic hierarchies are not congruent'.⁴⁸ In Punjab the standard ritual and practice of purity and pollution, a binary opposition considered axiomatic for caste ranking, has been relatively absent. How does one rank a *zāt* (caste) like the Khatri in the Punjab numbering around a quarter of a million? Commonly considered as a superior and flexible *zāt* the Khatri were not homogeneous. They were divided into numerous formal endogamous groups: the *dhaighar*, the *charzati*, the *chhezati*, the *barazati*, the *bawanjai*. Besides, there were differences in their respective economic resources. Studies which explain social developments in the Punjab by simply referring to caste groups like the Khatri assume that their internal differentiation was unimportant. This needs to be demonstrated, as does the assumption that if an individual is from a particular caste, he will behave in a particular manner. Despite the powerful spell exercised by caste in studies of social structure, its explanatory value is disappointingly limited. This is particularly so in the case of the Punjab.

Recently Hamza Alavi has suggested a way out without completely excluding the role of caste. He concludes a masterly article: 'kinship, rather than caste, is the primary factor amongst the primordial loyalties which govern social organization in West Punjab villages'.⁴⁹ This proposition based on extensive ethnographic work amongst the Muslim peasantry in contemporary West Punjab in Pakistan, has rich potentialities for historical application at the local level as I will try to show below.

Brotherhood

⁴⁸Clive Dewey, "Social mobility and social stratification amongst the Punjab peasantry " p.2.

⁴⁹Hamza A. Alavi, "Kinship in West Punjab villages" *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, New series, vol. 6, 1972, pp.1-27. Also see Z. Eglar, *A Punjabi Village in Pakistan*, New York, 1960 and Veena Das, "Masks and faces: an essay on Punjabi kinship " *Contributions to India Sociology*, New series, vol 10, 1976, pp.1-30. For a historical application of these ideas see Charles Joseph Hall Jr., "The Maharaja's Account Books".

This kinship system of the Sikhs in the Punjab was based on what they call a *barādārī*. The term *barādārī* is of Persian origin and literally means a 'brotherhood'. In its common usage it suggests a patri-lineal descent group, all of whose members can trace their origins to a common male ancestor. More precisely 'it may be looked upon as a term with a sliding semantic structure whose vertical axis is the principle of fraternal solidarity'.⁵⁰ Primarily based on descent, a *barādārī* ideally can be of indefinite size. In actual practice, in a pre-industrial society the absence of communication facilities and the lack of written genealogies, especially among the peasantry, tend to restrict a *barādārī* to descendants over four or five generations within a fairly compact physical space.

In its most frequent form a *barādārī* would extend over ten to twelve villages. It may be pointed out in parentheses that the members of a *barādārī*, were not the only inhabitants of a village. A typical village would consist of a carpenter, a blacksmith, labourers, occasionally a merchant and a religious figure - in short all those who played a role in the agrarian cycle. They related to each other through the Punjabi equivalent of the Jajmani system called the *sepīdarī* system.⁵¹ *Barādārī* members enhanced their solidarity through a real or putative ancestor, regular gift exchange and a strong sense of shared *izzat* or code of honour.⁵² The solidarity within the *barādārī* would be strongest when faced with a common adversary like the state. Depending on its resources and connections a *barādārī* would collectively resist any unjust demands of the state or its functionaries.

Occasionally a *mirasi* or bard orally recorded and transmitted the important events within a *barādārī*: he also played a key role in the *rites de passages* calendar. Of these, marriage was the most significant for it tied *barādārīs* into a network of connections and alliances. I will briefly describe the marriage arrangements as they had a crucial bearing on the framework of local

⁵⁰ Hamza A. Alavi, *Ibid.*, p.2.

⁵¹ The working of the *sepīdarī* system is delineated in Tom G. Kessinger, *Vilyatpur, 1848-1968: Social and Economic Change in a North Indian Village*, Berkeley, 1974.

⁵² For a detailed description of these elements see Hamza A. Alavi, "Kinship in West Punjab Villages", pp.5-19.

organization and provide a rare opportunity to minutely study the social mechanisms of the local society.

Marriage between eligible spouses was arranged by collaterals or ritual intermediaries like *barādarī* nais (barbers) or the family priest called *purohit*. The marrying parties themselves had no decisive voice in the arrangements: the power to decide was vested in a senior member of the household, a father or an important uncle. The *barādarīs* generally being exogamous, sought a spouse for their marriageable members from other *barādarīs* of the same *zāt*. A *zāt* is an endogamous unit and ideally all *barādarīs* constituting a *zāt* are equal in status.⁵³ It was preferable for a woman to marry a social equal or possibly superior, and it was dishonourable to wed a woman to an inferior. The Bedi Sikhs who belonged to the Khatri *zāt* preferred to kill their baby daughters rather than face the prospect of marrying them with social inferiors.

The value of gifts exchanged on the occasion of the marriage indicated the relative status of the various members of a *barādarī* on whose part it was virtually obligatory to make gifts. The powerful and the wealthy tended to bestow valuable gifts, which subtly demonstrated their superiority and authority. A household which received the gifts had to make gifts in exchange. For these future occasions all gifts, particularly those in cash, were recorded and publicly announced by a *mirasi*. At the wedding of Karam Singh, the son of Raja Sahib Singh of Patiala, his maternal uncle gave him 'a suit of clothes each to Kanwar Sahib and Raja Sahib Singh and a suit of clothes to Mai Khem Kaur, with one fine woolen shawl, some silk "Lungis " and rupees one thousand and ninety-five in cash. Raja Bhag Singh of Jind gave rupees five hundred, Raja Jaswant Singh of Nabha rupees one thousand. Himmat Singh rupees two hundred and others gave whatever they could according to their rank and position by way of 'Tambol' on occasion of the marriage.'⁵⁴

On the completion of the marriage rites a woman became a part of her husband's *barādarī*, and authority over her was transferred from her father to

⁵³ Principal *zāts* among the Sikhs in the Punjab are: Jat, Kamboh, Khatri, Arora, Tarkhan, Lohar, Nai, Chhimba, Ahluwalia, Chammar and Chuhra. Details in W.H. McLeod "Caste in the Sikh Panth " *Evolution of the Sikh Community*, Oxford 1976, pp.83-104.

⁵⁴ H.L.O. Garrett and G.L. Chopra eds., *Events at the Court of Ranjit Singh, 1810-1817*, Lahore, 1935, p.23.

her husband.⁵⁵ She retained no legal rights in her natal family and normally she could not claim any inheritance. Without any control over productive resources a woman was in a position of subordination. Decisions on all major household issues were taken by men. The line of descent among Sikhs was based on the male members of the family. Much like the Punjabi Muslims and Hindus the Sikhs in the nineteenth century lived in a patriarchal society.

The nature of the structure of authority within a *barādārī* will have to await much further research into local and clan history. At this stage a few preliminary statements may be hazarded. The key positions within a *barādārī* were occupied by those who controlled the economic resources, mainly land. Such individuals often enjoyed proprietary rights (*milkiyat*) over land and additionally, they may have the right to collect land revenue payments (*mālguzārī zamīndārī*) for remittance to the state coffers. Men with such rights emerged as the leaders of the *barādārīs* and were in the local parlance titled *chaudharis*. It was no coincidence that those who assisted the Lahore state collect revenue at the village level were also called *chaudhuris*. In this sense, a individual could occupy more than one social position. A *chaudhuri* belonged both to the central hierarchy of the state and the organization of the *barādārī*. A *chaudhuri* played an important role in the shaping of the local politics and often exerted social control through *barādārī panchayat* - an institution of the corporate group with a strong representation of the landed elites. A *barādārī panchayat* could pronounce judgements on a wide variety of issues which included land disputes, matrimonial disagreements, the non-fulfillment of a pledge, virtually any matter effecting the cohesion and honour of the *barādārī*.⁵⁶ If resources within the *barādārī* proved to be inadequate or there was much internal feuding, some members invariably made efforts to wean themselves away from the *barādārī*, with or without its support, and sought to bring uncultivated land under plough

⁵⁵ Captain W. Murray, who spent considerable time with the Malwa Sikhs, commented in his notes on the status of married women among the Sikhs: 'From the moment she has quitted the paternal roof, she is considered to have been assigned as the property of another, and ceases to have a free will,' in H.T. Prinsep, *Origin of the Sikh Power in the Punjab*, p.165.

⁵⁶ On the functions of the *panchayat* see *Ibid.*, pp.159-160.

or initiate some new activity like brigandage. These moves, if successful, led to the establishment of a new *barādārī*.⁵⁷

The Lahore state did not seek to dissolve the pre-existing social hierarchies like the *barādārīs* or clans at the local level: its major aim was to absorb the local segmentary lineages and found an empire on them. The protagonists of the Sikh movement in the second half of the eighteenth century had already initiated the process: the Lahore state completed it. The authority of the state was constructed out of two levels, the 'central' and the 'local'. At the top it established a system of administration which in its penetration of local society, for instance, under the *kārdārs*, stopped somewhere at the village level. Here the state, much in accordance with its segmentary nature, conserved the organization of the local society. It was not in its political or economic interests to upset the local arrangements. The Lahore state willingly recognised and accepted the local clans, which also entailed recognition of their rights over land. In return the elite members of these clans had to turn in the land revenue and provide any other assistance required by the state. The social play between the 'central' and the 'local' levels defined the power and weakness of the Lahore state. Whenever the local organizations were unable to stall conflict or resolve any other problem, the state intervened with great agility to settle the locally unsolvable matters. A news writer from the court of Ranjit Singh reported in April 1813, close to the harvest time for wheat: 'A letter from Chuni Lal and Bir Chand intimated that the attacking party of the Noble Sarkar had reached the ditch, that the Zamindars had attacked and killed ten out of them and had then retreated and established themselves in their own village, adding that the entrenchment was still intact and demands for expenses etc., had been met with. Thereupon a letter was issued to the representatives of Rahmat Khan and others that they should enlist five hundred more men and lay waste the village of Malu.⁵⁸ The orders for a punitive expedition clearly involved the exercise of state power at the local level.

The successful incorporation of the 'central' and the 'local' components may partly account for the ability of the Lahore state to rule over territories

⁵⁷For the history of one such lineage in the Doaba see Tom G. Kessinger, *Vilyatpur, 1848-1968*.

⁵⁸*Events at the Court of Ranjit Singh*, p.63.

extending from Peshawar to the banks of the Sutlej. By 1844 the Lahore state had an annual revenue of rupees 32,475,000 and a formidable army.⁵⁹ The wealth and the resources of the Maharaja easily conjured up images of 'oriental splendour' among the European observers who passed through the Punjab. The conservation of the pre-existing social framework by the Lahore state has prompted some authors to characterise it as the Hinduisation of the 'Sikh State' reflecting in part the way the egalitarian principles of the Sikh movement were watered down by the Lahore state, in part on how it sanctioned the rituals, and the life-cycle ceremonies associated with Brahmanical Hinduism and its accompanying social system encapsuled in the varṇa hierarchy. While the Hinduisation thesis partially succeeds in noticing the changes occurring under Ranjit Singh, it fails to point out why these transmutations took place, except for a questionable causation which castigates the Maharaja and his courtiers for what happened. In this work, without attributing any pernicious influence on the part of Ranjit Singh or his court for the so-called Hinduisation, I prefer to see the transformation of the Sikh movement as a passage from anti-structure to structure, an idiom very closely tied to the process of state formation.

Without such restructuration of the Sikh movement it is difficult to explain the perennial paradoxes within the Sikh movement of which the supposed equality of all men and the status of Ranjit Singh as the Maharaja of Punjab is only one. The high rate of female infanticide among the Bedis, the collaterals of the first Sikh Guru, rarely mentioned in traditional Sikh historiography, is another instance of a sociological paradox within Sikh society, i.e. the gap between the ideal of Sikh attitudes towards women and the actual practice. Why did the Bedis kill their newly born female children? Answering this question helps illuminate the subtleties of social stratification amongst the Sikhs.

Within the Sikh Panth the Bedis have always enjoyed high status and ample privileges. Their high ranking stems from the fact that Guru Nanak the founder of the religion was a Bedi.⁶⁰ In the late eighteenth century when the Sikh movement began to exert its control in the central Punjab, the leading Sikh

⁵⁹J.D. Cunningham, *A History of the Sikhs*, pp.383-387.

⁶⁰While the Bedis trace their origin to Lakshmi Das, the second son of the Guru Nanak, it is quite certain that the Bedis existed as a part of the Khatri zāt much before him. D. Ibbetson, *Punjab Castes*, p.250.

chiefs honoured the Bedis as collaterals of the first Guru as well as a belief in their superior piety by bestowing on them revenue, free land grants and positions of authority. This tradition continued under the Lahore state. In addition numerous jāgīrdārs emulated the state and endowed the Bedi's with similar grants.⁶¹ According to Cunningham's estimates, the Bedis and Sodhis (another group which traced its lineage to the Sikh Gurus), shared between themselves over forty per cent of the *dhamarth* or religious charity revenues endowed by the Lahore state. Frequently they acquired additional jāgīrs or cash salaries by working for the state. It is instructive to delineate the biography of the most celebrated of the Bedi's in the first half of the nineteenth century: Sahib Singh Bedi of Una in Hoshiarpur.⁶² In the 1770's Sahib Singh, a grandson of Bab Kala Dhari, settled a land dispute between two feuding chiefs, Sardar Gurdit Singh of Santokhgarh and Raja Umed Singh of Jaswan. His arbitration was so well received that the two chiefs expressed their gratitude by endowing him with liberal revenue free land grants. Umed Singh made the Bedi a jāgīrdār of the village Kulgaron and Raja Umed Singh vested the *taalluqa* of Una. In the next decade he became an influential figure in the Doaba with an equally large following among Sikh chiefs and the peasantry in the Majha. His eloquent exposition of Sikh theology and definitions of Sikh tenets cast him in the role of a Guru. Many Sikh chiefs honoured the Bedi by granting him liberal jāgīrs.

The most successful of the Sikh chieftains, Ranjit Singh greatly respected Sahib Singh, who accompanied him on several military expeditions. He commanded such influence that during the campaign against the Bhangi

⁶¹Numerous instances of such jāgīrs were recorded by the British officials when they enquired into the issues of land revenue. Prominent among the jāgīrdārs who made revenue free land grants to the Bedi's were: Hari Singh Nalwa, Jamedar Khushal Singh, Desa Singh Majithia Atar Singh and Ajit Singh Sandhanwaila Karam Singh and Gurmukh Singh Chahal. Foreign/Political Proceedings, 14 January, 1853, nos. 212-213.

⁶²The biography of Sahib Singh Bedi is largely based on Lepel H. Griffin, Colonel Charles Francis Massy, Major W.L. Conran, H.D.Craik and G.L.Chopra, *Chiefs and Families of Note in the Punjab*, Lahore, 1940, vol. 1, pp. 148-151.

chief of Gujrat, the Bedi convinced the young ruler to lift the siege.⁶³ In 1801, when Ranjit Singh decided to proclaim himself the Maharaja of Punjab, the coronation ceremonies at Lahore were carried out by Sahib Singh Bedi. The new monarch paid homage to his illustrious religious mentor by endowing him with extensive jāgīrs. Sahib Singh's experience was not uncommon, it was shared by other Bedi families, perhaps to a lesser degree, but together they constituted an important bloc within the ruling elite of the Lahore state. Their unequalled combination of ritual status and considerable economic resources placed them at the apex of the Sikh Panth. During the 1881 census the enumerators counted 6,804 Bedis in the Punjab province.⁶⁴ Most of them lived in the Jalandhar doāb, where Dera Baba Nanak in Gurdaspur was traditionally regarded as their headquarters. According to one contemporary report there were four major divisions among the Bedis which perhaps corresponded to four barādarīs.⁶⁵

The Bedis had to pay very dearly for their high social and ritual standing. They found it extremely difficult to find barādarīs of higher status from which they could draw husbands for their daughters. It was considered shameful to marry among barādarīs of a lower status. Being exogamous they could not marry among themselves. Also, the Bedis reasoned that, because of their position as Gurus among the Sikhs, they could not marry their daughters to their followers.⁶⁶ To solve this intractable problem the Bedis borrowed a solution which had for long been used by the Rajput landed aristocracy in various parts of India. They killed their female offspring on birth, thus avoiding a situation in which they would have to find a match within a low ranking caste.

⁶³ The occasion is described by the court chronicler Sohan Lal: 'The Exalted One (Ranjit) untied his sword from his waist and placed it on the ground before Baba Sahib Singh (Bedi). All the Sardars, Jodh Singh, Dal Singh, and Sahib Singh did the same. For one hour the swords lay on the ground and the Sardars did not say anything. Afterwards, the said Baba Sahib Singh tied the sword round the waist of the Exalted One and said that within a short time all his opponents would be exirpated and his rule would be established throughout the country.' *Umadat-ut-Tawarikh*, vol.2, p.49, quoted by Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, vol. 1, Princeton, 1963, p.199. .

⁶⁴D. Ibbetson, *Punjab Castes*, p.249. .

⁶⁵ Board's Collection, 1853-54, Vol. 2564, collection number 151,171, appendix E.

⁶⁶ R.R. Sethi, *John Lawrence as the Comissioner of the Jullundur Doab (1846-49)*, Lahore, 1930, p.30.

The Bedis used a similar stratagem of female infanticide to secure their *izzat* (honour) and maintain their superior status.⁶⁷

Several modes were used among the Bedis to kill their newly born female infants: a midwife choked the baby, sometimes the mouth was stuffed with cowdung or the head was immersed in cow's milk. In Gujrat the baby was put into an earthen pot, the top was covered with a paste of dough and then buried.⁶⁸ These brutal killings earned the Bedis the title of *Kooremars* or daughter slayers. The Bedis were not the only ones among the Sikhs who practised female infanticide: other high ranking *zāts* like the Berars of Ferozepore, the Khattris of Gujranwala, and the Sodhis of Shahpur practised it too. My intention in describing this female infanticide is not only to show the cruelty of the custom, but also to demonstrate the working of social stratification among the Sikhs. The superior groups had to devise or borrow social conventions which would publicly proclaim their high status and also in part legitimise it. Female infanticide was part of the social hierarchy or what Edmund Leach calls 'symbols of social status'⁶⁹ within the Sikh Panth. It made explicit what was normally implicit: the relationships of superiority and subordination, the position of men and women.

Before proceeding further, it may be useful to recapitulate the main propositions put forward thus far. Essentially, I have been arguing that the grammar of social organization among the Sikhs cannot be understood without

⁶⁷The custom of female infanticide in the Punjab is described in great detail by M.N. Das, 'The measures to abolish female infanticide in the North-West Provinces and the Punjab' *Studies in Economic and Social Development of Modern India: 1845-56*, Calcutta, 1959, pp.323-361. Mr. Montgomery, the Punjab Judicial Commissioner, who played an important role in curbing female infanticide under British government, noted in a report: '... as we ascend the scale of society... we must eventually reach those who stand on the highest round of the ladder and admit no superior; these classes find themselves in an awkward dilemma either they must bring up their daughters unmarried or they must provide husbands for them and thereby confess that they are not the high and exclusive race to which they lay claim; either alternative is attended with disgrace, and there is but one remedy, viz. to destroy there female infants: and hence we see the force of conventional rules.' Board's Collection, vol. 2564, collection number 151,171, Report of Montgomery, 16 June, 1853. For a somewhat different explanation see Pandit Motilal Kathju, *Memorandum on Female Infanticide*, Lahore, 1868.

⁶⁸ M.N. Das, *op. cit.*, p.336.

⁶⁹ Edmund Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, London, 1954.

knowing the historical evolution of the Sikh movement. While the Sikh Gurus and subsequently their disciples tried to redefine the norms of the society in which they lived, they were unable to create an absolutely new mode of social organization. Except for brief periods they continued with a segmentary lineage based society and the Lahore state was founded upon such lineages. Thus the Sikh Panth for a major part of its history was a lineage-based society and social stratification within Sikh society was closely linked to kinship ties and the control over land exercised by kin groups. Lineage-based societies are by nature flexible and quick to change.

Conclusion

In mid-nineteenth century the Sikh Panth, despite its egalitarian contours, was definitely inegalitarian, sharing a social structure with the other constituents of the Punjabi society.⁷⁰ What they did not share equally with the other Punjabis was an anti-structural mode, which became available to them out of the Sikh movement, as a means of challenging the regnant modes of established hierarchy. During crises, if ably voiced, the anti-structuralist drive found ready adherents. Examples of this abound in the Sikh annals, the Lahore army in 1844, the Kukas, Bhai Maharaj Singh, the Babbar Akalis are among the better known.

The Sikh movement, almost from its inception has oscillated between anti-structure and structure. The former is of its own making, the latter its social heritage. The tension between the two, if I may simplify, has generated what we today know as 'Sikh history'. Only by recognising these two poles can we make sense out of statements like those of Prinsep that, in late eighteenth century, Punjab was 'ruled by seventy thousand sovereigns.'⁷¹ The statement is suggestive of the anti-structure pole, where each man considered himself equal to the rest, and was unwilling to acknowledge any social superiors. George Forster, who toured the Punjab in the late eighteenth century, mentions

⁷⁰ E. Leach in his classic study of the Shans and the Kachins in Burma states: 'Differences of culture are, I admit, structurally significant, but the mere fact that two groups of people are of different culture does not necessarily imply - as has nearly always been assumed - that they belong to two quite different social systems.' Ibid., p.17.

⁷¹ H.T. Prinsep, *Origin of Sikh Power*, p.29.

in his travelogue an incident in which a Sikh told him that 'he disdained an earthly superior and acknowledged no other master but his prophet.'⁷²

The glorified legends of bloodshed, intense factionalism and the unbounded waves of enthusiasm with the Sikh Panth are symptomatic of the anti-structure pole. Female infanticide, zāt based hypergamy and the exclusion of 'untouchables' from certain Sikh holy places are the better known instances of what is here called a structure. From our discussion so far it may be reasonable to conclude that the tenets of Sikhism do not so much determine the structure of the Sikh Panth as the anti-structure.

⁷²G. Forster, *A Journey from Bengal to England through North India, Kashmir, Afghanistan and Persia into Russia, 1783-1784*, 2 vols., p.286, quoted by Indu Banga, *Agrarian System of the Sikhs*, p.33.

Chapter Two

Customary Culture In The Punjab And The Sikhs

At some point far in the past a group of people had something important to say, and they come alive again today in their descendants like deaf-and-dumb orators holding forth by means of beautiful and incomprehensible gestures. Their message will never be deciphered not only because there is no key, but because people lack the patience to listen in an age when the accumulation of messages old and new is such that their voices cancel out one another.

Milan Kundera, *The Joke*, p. 244.

European observers of the Sikhs in the nineteenth century, were often far more concerned with what Sikhism ought to be like rather than what it was. Men like Trumpp, Gordon and Macauliffe, following the conventions established by Oriental scholarship on India, showed far greater passion in recording the ideals of the faith rather than the actual behaviour of its practitioners. This preoccupation with texts led them to generally ignore a vast array of cultural tropes, myths, rituals and religious practices among the Sikhs.¹ Occasionally when compelled to take note of these practices in their accounts, they treated them with great disdain and dismissed them as corrupt accretions, resulting from the moral lassitude of the Khalsa, the decline in the political fortunes of the Sikhs and the boa-like advances of Hinduism. The Sikh literati who emerged under the shadows of the Raj were powerfully influenced by the European discourses on their religion and in due course began to exhibit a similar intolerance towards many aspects of the Sikh tradition. Like the Europeans they began a journey in search of 'authentic' texts so that the 'correct' articles of the faith could be established. This quest for a rationalized Sikhism free of 'spurious additions' collectively underwritten by the new Sikh

¹ In 1881 Macauliffe writing in an influential semi-official journal noted the characteristics, that in his view, distinguished a practitioner of the Sikh faith: 'All orthodox Sikhs must always have five appurtenances whose name begin with the letter K. They are spoken of by the Sikhs as the five K's, and are - the Kes or long hair, the Kirpan, a small knife with an iron handle round which the Kes, thus roled, is fastened on the head, the Kachh or drawers, and the Kara, an iron bangle for the wrist. While smoking and shaving any part of the person are strictly prohibited, the strict culinary ceremonies of the Hindus are relaxed. Excepting the flesh of the cow, the Sikhs are allowed to partake of all animal food and of many other viands held in abomination by the Hindus.' "The Sikh Religion Under Banda, and its Present Condition", *Calcutta Review*, vol. LXXIII, 1881, p. 162. In this highly idealized and selective definition there is no place for the beliefs and practices current among the Sikhs.

elites and the social forces generated by the colonial rule has come to exercise a powerful influence on Sikh historiography. Much like the European scholars or late nineteenth century Sikh reformers, contemporary scholarship either tends to ignore vast terrains of Sikh life in the nineteenth century or views it as a superfluous addition that had to be negated.

As a consequence we know virtually nothing about nature worship, witchcraft, sorcery, spirits, magical healing, omens, wizards, popular saints, goddesses, festivals, astrology and divination among the Sikhs. When occasionally these themes are mentioned in historical texts, they serve to dress up an argument on how Sikhism was relapsing back into Hinduism in the nineteenth century with its adherents deviating from the 'true' articles of faith and ascribing to superstitious and primitive beliefs. Ultimately, so the argument goes, Sikhs were delivered from the thralldom of these un-Sikh beliefs by the intervention of the Singh Sabha movement. Scholars who support such an interpretation fail to recognise that they are mistaking the ideology of a period for a historical explanation. It was Sikh reformers in the nineteenth century who for the first time labelled many of the current beliefs and practices among the Sikhs as acts of deviance and expressions of a superstitious mind. Historians cannot simply reproduce these value judgements and employ categories invented by a section of the Sikh elites to discredit certain beliefs and rituals. What needs to be explained is why at a particular juncture certain forms of behaviour came to be viewed with suspicion and invited constant censure. To suggest, as many have done, that this was because these beliefs were superstitious and without any rational basis is to propose a tautological argument that ends up by legitimising the Singh Sabha's propaganda. A firm distinction must be made between the way certain beliefs and rituals came to be represented in the rhetoric of socio-religious movements like the Singh Sabha and their actual place and function in the everyday life of the people.

Only by making such a distinction we may begin to unravel the complex evolution of Sikh cosmology. This chapter has two main aims. First, an ethnography of the myths, symbols and rituals for long ignored or viewed with hostility, second, a phenomenological inquiry into the meaning and social

basis of the customary culture described here.² To study the grid of symbols, myths and rituals long spurned is to get into a realm without clear boundaries, abounding in ambiguities and grey zones. While we may lack precise explanation for all that is recounted, the ethnography described brings us closer to the realities of the Sikh Panth and the transformations it underwent.

Nature Worship, Village Sacred Sites, Goddesses and Popular Saints

The Punjab in the nineteenth century was fundamentally an agrarian society. In 1881 approximately 87 per cent of of the population lived in the 34,000 villages of the province; only 13 per cent in urban centres.³ The three largest cities of the state - Lahore, Multan and Amritsar - which together had a population of about quarter of a million, controlled most of the long distance trade and some of the manufacturing. Smaller towns like Jalandhar, Batala, Sialkot and Rawalpindi, each with a population between ten to thirty thousand, served as centres of manufacturing. Although the trade with central and western Asia and Europe in luxury commodities like gold woven and silk fabrics, Kashmiri shawls and ivory goods enriched the small number of mercantile families involved in it, on the whole the rulers and the ruled alike were dependent on the fruits of an agrarian economy. The British colonial rule in the Punjab did not dramatically alter the situation. A contemporary English

²It was tempting to categorize the phenomena described here as popular culture. But there are several conceptual and empirical problems in the use of this fashionable term which has come to replace what in the past was often called folk culture. Conceptually it is not clear what exactly is gained by dichotomising culture into a binary dyad - elite and popular. Empirically in the period and region under study the myths, rites and festivals described here were widely shared across social boundaries. There was no cultural enclave specifically rooted among the non-elite, be they peasants, artisans, landless labour or city workers. The term customary culture was found to be far more useful for the purpose at hand. But custom should not be taken to mean static or homogeneous. There was much negotiation and antagonism within customary culture and like any other cultural process there were moments of contradiction, rupture and inversion.

³ *Report on the Census of the Punjab*, by D.C.J.Ibbetson, Lahore, 1883 (Hereafter *Census 1881*), p.17.

official perceptively noted : 'The Punjab can show no vast cities to rival Calcutta and Bombay; no great factories, no varied mineral wealth...'⁴

The rhythm of life for the vast majority of the people was dependent on the agricultural calendar and its seasonal fluctuations. The whole agricultural year was neatly divided into two halves corresponding to the sowing and harvesting of crops: the *rabi* in spring and the *kharif* in autumn. In the former season wheat, gram and barley were sown in October or November and harvested from April to June; in the second season, Indian corn was sown in July or August and harvested from October to December. Therefore the busiest time in the year for the peasantry was from mid-April to the end of June, and from September to the end of November.⁵

The calendar year based on the Vikramaditya era commenced in the month of Chet. A notion of temporal assumptions, and the cycle of work and rest for those engaged in agriculture, may be had from the following calendar:

Table 1: The Local Calendar and Agrarian Work.

No.	Name of local month.	Gregorian Calendar	Nature of Agrarian Work
1	Chet	March-April	Cane planting, irrigation for wheat. Ploughing of <i>kharif</i> crops.
2	Baisākh	April-May	Reaping and threshing of <i>rabi</i> crops. Cotton sowing and cane irrigation.
3	Jeṭh	May-June	Threshing and storage of <i>rabi</i> crops, grain and fodder.
4	Hār	June-July	Cotton sowing finished, commencement of rain, and

⁴ D.Ibbetson, E.D.MacLagan, and H.A.Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province*, vol.1, Lahore, 1919, p.3 (Hereafter *Glossary 1*).

⁵ For the divisions of time during the day and the night see R.W.Falcon, *Handbook on the Sikhs for the use of Regimental Officers*, Allahabad, 1896, p.45.

			<i>rabi</i> ploughing.
5	Sāuṅ	July-August	<i>Kharif</i> sowing completed.
6	Bhādauṅ	August-September	Ploughing for the <i>rabi</i> crops, irrigation and hoeing of cotton and maize.
7	Asāu	September-October	Ploughing and sowing of <i>rabi</i> crops.
8	Kattak	October-November	<i>Rabi</i> sowing completed, harvesting of <i>kharif</i> crops.
9	Maghar	November-December	Threshing of <i>kharif</i> crops, cotton picking and cane pressing.
10	Pauh	December-January	Cotton picking completed, cane pressing and watering of crops.
11	Māgh	January-February	Watering of <i>rabi</i> crops, pressing of cane completed.
12	Phagan	February-March	Watering of <i>rabi</i> crops.

Adapted from: *Punjab States Gazetteers Phulkian States. Patiala, Jind and Nabha*, Lahore, 1909, p. 95 and E.P. Newton, *Panjabi Grammar*, Ludhiana, 1898, p. 452.

Although free from the tyranny of mechanical time, the life of the peasant household was far from idyllic. A failure of rains could ruin a whole agricultural season and the spectre of drought and famine was never far away. If overcome by the calamity of famine, the peasants were compelled to abandon their homes, whole villages were depopulated and the dead were counted in

thousands.⁶ For a century preceding 1883, on an average there was a famine every nine years, and most of these were followed with a high mortality from fever that may have been partly linked to undernourishment. Epidemics like plague, cholera and smallpox were still mysteries: once they spread the old and the young literally died 'like flies in autumn'. In 1869, during a cholera epidemic in the city of Amritsar over 3,000 people died in one month. Again in 1881, after the monsoons a fever spread in the city from which for eleven days 200 persons died every day.⁷

To come to terms with these misfortunes and overcome them the Sikhs, like most other Punjabis, lived in a universe rich in gods, spirits, 'supernatural beliefs', sacred shrines, charms, spells, magical practices, miracle saints, witches, healers, and astrological advisers. Among the beliefs that an agrarian society must have inherited over several millennia was nature worship. Central to this concern was the reverence bestowed on the Sun as Suraj Devata.⁸ While no shrines were built to him, on Sunday people abstained from salt and instead of the usual churning of milk to make butter they cooked rice milk and offered a portion of it to the Brahmans. Also after each harvest, and occasionally in between, the Brahmans were fed to honour Suraj Devata. Similarly, the planets Mercury and Mars were worshipped, though as lesser deities.

A part of the nature pantheon was the Mother Earth whose worship must have been crucial for a people so heavily dependent on the success of the agricultural cycle for their existence. In rural Punjab the earth

⁶ A great famine in 1783 was grimly recollected by some of its survivors from whose memory two officials recounted its harrowing impact: In the fertile and populous central districts, wheat sold at from 1.5 to 2.5 seers for the rupee, the people fled to Hindustan, Kashmir and Peshawar, the seeds of acacia and the cotton plant were greedily devoured. So many died of starvation that bodies were thrown into wells, unburied mothers cast their children into rivers, and even cannibalism is said to have been resorted to. The cattle nearly all died, or were eaten up by the starving Mahomedans. Many ruins of old villages are traceable to this famine... the famine was followed by great mortality from fever and ague, and a large proportion of those who had escaped starvation fell victim to disease. Saunders and Waterfield, *Lahore and Gujrat Reports*, quoted in *Census 1881*, p.49.

⁷ C.R. Rodger, "Amritsar in 1881", *Calcutta Review*, vol. LXXIV, 1881, p.306.

⁸ Unless otherwise stated the following is based on *Glossary 1*, pp.193-208.

was widely propitiated as Dharti Mata. While no shrines were constructed for her, occasionally in a village a heap of stones or pottery was collected under a sacred tree to mark a spot for the worship of Mother Earth. The rural folk would go there to make offerings of milk, fruits and grains. On milking a cow or buffalo, the first five or seven streams of milk were offered to the Earth. During the harvest operations a few plants were left in the fields as an offering to Mother Earth. When a new house was constructed the Mother Earth was invoked by embedding in the foundations a coconut, a few silver coins, and a coral and a pearl tied in a *mauli* (multi-coloured threads). A common belief was that every month Mother Earth slept for seven days and during those days no digging, ploughing or sowing should be performed. This may have been a mode of establishing leisure time in a rural society. It was believed that a person who died on the surface of Mother Earth attained peace. Because of this belief if a person was about to die, he was removed from his cot, and laid on the earth. All kinsmen who came to mourn the dead slept on the ground for eleven days after the death.

Supplications to nature in popular religion included the worship of rivers and streams both for protection from floods and the use of water for irrigation in the fields. Khawaja Khizr was widely venerated as the god of water.⁹ Believed to be always dressed in green wherever he sat or prayed the soil turned green with verdure. Local lithographs showed him as an old man standing on a fish. During the months of Sāuṅ and Bhādauṅ when the monsoons swelled the river systems of the Punjab, Khawaja Khizr was invoked for the protection of fields, village homes and cattle. If a flood was imminent a rite was performed to propitiate the river. A coconut, dried grass, a golden ring and a buffalo with its right ear bored were cast into the river. If the buffalo was drowned or it swam across to the other bank of the river the rite was considered efficacious and the flood was predicted to recede. But if the buffalo returned to the same bank from where it was pushed into the river it was seen as an inauspicious sign and a flood was feared. During the British period, in the state of Patiala if the river Ghaggar was in flood the Sikh Maharaja of Patiala used to perform the rite of offering a golden ring, grass and coconut to

⁹ For background and legends see *Ibid.*, 562-565.

the river deity and the oral tradition records the flood waters receded.¹⁰ On the digging of a new well a clod of earth was put aside to venerate Khawaja Khizr. Prior to launching a boat or proceeding on a journey by river, Khawaja Khizr was invoked to ensure a safe voyage.

As part of nature worship certain trees were held to be sacred. The *pipal* (*Ficus religiosa*) and the *bar* (*Bengalensis*) trees were commonly venerated and only under dire circumstances like a famine were their leaves cut to feed the cattle. Among several Jat clans especially in the Malwa the bridegroom worshipped the *jand* (*Prosopis Spicigera*) tree on the day of the wedding procession. A cotton thread was passed seven times around the tree and after pouring a little oil at the foot of the tree the groom struck it seven times.¹¹ The *tulsi* (*Basil*) was worshipped among women by placing a lamp made of flour at its root. It was proverbial 'I have lit a lamp for Tulsi and she will take care of me when I die'.¹² Ancillary to nature worship was the reverence for certain animals among whom the cow is the best known example. It was not uncommon for cows to be worshipped and fed with ritually prepared food. Similarly a bull was not ridden for it was considered sacred and on the eleventh day of a lunar fortnight bullocks were not supposed to be put to work.

Central to these beliefs universally encountered in pre-industrial societies, was the conception that the cosmos was inhabited by benign and malevolent spirits. In order to live and survive people advocated close association with merciful spirits and the pacification of vengeful ones. Lineage ancestors were counted among the benign spirits. A.H. Bingley who prepared a manual for army officers recruiting soldiers among the Sikh peasantry noted :

The worship of the sainted dead, though contrary to the injunctions of Gobind Singh, is universal among Jats, whether Sikhs, Sultanis or Hindus. Small shrines to pits or ancestors will be found all over the fields, and there generally is a large one to the *Jathera* or common ancestor of the clan. Villagers

¹⁰ S.S.Bedi, *Folklore of the Punjab*, New Delhi, 1971, (Hereafter *Punjab Folklore*), p.30.

¹¹ *Punjab States Gazetteers Phulkian States. Patiala, Jind and Nabha*, Lahore, 1909, (Hereafter *Gazetteer Phulkian States*), p.235

¹² *Tulsi divā baliā, Mainun mardī nun sambhaliā.*

who have migrated will periodically make long pilgrimages to worship at the shrine of their ancestor, or if the distance is too great will bring away a brick from the original shrine and use it as a foundation of a new one.¹³

On the outskirts of a village under the shade of the sacred *jand* tree one could encounter several *jathera* shrines where offerings of purified butter and flowers were made by different clans settled in a village.

An integral part of the rural landscape in the Punjab was the shrine of the Bhoomia, a village godling who protected the land over which a village was settled. According to the Jat popular tradition, when the first man of a newly-founded village died, the place where he was cremated or buried was used to set up a shrine for Bhoomia. On the birth of a son or a wedding in the family Bhoomia was invoked and offerings made at his shrine. On Sundays women worshipped him and at harvest time the whole village propitiated him. If displeased Bhoomia struck back violently and inflicted punishment on the offender. It was believed that if an individual transgressed the sacred territory allocated for the worship of Bhoomia, for instance by brushing teeth near his shrine, the person would fall ill, or, in case someone dared sleep close to the shrine, a heavy weight would press on his chest during sleep. The worship of Bhoomia served to enhance the vertical solidarity amongst the lineage groups.

In popular demonology, evil spirits arose from the dead, especially if death occurred under unfortunate circumstances, for instance a man dying without a male issue or a person meeting a violent death. Initially a dead person's spirit roamed free as a *paret* for twelve months, a form in which it already possessed the power to create trouble. If after twelve months, the spirit did not reincarnate into a respectable next life, it transformed into a *bhūt* or, in case of a female, into a *churel*, a troublesome spirit, which took possession of old friends, inflicted fever and other diseases. It is of interest that members of low-castes, like scavengers, were considered especially susceptible to becoming evil spirits on death; the upper castes as a precaution insisted that they be cremated or buried face downwards, in order to prevent their spirit from escaping. Social hierarchies of caste affected the dead and the living alike. The greater fear from the dead of the lower castes was perhaps the fear of their

¹³ A.H.Bingley, *The Sikhs*, Patiala, 1970, first published, Simla, 1894, p.81.

reprisals for the discrimination they faced when they were living. Malignant spirits had special forms and codes. *Bhūts* accomplished all their tasks by night and cast no shadows while moving. They were unable to set their feet on the ground and when people went on a pilgrimage or transported the ashes of a dead affine to the Ganges, they slept on the ground to avoid them. *Churels* were classified into two main types: the spirit of women who died while pregnant or on the day of childbirth, and of those who died within forty days of childbirth. But the most dreaded *churel* was the spirit of a pregnant woman who died during the festival of Diwali. *Churels*, it was presumed, enticed men by assuming the form of beautiful women and appearing at lonely spots to entice their victims. The only way they could be evaded was by paying no attention to their gestures or calls. In their real form *churels* were hideous to look at with their feet set backwards. In Punjabi cosmology malignant spirits were the inverse of human beings: they were active at night when humans slept, they floated in the air instead of walking on the ground and occasionally their feet were in the opposite direction to that of the humans. It was this inversion which made them powerful and endowed them with a capacity to do harm.

No shrines were built for evil spirits. They were commonly appeased by offerings of food, fruit and flowers which were often placed after dark on a road leading to the house or the village of the person who had been taken ill and was diagnosed to be possessed by a spirit. In case these ritual offerings had no effect the possessed person was taken to a special shrine or an exorcist. One method of exorcising was by placing red lead, incense, sweetmeats, flesh, fish, betel nut, rice and a lighted lamp on a tray which was then placed under a *pipal* tree or at a tank or crossroads. In case these offerings were placed under a *pipal* it was recommended as part of the ritual that one, eleven, or twenty-one nails be driven into the tree and the person undergoing healing wear a string with three, five, seven, eleven or twenty-one knots until the threads wore off.

An integral part of customary culture in nineteenth-century Punjab was the worship of the goddess Devi, 'a powerful, creative, active, transcendent female being'.¹⁴ She was worshipped under numerous names - Durga, Kali, Kalka, Mahesri, Bhiwani. She also manifested herself in lesser deities like Sitala Devi, Mansa Devi and Naina Devi. These names are not very crucial for

¹⁴David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, Berkeley, 1986, p. 133.

all these goddesses shared similar attributes and were often represented by the same icons. Major centres of Devi worship at Kangra, Hoshiarpur and Ambala attracted thousands of Sikh and Hindu pilgrims at the annual or bi-annual fairs. Devotees often came on the fulfilment of a wish or to make a wish. These could concern the birth of a child, the success of a new venture or the cure of an illness. Sikhs were not simply devotees of the Devi but occasionally participated in the orders associated with the goddess. For instance there were Sikh faqirs among the Telraja order associated with the Jawalamukhi Devi in Kangra.¹⁵

In central Punjab, Sitala Devi, the goddess of smallpox, had a widespread following. Since it was her wrath which caused the dreaded smallpox epidemic, devotees exercised considerable caution to contain her anger. The shrines of Sitala which were to be found in almost every town and village were frequented only by women and children as men were not supposed to set foot within them. Ibbetson, the premier ethnographer of the Punjab, recorded in late nineteenth century the therapeutic rituals associated with her:

Sitala rides upon a donkey, and gram is given to the donkey and to his master, the potter at the shrine, after having been waved over the head of the child. Fowls, pigs, goats and coconuts are offered, black dogs are fed, and white cocks are waved and let loose. An adult who has recovered from small-pox, should let a pig loose to Sitala, or he will again be attacked. During an attack no offerings are made; and if the epidemic has once seized upon a village all worship is discontinued till the disease disappears.¹⁶

The therapeutic rituals undertaken to appease Sitala and cure her victims of smallpox can be understood in the context of Indian taxonomies of 'hot' and 'cold'. According to these all gods and goddesses, foods, drinks, days of the week, and medicines are either 'hot' or 'cold'. For instance among the days of the week Sunday, Tuesday and Saturday are conceived to be sacred to the Sun and considered to be hot days; Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday are sacred to the moon and cold days. Sitala, though literally meaning the 'cool one', was classified as a goddess possessing the quality of heat. When she

¹⁵ *Glossary 1*, p.319.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.350.

possessed someone, the victim had to be ritually cooled before the cure could be effected.¹⁷

Customary culture is by definition a part of the oral culture of a people and it is always difficult to reconstruct and recover all the elements which go into its making. However, what is much more arduous is the task of pinpointing the assumptions around which the fabric of customary culture is woven. Having looked at some of the popular deities, for many must have been left unrecorded, one thread which constantly unwinds is the belief that there are supernatural forces which if properly invoked can be made to intercede in human affairs. In other words there are agencies much more powerful than ordinary mortals who can order or alter human affairs.

Customary culture in the Punjab was passionately involved with saints and their sacred shrines. All three communities of the Punjab - the Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims - had a ubiquitous repertoire of living and dead saints, each with its own myths, attributes and miraculous powers. In almost all localities these saints were revered without religious distinction, for they possessed similar powers : to bestow a child, provide protection from evil spirits, cure an illness, bring relief to a disturbed person, help sick cattle recover and overcome vicissitudes of every sort. Among these saints Sakhi Sarvar, also known as Lakhdara or the Giver of Lakhs, Lalanwala or He of the Rubies, or Rohianwala or He of the Hills, was widely worshipped by the peoples of the Punjab.¹⁸ Major Aubrey O'Brien, at one time a court-appointed trustee of a Muslim shrine, commented in an article on the following of Sakhi Sarvar : 'The

¹⁷ The ritual cooling is explicit in the following cure used to heal children who fell victims to smallpox: 'When the pox has fully developed Devi Mata is believed to have come, and, when the disease has abated and the sores become dry, a little water is thrown over the child's body. This is called giving it the *phoa* or 'drop'. Kettle-drummers and Mirasis are then called in to make a procession to Devi's shrine and they march in front followed by the men, women and children related to the child who is carried in it, dressed in saffron clothes. A man who goes in advance sprinkles milk and water mixed with a bunch of green grass. In this way they visit some fig or other shrine of the Devi, and tie red ribbons to it, besmear it with red paint and sprinkle it with curds.' Ibid., pp.355-56. The dropping of water, milk and curd during the ritual cure was evidently to cool Sitala Devi.

¹⁸ The following of Sakhi Sarvar must have been sizable for his adherents were known by varied names in different localities : Sarvaria, Sewak Sultani, Hindu Sultani, Nigahia, Sarvar Sakhi, Sarvar Sagar, Sultani Ramrae, Sarvar Panthi, Guru Sultania, Khawaja Sarvar, Ramdasia Sultania. *Glossary 1*, p.566 .

greatest shrine in the Western Punjab is that of Sakhi Sarvar...Men, women and children, Sikhs, Hindus and Mohammedans alike, come from all districts in the Punjab. There are traditions to suit each, and all are welcomed by the Mohammedan servants of the shrine'.¹⁹

Sakhi Sarvar's following among Sikhs was considerable, for Giani Dit Singh took great pains in the late nineteenth century to write a lengthy polemical pamphlet admonishing those who worshipped the saint.²⁰ To wean worshippers away from Sakhi Sarvar must have been difficult, for he was believed to possess ample supernatural powers with which to reward his adherents without demanding much in return. Faith in him imposed hardly any restrictions on food, dress or social behaviour. Free of doctrinal dogma and with no stringent requirements of ritual purity, worship of Sakhi Sarvar attracted many votaries.²¹ The shrines associated with him and the seasonal fairs held in the saint's honour were frequented by a wide spectrum of the rural population.²²

Witchcraft, Sorcery and Magical Healing:

Popular belief in witchcraft in the Punjab never evolved into a major institution as it did at certain periods of African or European history. A *dayan* or female witch in the Punjab in fact resembled a sorcerer more than witches elsewhere, if the distinctions drawn by modern social anthropology are adhered

¹⁹ Major Aubrey O'Brien, "The Mohammedan Saints of the Western Punjab", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol.41, 1911, pp.519.

²⁰ Giani Dit Singh, *Sultān Puārā*, Amritsar, 1976, first published 1896, pp.1-63. For other references to Sikh participation in the cult of Sakhi Sarvar see *Khālsā Akhbār*, July 24, 1896, p. 6; November 19, 1897, p. 8; February 17, 1898, p. 3; July 22, 1898, pp. 8-9; July 14, 1899, p. 7; and October 27, 1899, p. 6.

²¹In the 1911 census 79,085 Sikhs recorded themselves as followers of Sakhi Sarvar. See *Census of India, 1911, Punjab, Part II*, by Harkishan Kaul, Lahore 1912, p. 39. This is a substantial following considering that the total Sikh population in the Punjab in 1911 was 2,883,729.

²²For further details on Sikh participation in the cult of Sakhi Sarvar see my, "Popular Saints, Goddesses and Village Sacred Sites: Re-reading Sikh Experience in the Nineteenth Century", paper presented at Second Sikh Studies Conference, University of California, Berkeley, February, 1987.

to.²³ The powers of a *dayan* were based on her control over a spirit through certain formula and incantations. With the powers in her possession it was believed she could find anything on earth, open or patch up the sky, restore life, set fire to water, turn stone into wax, torment lovers and transform powerful people into sheep or monkeys.²⁴ Also, she could transform herself into a tiger or a savage beast. A *dayan* was greatly feared for it was commonly believed that she relished eating human livers.²⁵ Mothers particularly dreaded a *dayan* ; her gaze could make a child ill or even cause it to die.

The nature of available sources and the present state of research make it difficult to chart out the social role of a *dayan* , the position of her victims, and the treatment meted out to those accused of being a *dayan*.²⁶ Further research on this theme will be most helpful in understanding social dislocations in the village communities and gender differentiation, for witches were invariably women, which may have something to do with their subordinate position in society.

Mortally afraid of the powers of a *dayan*, people still desired the aid of supernatural powers to allay their private misfortunes or illnesses. For this they readily turned to sorcerers called *ojhās* and *sianas* in the local parlance who cured their clients of fevers, aches, snakebites and other incurable diseases. Some even sought the help of the *ojhās* and *sianas* to settle property disputes, marital discord and family feuds. In the absence of scientific medicine or a public health system the *ojhās* and *sianas* performed a crucial function as healers, and occasionally, as what nowadays we would call psychotherapists.

²³The distinction was first introduced by E.E.Evans Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*, Oxford, 1968, p.121. The power of a witch is an inherited psychic quality and not dependant on any technical aids like a spell, incantation or a rite. In contrast, according to the distinction, a sorcerer to attain his ends needs to use specific methods like charms, magic and spells. In other words, witchcraft is an innate quality while the skill of a sorcerer can be acquired.

²⁴ See F.A.Steel and R.C.Temple, *Tales of the Punjab Told by the People* , London, 1973, first published, 1894, p.275. For a folk tale illustrating the powers of a *dayan* see in the above anthology the story, "The Son of Seven Mothers", pp.64-71.

²⁵ *Glossary* , p.208.

²⁶ Illustrations to these issues which may be applicable to the Punjab are in G.W.Briggs, *op.cit.*, pp.193-197.

While some sorcerers specialised in particular ailments, others could provide relief for all kinds of troubles.

What were the underlying assumptions behind illness? Simply stated: how was illness explained? Popular sentiment attributed illness to malignant influence of a deity, or to possession by a spirit in which case the spirit had to be conjured or exorcised. It was the sorcerer's role to establish through diagnosis which of the two, deity or spirit, was responsible. Only by establishing the right cause could the right cure be suggested. Fortunately we have a contemporary description of one or rather two such prognostication sessions, headed by a sorcerer:

He is consulted at night, the inquirer providing tobacco and music. The former is waved over the body of the invalid and given to the wise man to smoke. A butter lamp is lighted, the music plays, the diviner sometimes lashes himself with a whip, and he is at last seized by the afflatus, and in a paroxysm of dancing and head wagging declares the name of the malignant influence, the manner in which it is to be propitiated, and the time when the disease may be expected to abate. Or the diviner waves wheat over the patient's body, by preference on Saturday or Sunday: he then counts out the grains one by one into heaps, one heap for each god who is likely to be at the bottom of the mischief, and the deity on whose heap the last grain falls is to be propitiated. The malignant spirit is appeased by building him a new shrine, or by making offerings at the old one.²⁷

All diagnoses may not have been so complex. In most cases the client would simply consult the sorcerer and act on his advice.

The process of folk healing was dependant on the admixture of three ingredients: a method, a certain ritual and ample symbolism. The proportion among the three must have varied according to the individual *ojhā*, the nature of the patient and his particular affliction. To cure piles a patient was asked to wind a thread of five colours: white, red, green, yellow and black, thrice around his thumb, and at night the same thread was to be transferred to the big toe. For the cure to be effective the thread could only be removed after a fortnight on a Tuesday, the day sacred to Hanuman.²⁸

²⁷ *Glossary 1*, p.236.

²⁸ All the following examples, unless otherwise stated are from H.A.Rose, *Glossary*, vol.1, pp.253-258.

To heal recurring sores curdled milk was applied over them and a dog allowed to lick it off. A remedy for epilepsy was snuff made from dried worms snorted out by a camel. A common procedure to cure remittent fever was to place a spinning wheel on a cot in the sun. A person affected with tertian fever was asked to wear around his neck five shreds from a scavenger's tomb. For quartan fever a patient had to tie a thread seven times around a *kikkar* (Acacia) tree early on a Tuesday morning and embrace the tree once to effect the cure. A woman with a similar fever could be healed by covering her spinning wheel with a cloth and removing her to another house.

Curative powers were widely attributed to various objects. It was believed that when a goat kills a snake it devours it and afterwards spits out a bead which if applied to a snake bite absorbed the poison. After each application the bead had to be dipped into milk to allow the poison to be squeezed out of it. If this process was not undertaken the bead was supposed to burst. A soup made from the white paddy bird was used to cure asthma; boiling water in which the tip of an ibex horn had been dipped was recommended for rheumatism; and pea-fowl's legs were credited to cure fever and ear-ache. Hare's blood in a lump of cotton was prescribed for many ailments.

Some articles, it was believed endowed their possessor with magical powers. In popular sentiment the mythical horns of the jackal could make a person invisible and also prevent anybody who carried it from being reprimanded. Its latter power made it a much sought after object by junior government servants and in the nineteenth century it traded from fifty to a hundred rupees. Owl's flesh, particularly the heart, was considered a potent love charm, making the recipient fall in love with the giver. A particular bone from the owl was supposed to have the magical power to make people subservient to the will of its possessor.

A standard prescription in the repertoire of the *ojhās* and *sianas* was the use of incantations both for magical healing and granting special boons to overcome misfortunes. A patient with a pain in the head was asked to gaze at the rays of the setting sun, rub the affected portion with blades of grass and simultaneously utter the incantation: 'As the sun goes down, my pain goes

off.²⁹ This incantation was supposed to be repeated thrice to relieve the pain. To relieve toothache the sorcerer used the following charm:

Weevil, dark as lamp black, eating two and thirty teeth,
By the blessing of Shekh Farid, black weevil in the midst will die.
By the order of the teacher Saint, one, two, three, four, five, six,
Foh! Foh! Foh!³⁰

This charm is based on the belief that toothache is caused by a weevil which eats into the decayed teeth and destroys them as a weevil will produce powder in wood. The blackness of decayed teeth was said to be caused by the black colour of the weevil. The object of this charm was to kill the weevil by invoking Shekh Farid. While sometimes the incantations were based on meaningful formula, on other occasions they could be based on meaningless words or religious verse which were supposed to possess mystical curative powers. Sikhs believed that recitation of either words 'Satnam' or word 'Satnam' could cure rheumatism, cough and biliousness. Recited after meals they helped digestion and brought good luck.

Universally sorcerers in pre-industrial societies have used charms, spells and amulets for the benefit of their clients and prognostication of disease. The *ojhās* and *sianas* in the Punjab were no exception. When approached by a client to avenge an enemy the *ojhas* provided sanctified ash which needed to be eaten by or smeared on the enemy to achieve the desired revenge. Often women in the villages received specific charms to control a husband or a troublesome member of the family.³¹ Among the frequent visitors to a Punjabi sorcerer were barren women desiring children. One method used to fulfil this desire was to ask the interested woman to heat water at night on the burning funeral pyre of a bachelor and subsequently use the heated water to wash her hair and boil rice which must then be eaten. This rite was believed to induce the soul of the dead man to enter the womb of the barren woman.³²

²⁹ S.S.Bedi, *Punjab Folklore*, p.38.

³⁰ Cited in Mrs. F.A.Steel, "Folklore in the Punjab", *The Indian Antiquary*, vol.11, 1882, p.37.

³¹ S.S.Bedi, *Punjab Folklore*, pp.41-42.

³² *Ibid.*, p.42.

Sick children were often thought to be suffering from a form of witchcraft called *sayā*. To diagnose if a child was suffering from *sayā* a new earthen pot was filled with water from seven wells and then buried under the threshold for seven days. On digging if the water was found to have dried up in the pot the child was pronounced to suffer from *sayā*. The affliction had several possible cures: one was to pass the sick child seven times under a vessel filled with well water and subsequently throw the water on waste land as it could otherwise destroy crops. A second method was for a mother to collect ashes from a cremation ground which must be cast over an enemy's child. By doing so it was believed the *saya* would be transferred to the enemy's child.

Charms were frequently used to cure minor ailments or support sagging fortunes. To cure a whitlow the patient was asked to place his hand on the ground palm downwards. The *siana* hit the ground hard with a shoe and uttered a charm calling on the demon of the whitlow to withdraw. In case the patient's hand moved involuntarily it was taken to herald the cure of the disease. A powerful *ojhā* could cure a patient through his touch. The rite which survives in the Punjab even today was called *jhārā*. In most cases the *ojhā* would touch the afflicted part of a patient's body, mumble a charm and touch the ground with a knife or a broom at least seven times.³³

Many of the methods and charms used by the *ojhās* and *sianas* were part of a folk medicine inherited over many centuries and the line demarcating their ritualised use by sorcerers and self-application by people was sometimes nebulous. To cure lumbago the patient only needed to touch the painful part of the body with the peg to which a buffalo cow was tethered. For tertian ague a saucepan lid with an inscription 'Don't come out of it' had to be hung with dough on the wall of the patient's house. People with a sore throat were recommended to take a lump of salt to a potter and ask him to stroke the throat seven times with salt and then bury the salt under an unbaked earthen vessel. As the lump of salt melted the sore throat was supposed to be cured. Those afflicted with tertian fever could be cured if they performed a ritual burial of the village headman. A very small grave, smooth and clean, had to be dug up about half a mile from the patient's house, without anyone witnessing the ritual. By doing so the fever was supposed to disappear.

³³ See, *Gazetteer Phulkian States*, Lahore, 1909, p.259.

It is indeed possible to further add to this inventory of magical cures, but the striking aspect in the whole process which needs to be underscored is the unquestionable belief in the efficacy of the rites and methods employed. While we may be rightly sceptical of such credulity, in case of the contemporaries it seems to have actually worked, and in this sense a sorcerer's art was not fraudulent. Modern medical science has amply demonstrated the success of the placebo effect whereby a pill with virtually no pharmacological content but fully endorsed by the faith of the doctor and his patient has led to what amounts to miraculous cures.³⁴ Similarly, a nineteenth-century sorcerer in the Punjab staunchly believing in his art, working in an environment that shared his principles, could cure numerous afflictions, especially when they were without any organic basis. Two other factors contributed to the success of magical healing. Firstly, the versatility of the human organism to rid itself of afflictions must be counted. Many sorts of fevers, aches and wounds are naturally cured by the body's defence mechanisms over time and if a sorcerer was consulted he must have got credit for the cure. Secondly, *ojhās and sianas* mostly inherited their techniques from older master sorcerers, a chain which must have extended over many generations. The folk wisdom they used had been tried and tested very often; it combined a knowledge of herbs and commonsensical cures. The dramatic rituals and the power of suggestion further contributed to the success of magical healing. The credibility of the *ojhās* and *sianas* must have been very high for in the nineteenth century there were an immense number of them to be found all over the Punjab, some permanently settled and others itinerant.

Omens, 'Superstitions' and the Quality of Time:

The belief in omens and respect for 'superstitions' was part of an ancient tradition in the Punjab and similar traditions have been documented in all pre-industrial societies. Omens and superstitions were particularly heeded when an individual embarked on a new venture, was going to travel, or had a crucial appointment. On such occasions passing a sweeper, a woman with a

³⁴ I have used here the valuable insights of K.V.Thomas to explain the working and success of magical healing. See his, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, London, 1971, p.209.

male child, a corpse, or a woman carrying a filled pitcher, was considered auspicious. It was a bad omen to run into a washerman, a village headman, a Brahman, a woman carrying an empty pitcher or a bald man.³⁵ If a person commencing a journey was called back the forthcoming events could prove unlucky for him.

The behaviour and movements of the human body were extensively studied to predict the course of events. A sneeze before a journey was inauspicious. Twitching of the right eyelid forecast joy, the same in the left brought grief. A tingling in the right palm portended gain of money, in the left it meant loss of money. If the sole of either foot tingled it signalled a forthcoming journey. Shaking one's leg while sitting on a couch or a chair meant loss of money. An inadvertent biting of the tongue implied someone was engaged in back-biting.

Birds and animals were thought to be particularly gifted with the power of portending. A kite on the rooftop of a house brought misfortune; if an owl hooted thrice outside a house it was best for the residents to leave temporarily and only return after giving a feast to Brahmans; and a cock crowing during the day brought bad luck. Only the cawing of a crow was not dangerous and implied the coming of a guest. It was auspicious to sight a kingfisher or a partridge on one's right side. Dogs were said to possess the ability to see evil spirits and if they howled it portended evil. A calamity could be expected if a dog lay on his back with legs upwards.³⁶ Buffaloes and horses too were said to be gifted with similar prognosticatory powers.³⁷

The deep-rooted appeal to heed omens was matched by the concern with doing things at the right time. The belief in the unevenness and irregularity of time helped to reinforce another belief that fortune and misfortune were dependent on time. The months of Chet, Pauh and Māgh were regarded unlucky especially for consummating a marriage and were called the black

³⁵ Unless otherwise stated the following examples are from *Glosary1* pp.223-229.

³⁶ *Panjab Notes and Oqueries*, vol.I, May 1884, p.89.

³⁷ See Captain W.Murray, "On the Manners, Rules and Customs of the Sikhs", in H.T.Prinsep, *Origin of the Sikh Power in the Punjab*, Patiala, 1970, first published, 1834, (Hereafter *Origin of the Sikh Power*), p.151.

months.³⁸ Similarly certain days were considered lucky and others unlucky. To commence a journey on Monday, Wednesday and Thursday was auspicious, to do so on Sunday, Tuesday, and Friday was inauspicious. It was best not to do certain things on particular days. For instance, borrowing money or selling cattle on Saturday, Sunday and Tuesday was unlucky. If a woman washed her head on a Friday her brother could fall ill and if she did so on Saturday the husband would become sick. Sunday, Tuesday and Saturday were considered unlucky days for a marriage: if a marriage took place on a Sunday there would be discord between the couple; if on Tuesday the husband would soon die; and if on Saturday there would be much sickness in the family. In certain parts of the Punjab salt was not consumed on Sundays, in other regions never on Tuesdays. There was hardly a day which was neutral and any individual who strictly followed the calendar of lucky and unlucky days may have often found himself in a quandary wondering whether to act or not to act. In an agrarian society inevitably the belief in the conception of time not only affected humans but also animals. For instance it was proverbial: 'the mare that foals in Sāuṇ, the cow that calves in Bhādauṇ and the buffalo in Māgh, will either die or kill the owner'.

How are the omens, superstitions and the belief in lucky and unlucky days to be accounted for? These beliefs had been in vogue for many centuries. In the nineteenth century their ancient genealogy must have endowed them with respectability and helped sustain them. For people do not renounce inherited beliefs unless there are express reasons to do so. It is noticeable that many of the omens and notions of propitious time concerned crucial issues for an individual (a commercial transaction, a marriage, a trip away from home), and these beliefs may have forewarned an individual to be cautious in exercising an option. Once a decision was reached these beliefs also acted as significant explanations for the course of events. For instance if a person had an extremely successful journey and it was inexplicable why it was so, the conviction of having travelled on an auspicious day may have provided one answer. Similarly, a disastrous journey could be blamed on the fact of having travelled on an inappropriate day. These beliefs must have mitigated personal discomfiture by ascribing failures to reasons beyond human recourse. But

³⁸ D.Ibbetson, "Months in which Hindu Marriage is Forbidden", in *Panjab Notes and Queries*, vol.1, December 1883, p.26.

obviously, not everything about these beliefs can be explained. We have no way of knowing why tingling in one palm meant gain of money and tingling in another loss of money. Furthermore, it is virtually impossible to know how widely these beliefs were practised or their geographical extent.

Astrology, Divination and Prophecies:

In 1814, when the British were at war with the Gurkhas, a division of sepoys from Sirhind in the Malwa was requisitioned as reinforcements. Nand Singh, an accredited agent of Maharaja Ranjit Singh with the East India Company, counselled that the additional forces be asked to march on the day of the Dassehra. When told it was too early a date to commence, he recommended that at least a detachment of soldiers be sent on that day. Subsequently, when the Sirhind division succeeded in its operations against the enemy, Nand Singh attributed their victories to the choice of an auspicious hour, overlooking 'the wisdom, providence, and gallantry of its commander, his officers and men'.³⁹ In the winter of 1845 British troops were to engage the Lahore forces in a major battle that was to decide the fate of the last independent kingdom in India. In order to match the army manoeuvres with an auspicious hour, the crossing of the river Sutlej by the Lahore detachments was delayed by a day on the advice of the astrologers.⁴⁰ Ironically, despite the choice of the propitious hour, the Lahore armies suffered their first major defeat.

Behind these two dramatic episodes, illustrating the influence of astrology in nineteenth century Punjab, stretched the long history of the discipline in the Indian sub-continent dating back to the Vedic age. Subsequently influenced by Babylonian, Greek and Arabic discoveries, and discourses, indigenous practitioners of the art of astrology were quite successful in gaining wide patronage. Despite the erudite calculations involved in astrological divination, and the fact that much of its arcane wisdom was preserved in inaccessible Sanskrit treatises, the basic principles on which astrology rested were rather simple.⁴¹

³⁹ Captain W. Murray in, *Origin of the Sikh Power*, pp.153-154.

⁴⁰ See R. Bosworth, *Life of Lord Lawrence*, London, 1885, p.160.

⁴¹ My understanding of Indian astrology is based on Von Hans-Georg Turstig, *Jyotisa Das System Der Indischen Astrologie*, Wiesbaden, 1980.

Primary among them was the assumption that the terrestrial sphere was influenced by immutable celestial bodies, whose thrust it was the task of the astrologer to measure and predict. The Indian astrologer, like his counterparts elsewhere, scrutinised the seven planets- Sun, Moon, Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Venus and Mercury- to establish the changing relationship between them and the earth and also their shifts in relation to each other. The crucial difference between the Indian system and others was that the former ascribed a determining influence to the movements of the moon which was calculated through twenty-seven *naksatras* (lunar mansions or asterisms). A *naksatra* referred to the position of the moon in relation to a constellation of stars in its orbit and was also a unit for the measurement of time. It was postulated that the moon was stationed in each *naksatra* for slightly over a day and then established nexus with another one. Each individual was supposedly born under a particular *naksatra* and his life would be influenced by the dominant qualities of the *naksatra* under which he was born. For instance, according to the *Brhatsamhita*, an astrological text, those born when the *naksatra magha* was in ascendancy would be expected to be, 'the possessors of wealth and corn, granaries, mountaineers, men pious towards ancestors, traders, heroes, carnivorous animals, and woman haters'.⁴² The *naksatras*, in short, enlarged the zodiac system supposedly providing greater precision and sophistication in measuring time, tracing the influence of heavenly bodies and ascribing strengths and weaknesses to the living. The major preoccupation of astrologers was to draw up horoscopes for, among other things, noting the date and the hour of birth which would define the *naksatra*, the position of the seven planets of the celestial world and the twelve zodiac signs. There were five kinds of horoscopes: a birth horoscope, an annual horoscope, a monthly horoscope, a daily horoscope and a question horoscope. Their names indicate their scope. Among them the first was the most important for it predicted the future of a newly-born child: health, matrimony, nature of work and potential dangers.⁴³ The last horoscope was used for answering specific questions.

⁴² Ibid., p.27.

⁴³ On the casting of Maharaja Duleep Singh's birth horoscope see V.S.Suri, *Umadat-ut-Tawarikh*, vol.3, Delhi, 1961, (Hereafter *Umadat*), p.525

Unfortunately, contemporary sources do not enable us to specify with any precision what were the major questions addressed to an astrologer. But generally clients would consult to know if a child was born at a propitious hour, to fix an auspicious hour for a wedding, to know the right hour for commencing a trip and the timing for a funeral.⁴⁴ Astrologers were also consulted to decide the appropriate course of action, astral cures for sickness, location of missing goods, the prospects of wealth, and in dry years, the possibility of rainfall. But the primary task of an astrologer remained to determine an auspicious hour or *muhurta* for any undertaking considered crucial by the client. The fees charged by an astrologer must have restricted his clients to those who could afford the consultations. Those unable to afford the services of an astrologer could possibly consult printed almanacs which were current in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁴⁵ While this was certainly not the same as having a horoscope cast, much useful information concerning the configuration of planets, the calendar, seasons and festivities could be gleaned from an almanac. Often a part of the almanac was devoted to a description of astral cures for illnesses.⁴⁶

Distinct from the assumptions of astrology but widely practised were various modes of divination, often employed by people without the aid of a specialist. William Crooke in his classic work on popular religion described one such device:

A favourite method used by the Sikhs is to turn a little wooden hexagon, on each face of which certain letters are inscribed. Those which appear when it falls upwards are compared with a book of verses the first letters of which are here interpreted, and by this means it is ascertained whether the result of an enterprise will be lucky or unlucky.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Maharaja Ranjit Singh on his death in 1839 was cremated at an hour fixed by Brahmans who must have employed astrological skills to decide the appropriate time. See the account of the rite in Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, vol. 1, Princeton, 1963, p.289.

⁴⁵ The British Museum Library in London has a set of five printed almanacs in Gurmukhi script published at Lahore between 1854 and 1874.

⁴⁶ For instance see, *Tithipatrikā*, Lahore, 1870, p. 2.

⁴⁷ W.Crooke, *Religion and Folklore of Northern India*, Oxford, 1926, p.311.

Sacred books seem to easily lend themselves to divination. Sikh tradition records an illuminating example. Bhai Harbhagat Singh, a pious Sikh residing in Lahore, was unable to decide whether to accept Baisākh or Kattak as the month of Guru Nanak's birth. To find an answer he wrote Baisākh on one slip of paper and Kattak on another and placed the two before the Ādi-Granth. A boy who had performed religious ablutions in a sacred tank was asked to remove one slip. He chose the one with the month of Kattak recorded on it. Henceforth the tradition records Kattak was accepted to be the month of Nanak's nativity.⁴⁸ This myth undoubtedly helped legitimise the tradition contrary to much historical evidence, most of it indefinite that Guru Nanak was born in the month of Kattak. But our primary interest here is in the mechanisms of divination and not the correctness of the belief. In situations of doubt the Ādi-Granth was opened at random and the verses on the opened page used to decide on a course of action or resolve a lingering dilemma.⁴⁹

The urge to know the future, the need to grasp what in the absence of comprehensive disciplines of social inquiry or scientific explanations must have been for the contemporaries an inexplicable world, nurtured another tradition of divination, prophecy. Four characteristics distinguished prophecies from other modes of divination described above. First, they tended to avoid spelling out concrete details and glossed over how specific aims would be attained. Second, they were mostly in verse, a form which encouraged ambiguity and generated ample possibilities of reinterpretation. Third, they were attributed to an historical figure, especially one known to have possessed supernatural powers like a Guru or a Pīr. And finally, they were thought to be old, most of them gifts from earlier generations. Widely disseminated in medieval Europe and frequently recorded by social anthropologists in Africa, the prophecies in India were with one major exception comparatively more restricted. In the Punjab Sikhs were prolific creators and purveyors of prophecies, especially during the course of the nineteenth century.

⁴⁸ The following is based on M. Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion*, Oxford, vol. 1, 1909, p. lxxv.

⁴⁹ For the use of such a method by Maharaja Ranjit Singh see V. S. Suri, *Umadat*, p. 115.

The first Anglo-Sikh war in 1846 had left a truncated Punjab and a child Maharaja under the *de facto* control of the British resident in Lahore. The new English civil servants exhibited uncharacteristic haste to undermine the cherished achievements of the Lahore state. Sikh aristocrats were discharged, Sikh legions disbanded and the Khalsa Raj seemed destined to pale into insignificance. When two English administrators were murdered in Multan, the simmering discontent against the new rulers turned a local fracas into a 'national' revolt. The ranks of the rebels were rapidly swelled by demobilized soldiers, humiliated chieftains and all kinds of sympathizers of the old order. Among them was a religious visionary, Bhai Maharaj Singh, widely respected and honoured, thought by some to be the eleventh Sikh Guru, and earlier implicated in a cabal to eliminate the British resident at Lahore. On the detection of the palace conspiracy he escaped from Lahore into the Majha countryside where he fervently preached the overthrow of the feringhee rule. To justify his cause he cited prophetic tales from the *Sau Sākhīān* anthology.⁵⁰

In 1857, when the Revolt spread like a wild conflagration throughout northern India, the princes and the peasants of the Punjab with few exceptions came to the rescue of the collapsing Empire by readily enlisting in new regiments, raising desperately-needed supplies and staging a determined fight against the Hindustani sepoys. The crisis easily fuelled prophecies. A new version of the *Sau Sakhi* envisioned an Anglo-Sikh conquest of Delhi.⁵¹ Simultaneously, a small number of rebels in western Punjab circulated a prophecy attributed to the Sikh sovereign Sher Singh. It appealed in the name of the true Guru for all Hindus and Muslims to unite and warned the British: Beware that, when we advance towards Lahore, you will find it difficult to escape. The Punjabee troops will join us. Rest assured the Punjab shall never

⁵⁰The *Sau Sākhīān* (The Book of Hundred Stories), is commonly attributed to the tenth Sikh Guru, Gobind Singh. However, there is absolutely no historical evidence of his having authored such a text but crediting the tenth Guru with its authorship gave the work a seal of authenticity which in the mental climate of nineteenth century it must have been difficult to dispute. The circulation of different and conflicting versions of the *Sau Sākhīān* hardly undermined its credibility. Dating the *Sau Sākhīān* through textual analysis would be most useful. For an english translation of one version of the *Sau Sākhīān* see Attar Singh, *Sakhee Book, or the Description of Gorroo Gobind Singh's Religion and Doctrines*, Benares, 1873.

⁵¹ See Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs* vol.II, Princeton, 1966, p.110.

be yours. We know your bones will be reduced to powder in this country.'⁵² Departing from earlier practices, the prophecy exemplified a new convention: instead of being ascribed to the tenth Sikh Guru, it was proclaimed in the name of a Maharaja close to contemporary events.

The golden age of prophesying in the Punjab was inaugurated by the Kukas in the second half of nineteenth century. Their millenarian aspirations found in the art of prophecy an ideal idiom for achieving their mission. They rehashed old prophecies, experimented with new tropes and popularised their creations through verbal and textual transmission. In the summer of 1866 the colonial administration received from a native informer the copy of a prophecy ascribed to Guru Gobind Singh, probably from a new version of the *Sau Sākhīān*.

...I Guru Govind Singh, will be born in a carpenter's shop, and will be called Ram Singh. My house will be between the Jamna and Sutlej rivers. I will declare my religion. I will defeat the Faringhis and put the crown on my own head, and blow the sankh. The musicians shall praise me in 1921 (1864). I the carpenter will sit on the throne. When I have got one lakh and twenty-five thousand Sikhs with me. I will cut off the heads of the Fringhis. I will never be conquered in battle, and will shout "Akal", "Akal". The Christians will desert their wives and fly from the country when they hear the shout of 1 1/4 lakhs of Khalsas. A great battle will take place on the banks of the Jamna, and blood will flow like the waters of the Ravi, and no Faringhi will be left alive. Insurrections will take place in the country in 1922 (1865). The Khalsa will reign, and the Rajah and ryot will live in peace and comfort, and no one shall molest another. Day by day Ram Singh's rule will be enlarged. God has written this. It is no lie, my brethern (sic). In 1865, the whole country will be ruled by Ram Singh. My followers will worship Wahaguru. God says this will happen.⁵³

The prophecy hardly demanded any special deciphering skills from its readership. The correspondence between Ram Singh of the prophecy and Ram Singh the living Guru of the Kukas was obvious and direct: the latter lived

⁵² Secret Committee, 30 October, 1857, no.12, National Archives of India. Quoted in Dolores Domin, *India in 1857-59, A Study in the Role of the Sikhs in the People's Uprising*, Berlin, 1977, p.139.

⁵³ "Memorandum regarding Gooroo Ram Singh, of a new sect of Sikhs, "JAGIASIS", gathered from confidential communications from various officers in the Punjab", in Nahar Singh compiled, *Goroo Ram Singh and the Kuka Sikhs Documents 1863-1871*, New Delhi, 1965, p.6.

between the Jamuna and the Sutlej rivers in the Punjab and was from the Ramgarhia zāt, whose constituents often worked as carpenters. For those who accepted the prophecy as authentic, it served as what has occasionally been described as a 'charter of validation', a device to legitimise a new cause, in this case the re-establishment of Sikh power by Ram Singh and his followers. As Attar Singh of Bhadaur, a diligent observer of Sikh affairs, noted in 1876: 'the Guru's followers were increasing rapidly, and simply needed a stimulus to urge them to daring needs. A prediction of this nature was well calculated to awaken their energies, and to inspire them with hope. There is nothing surprising in the fact of their believing it, for does it not promise them the sovereignty of the country'.⁵⁴ The British authorities faced with the prospect of mounting civil strife from the Kukas decided to put an end to the source of their inspiration by deporting their leader Ram Singh to Burma. Convinced of the righteousness of his cause, Ram Singh in exile continued to entertain hopes of his eventual triumphant return to the Punjab. In his communications to his followers, he prophesied repeatedly and with great moral certitude the end of British rule.⁵⁵ The letters Ram Singh wrote from exile inspired his followers in the Punjab to fabricate an anthology of prophecies, similar in form to their Guru's communications. Attributed to Gobind Singh, the prophecies predicted the eventual return of Ram Singh from exile, a successful Russian invasion of the Punjab leading to the restoration of the province to the Sikhs, and the demise of British rule. Ram Singh was to become the king of India and go on to found a powerful Sikh kingdom, conquer a foreign island (the allusion probably was to

⁵⁴ Attar Singh, *Travels of Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh*, Lahore, 1876, pp. vii-viii.

⁵⁵ In a letter intercepted by British intelligence he announced: 'It is the Guru's order that in the beginning of the 34th year (3rd April 1878 corresponding with 1st Chet 1935) disturbances will commence and revolutions will take place in the different countries. Consider, O Khalsa ! that disturbances have commenced in the 34th year (Russian and Turkish war). Henceforth, all that has been predicted by the Sacha Padshah Kalghiwala (Guru Gobind Singh) will be fulfilled; rest assured of this. It is not necessary to write at length; you can understand for yourselves. All else predicted has reference to the ruin and destruction of the rulers... For the protection of the Sant Khalsa, a Muhammadan will appear from the West and collect all and eradicate the Malaichh Panth (the English).' Foreign Department (Secret-F), August 1889, nos. 114-115; Home Judicial (B), August 1882, Proceedings, 217-218, National Archives of India, quoted in Fauja Singh Bajwa, *Kuka Movement Delhi*, 1965, pp.161-162.

Britain), whose inhabitants would fall at his feet.⁵⁶ Besides producing spurious textual anthologies, Kukas used their high proficiency in the art of prophesying to devise verses which could easily be transmitted verbally .⁵⁷

How seriously did people take these prophecies? The question can be answered by looking in two directions: the reactions of the local population and the responses of the British . No Sikh uprising in the nineteenth century failed to use existing prophecies or invent new ones. Even after an uprising had been crushed the prophecies it generated continued to circulate demonstrating the existence of a receptive audience. The brutal treatment meted out to the Kukas by the British and the non-materialisation of their prophecies only partly reduced the appeal and production of prophecies. Soon afterwards a new version of the *Sau Sākhīān* was floated, predicting the return of the anglicised Duleep Singh as a reincarnation of Gobind Singh. The *Sākhī* went on to prophesy: '...Dleep Singh and his descendants will reign for three generations over the land lying between Calcutta and the Indus'.⁵⁸ The provincial bureaucracy, already apprehensive about Duleep Singh's return to his native land, was further unnerved by the contents of the prophecy and pressed higher authorities to prevent Duleep Singh from returning to the Punjab.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Text of prophecies and background in M.M.Ahluwalia, *Kukas The Freedom Fighters of the Panjab* , Bombay, 1965, pp.182-189.

⁵⁷ The following couplet illustrates their skills:

Khalsa ji ka raj hosi
unke agga rahe na kossee
(The Khalsaji will rule

before the Khalsa no one will remain).⁵⁷

Cited in a letter from the Revd. B.Golaknath to L.Griffin, officiating Secretary to the Government of the Punjab, dated 28th August, 1872, document 38 A, in Nahar Singh compiled, *Goroo Ram Singh and the Kuka Sikhs Documents (April 1872 to June 1880)*, Book III, Hissar, n.d., p.165.

⁵⁸ India Office Records Home 101, Memo, 4 December, 1885, quoted in Michael Alexander and Sushila Anand, *Queen Victoria's Maharajah Duleep Singh 1838-93* , New York, 1980, p. 188.

⁵⁹ See Sir Attar Singh, "Political Suggestions, Information and other Services of Sir Attar Singh K.C.I.E., Chief of Bhadaur", p.2. These papers indicate how the Duleep Singh prophecy influenced government policy. (I am grateful to Prof. Harbans Singh for allowing me to consult Sir Attar Singh papers).

The colonial authority's efforts to counter the dangerous visions being propagated by current prophecies, prompted the circulation of a curious prophecy attributed to Guru Tegh Bahadur, which foretold how the British would conquer India and destroy the Mughal empire. Coming from a Sikh Guru, the prophecy could have helped legitimise the British empire for it ordained they would rule India.⁶⁰ English curiosity and fear of prophecies motivated Attar Singh of Bhadaur, an oriental scholar and close associate of British officials, to translate into English two prophetic anthologies, in one of which he diffidently warned: 'The old prophecies affect their (Sikhs) minds to such a degree, that they are often tempted to strike for freedom'.⁶¹

Like other genres described in this chapter we need to know the functions astrology and prophecy performed and try to grasp why prophecies were believed in. Astrology presented individuals with the possibility for a kind of personal in-depth assessment, establishing their innermost strengths and weaknesses. An impressionistic portrait of these attributes must have sketched out what was worth cultivating and what was undesirable. On a more pragmatic level, the consultations with an astrologer must have aided the decision-making process particularly when crucial issues like a business deal or shifting to a new city were involved. Although the client may have virtually made up his mind, the weighing up of the pros and the cons of prospective choices by the astrologer must have given that extra boost which is often needed when a major issue needs to be decided. Also, an astrologer with his years of experience might sense what the client wants to do and proffer advice which would accord with the client's convictions. Inevitably in astrology and all modes of divination there is an element of auto-suggestion motivating people to do what they were already partly disposed to do.

Similarly, prophecies inspired men to take decisions for which there was little rational basis. When men have the belief that God is on their side they hardly need any other prop to act. Religious prophecies were perceived to be an expression of God's will, arming those who followed them with

⁶⁰ For one version of this prophecy see M. Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion*, vol. 1, p. xviii. He also noted another prophecy attributed to Guru Gobind Singh with a similar message, pp. xviii-xix.

⁶¹ Attar Singh, *Travels of Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh*, p. i.

unbounded courage and moral certitude to act. Convinced of the righteousness of their cause people acting on prophecies often fought against odds which would on many occasions lead them on to death. What to us may appear irrational or lunatic in their behaviour was for them perfectly 'natural', for there was in nineteenth-century Punjab no alternative public consciousness which could have firmly demonstrated that prophecies were in fact spurious inventions of one's fellow men and lacking in divine sanction. It was this quality of naturalness, a feeling of doing what was almost a predestined part of in the order of things, which gave people the faith to accept prophecies. Furthermore, prophecies, by delving into the past and constructing edifying stories, convinced people that the objectives they aspired to had in fact been foreseen by holy or powerful men in the past and therefore were not undesirable or radical. In other words, prophecies by disguising new projects as old ones created a continuity with the past, a feeling which must have reassured many that they were not taking a leap into the dark.

Calendrical Festivals, Rituals and Fairs:

The rhythm of seasons in the Punjab, as in other pre-industrial societies, was marked at regular intervals by calendrical festivals, partly manifesting or anticipating the state of the agricultural cycle and partly incorporating religious observances and rites. These annual festivals in conjunction with the unfolding of the seasons may be generally grouped into four seasons: summer (April-June), monsoon (July-September), winter (October-January), and spring (February to March). More specifically, the calendrical festivals and many of the monthly rituals can only be understood by reference to the lunar-solar calendrical system of which a brief description follows.⁶²

A lunar year consists of twelve lunar months. A lunar month is based on the time it takes the moon to complete one series of its successive phases, i.e. approximately 29.5 solar days. From this point onwards the calendar begins to resemble a maze. A lunar day is called a *tith* and is calculated from the time the moon takes to move eastward ahead of the sun by 12 degrees. Due to

⁶² Based on Ruth and Stanley Freed, "Calendars, Ceremonies and Festivals in a North Indian Village: The Necessary Calendric Information for a Fieldwork", *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, vol.20, 1964, pp.67-90.

the elliptical form of the orbits of the earth and the moon, the lunar day varies in length from a minimum of approximately 21.5 hours to a maximum of 26 hours. Coordination between the lunar year of 354 solar days and the solar year of 365 days, is achieved by dropping or adding lunar months. One full cycle of the lunar phase from full moon to full moon makes a lunar month. On the day of the full moon a month comes to an end (*pūraṇmāśī*), and on the following day the next month begins. The new moon (*masiā*) divides the lunar month into two fortnights: a dark fortnight when the moon is waning (*badī*), and a light fortnight (*sudī*), when the moon is waxing. Although dates for all the festivals and fairs were calculated by consulting the lunar-solar calendar, the varied interpretations of the calendar, and especially of the lunar-solar days, occasionally meant the same festival or fair was celebrated on a different day within different parts of the Punjab.

The major summer festival in the Punjab was Baisakhi. Named after the second month Baisākh, it marked in the local calendar the advent of the harvest of the *rabi* crops, mainly wheat. For the peasantry it was a long-awaited occasion to celebrate: the fields would be covered with crops especially if the rains had fallen in time. The reward for the hard toil in the preceding months was at hand. The festival had an added significance for the Sikh Panth. According to their popular tradition, the tenth Sikh Guru, Gobind Singh, established the Khalsa brotherhood on the first day of Baisakh at Anandpur. Baisakhi festivities were marked by a visit to a local fair, feasting, singing and dancing. From the standpoint of ritual observances the Sikhs would have visited the village shrine and some ventured further afield by embarking on a pilgrimage to a major religious centre like Amritsar.⁶³

Baisakhi may be interpreted as a festival of renewal: significantly the previous agricultural cycle had come to an end and a new one was about to begin. The conjunction of the festival with the commencement of harvest was not purely accidental. Technically the calendrical year had begun a month earlier in Chet but for the peasantry the year proper only started with Baisakh. It

⁶³ A.H.Bingley in his army manual commented on Baisakhi at Amritsar: 'on these occasions all the *bhungas* or hospices originally kept up by leading families round the Tank of the Darbar Sahib or Golden Temples, (sic) and all the semi-religious *Akharas* or rest houses, are filled to overflowing with representatives of every race in the Punjab'. *The Sikhs*, Patiala, 1970, p.113.

was a month in which the harvest was reaped, possibly marketed, and the peasant household looked forward to the fruits of its labour. It was also a time to take stock of what had happened in the previous year and what was in store for the coming year.

The advent of the new lunar year was also marked by local festivals honouring goddesses, particularly Sitala Devi and her seven sisters who were believed to cause smallpox and other pustular diseases. Attention to the goddesses at a time when cool temperatures were rapidly giving way to the intense heat of the summer months, possibly had a connection with Sitala Devi's dominant ascription of 'heat'. In popular sentiment the primary characteristic of Sitala Devi was heat which was manifested in heat and rashes among smallpox victims. The summer months would have further enhanced the ascriptive quality of the goddesses' 'heat', which inflicted the disease. To prevent disease, it was essential to cool her in advance through ritual observances, and offerings to her of cool substances like water. Thus the ritual sequences at the beginning of the summer season must have assured the worshippers that they were precluding any possibility of attracting the displeasure of the sinister goddess whose wrath caused the greatly-feared fever.

During the monsoon season the main calendrical events were the worship of Gugga-Pir and the propitiation of agnatic ancestors. The increase in the number of snakes during the rains in Bhādañ made it an appropriate occasion to invoke the powerful Pir for protection.⁶⁴ However, the Pir was worshipped not only to avert the physical danger of snake bites but also to seek his intercession against other evil spirits. In the following month of Asaū, during the dark fortnight when the moon was waning, ancestors particularly on the patrilineal side were worshipped by their descendants. The whole period was called *śrāddha* and the central ritual observance was the distribution of food, in particular to Brahmans. In honour of the departed ancestors nothing auspicious was celebrated during the period of the *śrāddha*.⁶⁵

Long after the monsoons cease in the plains of Northern India and half the lunar year is over, comes the widely-celebrated festival of Diwali, held on

⁶⁴ For the ceremonial observances in honour of Gugga-Pir see page 15 above.

⁶⁵ Background in S.S.Bedi, *Punjab Folklore*, pp.77-78.

the day of the new moon in the month of Kattak. The *raison d'être* of this festival of lights is so well known that it needs no explication here.⁶⁶ What may be recounted is how the festival crystallised into 'the greatest festival of the Sikhs'.⁶⁷ According to the Sikh tradition the sixth Sikh Guru, Hargobind Singh, on his release from the Gwalior fort by the Mughal authorities, arrived in the city of Amritsar accompanied by fifty-two chieftains. The residents of the city were greatly elated and since then have celebrated the day of the festival with great jubilation. I shall have more to say of this later.

Apart from illuminations the principal ceremonial observance on the occasion of Diwali at the household level, was the worship of the images of Ganesh and Lakshmi, the harbingers of good fortune and prosperity.⁶⁸ The theme of material wealth in the rite was publicly exhibited by worshipping a silver coin alongside the sacred icons. What was the significance of the festival? It may be interpreted as a festival of 'anticipation'. The peasantry was engaged in sowing the autumn crop which would only be reaped in the spring. There was a long wait ahead to know what fortune had in store. In anticipation of the future crop, there emerged a popular prognosticatory tradition that, if it rained on Diwali, the forthcoming harvest would be abundant.⁶⁹ The commercial classes cleared their old accounts and looked to Diwali as the beginning of the new business year. The average householder thoroughly cleaned his house, whitewashing the walls in anticipation of a visit by the gods of prosperity and good fortune. In short, various sections of the Punjabi society awaited the coming months in the hope that they would prove propitious. Thus several traditions - agrarian, commercial and religious - fused to make Diwali a major festival in the Punjab, and the Sikhs seem to have purposely added another tradition to justify their great celebration of the festival, especially at their central shrine in Amritsar.

The annual festival cycle terminated with Holi in spring, joyously celebrated on the full-moon day of Phagan. Indian festivals like Holi, at least

⁶⁶ A textual description of the festival is available in M. Macauliffe, "The Diwali at Amritsar", *Calcutta Review*, vol. LXXI, 1880, pp. 619-621.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 623.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 623.

⁶⁹ This was exemplified by the proverb: *Je minh pia Diwali, Jiya phus jiya hali.*

within the 'great tradition', signified the triumph of good over evil, illustrated through the ageless story of Prahalad which would be widely recounted during the festival. Our concern here, however, is not so much with what was said of Holi but what was actually done by the people on that day. A contemporary observer succinctly noted the principal events on the day of Holi:

Boys dance about the streets, and inhabitants of houses sprinkle the passer-by with red powder, use squirts, and play practical jokes. Towards the close of the festival, about the night of the full moon, a bonfire is lighted ... During the Holi women are addressed with the utmost familiarity and indecent jests at their expense are considered permissible.⁷⁰

How do we interpret these observations and what we generally know of the nature of the festival from the cultural area of Northern India?⁷¹ Human societies are invariably rule-governed, with each individual allocated a certain role to play. The dominant culture through its social institutions constantly communicates what is permissible and what is not. But simultaneously most societies make allowances for the temporary suspension of those rules of behaviour and hierarchy, particularly on ritual occasions. By doing so at regular intervals, societies ensure that social tensions are relaxed and the conventions regulating everyday existence are momentarily loosened. Such ritual play obviously helps society run smoothly.

The Holi festival in the Punjab or elsewhere in Northern India substantially fulfilled this role of ritual inversion. It was an occasion when people could without impunity reverse existing norms: the verbal and visual signs of social status were freely violated when those who were social inferiors threw colour on their superiors. With faces and attires smudged in colour all men tended to look alike. The usual deference exhibited for the female sex was dispensed with when bawdy jokes and obscene language were used in their

⁷⁰ A.H.Bingley, *The Sikhs*, p.110.

⁷¹ Since available descriptions of Holi in nineteenth century Punjab are fragmentary it would not be unreasonable to rely on recent ethnographic accounts which document and decode the festival. For instance see Mckim Marriott, "The Feast of Love", in M.Singer ed., *Krishna: Myths, Rites and Attitudes*, Honolulu, 1966, pp.200-212, and Oscar Lewis, *Village Life in Northern India*, Urbana, 1965, pp.229-33. For several references to Holi celebrations in the court of Ranjit Singh see V.S.Suri, *Umadat*, pp.10-11, 325,345.

presence, and it was not uncommon for dietary codes to be overturned as well. This annual carnival was an opportunity for people to discard normal social roles. The element of burlesque saturated the whole festivity. Everybody could become an actor and perform in the spectacle if he wished. No one was calling the lines, participants could deliver their own dialogue. In such an atmosphere, where rules were lax and authority subdued, the possibility of violence and the urge to settle old rivalries could not be ruled out.

Although ritual inversion was supposed to be only temporary and last only during the duration of Holi there was a possibility that it may suddenly become permanent and people may not uphold the order of society anymore. It was to prevent such an eventuality that Maharaja Ranjit Singh deemed it necessary in 1835 to issue orders to his commander Chet Singh to go 'at once to Anandpur and control the situation there, because the Holi was drawing near and the Maharaja wished nobody may create any disturbance and there should be no fighting'.⁷² The presence of Chet Singh's armed soldiers at Anandpur must have made it clear that the state would not permit the ritual inversion to be transformed into permanent anarchy. It may be pointed out here that for many Sikhs, Holi was an occasion to undertake pilgrimage to Anandpur, where this festival was celebrated with great verve for two days and took the form of a fair.

Part of the sacred calendar, but of somewhat different significance from the ritual cycle described earlier, were the monthly festivals timed according to the different phases of the moon. Within the Sikh tradition, *pūranmāsī* the day of the full moon and *sankrant* the first day of every lunar month were considered ritually significant.⁷³ It was expected of the Sikh devotees that they would either listen to or read the Ādi-Granth and pay a visit to the local shrine, if not to a central one in the region.

The visits to the shrines on festive occasions brings us to the closely related theme of melās or fairs. According to a highly authoritative count there were 127 major fairs in the different regions of the Punjab not including the

⁷² V.S.Suri, *Umadat*, p.221.

⁷³ *Glossary 1*, p. 712.

commercial fairs.⁷⁴ The number of fairs would certainly be far greater if one were to draw a detailed list based on the District Gazetteers. Without being awed by the details of these fairs the majority of them can be summed up under two categories: calendrical and sacred. The former were fairs associated with calendrical festivals, for instance the Diwali melā at Amritsar or the Hola at Anandpur. Under the latter category were fairs held to mark the principal days in the life-cycle of a holy person, for instance a Sikh Guru or a pīr and commemoration of events associated with the life history of a holy person. Also, within the same category we may include the fairs held in the honour of various gods and goddesses.⁷⁵

Despite the differences in ritual sequences and the scales of gatherings within the two categories of fairs held in nineteenth century Punjab, there were moments at which the proceedings of these fairs converged. They blended into a pageant of colour, chaos, entertainment, commerce and ritual. The assembled jugglers, wrestlers, singers, bards, dancing girls and transvestites mounted shows to entertain people. Alongside confectioners and cloth merchants, relic sellers and astrologers vied for clientele. The ritual specialists provided their own sacred services and occasionally there would be an exorcist aiding the possessed.⁷⁶ For many rural people a melā provided their first glimpse into the outer world. The prime significance of a melā, however, was to enhance the sense of solidarity among rural communities. Melās by their very nature as a motley assemblage of people from different neighbourhoods, villages and regions diluted the codes of class, caste or religious differences. In a melā an individual could not stand apart, he had to blend in the 'multitude of crowds'.

⁷⁴ Based on a "List of Fairs in the Punjab at which more than 10,000 persons ordinarily assemble", in *Report on The Administration of the Punjab and its Dependencies 1871-72*, Lahore, 1872, pp.LVI-CXIII.

⁷⁵ For an illustration of the first category see M.Macauliffe, "Diwali at Amritsar", *op.cit.*, pp.619-36, and for the second category see an account of the Muktsar fair held to commemorate a battle fought by Guru Gobind Singh, *Gazetteer of the Ferozepore District 1883-84*, Lahore, n.d., p.41.

⁷⁶ Max Macauliffe on a train journey to Amritsar on the occasion of the Diwali mela was quick to spot what impelled his fellow passengers to visit the city: 'Some to purchase horses, some in quest of pleasure, some to worship the goddess of wealth, some to obtain converse with the spirit of the holy Guru, some to pray for children to perpetuate their name and rescue their souls from the terrors of degraded transmigration, or Nanak itself, and some on other different errands, of a more or less worthy, or unworthy character'. "Diwali at Amritsar", p.625.

Conclusion

Any reading of our account of customary culture will immediately raise the question of the extent to which all these beliefs and practices were in accordance with the canons of Sikh religion. While this is an important question it cannot be simply answered in black and white. The notion of a uniform, coherent, organised, and exclusive religion is predominantly Christian. British administrators, Christian missionaries and European observers especially in the nineteenth century brought with them the conceptual baggage of a singular and systematic religion, and viewed Indian society through the spectacles inherited from their own faith. They looked for mutually-exclusive religions among people who shared no such conceptions. When their oversimplified and mechanical views did not correspond with the complex Indian reality, they proffered the interpretation that if any group of people does not subscribe to the articles of their faith, they must be either deviants or have lost their traditions. Instead of questioning their own faulty epistemology they stubbornly misread the evidence. An episode recorded by an evangelist Henry Martyn Clark in 1885 is most illuminating:

The doli-bearers on the Dalhousie road, though they seem to be Sikhs, yet use tobacco freely. When I asked the reason, they told me they found it very hard work to carry dolis without refreshing themselves with the huqqa, so when they left their homes to come up for the summer work, they had their hair cut, and so gave up Sikhism. On their return home for the winter they paid few annas and were reinitiated. These facts show that Sikhism is fast being reabsorbed into Hinduism.⁷⁷

By unscrambling this live action in Dalhousie through the colonial discourse of codifying religious identities Clark arrived at two conclusions: first, an implicit one, that Sikhs were deviating from their religious charter, and second, an explicit one, that Sikhism was being absorbed into Hinduism and, as a result, was on the decline. If we accept the argument that the notion of a coherent religion is primarily Christian, than Clark's mode of reasoning, which was typically part of the colonial discourse, is open to debate. An alternate way of reading Clark's experience is to say religious identities in nineteenth century

⁷⁷H.M.Clark, "Decay of Sikhism", *Panjab Notes and Oqueries*, vol.3, November, 1885, p.20.

Punjab were negotiable and renewable and if people did not act according to their religious precepts, particularly as set out in texts, it was not a contradiction which denied their faith. The use of the terms Sikhs and Hindus can be often misleading and confusing, preventing us from perceiving what people were doing with their religious beliefs.

To understand customary culture in the Punjab especially prior to the 1880s we have to be extremely cautious in the application of categories like 'Sikhs', 'Muslims', and 'Hindus' and even have to suspend them. In their everyday existence people did not always conceive or exercise their religious beliefs or rituals according to religious boundaries. The point which needs to be made here is that to cure an illness or overcome a misfortune Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims inhabiting central Punjab did not always respond differently. They may have all, without reflecting on their religious identities, invoked Gugga-Pir or vowed to undertake a pilgrimage to the shrine of Sakhi Sarvar. Customary culture cannot be interpreted as Hindu, Sikh or Muslim. The very notion of custom suggests that it was a shared idiom transcending religious and often class differences. There was nothing specifically Hindu in believing in spirits. A visit to a pīr or an exorcist should not be read as an act of religious identity.

By keeping in mind the 'peculiarities' of the Indian sacred traditions, the issue of the relationship between customary culture and Sikhism can be better addressed. Fortunately or unfortunately the first principles of Sikhism were never explicitly codified, the little that was formalised during the formative phases of the Sikh movement under the Gurus could hardly be enforced in the absence of an organised clerical hierarchy. Here a comparison with Islam, the other 'great' tradition in the Punjab, may be illuminating. Unlike Islam which possesses a definite code of conduct in the *sharīʿa*, which spells out for a devout Muslim what is permissible and what is prohibited, Sikhism had no such equivalent. If we may carry the comparison further, in Sikhism there is also no counterpart of the Islamic *ulamā* which always had both a personal and moral stake in enforcing a Muslim code of conduct and punishing its violation. The closest we come to something corresponding to the *sharīʿa* within Sikhism is the *rahit*, a distinctive mode of conduct constructed out of oral and scriptural sources and expressed in what has come to be known as the *rahit-nāmā*

(manuals of conduct) literature. These manuals visualized a considerably deritualized Sikhism, shorn of polytheism, idolatory and Brahmanical dominance. In addition they laid down ritual observances, outward appearance and social behaviour.

While the Sikh tradition sees the rahit as having evolved from the writings of the Sikh Gurus in the *Ādi Granth*, with revolutionary and definite additions made by Guru Gobind Singh to its corpus on the eventful Baisakhi festival of 1699 (and subsequently canonised through textual narration), recent historical research points in a radically different direction.⁷⁸ The bulk of the extant versions of the rahit all appear to date from the nineteenth century and not from the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century as tradition would have us believe. It is probable that the Chaupa Singh rahit-nāmā dates back to the middle of the eighteenth century. The complexity of the Sikh rahit is further compounded by the fact that there are according to one account eighteen works that qualify as principal texts expounding the rahit⁷⁹ and even when this list has been purged by a rigorous historian we are left with nine different manuals of the rahit.⁸⁰ While they all share certain normative premises, they are by no means a uniform body of literature establishing what may amount to a standard code of behaviour. Then there is the question of how representative of the Sikh Panth these works were. In what ways did Sikhs over the nineteenth century fashion their everyday lives according to the precepts laid out in the rahit manuals.

What we have here are different sub-traditions evolving within Sikhism, each claiming allegiance and constituents for its own version of Sikhism. The rahit-nāmā literature reflects only the aspirations and world view of the significant Khalsa sub-tradition and not of the entire Sikh tradition. A single orthodoxy for the entire Sikh community had still not been articulated and its first definite version was to crystallize with the Singh Sabha movement in the

⁷⁸For a seminal article on the origin and evolution of the rahit-nāmā literature, see W.H.McLeod, *The Problem of the Panjabi rahit-nāmās*, in S.N. Mukherjee ed., *India, History and Thought. Essays in Honour of A.L. Basham*, Calcutta, 1982, pp. 103-126.

⁷⁹Kahan Singh, *Gurśabad Ratanākar Mahān Koś*, Patiala, 2nd edition, 1960, p. 760.

⁸⁰W.H.McLeod, *op.cit*, pp. 110-11.

last decades of the nineteenth century, which many observers have mistakenly accepted to be the orthodoxy for all times and phases of the Sikh movement. It is quite possible that future scholarship, employing sophisticated linguistic tools, may indicate, on the basis of seventeenth century hukamnāmās and the eighteenth century gur-bilās literature that a definite orthodoxy had emerged earlier, but for the moment we cannot enter into that speculation, and must base our findings on what we know. Given the pluralistic nature of the Sikh tradition in the nineteenth century and the absence of a powerful orthodoxy, Sikh participation in Punjab's customary culture was not seen as deviant or un-Sikh.

Having stated the major features of customary culture and qualified the application of categories 'Hindu', 'Sikh' and 'Muslim' we are now in a position to ask where the social locus of these beliefs, values and practices was: among the landed aristocracy, or the peasantry or artisans or urban service groups or all of them collectively. In answering this issue it is of prime importance to draw attention to the fact that the mediators of popular religion like the pīrs, exorcists, magical healers, Mirasis, were patronised by all classes, ranging from the landed aristocracy at the top to the peasantry at the bottom. In return the patrons must have received virtually the same messages and heard similar myths, rituals, charms and incantations.

Seasonal festivals like Holi and Diwali, cutting across social divisions were celebrated by everyone in the towns and the countryside. During the Diwali festivities in Amritsar the city dwellings of the Sikh landed aristocracy were packed with their families and the streets were crowded with the 'usual tag rag and bobtail'⁸¹ a contemporary's way of describing participation by popular groups like the peasantry and the artisans. During Holi too, the high and the low, the elites and the non-elites joined together to celebrate the carnival-like festival, reversing social hierarchies, albeit momentarily. Favourite pilgrimage centres like Amritsar, Hardwar and Benares, as well as regional fairs were frequented by all social groups. A highly informed source estimated that at least a hundred thousand Sikhs visited Hardwar during a twelve year cycled Kumbh melā.⁸² No wonder an innovative social anthropologist discovered

⁸¹M.Macauliffe, "Diwali at Amritsar", p. 627

⁸² Calculated by the Government of the United Provinces. See M.Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion*, p.xxi.

with the *pāndhās* or religious brokers at Hardwar complex genealogies of numerous Sikh peasant households from the Doaba dating from the nineteenth century.⁸³ Since these genealogies belonged to the artisans and to different strata of the peasantry - rich, middle and poor - they are a fair indication of the appeal pilgrimage centres exercised over a cross-section of society. Members of peasant households visited Hardwar especially on festive occasions or to consign ashes of the dead affines to the river Ganges. Sikh Maharajas and feudatories made financial contributions to maintain temples at Rishikesh and Hardwar and must have visited them on ceremonial occasions. In 1844, when the Lahore court was in turmoil Lehna Singh Majithia, one of the foremost Sikh aristocrats, undertook a pilgrimage to Hardwar and Benares.

Similarly, astrologers and magical healers were consulted by superordinate and subordinate groups. Practitioners of these arts commanding a high standing among the elites were definitely beyond the financial reach of subordinate sectors like poor peasants and labourers. But what needs to be underscored is the belief they all shared in the efficacy of astrology and magical healing, without having visited the same consultants. The same holds true for many of the other values and attitudes described here. Raja Jaswant Singh of Nabha sought to disinherit his eldest son and heir, for he believed that he had been engaged in witchcraft to ruin the health of his father.⁸⁴ Sardar Bhup Singh, a Rupal chieftain, leveled similar charges against his uncle Darwa Singh. Ratan Kaur, the wife of the chief of Thanesar adopted a boy who died in 1828. She charged the nephew Jamerat Singh with killing him through magical arts. Captain W. Murray, who spent many years within the Sikh principalities across the Sutlej, commented on the spread of customary beliefs: 'they obtain under varied shapes, and in diversified shades ... warping the opinions, and directing the public and private affairs of all ranks in society, from the despot to the peasant, from the soldier in the battle-field, to the criminal at the tree of execution'.⁸⁵

⁸³ See Tom G. Kessinger, *Vilyatpur 1848-1968*, Berkeley, 1974, pp.35-36

⁸⁴ This and the following examples from Captain W. Murray in, *Origin of Sikh Power*, p.152.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.153.

Despite Captain Murray's testimony on how religious beliefs spread across different social strata and our own findings cited earlier demonstrating shared beliefs and attitudes across social divisions, it may be protested that the ecological diversity combined with social differences did not foster a homogeneous popular religion. Undoubtedly the caste hierarchy, as for instance between the Khatris and the Jats, the urban-rural divide and the literate non-literate dichotomy diversified popular religion. In face of these factors it would be banal to assert that all strata of society had the same involvement with popular religion. Giani Dit Singh, a major ideologue of the Singh Sabha, in a vernacular pamphlet alluded to earlier, exhorted the Sikhs to renounce the worship of Gugga Pir. In doing so he provides us with valuable insights into the social make-up of the cult.⁸⁶ He counted among Gugga's Sikh devotees an affluent jāgirdār, the wife of a senior village official, several common folk who appear to be peasants and the despised Chuhras. The characters in the text represented large sections of the Sikh panth but there are groups whose absence is conspicuous: merchants, urban professionals, and anyone literate. Social status certainly influenced religious transactions.

The urban Khatris had no territorial gods like the Bhoomia, so central to the Jats living in the countryside. The Jats hardly shared the rituals and myths of the Mazhabis. Sakhi Sarvar's following among the Sikhs in the second half of the nineteenth century was more widespread in the rural Doaba than elsewhere. People living in towns and cities did not have to go to the rural seasonal fairs. Literate Sikhs like Attar Singh Bahadur, unlike their unlettered co-religionists were skeptical of prophecies. But these differences were as yet not so formidable as to create two entirely different and competing visions of religion: one elite and the other non-elite. The underlying assumptions of popular religion - the nature of the sacred, the understanding of illness and misfortune, the beliefs in spirits, miracles, astrology, 'superstitions', magical healers, the cycle of festivals - were widely shared by all social groups.

In conclusion, it may be pointed out that it was largely in the last quarter of the nineteenth century when the socio-religious movements such as the Singh Sabha and the Arya Samaj assaulted the central themes and institutions of

⁸⁶ Giani Dit Singh, *Gugga Gapurā*, Amritsar, 1976, first published, 1902.

popular religion that the elites did gradually withdraw from customary culture, though not without some resistance as we will see in this thesis subsequently. The task of the socio-religious movements was indirectly and sometimes directly aided by the onslaught of British rule and the impetus it gave to social mobility, rationalism, new notions of time and communication through the media of print and innovative literary genres like the novel. These elements not only narrowed the 'social space' in which popular religion could prevail but also contracted its social audience. All beliefs, religious or otherwise, need space to be communicated and practised. The framework of the Raj provided this vital space only to forces allied to its causes, not to practices and institutions which to many within the Raj appeared primitive, irrational and reproachable.

Chapter Three

The Kuka Sikhs: Brotherhood of the Pure

Purity and impurity are principles of evaluation and separation. The pure must be kept uncontaminated by the less pure.

M.Douglas, *Implicit Meanings*, p. 186.

The spring month of Māgh heralded festivals, pilgrimages and popular rituals in the Punjab countryside. In the Malwa, a popular fair was held each year at the shrine of the tenth Sikh master, Gobind Singh, in Muktsar. In 1872 at the same time as the traditional fair at Muktsar, a small village Bhaini, fifteen miles from Ludhiana, was the scene of feverish activity. The followers of the Kuka leader Bhai Ram Singh had collected there in connection with the Maghi festivities on the 11th and 12th of January. They had, however, very little to celebrate. In the past four months nine of their numbers had been hanged by the colonial authorities on charges of attacking slaughter houses and killing butchers, others had been imprisoned, and many more were subjected to increasing surveillance and restrictions on the movements of their leader and the holding of periodic melās. The British officials nervously shifted their views of the Kukas. Earlier seen as reformers of the Sikh Panth, they were now deemed to be political rebels.¹ As those present felt heavily suspect in the eyes of the administration, the atmosphere at Bhaini must have been tense and unnerving.

¹This perspective is clearly reflected in Memorandum on Ram Singh and the Kukas by J.W.Macnabb, Officiating Commissioner, Ambala Division, 4th November, 1871, reproduced in Nahar Singh, *Goroo Ram Singh and the Kuka Sikhs*, I, New Delhi, 1965, pp. 143-152. Nahar Singh in a very useful three volume collection has compiled British official documents on the Kukas available at the National Archives, New Delhi. Vol. I and II are published from New Delhi, 1965 and 1966. The final vol. is from Sri Jiwan Nagar, 1967. (Hereafter these Vols. are cited as KS). There are some obvious shortcomings in these sources. The information in these documents comes largely from hostile observers, officers charged with the task of closely observing and later suppressing the Kuka Sikhs. They had no interest in understanding the Kukas and their collective beliefs. Their prime concern was to prevent the Kukas from becoming a law and order problem. The local police informers who provided most of the data in these government files often suppressed and distorted information, in accordance with their perceptions and self-interests. The nature of these sources demands caution in decoding the cognitive frames of colonial officials and spies and, where possible, has to be supplemented with other information.

On the 13th of January, the day of the traditional festival of Lohri, a party of Kuka zealots left their leader's village to mount an attack on Malerkotla, the capital of a small Muslim principality of the same name, approximately thirty miles south of Ludhiana. The next day, en route to their destination, the Kuka crowd raided the fort of Malodh, the residence of a Sikh jāgīrdār related to the Maharaja of Patiala, possibly to avenge through his affine the anti-Kuka Sikh policies of the Maharaja and equip themselves with arms and horses. The insurgents met with little material success. Next morning on the 15th of January, when a band of approximately a hundred and twenty Kuka Sikhs attempted against all odds to invade the town of Malerkotla, they were repulsed by trained and well armed state troops. The same afternoon an armed contingent from the Sikh state of Patiala succeeded in capturing sixty-eight Kuka Sikhs from the raiding party. They were brought to Malerkotla where Mr. L. Cowan the Officiating Deputy Commissioner of the Ludhiana District, following the hardened traditions of the Punjab school of administration, had forty-nine of them blown away from guns without the niceties of a legal trial. The next day Mr. T.D. Forsyth, Commissioner of the Ambala Division, on joining his subordinate, had sixteen more Kuka Sikhs blown from guns, but this time, after the formalities of a brief trial. These drastic measures earned the Kuka Sikhs a hallowed place in the text-books of modern Indian history and also made them a part of the 'heroic' Sikh tradition.

Why did a small party of Kuka Sikhs attack the state of Malerkotla? What was the source of their confidence which made them feel invincible against a superior political-military power? Answers to these questions have not been lacking since the Kuka movement reached its climax at the parade grounds of Malerkotla. The first to respond were the British officials who proposed a simple and straightforward theory to vindicate their actions and the fair name of English justice. In British eyes, the kingdom of Maharaja Ranjit Singh was a Sikh state. Its annexation meant Sikhs lost their superior status in the Punjab and a proud community was humiliated. To avenge their disgraceful defeat and regain past glories Sikhs were constantly on the look out for the first available opportunity to overthrow the British empire. The Kuka movement under Bhai Ram Singh was a direct manifestation of this basic urge. By

suppressing it in time the authorities prevented evil designs from materialising and protected the interests of the civil society.²

The second interpretation of the Kuka actions is advanced by the nationalist historians. For them the Kukas provided a ready-made illustration of how the Indian people waged war against British imperialism almost immediately after their territories had been unjustly annexed. The Kuka struggle thus was part of the gigantic all-India struggle for freedom from British colonial oppression. It deserved to be highlighted and commended.³

In retrospect, it was not hard to see through the ideological justifications of British apologists and the persistent efforts of nationalist historians to incorporate all sorts of social movements under the nationalist banner. But no alternative perspective was available until recently, when W.H. McLeod re-examined the available materials. With refreshing vigour he broke clear of existing orthodoxies and offered an alternative theory, showing how the Kuka movement constituted a millenarian response emerging from specific socio-economic circumstances, particularly a tremendous rise in population, failure of harvest leading to a famine and the presence of a discontented peasantry, features present in most millenarian uprisings. McLeod significantly also noted the immense similarities of the Kuka movement with millenarian stirrings in other parts of the world.⁴

Existing studies of the Kukas, while demonstrating the various facets of the movement, its political dynamics and its close connection with social conditions, have shown greater interest in exploring pragmatic themes rather than the semantic aspects. They help us to firmly grasp the underlying causes of the movement and define its character, an essential task for any study, but tell us little of what the movement meant for the Kukas themselves. To interpret the actors' objectives, their own structures of consciousness and experience, is as

²For this interpretation see Macnab's memorandum cited above.

³This line of thought is clearly seen in Fauja Singh Bajwa, *Kuka Movement an Important Phase in Punjab's Role in India's Struggle for Freedom*, Delhi, 1965, M.M.Ahluwalia, *Kukas The Freedom Fighters of the Panjab*, Bombay, 1965 and Joginder Singh, *Kuka Movement : Freedom Struggle in Punjab*, New Delhi, 1985.

⁴W.H.McLeod, "The Kukas a Millenarian Sect of the Punjab", in G.A.Wood and P.S.O' Connor eds., *W.P.Morrell: A Tribute*, Dunedin, 1973, pp. 85-103.

crucial as locating the major causes and features of a social movement. Such an exercise requires a study of imagery, symbols, metaphors, codes of behaviour, elements which have not been as thoroughly considered, in earlier studies, as the socio-political circumstances. But if we neglect the former it is hard to fully understand the discourses of Ram Singh and the statements of his followers. In a letter to his disciples, Ram Singh prophesied: 'on a Sunday midnight locks will open and two suns shall appear on the horizon, one on the left and the other on the right. A white elephant will descend on earth...'⁵ The message loaded with symbolic language is meaningless without a semiotic analysis. Kaisra Singh, a Kuka Sikh, recorded before he was blown away from a gun at Malerkotla parade grounds:

I went to Bhainee for the Maghee Mela. I sat near where Heera Singh and Lehna Singh were. They did not advise me to join in any enterprise. *God put it into my heart to go with them...* I left Bhainee with them. We went together to Ruboo, and from Ruboo to Malodh. God ordered me to go there. No one else told me... I had not even a stick. I then came with the party to Kotlah. I came inside the town to the palace gate. I was in fight before the treasury, but had no arms... We came to Kotlah *by God's order to kill the slayers of kine...*⁶ (emphasis added).

Kaisra Singh was hardly an exception among the Kuka insurgents. Their ranks were crowded with men who shared similar beliefs. Men who staunchly believed in the righteousness of their cause and that they possessed the power to challenge the alien Raj and its collaborators. For God was on their side, he spoke to them, and they were following his directives. This chapter examines the phenomenology of such deeply held beliefs in the hope that we may understand : What convictions made people to die for their religion? How does religion play a role in resistance ? Why are apocalyptic visions believed in? What evokes the moral indignation of communities ? What follows is thus not primarily an analysis of causes, a terrain handled with distinct success by W.H. McLeod's essay, but concerns itself more with the questions posed above.

⁵ Reproduced in Ganda Singh, *Kūkian dī Vithiā*, Amritsar, 1944, letter no., 4, p.25, my translation (Hereafter *Vithiā*).

⁶ Examination of the accused number 3, Kaisra Singh in "Copy of the Correspondence , or Extracts from Correspondence , relating to Kooka outbreak", Great Britain, House of Commons, *Parliamentary Papers*, vol.45, 1872, p.43.

One cautionary note is in order. One may wonder why there is no discussion of the Nirankari order here which was contemporary to the Kukas and should legitimately be included in a study of the Sikh Panth in the second half of the nineteenth century. The reasons for considering the Nirankaris beyond the scope of this study are fourfold. First, the experiences and motivations which must have inspired Baba Dayal (?-1855), and his early adherents occurred largely in a period pre-dating this study. Second, from all accounts it appears the movement largely remained localised in the region around Rawalpindi, peripheral to central Punjab and could never mobilise a substantial following. Most of its adherents like its founder were drawn from service and mercantile castes like Khatri and Aroras, a minority within the Sikh tradition. Third, the sources for the reconstruction of the Nirankari history are fragmentary, unreliable and insufficient. There is very little Nirankari material from the nineteenth century. A hukamnāmā believed to be issued by Baba Darbara Singh, a Nirankari Guru, a very informative document, is unfortunately not available in original but only in subsequent copies. Fourth, John C.B. Webster has recently written a significant monograph on the Nirankaris.⁷

In Pursuit of Holiness:

Holiness, a fundamental concern of religions, is a difficult concept to define but, as a preliminary definition, it stands here for a complex of ideas which endow individuals, texts, time, places, institutions and communities with a distinct power and quality of sanctity that distinguishes them from the rest of civil society.⁸ The term holiness also includes the meanings evoked by the word sacred and in common practice the two words are often used as synonymous. But as distinct from the sacred, holiness has a moral code

⁷John C.B. Webster, *The Nirankari Sikhs*, Delhi, 1979. Also see my review of Webster, "The Nirankari Sikhs", *Indian Book Chronicle*, 1 June, 1980.

⁸Although the term 'holiness' originated in the Judeo-Christian tradition, I use it in this study because it seems to be the broadest and most useful analytical category available for the general phenomenon considered here. In contrast to terms like 'numinous' which have very specific theological connotations closely tied to Judeo-Christian beliefs (see, for example R. Otto, *The Idea of Holy*, London, 1952), the term holiness has come to be accepted as appropriate term for diverse cultures. Like the term 'religion', 'millenarian', and 'prophet' it seems well suited for comparative study and cross-cultural communication. Their analytical use is not diminished by the fact that the actors themselves may not have used these terms.

inscribed into it, a code that informs of those values, beliefs, concepts and symbols through which a community conceives what is just, legitimate and virtuous. The power of this moral order largely arose from its nexus with the sacred. Holiness, with a moral order encapsulated within it, helped people distinguish the pure from the impure, the right from the wrong, and the sacred from the profane, thereby establishing moral codes of individual and collective conduct.⁹

Those who violated its standards were subjected to the intense rage and indignation of the community, expressed through words, gestures, rumour, signs and occasionally, weapons. These traditional sanctions against the transgressors of the holy order were easily communicated and comprehended by the constituents of the local society but were not that easily decoded by external observers. For instance the British officials saw in many of the Kuka actions a primitive mind at work, while for the community their punitive acts were derived from the store house of expressive tradition. The purpose of the argument which follows is to place the holy order and its defence at the center of the analysis of the Kuka movement.

The Kukas did not create the holy order they so zealously chose to pursue; they only extended and interpreted it. The evolution of the Kukas into a 'sect' within the Sikh Panth and their singling out in British files has heavily coloured the readings of the early history of the Kukas. Consequently, it occasionally appears as if their ideology suddenly materialised out of nowhere and was without deep roots in their society. Such a view is erroneous, useful for the orthodox Sikh tradition which seeks to view Kukas as a marginal sect that went astray, but not permissible historically if one particularly studies them in relation to the larger Sikh society. The Kuka cosmology concerning a holy

⁹On the importance of a moral order for peasant societies particularly in the 'economic' domain see the well known work of James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, New Haven, 1976. For its ramifications in the Indian sphere see Barbara Daly Metcalf ed., *Moral Conduct and Authority*, California, 1984, pp.1-22. Although she surveys the importance of the moral order in Islam, her study can illuminate similar concepts among other Indian traditions.

person, purity, right conduct, dress and food taboos and sacredness had a long history.¹⁰

If we accept Sikh tradition, in 1708 Gobind Singh, before his death, decided to abolish the two-century old line of human Gurus and instead make the Ādi Granth the future Guru of the Sikhs, thereby endowing the young Panth with a source of both cohesion and conflict. Solidarity was achieved because the community was left with a common object of veneration and a scripture to guide the faithful particularly in periods of trial, but discord was also a consequence for hundreds of pages of verse in the holy book were open to conflicting interpretations. The evolving panth was partially saved from this fundamental source of discord and strife by the important tradition of the bhāīs dating back to the period of the Sikh Gurus.

Etymologically the word bhāī means brother but within the early Sikh tradition the word was also used as an honorific for the holy men of the Panth. To qualify for the title a person had to demonstrate a capacity to interpret the Ādi Granth, communicate the wisdom of the Gurus it enshrined and be publicly recognised for his piety. If in addition he could work miracles, heal the sick and give succour to the distressed he was sure to occupy a position of considerable reverence and command within the community. Such fully realized men were sometimes also honoured with the appellation Baba and more rarely Guru. The last term in the nineteenth century was more often used for those Bedis, Sodhis and Nirmalas who performed the Sikh initiation rites. However, it must be noted here that in the nineteenth century the epithet bhāī was also used for the men who acted as professional *granthīs* or readers of the Ādi Granth.¹¹

The concept of bhāī is as old as the Sikh faith. Among the first to earn the title and respect of a bhāī, probably the progenitor of the whole bhāī

¹⁰ I have often used the term Kuka Sikhs here for the differences between the Kukas and the Sikhs had not fully crystallised in the nineteenth century and the two categories often overlapped. This is one reason why the British authorities found it so hard to judge the exact number of Kukas in the Punjab. But at the same time it must be acknowledged there were certain differences between sectors of the Sikh tradition and the Kukas, particularly doctrinal ones which came to a head when Ram Singh visited the Anandpur shrine.

¹¹ R.C. Temple, "Honorific Class Names in the Punjab", *Indian Antiquary*, vol.11, 1882, p.118.

tradition, was Bhai Buddha (1571-1631). A disciple of Guru Nanak from the time of the Kartarpur community, he was a contemporary of seven Sikh Gurus and installed four of them to Guruship. It appears he was also consulted in the compilation of the Ādi Granth. Equally important, if not more crucial, for the foundation of the bhāī tradition was Gurdas Bhalla (1558?- 1636) in the sixteenth century. Well known for his work as a scribe, and amanuensis of the Ādi Granth, he also authored commentaries on the compositions of the Sikh Gurus. The latter task he performed so well that his exegetical works are known as 'the key to Guru Granth Sahib'. Possibly since the days of Gurdas Bhalla, popularly known as Bhai Gurdas, the faculty of expounding on *gurbānī* or the teachings of the Sikh Gurus has been woven into the definition of a bhāī, and bhāīs have been honoured as embodiments of the holy.

In the chronicles of the Sikhs after Bhai Gurdas, the following are prominent: Bhai Nand Lal, a poet closely associated with the tenth Sikh master, Bhai Mani Singh, a renowned martyr, Bhai Vasti Ram, famed for his miraculous powers to heal the sick, Bhai Sant Singh, a tutor of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Bhai Ram Singh, at one time a prime-minister of the Lahore state, Bhai Gobind Ram, a member of the Lahore court, Bhai Gurmukh Singh, a confidant of Maharaja Sher Singh, Bhai Bir Singh, a guide to the Sikh nobility and subalterns alike, and Bhai Maharaj Singh, a stringent opponent of the British. The holiness of Bhais Vasti Ram and his grandson Ram Singh elevated them to the position of chief arbiters in the affairs of the Sikh state.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh is credited with saying that he owed his kingdom to blessings of Bhai Vasti Ram, a figure of phenomenal piety and learning in the eighteenth century.¹² This belief of Ranjit Singh, while illustrating the centrality of a holy person in the Sikh tradition, also exemplifies another key concept of the Sikh community: blessings. Blessings from a holy man could rectify worldly misfortunes, ward off evil and help overcome human shortcomings.

In 1799, when faced with the combined forces of leading Sikh chieftains outside the city of Lahore, the Maharaja turned to Bhai Vasti Ram for advice and blessings. Victorious in the battle, his conviction of Bhai Vasti Ram's holiness was further confirmed. The Bhai's death in 1803 cut short his

¹²Kirpal Singh, *An Historical Account of Bhai Vasti Ram and Bhai Ram Singh*, Amritsar, n.d., p. 9.

career, but his progeny amply enjoyed the bounties of the state. Bhai Ram Singh, a grandson, was given such great deference that he was the only person allowed a seat in the presence of the Maharaja.¹³ He was a scholar of Sanskrit, proficient in Persian, with ample skills in medicine, and his counsel was sought on a variety of issues: the politics of the court, the policy towards the British, treatment of the Sikh feudatories and the crowning of Ranjit Singh's heirs. Under Kanwar Nau Nihal Singh the Bhai was made prime-minister, and six months before he died in October 1846, Ram Singh was among the signatories of the fateful treaty between the British government and the state of Lahore.

Another famous bhāī lineage in central Punjab was that of the Bhais of Bagarian, an old Sikh family dating back to the time of the Sikh Gurus. Of humble Tarkhan origins, their close association with Sikh Gurus greatly enhanced their social standing and earned them much religious merit. In the seventeenth century they were given the title bhāī by Guru Hargobind, the sixth Sikh master, for their exemplary service and unflinching devotion to the Sikh cause. The family was renowned in the Malwa for their piety, works of charity and propagation of Sikhism. The *rites de passage* for the Phulkian princes, including pāhul, were conducted by the head of the Bagarian family. He was also approached in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the princes for religious instruction and blessings. The Bagarian Bhais endowed one of the largest langars in the province in their ancestral village at Ludhiana; it fed a constant stream of travellers, pilgrims and rural poor without distinctions of caste or creed.¹⁴ From the time of Bhai Gurdas, a poet and scribe to the Bhais of Bagarian religious and political mentors of Maharajas, the tradition of the bhāīs, although never canonised, had become deeply rooted and attracted wide veneration. An average Sikh in the nineteenth century considered the person of a bhāī holy, sacred and inviolable. But bhāīs were not only born to established families, they could be recognised, exalted and endowed by the Sikh public.

¹³Ibid., p.17.

¹⁴Account based on T. Gordon Walker, *Final Report on the Revision of Settlement 1878-83 of the Ludhiana District*, Calcutta, 1884, p.61 (Hereafter *Ludhiana Report*) and *Chiefs and Families of Note in the Punjab*, vol.1, 4th edition, revised by G.L.Chopra, Lahore, 1940, pp. 203-209 and *Khālsā Akhbār*, April 14, 1888, p. 7.

Ram Singh, the leader of the Kuka Sikhs in the second half of the nineteenth century, became a leading representative of this ancient Sikh tradition and effectively harnessed it to launch a powerful millenarian movement. Although the Kukas today use the honorific Guru for Ram Singh, the prefix employed by Ram Singh himself was Bhai.¹⁵ Placed outside the ambience of this hallowed lineage, historians are hard pressed to explain how the humble Ram Singh, a one time carpenter and soldier, succeeded in making thousands flock to his standard. The legitimacy of his prophetic utterances, the power of his person, and his drive to reorder the world around him stemmed from a process which his contemporaries understood very well and openly offered to support. I will try to reconstruct it but, without reference to the paradigm of the bhāīs, it is hard to get into the world the Kuka Sikhs constructed for themselves.

Very little is known about the early life of Ram Singh.¹⁶ He was born in 1816, in a humble rural family - his father was a carpenter in the village Bhaini in the Ludhiana district. Assisting his father in daily chores, the child Ram Singh grew up memorising several compositions from the Adi Granth, reciting *gurbānī* and acquiring a working knowledge of Gurmukhi. He may have received some formal education at the hands of a local learned man. By the time he was twenty, like many other young men of his age, he left his village to join an army regiment, named after Prince Nau Nihal Singh, the grandson of Ranjit Singh. During his service years he met Bhai Balak Singh whose personality, convictions, teachings, and vision, so impressed Ram Singh that he became his ardent disciple. Although Bhai Balak Singh, had been influenced by another teacher, Jawahar Mal, for the Kukas the line of their masters only starts with Balak Singh, who is considered the eleventh Guru after Gobind Singh and in a sense the founder of the movement. Just before the Anglo-Sikh war of 1845, Ram Singh left the army and returned to his native place to work as a sharecropper. In his thirty-fourth year he once again left Bhaini for Ferozepore to work for an uncle who had undertaken to repair a fort

¹⁵Ganda Singh, *Vithiā*, p. 6.

¹⁶This brief biographical note is based on Ganda Singh, *Vithiā* and Nahar Singh, *Nāmdhārī Itihās*, Delhi, 1955. (Hereafter *Itihās*). Both these works have made extensive use of primary sources in Urdu and Punjabi, particularly the literature produced by the Kukas themselves. For instance Santokh Singh, *Satgur Bilās* (Unpublished), Dhian Singh, *Sri Satguru Bilās*, Bhaini Sahib, 1942 and Nidhan Singh Alam, *Jug Paltau Satgurū*, Delhi, 1947.

and various other buildings. During his stay there legends record his powers to work miracles. According to an account, one Sunday Ram Singh was employed to put a roof on a poor man's house in Ferozepore city. One of the beams proved a foot too short, and the owner begged Ram Singh to remedy the defect without obliging him to buy a new beam, which was more than he could afford. Ram Singh thereupon by his miraculous powers lengthened the beam to the required length without adding to it - the beam had grown a foot. According to Mrs. F.A.Steel who recorded the above legend 'hundreds of persons in Ferozepore will attest the above tale, many being "eye-witnesses" and the house can be shown to the curious'.¹⁷ It is significant that the legend concludes by stating that on the day of this miracle Ram Singh obtained five hundred followers. Clearly in popular sentiment there was a connection between miracles and the sanctity accorded to Ram Singh as a Bhai and the recognition of his teachings. Recognising the elements of holiness in Ram Singh was for many a means of earning religious merit, a claim he never explicitly makes but is granted by others. This process of recognition by the Sikh masses is acknowledged by Ram Singh in a letter: 'first Sikhs generally recognised Bir Singh, then Maharaj Singh and now me'.¹⁸

The uncharted domain of miracles has much to tell us about faith, beliefs and consciousness in nineteenth-century Punjab. To some of us today, with the arrogance of our intellectual assumptions, miracles may appear to be inventions or signs of credulity; for those who believed in them they possessed a rationality of their own and functioned within a system of cultural references they understood. Ram Singh was no ordinary mortal and so he could do what common men could not. Miracles ascribed to him gave credence to his prophetic status. When he was absorbed in early morning meditation, it was believed a bright light could be seen perambulating his head.¹⁹ The sign of a light around the head has for long in the histories of religions indicated the holiness of a person.

Two years before the Uprising of 1857, Ram Singh returned to his native Bhaini and got interested in a shop dealing in food grains and iron

¹⁷Mrs. F.A.Steel, "Folklore in the Punjab", *The Indian Antiquary*, vol.11, p.42.

¹⁸Ganda Singh, *Vithiā*, letter number 44, p.302.

¹⁹Nahar Singh, *Itihās*, p.46.

implements. At the same time he collected around him a core group of associates and disciples, most of whom were demobilized soldiers from the former regiments of the Lahore state. From this nucleus were to emerge many of the prominent Kukas of the future. For the benefit of a growing number of adherents who visited Bhaini, Ram Singh, in line with Sikh tradition, set up a langar or free community kitchen. In 1862, when Bhai Balak Singh died at Hazro, Ram Singh emerged as one of his three successors.²⁰ By now he manifested the major characteristics of a Bhai: the ability to expound on *gurbani*, piety and a demonstrated capacity to work miracles. These features confirmed for his followers that Ram Singh was a holy man whose rise had in fact been predicted in the current prophecies. Let us now turn to what Bhai Ram Singh preached to his growing following. What was his message?

It is conventional to divide Ram Singh's teachings into three spheres : religious, social and political. The first deal with how he put the house of Sikhism in order; the second with how he weaned away his followers from debilitating social customs, and the third contributed to the anti-British struggle. Such divisions are no doubt convenient and difficult to avoid, but before proceeding further we need to be aware that they exist.²¹ Dissected in this tripartite form it is difficult to comprehend the content of Ram Singh's message. If one were to follow this schema, where does one place his teachings against cow slaughter? Is it religious, social or political, for it ultimately collides against the British law which declared cow slaughter legal. I propose that his teachings be viewed in their totality: not as an inventory of parts but a structured unity .

If there is one theme that pervades his teachings it is the opposition between pure and impure.²² Such a recurrent concern on part of Ram Singh may appear to be novel, particularly because interpretations of the Sikh movement always emphasise how Sikhism freed itself of ritual concerns, discounting ideas of purity and impurity. While it is correct that the polarity between purity and impurity as an organising principle of society exemplified in

²⁰Ganda Singh, *Vithiā*, p.17-18.

²¹This is best exemplified by M.M.Ahluwalia, *Kuka Movement: Freedom Struggle In Punjab*, Delhi, 1965.

²²On how the pure impure antinomy has influenced different cultures see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, London ,1966.

the Hindu caste system, was questioned by the anti-structuralist pole in the Sikh movement, it must not be overlooked that the Sikhs have always paid great attention to notions of ritual purity both individual and corporate.²³ The third Sikh Guru, Amar Das (1479-1574) constructed a *baoli* or water tank at Goindwal where the Sikhs would go for pilgrimage and bathe in the waters of the tank, thereby ridding themselves of impurities. All major Sikh shrines, including the famous Golden Temple were to continue with this tradition. On being built, a large water tank was added to their structures where the pilgrims would dutifully undertake ritual purification by immersing themselves in the holy waters of the tank. The purificatory powers of water are universally recognised and in the Indian cultural tradition have always been particularly significant; thus the great tradition of acquiring merit by bathing in the river Ganges. M.Eliade, one of the most creative phenomenologists of this century notes several features associated with water in religious thinking: it breaks and dissolves all forms, does away with the past, and purifies and regenerates; in short, it is a symbol of renewal.²⁴ In the Sikh tradition it is noteworthy that if the teachings of the Sikh Gurus need to be summed up they are reduced to three cardinal virtues: *nām* or divine name, *dān* or charity and *isnān* or bath. Once again the importance of moral purification is highlighted. In fact some authors avoid the literal meaning of the word *isnān*, which is bath, and instead translate the word as purity.

All visitors to a Sikh shrine, from very early in the history of the community but certainly in the nineteenth century, were required to take off their shoes, if they wore any, and subsequently wash their feet and hands before entering the shrine. Once again this practice illustrates very well Sikh concerns for purity and the efforts to eliminate dirt. The space outside the temple is considered dirty and unclean. To get into the shrine one must undergo cleansing by leaving behind soiled footwear and particularly wash those parts of the body that are constantly exposed to the outside world. The

²³Sikh concerns with purity and pollution are clearly reflected in the *Sau śākhīān* anthology circulated within the community in the nineteenth century. In a list of 64 injunctions in the anthology, several are concerned with the maintenance of purity. For an English translation of the original text see Attar Singh, *Sakhe Book or the Description of Gooroo Gobind Singh's Religion and Doctrines*, Benares, 1873, pp. 18-24.

²⁴M.Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, London, 1958, p.194, cited in Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, London, 1979, p.161.

dirt encountered outside is not merely that of soil, excrement and germs, but is a cultural notion embedded in spatial classification. To venture outside means being exposed to pollution, particularly from other people; to gain access to a place where purity is believed to be concentrated it is mandatory to get rid of acquired dirt. Today all major Sikh shrines, reflecting the old custom, have attendants at the entrance who collect visitors' shoes before they are allowed in.

The Sikh ideas of ritual purity were fully articulated in the community's rites of initiation. Tradition prescribes the rules, procedures and occasionally the meanings of the initiation ritual. Elements of the ritual were in evolution from late seventeenth century, and orthodoxy has only fully codified it in the present century. Broadly, in the nineteenth century, prior to the rise of the Singh Sabha, the initiation rite consisted of the following.²⁵ First, those who underwent initiation were for the period of the rite separated from others. Second, a complex process of scriptural recitation and preparation of *amrit* or sanctified water was undertaken. Once the *amrit* was ready it was administered to all those who were undergoing the initiation. Third, they were instructed in a strict moral code of conduct.²⁶ Although the scope and exact importance of this code has varied enormously over time as have the contents of the texts which record it, on one issue there is a broad agreement. Violation of the injunctions laid down in the code, particularly contact with any of the prohibited persons or foods, make a person impure and dangerous. He is a threat to the community and can not be considered a Khalsa. Fourth, for an initiate to hold on to his purificatory state he is obliged to maintain the five symbols of the faith.

Significantly, those who underwent the initiation rites were considered qualified to enter the ranks of the Khalsa, body of the pure ones. The word Khalsa is derived from the Arabic *Khālīs*, and one of its meanings is pure or pious. With this background on ideas and notions of purity in Sikhism, the insistent emphases in Ram Singh's teachings on avoiding impurities of life should hardly appear surprising. They were in accord with his own religious

²⁵Reconstructed from J.D.Cunningham, *A History of the Sikhs*, Delhi, 1955, first published, 1848, pp. 314-315.

²⁶For examples of this code see P.S.Padam, *Rahit-nāme*, Patiala, 1974.

heritage and meshed in well with the beliefs of the larger society.²⁷ A state of purity may be a desirable ideal but the organic processes of the human body and social surroundings make its attainment difficult. Impurities arise out of bodily emissions, menstruation among women, *rites de passage* such as birth and death, certain kinds of foods and materials, and anomalous social situations. To negate these polluting forces Ram Singh elaborated a cluster of rituals which would generate purity of body, speech, food, dress and actions. An account of these follows.

According to the hagiographic literature, which in this case can be relied on since there are no contrary indications, one of the first ritual acts Ram Singh performed was the initiation of five Sikhs around 1857 at Bhaini.²⁸ In itself this was a minor happening but it marked an important departure in the practice of the initiation ritual. Candidates for initiation mostly visited four or five large Sikh shrines such as the Golden Temple at Amritsar. Ram Singh changed this and literally brought the possibility of the ritual to the doorsteps of those who wanted to participate in it. Literature records how in his extensive tours of central Punjab Ram Singh conducted the initiation ritual in innumerable villages.²⁹ In his teachings he persistently insisted on the need and importance of the initiation. How is Ram Singh's insistence on the initiation ritual connected to ideas of purity and impurity? The uninitiated were perceived to be in a state of religious marginality, for while they may nominally be Sikhs they had not confirmed this and were thus liable to the dangers of impurities. In the nineteenth century these impurities, besides those flowing out of bodily processes, had to do with food, dress, speech, social associations and the violation of the five symbols of the Sikh faith. While there is rarely a direct reference to dangers we can infer from contemporary sources at least three forms of danger: being cut off from God, a major source of protection and boons; languishing in the misery of the transmigratory cycle and, sometimes, the possibility of turning into a non-human or *bhūt*. These dangers could be eliminated through initiation. An initiated individual stopped occupying a liminal position for he was now a part of the Khalsa order and in his state of

²⁷For an early attempt at conceptualising purity and impurity in India see an unsigned essay possibly by Louis Dumont and David F. Pocock, "Pure and Impure", *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol.3, 1959, pp.9-39.

²⁸Nahar Singh, *Itihās*, p.51.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p.65.

ritual purity was protected from what his society deemed to be impure and dangerous.

But the ritual purity attained through initiation was clearly not permanent. Even if there was no direct transgression of the rules contained in the code to maintain the state of purity, an individual was daily besieged by impurities. To negate their influences Ram Singh untiringly demanded of his followers an early morning bath. It is easy to read into this stricture a call for hygiene. But it is hard to imagine a people in an agrarian society, with blazing temperatures avoiding bathing. Ram Singh is pressing towards a morally clean state and not simply rules of hygiene. Given the overall context of his teachings, the insistence on a bath before dawn can only be explained within the framework of the purity : impurity opposition. Bhai Balak Singh, considered by the Kukas as the founder of their faith, had demanded that his disciples bathe three times a day.³⁰ Bhai Ram Singh is known to have followed this precept of his mentor very seriously. In a *rahitnāmā* issued by him sometime in 1866, to which the Kukas subscribe even today, he demanded: 'Rise during the last watch of the night and taking a pot of water [for cleansing] go out into the fields to relieve nature. When you return scour the pot twice, remove the clothes which you were wearing while in the fields, clean your teeth, bathe, and recite [the prescribed portions] of sacred scripture.'³¹

Defecation not only pollutes the body but also personal clothing and water pot - objects which were in close proximity during the process. To overcome its negative influence Ram Singh recommends a thorough cleansing of the water pot, disuse of clothing before washing and a bath. This is to be followed by the recitation of sacred scriptures. The same schedule is followed even today at the Kuka headquarters in Bhaini. According to S.S. Sanahi 'a namdhari, or Kuka, living at Sri Bhaini Sahib bids good-bye to his bed at about three in the morning ... Having been to the toilet, he *purifies his hands seven times* with either sand or ash or earth ... He cleans his teeth with a branch of a tree used in India for this purpose instead of a tooth brush. Then he takes a bath either with well water or in the holy tank named Ram Sarovar ... Having

³⁰Ganda Singh, *Vithia*, p. 16.

³¹Reproduced in Ganda Singh, *Vithiā*, pp. 313-314. Above passage translated by W.H.McLeod, *Textual Sources For The Study of Sikhism*, Manchester, 1984, p.129 (Hereafter *Textual Sources*).

taken his bath , the Kuka puts on different clothes, not those he had worn going to the toilet ... (emphasis added).³²The passage of a century has hardly altered a tradition begun by Ram Singh.

Bhai Ram Singh's command for reciting sacred scriptures may be divided into two. One was the recitation of the prescribed texts and the other was readings from the *Ādi Granth*. The former were part of everyday life and helped in overcoming the pollution of individual consciousness.³³The latter was seen as particularly efficacious in cleansing the environment. Bhai Ram Singh made it mandatory for his chief lieutenants to read at least a hundred pages daily from the Sikh scripture, the *Ādi Granth* consisting of 1430 pages in its standard version. At Bhaini, the Bhai's headquarters from the 1860's, five different copies of the *Ādi Granth* were continuously read, from beginning to end, day and night, without any break. On the completion of one round of uninterrupted recitation which took about forty-eight hours, a new round of reading was initiated by a relay of recitors. This impressive feat was kept up throughout the year and by 1871 the convention was enlarged to the continuous reading of twenty-five copies of the *Granth*.³⁴The visual and audible impact of this grand ritual must have been immense for all the visitors to Bhaini. It powerfully illustrated both the need of individual recitation as constantly enjoined by the Bhai on his followers, and also the power of *gurbānī* or holy utterance. In Sikh theology the holy word is the manifestation of God, an idiom of self-understanding and finally a mode of self-purification.

In order to construct a comprehensive ideology, the purity principle was further extended to encompass diet restrictions, a code for dress and several commandments for social behaviour. Bhai Ram Singh's spiritual mentor Balak Singh had already enjoined that his followers not eat food cooked by those outside the community of disciples and never drink water from a leather pouch. The latter reflects the reverence for the cow and abomination for anything made out of cow hide. Kuka Sikhs were further prohibited from consuming meat or liquor and smoking tobacco. In one of his writings Ram

³²Swaran Singh Sanehi, "Kukas as they live" in John C.B. Webster ed., *Popular Religion in the Punjab Today*, Delhi, 1974, pp. 30-31.

³³See Ram Singh's correspondence, letter number 3, reproduced in Ganda Singh, *Vithiā*, p. 220.

³⁴Nahar Singh, *Itihās*, p. 60.

Singh stated 'meat and liquor are the diet of *mleccha*. Consuming them pollutes consciousness.'³⁵ Food taboos appear to be the most widely respected rules among the Kuka Sikhs in the nineteenth century. Before entering a kitchen to cook they were expected to wash their feet.³⁶ Food cooked or already part eaten by others was not to be partaken by the Kuka Sikhs.³⁷ It was polluted and therefore endangered their state of purity. Significantly, the Punjabi word employed by Bhai Ram Singh for impure foods was *jhūth*. It is closely associated with *chūt*, a word Punjabis use for impurity attached to women at birth and menstruation, skin ulcers and contagious diseases. The possibility of coming into contact with these impurities (*chūt*) is highly repugnant. When Bhai Ram Singh uses the highly suggestive word *jhūth* related to the cluster of meanings attached to *chūt*, he is through analogy recommending that polluted food is as strictly tabooed as other impurities. According to a contemporary document, Kuka inmates at a lock-up in the Ferozepore district jail refused to eat jail-cooked food, possibly fearing pollution.³⁸ The favoured colour for personal garments and turbans among the Kukas was white. The colour white, has in many cultures the world over been considered a sign of purity. Also, Kuka Sikhs were instructed to use a rosary made of white beads.³⁹ Disciples were expected to uphold the injunctions against theft, adultery, ill-speech, female infanticide and exchange of large amounts of money at the time of marriage. They were to practice *sevā* or service, liberal charity and not charge any interest in their financial transactions. Visiting prostitutes was prohibited.⁴⁰ Those who disobeyed these commandments were not to be allowed to take part in the proceedings of the *saṅgat*. It may be mentioned here that the *saṅgat* was considered holy. Any denial to join it amounted to being cut away from a source of holiness.

³⁵Ganda Singh, *Vithiā*, p. 288.

³⁶Ram Singh's letter number 32 reproduced in Ganda Singh, *Vithiā*, p.277.

³⁷Ram Singh's personal instructions in two different letters numbers 46 and 49 in *Ibid.*, p. 305, 310.

³⁸"A brief Narrative of the Kuka Sect with some account of Ram Singh of Bhaini", in Nahar Singh, *KS*, I, p. 27.

³⁹Kahn Singh, *Gurśabad Ratanākar Mahān Koś*, Patiala, 1960, 2nd edition, first published, 1930, p.1034.

⁴⁰These moral rules are constantly reiterated in Bhai Ram Singh's correspondence and *rahit-nāmās*. See Ganda Singh, *Vithiā*, p. 223, p. 225, p. 227, p. 240, p. 245, p. 261, p. 263, p. 287, p.291 and p. 297.

The centrality of purity in the Kuka thought system is most marked in the rules laid down by Bhai Ram Singh for ritual occasions. In a manual of rules for daily conduct enunciated in the 1860's the Bhai stated the intricate steps needed to perform a *jag* or ritual.

When a *jag* (*yajna*) is to be performed purify the place where it is to be held [the *jag* square] by plastering it. Bring earthen vessels which have not previously been used and wash your feet before entering the *jag* square. There perform the *havan*, or *hom* [ritual fire ceremony]. Use wood from either the *patas* or the *ber* tree. Do not [fan the fire by] blowing it with human breath. During the course of the ritual fire service [five officiants] should read the following from copies of the scriptures : *Chaupai*, *Japji*, *Jap*, *Chandi Charitra* and *Akal Ustat*. A sixth officiant should meanwhile pour incense [on the fire] and a seventh should [intermittently] sprinkle a few drops of water on it.⁴¹

In the Kuka logic of purity and impurity, without these elaborate procedures the ritual could not be efficacious. Its success depended on a pure place for the ritual, the use of undefiled vessels, feeding the right materials into the fire and the recitation of certain sacred texts. Even after these elaborate precautions the sanctity of the fire further needed to be protected by incense and drops of water, two ancient ingredients in most rituals across South Asia.⁴²

This discussion poses a central question : What was the reason for the considerable emphasis on ritual purity in the Kuka ideology ? I have already pointed out that the Kukas shared their concern for purity with the rest of the Sikh Panth. While the Kuka notions of purity were correlated with the varnic concept of purity and pollution, the similarity did not extend much further. Caste for the Kukas was unimportant.⁴³ They did not employ the purity : pollution opposition to assign a group of people the task of being permanent hereditary specialists in impurity so that the other members of society belonging

⁴¹Reproduced in Ganda Singh, *Vithiā*, pp. 313-314. W.H.McLeod's translation, *Textual Sources*, p. 130. For a similar description of a *jag* see Ram Singh's letter number 5, reproduced in Ganda Singh, *Vithiā*, p. 227.

⁴²For the performance of one such ritual by the Kuka Sikhs see T.H.Thornton, Secretary to Government Punjab to J.W.S.Wyllie, Secretary, Government of India, *Foreign Department*, no.154-157, 2nd February, 1867, Nahar Singh, *KS*, I, p. 31.

⁴³Contemporary official reports repeatedly commented on how members of different castes were freely admitted into the Kuka ranks. For instance see *Ibid.*, p. 29.

to the 'twice-born' groups could retain their purity. In their consanguinity, marriages, commensality and most importantly their world-view they overturned the commonly accepted determinants of the caste system. This should not be taken to imply that they did not have any rules governing social relationships, only that their rules at the level of abstraction were not those of the caste hierarchy. To a certain extent the Kuka expression of pure : impure marks a historical continuity with the Sikh conceptual structure briefly delineated earlier which also gave a privileged position to the same dyad and its system of meaning.

The Inspector-General of Police for Punjab seems to have got to the heart of the matter. In a report he commented on how the Kukas 'appear anxious merely to revive the Sikh religion in its original state of purity and to eradicate the errors which have from time to time, defiled it'.⁴⁴ Purity as Louis Dumont and D.F.Pocock argue in an essay cited earlier is an essential prerequisite to approaching the gods. They observe 'this does not mean their [gods] nature is purity, but that purity is a condition for the contact with them to be beneficial ...'⁴⁵ It simply is a crucial requirement for relating to the gods. By upholding ritual purity, following the dictates of a strong moral code in everyday life and the cleansing of the body, in part represented the efforts of the faithful to establish a firm nexus with the sacred, build up magico-religious defences, create order out of chaos and acquire powers that ordinary people lacked. To recapitulate thus far, Kuka symbolic structure may be represented by the binary opposition purity : pollution. Underlying it was the belief that through purity one was powerful, almost invincible; in state of impurity one was weak and susceptible. Those who were pure in the mode of the Kukas were part of the brotherhood, those who endangered purity were certainly adversaries. By the late 1860's, for the Kuka Sikhs those who transgressed the boundaries between pure : impure were violating the moral order contained within the framework of holiness and had to be punished for their behavioural improprieties. In other words, upholding holiness called for stern action on part of the faithful. But who were the adversaries inviting the wrath of the Kukas ?

⁴⁴From Inspector General of Police, Punjab to Secretary to Government Punjab, 20th January, 1868, Nahar Singh, *KS I*, p. 64.

⁴⁵ L.Dumont and D.F. Pocock, "Pure and Impure", *op.cit.*, p. 31.

In Defence of Holiness:

From 1866 onwards the Kukas, deeply committed to their world view and with an unshakeable belief that the forces of cosmos were on their side, spent their energies assailing those they saw as responsible for violating the conceptual principles of holiness. Increasing number of reports from district police chiefs kept pouring in at the state headquarters informing how Kukas were desecrating, demolishing and destroying village shrines and other sacred ancestral sites in the countryside. One such report lodged by an official from Ferozepore district stated: 'some tombs⁴⁶ lying between the boundaries of the village of Chuhar Bhainee and Choote Borrshoo were destroyed about the 1st September, 1866 by Wariam Singh, Futteh Singh and Jymal Singh Kookahs. One of the tombs had been erected to the memory of one Sungoor Singh a man held in reverence by the neighbouring villages.'⁴⁷ The police in Lahore, alarmed, informed the superiors 'on the 24th December, Ruttan Singh, a Brahmin of Shekhwan, reported at the Moreedke Police station that some of the new sect of the Kookas recently established in that village, had destroyed, by digging up with spades, two places sacred to Hunooman and Lutchman, worshipped by the Hindus of the village'.⁴⁸

While the colonial authorities in the 1860's were still busy debating what kind of threat the Kuka Sikhs represented to the Raj, four butchers in Amritsar were killed after protracted efforts on the part of the Kukas, on the night of 15th June 1871. By the time the police had caught up with the suspects and the investigating detective Mr. Christie proudly claimed that he had blown the conspiracy, butcher families in the town of Raikot were attacked on the 1st of July and three people were killed. To the further embarrassment of the authorities, it turned out that the persons apprehended for the Amritsar attack were innocent and had been forced to confess the crime due to third degree methods employed by the police. Now events moved quickly. Exactly a month

⁴⁶Contemporary officials used the word tomb loosely without distinguishing between a grave, shrine or ancestral site.

⁴⁷From T.H. Thornton, Secretary to Government Punjab to J.W.S. Wyllie, Officiating Secretary, Government of India, *Foreign Department*, number 154-57, 2nd February, 1867, in Nahar Singh, *KS*, I, p. 34.

⁴⁸Inspector General of Police Punjab to Secretary to Government of Punjab, 20th January, 1868, in Nahar Singh, *KS*, I, p. 70.

after the Raikot killings, three Kuka Sikhs held guilty for the murders there were hanged in August outside the slaughter house of Raikot. A month later four of the accused in the Amritsar case were hanged and two of them were transported for life. On 27th November 1871, two more Kuka Sikhs were hanged on account of abetting the Raikot murders. Barely two months had passed when an irregular mass of Kuka Sikhs started on their famous march to Malerkotla, which ended in the tragic disaster, detailed previously in this chapter.

These seemingly bizarre episodes have caused much confusion among historians. Contemporary scholarship finds it hard to untangle the mystery of why the Sikhs should have taken on themselves to protect the cow, particularly in a period when many of their brethren would soon be proclaiming Hindu-Sikh distinctions. Picking up what visibly was a Hindu sacred symbol would hardly have helped any enterprise wanting to establish the independent identity of the Sikhs. Deciphering targets of civil violence and symbolic protest originating from religious communities is never simple, particularly because the unlettered activists do not leave behind textual records containing an account of their motives and actions. For contemporary police and military officials tutored in a colonial epistemology which highlighted crime and insurrection as the major motivations of indigenous population, comprehending Kuka actions was not too difficult. Using their evocative vocabulary, they categorised Kuka actions as foolish, dangerous, evil, criminal and premature. Nationalist historians, as pointed out earlier, read in them the imprint of an anti-imperialist consciousness. A more recent historiographical approach questions this interpretation, claiming that the 'victims of the Kuka's verbal and physical attacks were nearly all fellow Punjabis, not Englishmen'.⁴⁹

The obsessive concern among historians whether the targets chosen were anti-British or not is somewhat misplaced. This pointless debate diverts attention away from the more fundamental problems such as why did the Kukas chose to attack and kill butchers rather than local officials, members of police or moneylenders - the frequent victims of peasant jacqueries in nineteenth century North India. What were the Kuka Sikhs trying to communicate to their

⁴⁹Andrew J. Major, "Return to Empire: The Sikhs and the British in the Punjab 1839-1872", unpublished, Ph.D. thesis, The Australian National University, Canberra, 1981,p.320.

fellow comrades in the civil society when they decided to act as the defenders of the cow? What was the *raison d' être* behind desecrating village sacred spots and demolishing ancestral shrines instead of attacking civil courts, police stations and railway-yards - the obvious targets for nationalist insurgents. These issues can hardly be answered if we continue to evaluate the locations of Kuka sacrilege and violence in isolation. Considered in isolation they are as meaningless as a few bar lines torn out of a music score card. This is perhaps one reason why Kuka responses to many historians appear to be incoherent, spontaneous and ill-conceived. But to be meaningful they have to be treated as a part of a cultural system for even madness, to paraphrase Edmund Leach, has an order.⁵⁰ It is the task of a historian to discern that order. In the present case that order was embedded, to use semiotic terminology, in a cultural code and was made up of the antinomy between purity : pollution. Once we place the indices of the Kuka actions within the parameters of this code it becomes easier to recover at least some of their shadowy meanings.

But before doing so it is imperative to firmly distinguish the two types of protest actions undertaken by the Kuka Sikhs, for their referants are different although interdependent and occasionally perhaps sponsored by the same activists. In the first instance the moral indignation of the Kuka Sikhs was directed against ancestral shrines normally located at the edge of village boundaries and other sacred sites associated with men who had been deified in their localities. In the second case Kuka Sikhs directed their violence against kine-slaughtering butchers and their families. What was the logic behind these two different sets of ventures ?

The previous chapter on popular religion showed how it was a common convention among Sikhs in the countryside along with the local Hindus and Muslims to frequently visit *khānaqāhs* (major shrines of Muslim pīrs), *piīkhānās* (minor shrines of Muslim pīrs), *jatherās* (cremation sites of village ancestors), *mazārs* (Muslim tombs), *kabars* (graves), and *samādhs* (tombs associated with Sikh and Hindu holy men).⁵¹ The visits to these sacred village sites were undertaken for healing illness, procuring a son, curing cattle of disease and quite often as propitiatory village rites. The ancestral shrines

⁵⁰Edmund Leach, *Culture and Communication*, Cambridge, 1976, p. 39.

⁵¹For sake of convenience in the rest of this section I will be calling these various sacred spots simply village sites.

located on the boundaries of the Punjab villages were seen to protect the Punjab villages from malignant spirits and other evil forces. At regular seasonal intervals through the year these ancestors were propitiated by the village inhabitants. In the eyes of the orthodox Sikhs this of course amounted to a serious breach of the teachings of the Sikh masters who had consistently stressed the futility of worshipping at such shrines. Sikhism preached the interiorization of faith. Bhai Ram Singh delivered a similar message in his sermons. A perceptive colonial official recorded 'the Kukas have no respect for tombs, temples or shrines, they are also iconoclasts'.⁵² Another official writing in the same report commented on the Kuka articles of faith: '*debiddwaras*, *shibdwaras* and *Mandars* are means of extortion, to be held in contempt and never visited. Idols and idol-worship are insulting to God, and will not be forgiven.'⁵³

These iconoclastic doctrines noticed by the British observer were effectively demonstrated to the public when the Kuka Sikhs decided to desecrate and defile village sites. A proverb current among them stated 'rase *marhī* and *masānī* [sacred spots located at village cremation grounds and generally related to lineage ancestors] to the ground'.⁵⁴ A report lodged by the district administration at Ludhiana clearly illustrates Kuka goals and methods:

The Deputy Inspector of Police at Dehlon reported that twenty-seven graves had been destroyed at a village named Khuttree Koseh; the parties suspected were four Muzbee Kookas (Khazana, Kana, Bussawa Singh and Bahadur Singh). These graves or Murrees are the sites where the cremation of the bodies take place. After burning the body the ashes are collected and a small heap or mound is made, which is plastered over with mud; these may be seen outside every Hindoo village. The graves the four men injured were those of their own friends and relatives. The deed was done in the middle of the day, so that

⁵² *Foreign Department Political*, 8 October, 1866, in Nahar Singh, *KS*, I, p. 28.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ '*marhi masani dhai ke kurdio mdana*', quoted in T.H. Thornton to J.W.S. Wyllie, *op.cit.*, my translation.

no difficulty was experienced in obtaining evidence and the accused were sent for trial...⁵⁵

Three points must be highlighted about this report, points that it shares with other similar reports. First, Kukas reasoning seems to be that a powerful way of questioning the sacrality and power of these sacred spots was to demolish them and show to the rural population that the Kuka zealots remained unharmed after the sacrilege. Second, they went about their task during broad daylight when their actions would be easily noticed by others. The aim of the whole exercise appears to be to preach through deeds and wean rural folk away from the practice of worshipping at village sites. In the absence of alternative channels of communication, the desecration of village sites became an effective mode of advertising the Kuka cause. Third, the targets against which the Kuka Sikhs directed their wrath were associated with their own lineage and probably frequented by fellow clan members for worship. These village sites, it may be reiterated, were mutually shared for worship by all village inhabitants - Sikh, Muslim and Hindu - particularly - if they were efficacious in granting boons.

These kinds of actions, demonstrating the profanity of village sites, seem to have peaked by 1867. After this year there is almost no mention of them in official records. This examination still leaves us with the task of explaining the second type of violence focused against the butchers, and the fateful march to the tiny principality of Malerkotla. The meaning of this second type of actions is to be found in the strategies and insensitive policies of the 'unholy British Raj'. From the Kuka viewpoint its nature can be best exemplified by their contrasting attitudes towards the sanctity of the cow.

From the Kuka point of view colonial rule switched the existing cultural codes, producing an ambiguity in the given classificatory system governing purity : pollution :: sacred : profane :: morality : immorality :: holy : unholy. The new Christian rulers of Punjab found it hard to apprehend many of the old customary categories regulating social behaviour. As representatives of the most advanced nation on earth, extremely confident in their utilitarian ideology,

⁵⁵From Inspector General of Police, Punjab to Secretary to Government, Punjab, number 11-188, 20th January, 1868, Nahar Singh, *KS*, I, pp.70-71. The usage of the term grave here conveys a misleading impression. As the report itself indicates these were not graves but *mar̥his* constructed at the cremation grounds.

possessed of an unbounded evangelical zeal, they had little patience with other peoples' world views and were keen on imposing their own norms and standards. Having annexed the Lahore state after two stiff battles they had little to fear and were in a mood to innovate despite political risks. The 'Punjab school of administration' charged with messianic fervour, was determined to present Punjab as a model state for the rest of the Empire, almost as if it had been ordained by God. Reform, progress and civilization were the three key terms in the vocabulary of the British men asked to administer the newly conquered frontier province. Christian missionaries, English educators and British officials were given a free rein to experiment with their subjects, spread the new civilizing doctrines and reshape the rustic Punjabis. This new imperial trinity spared no efforts to purge old customs and impose Victorian ethics, all in the name of God or enlightenment. In the process of changing the face of the land they quite unwittingly ruptured the symbolic order underpinning local society, generating cultural conflicts British authority would find hard to comprehend or contain.

Unlike the case of earlier empires, political legitimacy was no longer sought in the normative categories of an indigenous culture, but in an imperial ideology mixed with racism, superior moral purpose and an arrogant repudiation of local cultural mores.⁵⁶ The new rulers did not seek approval or justification for their actions against gods they considered pagan, holy men they thought were crazy and Oriental beliefs they dismissed as irrational. Men of great piety, who had once been at the top of the social apex under the Sikh Raj, were now easily dispensed with. Those at the bottom, without any ritual standing but useful as political collaborators, were given ample privileges and command posts. Departures from accepted political conventions deeply ingrained in a system of local cultural references and a symbolic sacred order may be best exemplified by the contrasting attitudes between sectors of the local population and the English administration on the issue of kine slaughter in the Punjab.

⁵⁶On how the British administration repeatedly tried to disassociate its political authority from the local religious culture in the Punjab, although often without any success, see Ian J. Kerr, "British relationships with the Golden Temple, 1849-90", *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 21, 1984, pp. 139-151 and David Paul Gilmartin, "Tribe, Land and Religion in the Punjab: Muslim Politics and the Making of Pakistan", unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1979, pp.53-105.

Although the belief in the sacredness of the cow is widespread today among Hindus and Sikhs, the history of how it came to be considered sacred and why killing a cow became taboo is less easily understood.⁵⁷ The cow was frequently alluded to in Vedic texts. By the early Vedic period the cow became a measure of payment, in literary imagery goddesses were compared to cows, the products of the cow were an integral element in Vedic sacrifices and significantly the cow and the bull came to symbolise maternity, fertility and virility.⁵⁸ In the same period, however, beef was regularly consumed and there was no taboo attached to cow slaughter. In the Brahmanical text the *Shatapatha Brahmana*, a Brahman priest says in answer to a question why the flesh of the cow and the cart-ox should not be eaten, 'that very well may be, but as long as it puts flesh on my body I will continue to eat it'.⁵⁹ Only in the Gupta age, that too within the orbit of the elitist Brahmanic religion, the cow began to be perceived as inviolable and according to one source its killing was capital offence.⁶⁰ A Chola king ordered executions for cow slaughter. By the early medieval period there is sufficient evidence to show increasing veneration for the cow among the Hindus and also the practice of cow slaughter among Indian Muslims. To placate Hindu feelings, Emperor Akbar prohibited cow slaughter and those who disobeyed the royal edict were faced with capital punishment.⁶¹

⁵⁷Marvin Harris, an anthropologist, in numerous writings has argued that Indian attitudes towards cattle have to do with ecological adaptation, nutritional efficiency and bioenergetic productivity. For instance see his, "The Cultural Ecology of India's Sacred Cattle", *Current Anthropology*, vol.7, 1966, pp. 51-66 and "India's Sacred Cow", *Human Nature*, vol. 1, 1978, pp. 28-36. This perspective has been bitterly opposed by Paul Diener, Donald Nonini and Eugene E. Robkin, "The Dialectics of the Sacred Cow: Ecological Adaptation Versus Political Appropriation in the Origin of India's Cattle Complex", *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol.3, 1978, pp.221-241. These authors argue the position of the cow can be understood through an analysis of class conflict, power equations, appropriation of surplus and the rise of Indian empires. But both these approaches remain locked within the polemics of materialism and are uninterested in cow symbolism or its sacrality.

⁵⁸W.N.Brown, "The Sanctity of the Cow in Hinduism", *Economic Weekly*, vol.16, 1964, pp. 245-255.

⁵⁹Quoted in Edward Rice, *Eastern Definitions*, New York, 1978, p. 111.

⁶⁰Benjamin Walker, *The Hindu World: An Encyclopedic Survey of Hinduism*, vol. 1, New York, 1968, p. 256.

⁶¹Vincent A. Smith, *Akbar the Great Mogul: 1542-1605*, Oxford, 1919, p. 220. Quoted in John R. McLane, *Indian Nationalism And the Early Congress*, Princeton, 1977, p. 277.

Cow killing or its prevention became an obvious barometer to gauge state policies on religious matters. Once the Mughal empire disintegrated, its successor states across northern India continued respecting the old tradition of banning the killing of cows. Under the Sikh rulers of the Punjab cow slaughter was punishable with death. Even the English authorities, early in their expansionist drive were not averse to adhering to conventions concerning the killing of cows. In signing treaties with princely states like Kutch it was conceded to uphold the tradition.⁶² According to a Muslim Maulvi in 1882, eight hundred Muslims were in Kashmir prisons on charges of cow slaughter.⁶³ In the Punjab soon after the Anglo-Sikh War, when Henry Lawrence was appointed as the British resident at Lahore he posted orders outside the Golden Temple prohibiting cattle slaughter in the holy city of the Sikhs. The effort to placate Sikh-Hindu sentiments, however, did not last for long.

While this background to India's cattle complex helps us to understand in general terms attitudes towards the cow and cow killing, to comprehend the nature of the Kuka actions against the butchers it is imperative to specify the position of the sacred animals in Punjabi cosmology. During the 1857 Uprising when rebellious Sikhs in Rupar declared the end of the British rule, one of their first acts was a proclamation announcing that cow killing henceforth be forbidden.⁶⁴ People the world over employ a variety of simple and complex symbols to communicate their world view. This is particularly true when core cultural ideas need to be expressed. In nineteenth century Punjab the cow signified notions of ritual purity and impurity and helped map out the sacred terrain as distinct from the profane. In an essay demonstrating the homology between social structure and animal classification Mary Douglas comments, 'taxonomy organises nature so that the categories of animals mirror and reinforce social rules ...'⁶⁵

⁶²William Crooke, *Religion and Folklore of Northern India*, Oxford, 1926, p. 364.

⁶³J.R.McLane, *Op.Cit.*, p. 279.

⁶⁴From J.W.Macnabb late Officer Commanding, Ambala Division to L.H.Griffin, Officiating Secretary to the Government of Punjab, 1st February, 1872, Nahar Singh, *KS*, II, p.4.

⁶⁵Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings*, London, 1975, p.285.

It is commonly acknowledged that animal taxonomies are influenced by social structures, reflect social concerns and help human beings think about the world around them. Through the animal world and the folklore concerning it, people in diverse cultures have constructed symbolic oppositions between pure and impure, good and bad, industrious and lazy, lucky and unlucky, culture and nature.⁶⁶For instance the Karam people in the New Guinea Highlands identify the cassowary as their sister's child.⁶⁷In speaking of it during a hunt the Karam use the same language as they would for their cross-cousins and affines. A hunter who successfully kills a cassowary has to undergo extensive purificatory rites, the same as if he had killed a man. The bird, through a complex set of beliefs and maze of kin relationships, mediates between man and nature for the Karam people.

In classifying animals Punjabis much as in other cultural traditions distinguish between wild and domesticated varieties. Those labelled wild belong to the realm of Nature while those classed within the domesticated taxonomy belong to human Culture. The wild pig, a dreaded scourge for the crops, was viewed with great hostility by the peasants and placed beyond the frontiers of human society. The cow, as we will shortly see, belongs to the realm of human culture with an exceptionally high ritual standing among domesticated animals. Its special position in the hierarchy of domesticated animals may be epitomised in contrast to its nearest relative the buffalo.⁶⁸To begin with, Punjabi language categorically distinguishes between the two through a variety of linguistic terms. Second, the cow as an anthropomorphic figure occupies the position of a deity while the buffalo is considered both malevolent and inauspicious and commonly called a 'black ghost'. Third, the

⁶⁶The literature on this subject is vast, see especially Claude Levi Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, Chicago, 1966; Edmund Leach, "Anthropological Aspects of Language: Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse", in Erik H. Lenneberg, ed., *New Directions in the Study of Language*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1964, pp. 23-63 and Ralph Bulmer, "Why is the Cassowary not a Bird? A Problem of Zoological Taxonomy Among the Karam of the New Guinea Highlands", *Man* (N.S.), vol.2, 1967, pp. 5-25.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸For the following observations on the ritual importance of the cow I am indebted to an essay by Paul Hershman, "Virgin and Mother", in Ioan Lewis ed., *Symbols and Sentiments*, London, 1977, pp. 269-292. Although this work is based on a study carried out in the 1970s there is no evidence to show the situation was any different in the nineteenth century. Occasionally, I have supplemented Hershman's findings with other contemporary sources.

cow is a stall animal and the ox harnessed for farm labour. The buffalo is tethered in the open and its male classed as intractable and considered not amenable to ploughing. A proverb current in nineteenth century Punjab stated 'threshing for a male buffalo, grinding for a man and travelling for a woman, these are all unsuitable'.⁶⁹ Fourth, a barren she-buffalo is easily pressed into ploughing fields. The same task is inconceivable for a barren cow and interestingly there is no Punjabi word for it. Finally, these cultural antinomies posit cow's milk as highly desirable for a superior intellect while the buffalo's product is deemed suitable only for physical strength.

Punjabis address cow as *gaū mātā* or mother of man, exhibiting a close association between human life and the sacred animal. By speaking of the cow in the same language as one's kin group they easily substitute human beings for the cow. Paul Hershman, an anthropologist, while carrying out his field work in the Punjab often heard the expression, 'A man is the calf of the cow'.⁷⁰ Therefore just as a human mother feeds her child with milk, the cow provides milk to the humans. The cow as a mother figure in Punjabi thought represents the indigenous ideal of womanhood: virtuous, domesticated, amenable and productive. Constitutive of this maternal image is the identification of the mother who produces children with the cow that produces calves. On certain occasions the cow is identified with a virgin. *Gaū Dān* or gift of a cow is undertaken at the same time as *Kanyā dān* or gift of virgin in marriage. Both are garlanded, annointed in red upon the forehead and clothed in red garments on ritual occasions.

The identity between human beings and the cow in public morphology is further spelled out in the treatment of the sacred animal. The mode of worshipping a cow was hardly different from that of a holy figure. In the month of Kattak men and women went to the cows and worshipped them, garlanding their horns with flowers. Each cow was then fed with kneaded flour balls, her feet dusted, and obeisance done to her with prayer.⁷¹ On the occasion of *gaū grās* 'performed daily in some households and generally on ritual occasions by others' - the first portion of pure untouched food is given to the

⁶⁹W.E.Purser, *Revised Settlement of the Jullundur District*, Lahore, 1892, p. xxxiii.

⁷⁰Paul Hershman, *op.cit.*, p. 281.

⁷¹H.A.Rose, *Glossary I*, p. 139.

cow, and at the same time its feet reverently touched.⁷² If a woman is pregnant during an eclipse her clothing and any knotting to her undergarments is loosened to prevent any harm to the child through constriction. Similarly, a rope tethering a pregnant cow is loosened at the time of an eclipse. The placenta of a human body and a calf are both buried in the belief that otherwise they are susceptible to harm. The most striking substitution of human beings by a cow is in the practice of sorcery. In the rites of sorcery killing a human child or cow produces the same end result: the spirit is captured in the womb of the barren sorceress enabling her to conceive a child.

For the purpose at hand, the most crucial aspect of the cow is its capacity to act as a channel of purification. While the organic eruptions of human beings: faeces, urine, saliva, the milk of a woman, are highly impure and polluting, the exudations of a cow are not only pure in themselves but also have a power to purify impurer elements. Hershman, a keen observer of Punjabi society needs to be quoted here *in extenso* :

Cow-dung is separated from all other faeces not only linguistically but also psychologically in that Punjabis feel no repulsion at picking up the dung, warm and fresh, almost as it falls from the animal. The cow-dung is mixed with mud, and patted into cakes and then dried in the sun. Cow-dung cakes are the main source of fuel and are handled freely while cooking. Cow-dung is smeared upon the walls and floor of the house and especially upon the cooking place. All sacred rituals are performed on a piece of ground smeared with cow dung, and dying man is lowered onto such a surface. The ashes of cow-dung are swallowed in order to cleanse the body and especially to expell evil spirits. Cow-urine is drunk by women at the end of the period of ritual pollution following childbirth in order to cleanse themselves "inside". Similarly all the products which come from the cows milk are used at various times to purify the human body: *kaccī lassī* (milk mixed with water) is used in offerings to shrines and to wash the bones following cremation; clarified butter is rubbed into the hair and scalp of a woman in the days following childbirth, and is also put into the facial orifices of a corpse prior to burning; curd is used to wash the hair and especially that of a dead person. Various sweets are made from milk which are important on ritual occasions: *khīr* (milk, rice and sugar) used at festivals, and *parsād* (clarified butter, semolina flour and sugar) which is used as a sacrament communally partaken of in temples.⁷³

⁷²Paul Hershman, "Virgin and Mother", p. 283-284.

⁷³Ibid., pp.284-285.

The cow and its exudations undoubtedly possess the power to overcome the most impure and polluting processes in life and death.⁷⁴ The cow performs a role akin to that of Louis Dumont's 'specialists in impurity' - the low caste individuals who by obliterating the unclean and defiled keep the high castes in their state of ritual purity.⁷⁵ The fundamental difference between the cow and human carriers of impurity is that while humans remain permanently impure, the cow is intrinsically pure. In being empowered to invert impurity, the cow mediates the division between the pure and impure. For the Kuka Sikhs who are much more preoccupied than their fellow Punjabis with the boundaries of the ritually clean and unclean, the importance of the cow can hardly be exaggerated. An anthropomorphic deity, firmly established in the framework of indigenous culture, the cow signalled the most fundamental ideas in the Kuka universe: ideas concerning the sacred and the profane and separation of the holy from the unholy.⁷⁶

In the British imperial mind imbued with an ethnocentric logic the cow had very different connotations from those of the Sikhs. For an English administrator brought up in an alternative cosmogony the cow was simply a profane animal to be slaughtered and its meat devoured.⁷⁷ Once British authority felt secure in the Punjab it made cow slaughter legal. Even in Amritsar, the sacred city of the Sikhs, where once the ever sensitive Henry

⁷⁴For an explicit Sikh statement on this see Giani Gian Singh, *Pustak Khālsā Dharam Patit Pāvan Bhāg*, Amritsar, 1903, p. 20

⁷⁵Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, London, 1972, pp. 85-87.

⁷⁶These themes are well illustrated by the treatment meted out to a person found guilty of killing a cow, among the Sikhs. He was immediately ostracised from the community and to be admitted back had to undergo prolonged penance. To begin with the offender had to visit a major Sikh shrine at Amritsar, Tarn Taran or Patiala where he had to bathe and thoroughly cleanse his clothes in the attached holy tank. Thereafter, he had to sleep on the surface of the earth for eleven days, eat a frugal meal once a day and repent his heinous crime. Having done this, he could present himself before the local community and ask for forgiveness. If this was granted he was to feed community members and holy men. Only on the completion of these prescribed steps could a Sikh regain his purity and be readmitted to the community. See Giani Gian Singh, *op.cit.*, pp. 132-133.

⁷⁷The oft-reiterated nationalist position that British authorities introduced cow slaughter to divide Hindu and Muslim populations is oversimplistic and at present has nothing to support. For the nationalist argument see the works listed in footnote 3 above.

Lawrence had extended a concession by forbidding cow slaughter, butcher shops were given the go ahead in 1849.

Administrative restrictions on the sale of beef within cities were hard to maintain and more often breached than adhered to. Cases where butchers were apprehended for selling beef within city limits were not unknown.⁷⁸ A district official in Amritsar candidly admitted 'though there does not appear to have been any systematic violation of rules, it is certain that beef has been brought openly and carelessly into the city to the disgust of the Hindoo community'.⁷⁹ In the eyes of the civic population, butchers violating rules were too often let off without severe penalties by the colonial authorities. A Sikh zealot, Deva Singh, a disciple of the famous Bhai Bir Singh, shocked everyone when in April 1871 he produced a beef bone before the holy book within the Golden Temple. He claimed he had found the bone within the precincts of the temple. This well planned publicity blitz visibly angered large sections of the Hindu-Sikh population in the city who now started a vociferous campaign against the sale of beef in the city and demanded a complete ban on cow slaughter in Amritsar. The circulation of a rumour that the administration was thinking of allowing a butcher shop in front of the Golden Temple further angered the protestors.⁸⁰ During the months of April and May several minor riots involving Sikh-Hindu groups and Muslims took place in Amritsar. Barely a month later, when the administration appeared to be completely insensitive to public feelings, the Kukas struck against the butchers at Amritsar, killing four of them in the attack. The subsequent violence against the butchers at Raikot and the march on Malerkotla noted previously, were part of the same cycle of events.

British incomprehension, together with rigid policies, bred a moral repulsion among Kuka Sikhs. For them British Raj was *mleccha* Raj. The frequent use of the highly loaded word *mleccha* among the Kukas for the English rulers, pointedly illuminates Kuka mentalities and the deep seated contempt they harboured towards the alien rulers. Linguistic categories encode collectively-held cultural principles and beliefs. Labelling is a universal mode to

⁷⁸For several instances see Nahar Singh, *Itihās*, pp. 119-120.

⁷⁹*Home Judicial Proceedings*, (A) 29th July, 1871, 45-61. Many British officials used the term Hindu comprehensively and included Sikhs within it.

⁸⁰Nahar Singh, *Itihās*, p. 123.

carry on a dialogue with social reality and order diffuse human experiences into comprehensible categories. By naming the English as *mleccha* the Kukas were following an ancient Indian convention that helped them make the crucial cultural distinction between us and them. It was an index of their distance from the British ethos. Over the last two milleniums sections of the Indian society have employed the term *mleccha* for those barbarians, like the Greeks, Scythians and Huns, who were of foreign origin, spoke an alien language, did not perform the prescribed sacred rites, were impure in their food and drinking habits, breached rules of ritual purity and were thus beyond the pale of civilization.⁸¹ Coming into contact with such barbarians carried the danger of being polluted. Theoretically the Hindu legal treatises prohibited such contacts and there were dire punishments for those who violated prescribed rules. But at the same time there were special rites to overcome one's loss of purity. In the early medieval period the high caste orthodox Hindus used the concept of *mleccha* to designate the beef-eating and casteless Muslims who swept across north India. Now the Kukas applied it to their British adversaries, who in less than a generation, had turned the familiar world upside down. Kahn Singh Nabha, a model of contemporary Sikh learning, noted in his well known encyclopaedia of Sikh thought that the word *mleccha* is used for individuals who consume beef, inveigh against the Vedas and are devoid of a noble character.⁸² From the Kuka view point the impure British exactly fitted this classic description of a barbarian. Much like earlier hordes of barbarians one needed to avoid them and hope that the gods would help in their destruction.

A universe created and ordered by God needed to be defended and decontaminated by men of God before the unholy *mlecchas* completely smashed its coherence, classifications and what appeared to be eternal visions. Unwilling to share the normative values of the British Raj the Kukas created their own symbolic universe. They refused to travel by trains (a British innovation) and had no use for the newly introduced postal facilities. Devout Kukas exhibited their abhorrence for English textiles by wearing garments made

⁸¹Romila Thapar, "The Image of the Barbarian in Early India", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 13, 1971, pp. 408-436, a comprehensive paper on the evolution of the ideology of *mleccha*, the nuances and subtle distinctions in its usage and its cultural implications for Indian History, particularly when the term was used for indigeneous populations.

⁸²Kahn Singh Nabha, *Guršabad Ratankāar Mahān Koś*, Patiala, 1960, first published 1930, p.957.

out of Indian fabrics. In addition, they stayed aloof from the British judicial system, the English schools and sometimes even government jobs. As members of a millenarian community headed by a prophetic figure, the Kuka Sikhs promptly acted against adversaries who violated their symbolic order. The centrality of the cow in this symbolic universe made butchers a prime target; murdering them was perceived by the Kuka Sikhs as bestowing great religious merit. Bhai Ram Singh personally instructed his followers to destroy those who killed cows. He is reported to have stated: 'if my followers were true to their religion, instead of fighting among themselves they would purify the land from the slaughter of cows, and make some arrangement to stop the work of butchers'.⁸³ His adherents, true to the words of their master, made such arrangements when they murdered the butchers at Amritsar, Raikot and undertook the march to Malerkotla to dispatch the butchers in the Muslim principality. By doing so they were translating the articles of their faith into action and defending those ultimate values which they believed were ordained by the Absolute. Kurrain Singh, on being interrogated by British officials on why he joined the march against Malerkotla simply replied: 'I did this because God told me to do so'.⁸⁴ Such statements were contemptuously dismissed by the colonial bureaucracy. Nationalist historiography, unsure of how to combine such mystical pronouncements with what they construed as an anti-imperialist struggle, left obfuscating messages like Kurrain Singh's alone. Like religious symbols, religious messages, encode a whole universe of rich meanings, icons and metaphors. It is the task of a historian to decode them. The foregoing is an effort in that direction. Certainly it was not eccentric on the part of the Kukas to defend the cow as some scholars have led us to believe.

The Defenders

Millenarian movements the world over have attracted a disproportionate number of their following from the ranks of the dispossessed, the underprivileged and the poor. This has led to a conviction that economic

⁸³Memorandum by Lieutenant Colonel G.McAndrew, Deputy Inspector General of Police, Ambalah Circle, 20 November, 1871, Nahar Singh, *KS*, I, p.152. Ram Singh expressed similar views in a letter reproduced in Ganda Singh, *Vithiā*, letter number 14, p.245.

⁸⁴ "Copy of the Correspondence, or Extracts from Correspondence, relating to Kooka outbreak", Great Britain, House of Commons, *Parliamentary Papers*, Vol.45, 1872, p.46.

disaffection and millenarian expectations in certain cultural traditions go hand in hand.⁸⁵ To what extent does the Kuka movement fulfil this axiomatic principle? It is hard to estimate how far the Kukas were a classical millenarian community pressed by serious socio-economic dislocations. Social expectations are highly variable, subjective and complex. As yet there is no reliable yard-stick to measure what amounts to an unbearable deprivation level fuelling a violent rebellion. In the first two decades after British annexation of the Punjab, the years in which the Kuka movement took shape, the central Punjab was economically fairly prosperous by north Indian standards. This was one major reason the Sikhs of central Punjab stayed largely aloof from the 1857 Uprising. Dolores Domin, who has extensively examined the agrarian situation of these years, has shown how in 1855 the Punjab peasantry was the least taxed in British India. In her estimate the per head incidence of land revenue in the Punjab was Rupees 1.34, while in Bombay it was Rupees 1.97, in North West Provinces Rupees 1.65 and in Madras Rupees 1.50.⁸⁶ This moderate land tax promised higher living standards to the Jat-Sikh owner cultivators. Moreover, British law gave them legal title to their possessions making land a highly prized commodity. In the Punjab the functionaries of the Raj sought 'to greatly improve agriculture by providing the means to extensive irrigation systems and internal communication ... care was taken in the Punjab to avoid the break down of the land revenue system as an invariable concomitant to early British land settlements and to promote agriculture by gradually realising the productive forces from feudal chains'.⁸⁷ The theory that once highlighted the deteriorating conditions of the Indian people under colonial rule, and the clichés of nationalist-marxist historiography concerning the expropriation of the peasantry cannot be easily applied to the early colonial Punjab, especially not to the Sikh peasantry, who, in the central districts of the province, did fairly well for themselves from the commercialization of agriculture.

⁸⁵For example see Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed*, New York, 1965, Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, Manchester, 1959 and Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of Cargo Cults in Melanesia*, New York, 1978.

⁸⁶Dolores Domin, *India in 1857-59: A Study in the Role of the Sikhs in the People's Uprising*, Berlin, 1977, p.63.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, p.224.

Even the Sikh soldiers, a major discontented strata, who had been demobilized from the armies of the Lahore state on annexation must have been greatly gratified when recruitment rules were changed in 1857 and they were reenlisted in large numbers to fight their countrymen. According to one careful estimate, before the 1857 Uprising the Sikh proportion of the Punjab forces was 10 per cent, during the course of the Uprising it rose to a staggering 28 per cent.⁸⁸ When, after the Revolt, there were apprehensions within official circles about the large number of Sikhs in the army, they were occasionally retrenched from a regiment only to be reenlisted soon after to a new force to engage in another colonial war. After 1858 over half of the Indian segment of the British army belonged to the Punjab and the Sikhs were proportionally in a majority among Punjabi recruits. Thus, by the 1860s they had once again gained access to a traditional opportunity structure that enabled peasant soldiers to periodically remit funds to their rural households. The growth in Punjab population between 1850 and 1870, a factor potentially capable of undermining social stability for it raises the pressure on land, fragments peasant holdings and increases rents, was accommodated by the phenomenal expansion in land under cultivation, rising productivity, better marketing facilities due to rapid expansion in communications and increase in the value of agricultural commodities.⁸⁹ From 1850 to 1890 land brought under cultivation in twenty major districts of the Punjab, including the area of Kuka influence, expanded by 28 percent - a dramatic increase considering the already high ratio of arable land.⁹⁰ Admittedly the gradual transformation in Punjab's agrarian economy advantaged the proprietary peasants, but through the patron-client network some of the advantages must have seeped to the other sectors of the rural population, particularly those who had a customary share in agricultural production through the dyadic *sepidari* system. Indeed, P.H.M. van den Dungen has shown how the low castes like Malis, Labanas and Kalals

⁸⁸Ibid., p.212.

⁸⁹On the 'boom' in Punjab's rural economy in the second half of the nineteenth century see Tom Kessinger, *Vilyatpur 1848-1968 Social and Economic Change in a North Indian Village*, California, 1974 and Satish Chandra Mishra, "Commercialization, Peasant Differentiation and Merchant Capital in Late Nineteenth-Century Bombay and Punjab", *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol.10, 1982, pp.3-51.

⁹⁰J.F.Richards, James R.Hagen and Edward S.Haynes, "Changing Land Use in Bihar, Punjab and Haryana, 1850-1970", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.19, 1985, pp.,699-732.

improved their position and enlarged their resources under *Pax Britannica*. He also notes that there were members of the ritually low Tarkhan caste, traditionally carpenters who, contrary to their hereditary calling, engaged in agriculture and occasionally even came to own an entire village.⁹¹ As pointed out earlier, Bhai Ram Singh and many of his disciples were Tarkhans by caste. Their low ritual status does not necessarily imply that they were poor.

It will be useful here to look briefly at some of the agrarian indices for the Ludhiana district, a Kuka stronghold.⁹² One of the smallest districts of the province, the total area under cultivation in 1850 was 644,105 acres. By 1880 an additional 62,506 acres had been brought under cultivation, an increase of approximately 10 per cent in cultivation. On an average this amounted to 2,000 acres per year over three decades. Since a standard village in central Punjab was 900 acres, new land brought under cultivation was equivalent to two villages. In the same period there was an increase in area under artificial irrigation, new wells were dug all over the province and communications improved. The construction of a railway line through the district, from the south-east to the north, was a tremendous boon for agricultural marketing, linking Ludhiana not only to the grain markets of India but that of England. Population density in the district rose from 383 per square mile in 1855 to 450 in 1881. The steady changes in the region's agrarian economy enabled the peasant commodity producers in the district to efficiently cope with the rise in population. During the famine of 1860-61 the rural population was not haunted by the spectre of starvation. In fact, the more substantial peasant households, according to the local administration, greatly profitted by selling their grain stockpiles at very high prices. Crops did not fail completely, and the greatest loss sustained by the peasantry was lost cattle. The brunt of the famine was faced by the urban poor particularly artisans and labourers. Rural labour mostly fared somewhat better due to the patron-client relationships. But overall the conditions must not have been very bad for people migrated to the district from the so-called 'Bangar country' - the south-east Punjab covering the districts of Rohtak and Hissar. According to the district officers the impact of the second

⁹¹P.H.M. Van den Dungen, "Changes in Status and Occupation in Nineteenth Century Punjab", in D.A. Low ed., *Soundings in Modern South Asian History*, Canberra, 1968, pp. 55-93.

⁹²Details in H. Davidson, *Report on the Revised Settlement of the District of Ludhiana*, Lahore, 1859 and T. Gordon Walker, *Settlement Report*.

famine in 1869-70 was even less. Although its consequences were again acutely felt by the urban poor, the rural population, particularly in the west where most of the Sikh peasantry of the district lived, profitted from the misfortunes of others and the 'advantages to them as a whole far outweighed the evils'.⁹³

Thus in the mid 1860s when the Kuka movement began to be increasingly evident, on the eve of the Kuka march to Malerkotla there is no substantial evidence indicating any serious economic dislocation suffered by members of this millenarian community. The rural poor were no poorer than before. Recent economic literature gives us enough reasons to believe they had a rising standard of living, at least in the central districts of the Punjab. During 1868-69 when parts of the Punjab, particularly the south-west, were faced with famine conditions, the administration, full of confidence, noted that no special relief measures were needed for the peasantry in the districts of Ludhiana, Ambala, Amritsar and Hoshiarpur. Only in parts of Ferozepore was some special relief instituted.⁹⁴ In this sense the Kuka Sikhs were not an underprivileged strata, and as such do not fit the typology of millenarian movements; their motivations must be therefore located outside the purely economic realm - in the realm of the *homo religious*. While this notion may have sounded unusual a decade ago when the literature dealing with millenarian protest movements repeatedly linked difficult economic circumstances with rites of religious violence, it is not so singular today. Anand A. Yang who has extensively studied an 1890s religious riot in a north Indian town (a riot specifically concerned with the the protection of the cow and its related sacred space), notes no economic hardships among its participants or leaders. They do not conform to the image of the dispossessed so commonly written about. Rather they include an entire body of local Hindu population, 'not just Hindus of certain economic and social status'.⁹⁵ One

⁹³T.Gordon Walker, *Settlement Report*, p.124.

⁹⁴"Memorandum on the Famine in the Panjab, during 1868-69", *Punjab Administration Report:1868-69*, Lahore, 1869, pp.1-10.

⁹⁵Anand A. Yang, "Sacred Symbol and Sacred Space in Rural India: Community Mobilization in the "Anti-Cow Killing" Riot of 1893", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol.2, 1980, pp.594. N.Z. Davis in her, *The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth Century France*, *Past and Present*, vol.59, 1973, pp.51-99, in what has now become a classic essay, advances a similar argument about the nature of religious violence.

major difference between the cow protection movements and riots in the rest of north India on the one hand and the Kukas on the other was that while the former were able to bind rural and urban population to a common platform, at least momentarily, the Kukas never achieved this.⁹⁶ In its support base the Kuka movement was primarily rural, agrarian and pluralist. Definitely rooted among the Sikh peasantry of central Punjab, it never succeeded in appealing to the urban sector of the Sikh Panth. This is hardly surprising, since the great majority of the Sikhs lived in rural tracts. By looking at the biographical sketches of 140 Kuka Sikhs I can roughly plot their territorial spread in the Punjab (See Table 2 below).

Table: 2: **Kuka Distribution in the Punjab.**

Ludhiana	26	Karnal	1
Ferozepore	11	Jalandhar	7
Patiala state	41	Hoshiyarpur	7
Malerkotla state	8	Lahore	2
Nabha state	12	Gurdaspur	3
Jind state	4	Sialkot	7
Ambala	4	Amritsar	7

Sources: From Inspector General of Police, Punjab to Secretary to Government Punjab, 20 January, 1868, Nahar Singh, *KS I*, pp.79-81; Chiefs of the Kuka Sect, Nahar Singh, *KS I*, pp.156-163; Names and place of Residence for 60 Kukas killed in the march to Malerkotla including the 49 blown away from guns by order of Mr. Cowan, listed in Nahar Singh, *Itihas*, pp.203-204; and Proceedings in Case of Sixteen men tried at Malair Kotla on 18 January, Nahar Singh, *KS I*, p.40. Persons common to these lists have been taken into account.

More than half their numbers came from the Malwa followed by a large segment from the neighbouring Doaba. They also found some representation in the Manjha but their strength certainly lay within the Malwa belt. The pattern

⁹⁶On urban and rural linkages for the protection of the cow see Sandira B. Freitag, "Sacred Symbols as Mobilizing Ideology: The North Indian Search For a Hindu Community", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol.22, 1980, pp.597-625. Curiously enough, this fascinating paper, influenced by a diffusionist model, views peasants as passive receptacles of urban ideology, waiting for ideas to fill them.

of Kuka distribution is fairly understandable; it corresponded to a set of concentric circles: at the center was Bhaini, the residence of the Kuka leader in Ludhiana, and from this source where it was most intense, the movement radiated outwards, becoming more diffuse within the outer arcs. This spread coincided approximately with the boundaries of the Sikh faith in the Punjab. A peasant-based movement always finds it hard to overcome its inevitable concomitant - peasant localism - and its associated ecological, ethnic and cultural differences. The Kukas were no exception to this.

In the countryside the social base of the Kukas was not uniform but, as we will shortly see, it gradually broadened. In 1867, three Deputy Superintendents of Police from Ludhiana, Amritsar and Ambala reported that the Kukas had gained adherents among members of ritually low castes like the Tarkhans, Mazhabis, Labanas and Kalals.⁹⁷ Largely on basis of these reports, the Inspector General of Police circulated a memorandum confirming the assessment of his Deputies.⁹⁸ His perspective has tended to colour most subsequent interpretations of Kuka following. But the case for this belief does not appear to be as clear cut as it is often made out to be, even in official sources. T. Gordon Walker, the second settlement officer of the Ludhiana district, who must have had ample first hand knowledge about the Kuka Sikhs (Bhaini, their base, was in his district), disputed the general impressions about the Kuka following and commented 'it is very doubtful whether it can be said that even the majority of the Kukas are drawn from the lowest classes, for the sect has made much more progress among the Jat Sikhs than any returns would show'.⁹⁹ In 1867, during a pilgrimage to Amritsar Ram Singh was attended by twenty-two leading Kukas among whom fourteen were Jats and five like him were of Tarkhan background.¹⁰⁰ Roughly similar figures are repeated in a police report compiled four years later. Of the 50 Kukas under examination, twenty-eight were Jats, seven were Tarkhans, ten belonged to ten different

⁹⁷T.H.Thornton, Secretary to Government Punjab to J.W.S.Wyllie, Officiating Secretary to Government of India, *Foreign Department*, 154-157, 2nd February, 1867, Nahar Singh, KS I, p.30.

⁹⁸Ibid.,p.37.

⁹⁹T. Gordon Walker, *Settlement Report*, p.57.

¹⁰⁰From Inspector General of Police, Punjab to Secretary to Government Punjab, 20 January, 1868, Nahar Singh KS I, pp. 79-81.

castes, while the caste of three was not specified.¹⁰¹ The Jats, the largest numerical group within the Sikh Panth, were primarily peasant proprietors famed for their skills in agriculture and martial prowess, they continued to be the leading constituent among the Kuka Sikhs. But it is hard to be precise about their economic background or the nature of their land holdings. J.W. Macnabb an Officiating Commissioner of the Ambala Division provides us with an important clue to the nature of the Kuka movement:

at the time of the reports mentioned [i.e. earlier official reports] none of the Sardars, except Mangal Singh of Bishanpura in Patiala, was connected with the movement. Now many men of position are joining the sect. For instance, the Sardars of Khamanoh in Patiala, not far from Bhaini; also Gurdut Singh of Naiwalah, in Patiala Sardar Bir Singh of Dialgurh; Sardar Gursaran Singh and his three nephews of Mustafabad; (this Sardar, who is deeply in debt himself, told me he was a Kuka) Hira Singh, Jagirdar of Sadhowara, who went as commandant with 100 men to form the Kuka regiment in Jammu; all other small Jagirdars of Sadhowara; Beda Singh cousin of the Honorary Magistrate of Sohanah, and a connection of the above Dialgarh Sardar; Jaimal Singh and Dalip Singh of the Kalsia state.

Few of these are really big men, but they are of quite a different class, to the carpenters and blacksmiths and low-caste Sikhs who first joined the movement.¹⁰²

Other sources also point in a similar direction. Well dressed men with respectable social credentials were widely noticed among the Kukas.¹⁰³ By the late 1860s the Kukas had a wide support base transcending clear-cut class distinctions. Their actual numbers will perhaps always stay a mystery for 'a Kuka would call himself a Sikh unless he were well known to be a Kuka'.¹⁰⁴ In early government reports official estimates fluctuated between

¹⁰¹Chiefs of The Kuka Sect, Nahar Singh, *KS I*, pp.156-163. Eight persons are common between this and the report cited above.

¹⁰²Memorandum on Ram Singh and the Kukas by J.W. Macnabb. Late Officiating Commissioner, Ambala Division, 4 November, 1871, Nahar Singh, *KS*, pp.144-45.

¹⁰³L.H. Griffin, Officiating Secretary to the Government of Punjab to E.C. Bayley, Secretary to the Government of India, 22nd February, 1872 and *The Englishman*, 14 February, 1872. Both in Nahar Singh, *KS III*, p.192 and pp.245-46.

¹⁰⁴T. Gordon Walker, *Settlement Report*, p.57.

40,000 and 60,000.¹⁰⁵ By the late 1860s one estimate was as high as 150,000 but a more conservative figure stood at 50,000.¹⁰⁶ Fauja Singh, the Sikh historian, who did extensive research on the Kukas, calculated in the early 1870s that their number was no less than 300,000 or 400,000. Unfortunately he does not specify the source of his figure; possibly the numbers are based on histories written by Kukas in this century. But his figures may be accurate since early in the year 1867 at the Holi festival in Anandpur he gained several hundred disciples in two days and later in the year, on a visit to Amritsar on the occasion of the Diwali festival, again admitted 2,000 new converts to the Kuka fraternity in a few days.¹⁰⁷ At this staggering pace of gaining adherents a Kuka following in excess of 200,000 seems an underestimate. But the moment the Kukas faced their debacle at Malerkotla many of their substantial aristocratic supporters, fearful of British hostility, hastily pulled out and sided with the British administration in pronouncing the government actions against the Kukas to be fully justified. For others it gave a splendid opportunity to publicly exhibit their loyalty to the Raj.

Innumerable public resolutions and prosaic memorials were addressed to the authorities by aristocrats, merchants, raises and petty village officials applauding the actions of Mr. Cowan and Mr. Forsyth, the two British officials responsible for the Malerkotla operations.¹⁰⁸ Thakur Singh Sandhanwalia, a member of a leading family of Sikh aristocrats and a future leader of the Sikhs, who had once met and presented gifts to Bhai Ram Singh at Amritsar, was among the leading signatories of a memorial to the government condemning the Kukas in no uncertain terms. Among other Sikh public figures who opposed the Kukas at this juncture were the Sikh Maharajas of the Cis-Sutlej states, Bikrama Singh, a Kapurthala prince, Mangal Singh Ramgarhia, the manager of the Golden Temple, and Dyal Singh Majithia, an affluent Sikh aristocrat. To

¹⁰⁵From T.H.Thornton, Secretary to Government Punjab to J.W.S.Wyllie, Officiating Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign department no. 154-57, 2 february, 1867, Nahar Singh, *KS I*, pp.36-37.

¹⁰⁶Memorandum by Liutenant Colonel G.McAndrew, Deputy Inspector General of Police, Ambala, 20th November, 1871, Nahar Singh, *KS I*, p.154.

¹⁰⁷T.D.Forsyth, Commissioner Jullundur Division to T.H.Thornton, Secretary to Government Punjab, 21 March, 1867 and Inspector General of Police Punjab to Secretary to Government Punjab, 20 January 1868, Nahar Singh, *KS I*, p. 51 and p.76.

¹⁰⁸For several instances see Nahar Singh, *KS II*, pp.164-181.

salvage the fair name of the Sikh Panth, tarnished by the unruly Kukas, prominent Sikh leaders were to soon set up a new public society at Amritsar - the subject of the next chapter. Considering the stringent opposition towards the Kukas, it is worth examining the sources of Kuka resolve, their mobilization strategy and factors responsible for their feeling of invincibility against the superior forces of the Raj.

A principal reason for the Kuka conviction in their righteousness was Bhai Ram Singh's ability to establish the legitimacy of his cause among his followers. I have already pointed out his place within the bhāī tradition and the close association between Sikh thought and Kuka principles. Let us now look at some additional features of the movement. Like past emperors the Bhai rode in regal splendour on fine horses and in his frequent sojourns in the countryside was accompanied by an entourage on horse and foot. These accoutrements of royalty must have helped enhance his status and attract fresh disciples.¹⁰⁹ Besides the imperial imagery must have evoked among the Sikh peasantry associations with the tenth Sikh master, Gobind Singh, who is seen to have followed a similar style in Sikh tradition. Following Mughal administrative precedents Ram Singh carved up the Punjab into territorial zones and appointed Subedars as his deputies in these divisions. Bestowing titles or offices was normally the prerogative of monarchs or sovereign powers. In public displays of his authority he accepted homage from leading aristocrats, merchants and rich peasants. But at the same time he feted and rewarded the poor. To further bolster his legitimacy, he followed well established imperial customs by sending emissaries to the rulers of Kashmir and Nepal, exchanging gifts with them and seeking their assistance in enlisting armed troops.

In the years before being expelled from the Punjab, Bhai Ram Singh undertook extensive pilgrimages to Sikh holy places at Amritsar, Anandpur, Dera Baba Nanak and Muktsar. By visiting them on the occasion of heavily attended melas - a combination of religious and seasonal cattle fairs- such as those at Baisakhi and Diwali, he made himself highly visible and could easily

¹⁰⁹An envious British official angrily remarked 'he [Ram Singh] visits you attended by half a dozen horsemen; he is followed by scores of men on foot; he comes into your room surrounded by a court like a prince. He and his people are dressed in exquisitely fine clothes', Memorandum by Lieutenant Colonel G. McAndrew, Deputy Inspector General of Police, Ambalah Circle, 20 November, 1871, Nahar Singh, *KSI*, p.154.

recruit new disciples amongst the attending peasantry. His large following attests to the success of a mobilizing strategy which activated old sacred and market networks. Imitating Sikh sacred places, he named sites at Bhaini after well known symbolic centres at Amritsar like the Akal Bunga, hoping thereby to replicate the sacredness and high ritual standing of these places.

As part of this quest for legitimacy Kukas made use of the old Sikh practice of inventing prophecies. They circulated a version of the *Sau Sākhīān*, an anthology widely believed to be authored by Gobind Singh. It contained prophetic announcements concerning the forthcoming reign of one Ram Singh, a carpenter, obviously Bhai Ram Singh, the leader of the Kuka Sikhs.¹¹⁰ Such millenarian visions have been a recurrent theme in Sikh history and more recently were current during the Bhindranwale phase in the Punjab.¹¹¹ In relating to the Sikh belief system, the Kukas selectively highlighted the twin concepts - hukam and bhāṇā - the two most important conceptual building blocks of Sikh martyrs.¹¹²

The doctrine of hukam is old and dates back to the time of the first Sikh master, Guru Nanak. He expounded on its meaning in his well known composition, the *Jāpī* - the most frequently read text among Sikhs. Hukam may be roughly translated as God's Order; nothing - birth, joy, sorrow, death - can happen outside it. This divine principle creates form, determines the destiny of man and regulates the universe. Everyone has to submit to it. It is only the ignorant who overlook this principle and thus suffer the unending cycle of birth and death. Those who comprehend God's Order or hukam may also understand the nature of God and in the process attain liberation.¹¹³ The

¹¹⁰For an English translation of the *Sau Sākhīān* anthology used by the Kukas see Sardar Attar Singh of Bhadaur, *Sakhee Book or the Description of Goroo Gobind Singh's Religion and Doctrines*, Benares, 1873. He believes the circulation of the *Sau Sakhis* was the only reason for the Kuka 'disturbances'. I have discussed the meaning of the prophecies for contemporary Sikhs in chapter two.

¹¹¹See my 'Two Poles of Akali Politics', *The Times of India*, 1 June, 1983.

¹¹²For Kuka usage of these concepts see Bhai Ram Singh's correspondence reproduced in Ganda Singh, *Vithiā*, pp.212-314 and statements of official witnesses in L.H.Griffin Secretary to Government Punjab, to Secretary to Government of India, 20 February, 1872, Nahar Singh, *KS II*, p.189.

¹¹³W.H.McLeod, *Guru Nanak And the Sikh Religion*, Oxford, 1968, pp.199-203. Also see Sahib Singh, *Sri Gurū Granth Sāhib Darpaṇ*, vol. I, Jullundur, 1962, pp.50-51, for an exposition on the doctrine of hukam.

influence of this key principle on the Kuka Sikhs is evident from the following verses in the *Ādi Granth*:

(Of itself, i.e. apart from the Hukam)the soul does not die and it neither sinks nor crosses over. He who has been active (in creation) is still active. In accordance with the Hukam we are born and we die. Ahead and behind the Hukam pervades all.¹¹⁴

The human soul is thus indestructible. Even birth and death are determined by God and when Kukas rushed into the principality of Malerkotla many believed their life and actions were being regulated by God or his hukam. Closely related to the doctrine of hukam in Sikh thought is the concept of bhāṇā. Once again it is hard to fully convey its meaning in one word; the closest translation is Divine Will. In Sikh metaphysics those who adhere to the Divine Will transcend all doubt about the nature of the universe and overcome human suffering. In one evocative passage the third Sikh Guru pronounces:

What he wishes to grant he provides, (although he is) aware few readily abide by the bhāṇā, those who do submit to the bhāṇā live in bliss. A follower of the Guru joyfully lives by the bhāṇā, by accepting the bhāṇā he attains equipose, although it is hard to comprehend the bhāṇā he helps (a few) to abide by the bhāṇā. One who submits to the bhāṇā finds refuge in him and merges with God, there is great honour for those who live by the bhāṇā but there are few such individuals who can live by the *bhāṇā*. By his grace an individual meets his liberator, enabling a disciple to meditate on God's name, by his bhāṇā the universe was created and those blessed by him joyfully accept the bhāṇā.¹¹⁵

The most striking aspect in this passage is that individuals who abide by the bhāṇā or Divine Will transcend human miseries and attain union with God, the supreme goal in Sikh thought, for all men and women. Kuka Sikhs, by adhering to the bhāṇā, were simply living by the Divine Will. In seeking the destruction of the impure *mlecchas* they were following well established Sikh principles - hukam and bhāṇā - and were merely the instruments of God, enacting the Divine play. The Kukas compared the ever changing human

¹¹⁴Gauri 2, *Ādi Granth*, p. 151, W.H.McLeod's translation in *Ibid*, p. 201.

¹¹⁵Maru 3, *Ādi Granth*, pp.1063-64, my italics.

situation to a play, reminiscent to similar metaphors often used by the Sikh Gurus in their writings to suggest the impermanence of the world.

Aiding Kukas in their trajectory of invincibility were the well established collective rituals of solidarity: singing, chanting and dancing (especially at nocturnal hours), and the performance of a *havan*. British informants appear to have misrepresented the nature of these collective rituals. They reported the Kukas were collecting for nightly drills, possibly in preparation for an insurrection. The purpose of these nocturnal assemblies by Kukas, however, was to meditate and chant sacred verses. In particular they were recommended by their leader to recite *Chāṇḍī Kī Vār* - an epic composition attributed to Gobind Singh, describing the war between the goddess Chandi and demons. In this metaphoric statement on the struggle between gods and demons, a symbolic transference identifies the Kukas with the former and the *mlecchas* with the unholy demons. On important ritual occasions such as festivals in the local calendar, the chanting was accompanied by the performance of a *havan*, a rite briefly described earlier.¹¹⁶

The continuous chanting around the fires of a *havan*, music, dance and trance, must have created all kinds of striking images and an ecstatic experience among the participants. As a result of this theatre of sound and sight some people were said to attain the state of *mastānā* or trance. But two other characteristics distinguished a *mastānā*: a greater state of liminality than that of other Kukas and a transformation into a figure of considerable awe and inspiration for the rest of the brotherhood. It is significant that before the ill fated march to Malerkotla, on the occasion of the Maghi festival, a *havan* had been performed. There had been much chanting and dancing during the previous nights and about a hundred Kukas were declared to be *mastānās*. It was many of these men, inspired by and convinced of their powers, who first

¹¹⁶A contemporary document records the performance of a *havan*: 'First, two or three maunds of wood are collected and set fire to, then ghee, hulwa, fruits etc, are thrown on it, to make the wood burn more slowly; the assembled Kookas sit round whilst one reads the Grunth and other repeat shloaks. After this has been going on for a time, some of the fraternity become so excited that they endeavour to throw themselves into the fire'. Description in T.H.Thornton, Secretary to Government Punjab, to J.W.S.Wyllie, Officiating Secretary to Government of India, Foreign Department, 154-57, 2 February, 1867, Nahar Singh, *KS I*, p. 31.

marched to Malodh and then attacked the butcher quarters at Malerkotla, so inviting British repression.

With this background to Kuka beliefs, practices and collective rituals, it is understandable why Bhai Ram Singh, even after being exiled to Burma (and fully aware that his chief disciples had been imprisoned and that the colonial state was in no mood to tolerate his teachings), continued to believe in the righteousness and legitimacy of his cause. This belief in righteousness must have been deeply shared by those who undertook the march to Malerkotla for they were not deterred by the knowledge that they were ill equipped to deal with the troops of the Malerkotla principality. Conscious of the strength of their adversaries they still undertook to attack Malerkotla for they were sure of their moral superiority, the justness of their cause, the efficacy of their beliefs and rituals and the urge to defend the holy order.

Conclusion:

Interpretations of the Kuka movement tend to swing between two extremes: one side dismisses them as an incoherent band, virtually mad, what T.Gordon Walker the British Settlement Officer in Ludhiana district described as the 'insane proceedings of a small body of fanatics'¹¹⁷; the other extreme eulogises them for their anti-imperialist fervour. In this chapter I have tried to steer clear of these volatile judgements and attempt to show that there was coherence in both the thinking and actions of the Kuka Sikhs. If their logic was different from ours, it does not mean they were illogical. Within the prevailing belief system their strategies and millenarian visions were plausible. In a society where the sacred was always intervening in human affairs their use of miracles, symbols and rituals was perfectly reasonable and by the standards of their culture capable of yielding results. There was nothing psychopathological in their behaviour as many colonial officers insisted. Their symbolic and ideological universe was closely related to Sikh cosmology. Without the indigenous conceptions of holiness, the Sikh institution of the bhāīs, the binary opposition between the pure and impure, the widespread practice among the Sikhs of circulating prophecies, it is hard to imagine the emergence and consolidation of the Kuka movement. The Kuka Sikhs did not invent a novel world-view *de novo*; they had a long history behind them which

¹¹⁷T. Gordon Walker, *Settlement Report*, p. 36.

made them oppose the imposition of a new cultural code imported by the unholy English. This may make them heroes for some and frenzied obscurantists for others, collectively they represented one vision of Sikhism from among many. In the nineteenth century there were different competing repertoires of Sikhism available. Kukas performed one of them. Immediately preceding them, the Nirankaris had enacted another. In the very near future the Singh Sabha offered a third alternative. Let us now turn to them.

Chapter Four

Transmission of Traditions: The Foundation of the Sri Guru Singh Sabha

Decline in Sikhism ?

It has become a standard practice in works on Sikh history to portray the community in the nineteenth century, particularly after the British annexation of the Punjab, in a state of decline. Its adherents are perceived to be effete, decadent, confused and unsure of their identity. The Sikh defeat at British hands is seen to have left them without any vigour or initiative.¹ But there is no documentary evidence to support these and similar assertions, except for dubious ideological assumptions whose nature I will shortly examine. It is never made clear in these standard histories what exactly is being implied by the notion of the declining fortunes of Sikhism. Is it a decline in the quality of the faith or the numbers of the faithful or both? Unfortunately in this case both indices are hard to quantify. There are all kinds of problems with such a notion as the quality of faith. First of all, quality according to whom - nineteenth century reformers or indigenous practitioners. Second, quality according to which standards - scriptural or historical. Quality in matters religious is a relative matter which we may do well not to try to quantify.

Turning to the demographic pole of the Sikh decline one is confronted with a major problem. No reliable data on the Sikh population in the 1800s is available. Without any statistics that would serve as a base line, it is hard to know if there was or was not any actual decline in the Sikh population following colonial rule. In 1849 J.D.Cunningham relying on largely the statistics for Sikh soldiers in the Lahore army, calculated the Sikh population to

¹For examples of this approach see Jagjit Singh, *Singh Sabhā Lahir*, Simla, 1941, pp. 1-11; G.S.Dhillon, "Character and Impact of the Singh Sabha Movement on the History of Punjab", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1973, pp.4-49; Khushwant Singh, *Social Reform Amongst the Sikhs*, Delhi, 1974; Avtar Singh, "The Singh Sabha Movement", in G.S.Talib ed., *The Origin and Development of Religion*, Patiala, 1975, pp. 85-91 and Rajiv A. Kapur, "Religion and Politics among the Sikhs in the Punjab 1873-1925", Ph.D. thesis, Oxford, 1978, p. 27, revised and published as *Sikh Separatism The Politics of Faith*, London, 1986.

be between 1,250,000 and 1,500,000.²By tabulating these numbers in his controversial history, Cunningham revised the earlier estimates of Alexander Burnes and Mountstuart Elphinstone by as much as two-thirds.³ Cunningham's upper limit can be accepted as a fairly reliable figure of Sikh population in mid-century Punjab. On gaining control of the Punjab, the colonial administrators pressed by the needs to govern a new territory and neutralise any potential resistance, began to count and classify the indigenous population.

Unfortunately, the results of the first two censuses in the province, one in 1855 and the other in 1868, cannot be listed for comparison as they suffered from severe limitations. First, they did not include all districts in the province. Second, the princely states in the Malwa region where a substantial Sikh population resided were excluded from their purview. Third, in the 1855 census the Sikhs were lumped together with the Hindus, Jains and Buddhists in most Punjab districts. In the 1868 census report, like the preceding survey, the definition of the category Sikh remained unclear. Subsequent census commissioners repeatedly recognised the limitations of the 1855 and 1868 enumerations.⁴

The first comprehensive and reliable census in the Punjab was conducted in 1881. By this time the colonial administration was well entrenched and had succeeded in establishing the massive apparatus necessary to carry out extensive census operations. The first of these decennial censuses reported a Sikh population of 1,716,114.⁵ Sikh numbers in 1881, however, were far greater than the census made them out to be. This was not because of any administrative lapses but solely due to British misconceptions. Although the exact definition of the term Sikh in the 1881 census is not available, it is quite clear that only those who explicitly stated that they were Sikhs and appeared to be Sikhs were recorded as Sikhs. The census commissioner Ibbetson's definition of appearing to be Sikh or what he termed 'true' Sikh

²J.D.Cunningham, *A History of the Sikhs*, Delhi, 1955, first published from London in 1849, appendix II, p. 301.

³They had estimated Sikh population to be close to 500,000.

⁴For instance see *Report on the Census of the Panjab, 1881 Vol.I*, by D.C.J.Ibbetson, Calcutta, 1883 (Hereafter *Census 1881*), pp. 8, 108 and *Census of India, 1921, Vol.XV Punjab and Delhi, Part 1. Report*, by L.Middleton and S.M. Jacob, p. 42.

⁵*Census 1881*, p. 101.

covered only those who maintained the five external symbols of the faith and abstained from the use of tobacco.⁶ All those who did not fulfil these rigid conditions were regarded as non-Sikhs.⁷ Any person who could not clearly formulate his religious allegiance was categorised as Hindu.

The colonial state, heavily influenced by the Christian perceptions of religion discussed in chapter two perceived Sikhism and other native religions in a highly mechanical and utilitarian manner. As a result of the rigid classifications adopted by the census officers, a very large number of Nanakpanthi, Ram Dasi, Nirmala, Udasi and other Sikhs were left out of the Sikh numbers and classified as Hindus. Since no separate data on Hindu 'sects' were included in the 1881 census report, one cannot easily correct the distorted nature of the Sikh returns.

The closest we can come to rectifying these figures is by looking at the 'sect' tables in the 1891 census and extract from these the number of those who should have been counted as Sikhs. By doing so and taking account of the 10.1 per cent aggregate growth between the two decennial censuses of 1881 and 1891, we get a Sikh figure of 2,925,145 (see table 3) for 1881. Compared to Cunningham's upper estimate, even if there is a ten per cent overestimation in my figures, it certainly does not point towards a quantitative decline in Sikh numbers between 1849 and 1881.

⁶*Census of India, 1931, Volume XVII Punjab Part I. Report*, by Khan Ahmad Hasan Khan, Lahore, 1933 (Hereafter *Census 1931*), p. 290.

⁷The reasoning that influenced Ibbeston becomes clear from his following statement in the census report: '... but while the followers of the first Guru, or Nanaki Sikhs, are *Sikhs*, they are not *Singhs*, which is the title by which the followers of Gobind, or Govindi Sikhs, are distinguished. In common practice, however, it is the latter only who are called the Sikhs; it is they only who are ordinarily regarded as such by the unlearned, and are commonly referred to when the word is used; and the vast majority of those who profess only the tenets of Nanak call themselves Hindus *and will have returned themselves as such* (emphasis added).' *Census 1881*, vol.1, p. 136

Table 3: A Select List of Religious 'Sects' Returned by the People of the Punjab in 1891 and Included Under the Category Hindu.

<i>Census Category</i>		<i>Census Category</i>	
Akali	231	Angad Guru	1
Arjan Singh Guru	56	Anandpuria	1,564
Baba Buddha	775	Gur Ditta Baba	11,997
Guru Gobind Singhie	78,952	Jawahir Singh Baba	9,502
Nanak Panthi	542,631	Nirmala	2,828
Ram Dasi	377,457	Sikh	143,516
Gulab Shahi	1	Tegh Bahadur Guru	415
Udasi	10,518	Narinjni	756
Kuka	16	Kala Dhari	220
Amardasi	182	Kalu Panthi	26,626
Diwana	76	Ram Raia	26,981
Barbhag Singh Guru	3,687	Gulabdasis	482
Suthra Shahis	1,210	Kalu Baba	102,025
Total		1,344,862	

Source: *Census of India, 1891, Volume XX, The Punjab and its Feudatories* , by E.D.Maclagan, Part II and III, Calcutta, 1892, pp. 826-29 and 572-73.

British misconceptions concerning Indian religious traditions led to the birth of a colonial myth that predicated a decline in Sikh population. Such a myth exercised an enormous influence on sections of the colonial administration, particularly the British army that now projected itself as the saviour and guardian of the Sikh 'martial race'. If Sikh numbers were declining, it was argued that the colonial state must intervene and prevent that from happening. This colonial myth lasted for much of the period of imperial rule, but by the time of the 1931 census officials had begun to realize what had been happening and why they were getting unreliable data on the Sikhs. It was largely an epistemological problem that they had inadvertently become entangled in.⁸

The conventional thesis of a declining Sikhism can thus be traced back to two major sources: first, British perceptions and second, the writings of the Singh Sabha ideologues. As a conquering power the British administrators entered Punjab with a unidimensional vision of Sikhism, viz. of a people of the Book, obliged to maintain the five external symbols of their reformatory religion which was anti-caste and anti-ritual. The British administrators were bitterly disappointed that the contemporary state of Sikhism did not measure up to their standards. To reconcile the discrepancy between what they observed and the ideals which the texts seemed to espouse, they invented an antinomy between what they saw as a spurious yet current Sikhism and traditional, authentic or true Sikhism. This discourse after all received ample corroboration from the census figures. The British thought that the rise of a spurious tradition had led to an inevitable decline in Sikh numbers. In a classic statement, Richard Temple, a secretary to the government of Punjab prophesied in 1853:

The Sikh faith and ecclesiastical polity is rapidly going where the Sikh political ascendancy has already gone. Of the two elements in the old Khalsa, namely, the followers of Nanak the first prophet, and the followers of Guru Govind, the second great religious leader, the former will hold their ground, and the later will lose it. The Sikhs of Nanak, a comparatively small body of peaceful habits and old family, will perhaps cling to the faith of their fathers; but the Sikhs of Govind, who are of most recent origin, who are more specially styled the Singhs or Lions, and who embraced the faith as being the religion of warfare and conquest, no longer regard the Khalsa now that the prestige has departed from it. These men joined in thousands, and they now

⁸*Census 1931*, pp. 290-94 and 303-342.

depart in equal number. They rejoin the ranks of Hinduism whence they originally came, and they bring up their children as Hindus. The sacred tank at Amritsar is less thronged than formerly, and the attendance at the annual festival is diminishing yearly. The initiatory ceremony for adult persons is now rarely performed.⁹

This statement of Temple has been endlessly parroted in administrative reports, census records and innumerable historical texts, whence it has virtually acquired the status of an unquestionable historical fact. It has been taken to be sufficient proof that Sikhism was on the decline.¹⁰ The result, as already stated, has been the construction of a powerful discourse that has come to occupy the status of an ontological truth.

The ideologues of the Singh Sabha, in order to enforce their new version of Sikhism, also wanted to demonstrate that prior to their intervention Sikhism was weak and ill-equipped to cope with the future. In the reasoning of the Sabha's intellectuals, they rescued the community from the dark ages and created the Golden epoch without which Sikhism was doomed. Unfortunately, historians have tended to take the British discourse, seconded by the Sabha's literature, at its face value. It is a neat little model that posits a decline in Sikh fortunes and then shows an ascendancy - what has variously been called the Sikh revival or renaissance. Following British rule the Sikhs were undoubtedly faced with complex changes, both in the institutional domain of the community and the everyday life of the faithful. But terms like 'decline' and 'effete' conjure up images that do not easily correspond with social reality.

Who defined the Sikh religion ?

Among all the prophets of doom there was a dissenting note that has been largely ignored. Of course The colonial State went to the extreme of silencing this lone voice, by dismissing Joseph Davey Cunningham from the

⁹Quoted in *Census 1881*, p. 140.

¹⁰It must be noted here that besides Temple other powerful colonial opinion makers also voiced similar opinions. Major R. Leach made a prediction on the decline of the Sikhs in 1845. See his "Notes on the Religion of the Sikhs and Other Sects Inhabiting the Panjab", in *Foreign Secret*, December 20, 1845, no. 144. Governor General Dalhousie was confident of a similar outcome. See his letter dated May 7, 1849 in J.G.A. Baird ed., *Private Letters of the Marquess Of Dalhousie*, Edinburgh, 1911, p. 69.

elite administrative service. But Cunningham was probably one of the most informed individuals on the Sikh faith in mid-century Punjab. In his well-known work on the Sikhs he stated:

... the Sikhs are converts to a new religion, the seal of the double dispensation of Brahma and Muhammad: *their* enthusiasm is still fresh, and *their* faith is still an active and a living principle. *They* are persuaded that God himself is present with them, that He supports them in all their endeavours, and that sooner or later He will confound *their* enemies for His own glory ... Those who have heard a follower of Guru Gobind declaim on the destinies of his race, his eyes wild with enthusiasm and every muscle quivering with excitement, can understand *that* spirit which impelled the naked Arab against the mail-clad troops of Rome and Persia ... They will dare much, and they will endure much, for the mystic Khalsa or commonwealth; they are not discouraged by defeat, and they ardently look forward to the day when Indians and Arabs and Persians and Turks shall all acknowledge the double mission of Nanak and Gobind Singh.¹¹

This was written only three years prior to Richard Temple's much quoted statement. In the absence of a centralized church and an ordained ecclesiastical hierarchy among the Sikhs, what was the source of Cunningham's optimism? Who defined what it meant to be a Sikh in the nineteenth-century? Who generated, transmitted and interpreted the core elements in Sikh identity? What were the social processes through which their texts, myths and symbols were reproduced? In brief, was there a specific channel or an ensemble that had the authority to underwrite the traditions and the cultural praxis of the Sikh Panth. This crucial exercise appears to have been performed by three kinds of men: members of Guru lineages, holy men and traditional intellectuals. These three categories are like Weberian ideal types and could often easily converge in both their origins and functions. For the present let us leave aside their correlations and look at what they encompassed and their distinctive functions.

Members of Guru lineages were those persons who were recognised by the Sikh population to have descended from the Sikh Gurus. All ten of the Sikh masters were of the Khatri caste but belonged to different got's. Guru Nanak belonged to the Bedi got, his successor Angad to the Trehan got, the third in the line Amar Das was a Bhalla. From the fourth Guru, Ram Das to the tenth

¹¹J.D.Cunningham, *History Of the Sikhs*, pp. 10-11.

Gobind Singh, all belonged to the Sodhi got. Their descendants on basis of their got names became known as Bedis, Trehans, Bhallas and Sodhis. Due to their descent from Sikh Gurus they commanded great respect, some came to be worshipped in the same manner as Sikh Gurus and were widely venerated by the populace as Gurus.¹² 'The history of Sikhism in earlier days' wrote an informed observer 'was practically made by these Gurus, who were not only priests but politicians and soldiers'.¹³

Many of them performed a great variety of ritual and political functions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: custodians of Sikh holy shrines or sacred objects, keepers of armed retainers, campaigners on behalf of Sikh chieftains and active proselytisers among the Hindu and Muslim peasantry of the Punjab. Most of these diverse ritual and institutional roles were exercised, for example, by the famous Sodhi lineage of Anandpur.¹⁴ Descended from Guru Ram Das, the family appears to have come into prominence sometime in the eighteenth century under four brothers- Nahar Singh, Udai Singh, Khem Singh and Chaur Singh.¹⁵ Without the concurrent and active aid of the Sodhis of Anandpur in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries no army campaign could have been carried out south of river Sutlej. The town of Anandpur, in the foothills of the Sivaliks, best known in Sikh history as the place where the Khalsa order was founded, was virtually under their hegemony. It was counted among the five seats of Sikh sacred authority and had high ritual standing. The Sodhis controlled some of the major sacred shrines in the town, and lived in grandeur on offerings made by Sikh devotees and extensive revenue free land grants from the Lahore state and the Sikh chieftains.¹⁶ At the time of the sacred festivals, the Sodhis would personally receive thousands of pilgrims, instruct

¹²See *Khālsā Akhbār*, July 17, 1886, p. 6 and April 2, 1887, pp. 3-5.

¹³Lepel H. Griffin, Charles Francis Massy, W.L. Conran, H.D. Craik and G.L. Chpora, *Chiefs and Families of Note in the Punjab*, Lahore, 1940, vol. 1, (Hereafter *Chiefs and Families of Note*), p. 166.

¹⁴The following account is based on *Ibid.*, pp. 142-147.

¹⁵The four brothers in order of precedence were known as *barī*, *dusrī*, *tīsri* and *chauthī sarkārs*. After the death of these four brothers, their descendants continued the usage of these respective titles to distinguish different members of the lineage and also to apportion in order of seniority, their customary offerings, deposited by Sikh devotees particularly at the shrine called Manji Sahib Tikka.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, At the time of the British annexation their revenue free land holdings had a value of Rs. 150,000.

them in their faith, bless those seeking boons, particularly barren mothers, and occasionally seek to cure the sick. We have the testimony of a British settlement officer for the Hoshiarpur district in the 1870s, Captain Montgomery on how the Sodhis performed part of their ritual duties. On occasion of the Holi festival, a major Sikh festivity at Anandpur:

The Sodhis come on their elephants and caparisoned horses and move through the crowds, and the *Bari Sarkar* on an elephant, with *chauri* (fly-whisk) waving over his head, receives the obeisance of the people and accepts offerings. The people collected on this occasion number some 30,000. Towards evening the standards move slowly towards the town and are carried back as if in triumph to their respective shrines; and at sunset the crowds melt away, and many of the worshippers move homewards.¹⁷

Many among the Guru lineages established *derās* or sacred establishments to impart religious instruction, dispense charity and take care of the holy relics in the family's possession. The Sodhis of Harsahai in Ferozepore district managed a shrine called Pothi-Mala, so named because according to Sikh tradition it contained a *pothī* or sacred scripture and a *malā* or rosary belonging to Guru Nanak. People visited the shrine to pay homage to these relics and a special fair was held there annually on Baisakhi.¹⁸ Similarly the Sodhis of Kartarpur, descended from Dhirmal possessed a manuscript of the *Ādi Granth* which in Sikh tradition is said to be the copy dictated by Guru Arjan to Bhai Gurdas. This prized possession earned the Sodhis ample honour, distinction and even money.

Sadhu Singh, an ancestor of the present Guru, took the volume to Lahore at Ranjit Singh's request in 1830, and received the highest honour as its guardian. A daily offering was made of Rs. 86; and special doles of Rs. 600 were received at each festival of the *amawas* (end of a moon) and *sankrant* (begining of a calendar month); while once a year a valuable shawl and horse were presented in the Maharaja's name. The *Granth Sahib* was always taken into camp whenever a military expedition of importance was to be undertaken ... This sacred volume was similarly taken to Patiala in 1860 to be shown to Maharaja Narendara Singh, who in vain tried to acquire it. He fixed for

¹⁷J.A.L.Montgomery, *Final Report of the Revised Settlement Hoshiarpur District 1879-84*, Calcutta, 1885, p. 38.

¹⁸D.Ibbetson, E.D.Malagan and H.A.Rose, *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province*, vol. 1, Lahore, 1919, p. 714.

its guardians a daily allowance of Rs. 51, and made them stay with their precious charge for three whole years. The book now rests at Kartarpur. It is exposed every *sankrant* day to the public gaze in the shishmahal of the Guru's house; and the charawa or money, cast before it by the faithful; forms an important item in the owner's income.¹⁹

By incorporating local seasonal festivals as part of their ritual traditions the Kartarpur Sodhis further enhanced their prestige. Every Baisakhi they had a huge celebration at their opulent headquarters. Approximately 20,000 pilgrims bathed in the Gangsar tank and then offered homage at the Thamji Sahib shrine and to the *Ādi Granth* in the family's possession. Later the Sodhi Guru, the head of the lineage, arrived with much pomp at the Damdama Sahib shrine, where he read from the holy scripture and expounded on Sikh traditions.²⁰

The influence of the Guru lineages was widespread in nineteenth-century Punjab covering much of the Sikh population from the Indus to the south of the river Sutlej. An idea of their position may be gained from the following table, which is in no way exhaustive.

Table 4: Guru Lineages in the Nineteenth Century

Name of lineage or head of the family	Headquarters	Approximate areas of influence
Sodhis of Anandpur	Anandpur (Hoshiarpur district)	Doab and Malwa
Bedis of Una	Una (Hoshiarpur district)	Manjha and Doab
Sodhis of Guru Harsahai	Ferozepore district	Malwa, Rawalpindi, Kohat, Derajat, Hazara, Kabul
Khem Singh Bedi Lyallpur, Shahpur,	Rawalpindi	Rawalpindi, Attock

¹⁹*Chiefs and Families of Note*, vol.1, p.167.

²⁰W.E.Purser, *Final Report on the Revised Settlement of the Jullundur District*, Lahore, 1892, p. 57.

		Attock
Sodhis of Haranpur	Jhelam	Jhelam
Bhallas of Rawalpindi	Rawalpindi	Rawalpindi
Sodhis of Butar	Ferozepore district	Malwa
Sodhis of Kartarpur	Jalandhar district	Doab and Malwa

Sources: *Chiefs and Families of Note*, vol. 1-2; J.A.L.Montgomery, *Final Report of Revised Settlement Hoshiarpur District 1879-84*, Calcutta, 1885, pp. 38-39 and 65-66 and W.E.Purser, *Final Report of the Revised Settlement of the Jullundur District*, Lahore, 1892, pp. 94-95 and 148.

Over several generations representatives of different Guru lineages established firm relationships as patrons with large number of Sikh kin groups. In most cases they would have either converted the client family to Sikhism or in case it was already within the ambit of Sikhism, the initiation rite for family members would be performed by the patron Guru.²¹ At regular intervals, members of client families would visit their Guru patrons to seek blessings and advice on important family matters, and provide offerings. This dyadic relationship may be conceptualised as Guru-Sikhi.²²

But outside this traditional circle of followers, the precise authority and influence of the Gurus fluctuated: it depended on who headed the lineage, on popular estimates of his charisma and on the closeness of his relations to the state. Despite the changing fortunes of Guru lineages, the tradition collectively played a key role in defining Sikhism and mediating between God and man. Occasionally it could even include mediation between man and man.

²¹See Giani Ishar Singh Nara, *Rājā Jaugī Bābā Sāhib Singh Jī Bedī*, pp. 228-230 and 259-260.

²²H.A.Rose the commissioner of the 1901 census in the Punjab remarked in his official report: 'in all religions, it would seem, the religious leader is regarded as a spiritual father, and as such is the indispensable mediator between the worshipper and the worshipped, unless indeed the mediator displaces the latter and becomes himself the object of worship. Thus is created a system of spiritual relationship, known as Pir-muridi among Mohammedans and Guru-sikhi among Sikhs.' *Census of India, 1901, The Punjab, Its Feudatories, And the North-West Frontier Province, The Report of the Census, Part I*, Simla, 1902, p. 165.

In the sacred hierarchy of the Sikh community, close in rank to the Guru lineages were various holy men- bhāīs, sants and bābās. The big difference between Guru lineages and these holy men was that while the former inherited their holiness, the latter mostly earned it in their lifetime. In chapter four I have already stated and discussed the origins, nature and functions of holy personages, under the generic name of the bhāī principle. We may only add here Gellner's fascinating insights on holy men, based on his study of saints in Morocco. He points out that these saints not only transmitted Islam to Berber tribesmen in the Atlas but also exemplified through their personal lives the meaning of the great tradition. His forceful maxim 'Islam is what they do. They are Islam', may be usefully extended to Sikh holy men too.²³ It was Sikh holy figures like Bhai Bir Singh, Bhai Maharaj Singh and Bhai Ram Singh who made Sikhism a living tradition in the Punjab.²⁴ Their biographies, known to the public either directly or through an immensely rich oral tradition, presented Sikhism to the Sikh peasantry. An unlettered Sikh peasant in the Punjab had hardly any formal exposure to the tenets of Sikhism; he may not undergo Sikh initiation, but he learnt of the Sikh great tradition through the life stories and actions of Sikh holy men. For him, what they said and what folklore narrated about them, was Sikhism.²⁵

Perhaps the most creative and institutionalised among the three groups upholding, interpreting and transmitting Sikh tradition were the traditional intellectuals. This category included the Sikh ascetic orders namely the Udasis and Nirmalas; Giānīs; Granthīs; Pujārīs; Dhādīs, Rabābīs and Ardāsīas. Once again the functional boundaries between these groups were blurred. But for heuristic purposes it is best to separate the ascetic orders from the rest.

One important caveat must be noted here: due to recent changes in popular Sikh consciousness, a change that forms a major focus of this study, not only are the Udasis and Nirmalas excluded from the body of Sikh believers as a result of their 'unreformed' heterodox beliefs but it has come to be believed

²³Ernest Gellner, *Saints of the Atlas*, Chicago, 1969, p. 149.

²⁴For biographies of the first two Bhai's see M.L.Ahluwalia, *Bhai Maharaj Singh*, Patiala, 1972.

²⁵For a rich store house of miraculous stories about the life of a leading saint in the second half of the nineteenth century and how these narratives influenced the Sikh community see Teja Singh, *Jivan Kathā Gurmukh Pīiare Sant Attar Singh Jī Maharaj*, Patiala, 1981

that this was always the case. Applying these contemporary perceptions to nineteenth century Sikh society would be misleading and a serious historiographical error. If we are going to edge out Udasis and Nirmalas from Sikh society because of their non-conformist beliefs, then all those hundreds and thousands of Sikhs who worshipped Muslim pirs, undertook periodic pilgrimages to Hardwar and Benares, patronized Brahman priests and believed in the holiness of persons other than the Sikh Gurus will have to be excluded too. A strict application of these modern orthodox standards may eliminate two-thirds of Sikh society or possibly even more. Without the Udasis and Nirmalas Sikhism indeed would be a fairly impoverished tradition .

Just as we cannot apply post-reformation ideals to the study of early medieval Christianity, so we cannot use post Singh Sabha articles of faith to gain an understanding of Sikhism as it was before this time. There is ample evidence to show that the seemingly conflicting ideals and unorthodox practices of these ascetic orders had a firm place within the ambit of Sikh social structure for much of the past century. Their vision of the world or rather the anti-world vision of the ascetics was widely shared and supported. E.D. Maclagan, the perceptive commissioner for the 1891 census, stated in his report: 'It is a mistake to say that they [Udasis] are not generally recognized as Sikhs; they pay special reverence to the Adi-granth, but also respect the Granth of Gobind Singh, and attend the same shrines as the Sikhs generally'.²⁶ In fact it is hard to conceptualise Sikhism of that period without them and their monastic establishments, even if there were occasional tensions between them and sections of the Sikh society, as following account will show.

In the mid-nineteenth century the number of Udasi establishments exceeded 250.²⁷ Their actual number may have even been greater because the estimate of 250 is based on establishments that received state patronage and as a result found mention in official records. As yet no reliable estimate of similar Nirmala establishments is available but they too were undoubtedly substantial in number. A recent study points at the existence of three main kinds of Udasi

²⁶*Census of India, 1891, Volume XX, The Punjab and its Feudatories*, by E.D. Maclagan, Part I, Calcutta, 1892, p. 152

²⁷Sulakhan Singh, "The Udasis in the Early Nineteenth Century", *Journal of Regional History*, vol.2, 1981, p.35.

establishments or akhārā.²⁸ First, those established at towns and cities associated with the Sikh Gurus, for example the Brahmbuta akhārās within the precincts of the Golden Temple in Amritsar. Second, the Udasi akhārās controlling shrines associated with Gurus Nanak, Ram Das, Arjun and Hargobind, for instance the Udasi centre at Dera Baba Nanak which managed a shrine associated with Guru Nanak. Finally, Udasi akhārās were founded at places associated with well known figures from Sikh history, for example the Baba Buddha shrine in the Amritsar district. To this list we may add a fourth category covering Udasi akhārās that were not distinguished by any of the above characteristics, for instance the Udasi akhārās at popular pilgrimage centres like Hardwar or at Dera Ismail Khan, a region beyond the core Sikh territories.

These Udasi establishments, besides receiving alms from the common people, enjoyed extensive patronage from the state, landed aristocracy and rich peasants. One estimate puts the worth of their revenue-free land grants in mid-century at Rupees 200,000, which was ten per cent of the total value of such religious grants.²⁹ In monetary terms this made them collectively, after the Guru lineages, the second richest beneficiaries of religious land grants from the Sikh state. The Nirmalas did not lag behind in patronage or funding. In 1861 the Sikh rulers of Patiala, Jind and Nabha doled out approximately Rupees 100,000 in cash and revenue-free landgrants worth Rs.5,875 to the leading representatives of Nirmala Sikhs to set up akhārās at Hardwar, Prayag, Ujjain, Triambak and Kurukshetra.³⁰

What were the reasons behind the vast patronage and rising popularity of Udasi and Nirmala Sikhs that saw, in less than half a century from the 1790s to 1840s, the number of Udasi establishments rise by approximately 500

²⁸For background see Sulakhan Singh, "Udasi Establishments Under Sikh Rule", *Journal of Regional History*, vol.1, 1980, pp. 70-87. Besides the name akhārā these monastic establishments were variously known as derās, samādhs, darbārs, dharamsals and gurdwārās. As yet the basis of nomenclature are unclear. I use the term akhārās as a convenient short hand encompassing all other above mentioned titles.

²⁹Sulakhan Singh, "The Udasis in Early Nineteenth Century", *op.cit.*, p. 39. Also see Indu Banga, "Religious Land Grants Under Sikh Rule", *Proceedings Punjab History Conference*, Patiala, 1971, pp. 141-151.

³⁰Kahn Singh Nabha, *Guruśabad Ratanākar Mahān Kos*, pp.38-39.

per cent?³¹ What could be the reasons behind this phenomenal expansion? All universalistic religions in their role of divine mediation need a group of specialists who will cross geographical and cultural frontiers propagating the faith. This specialist support staff often carries the great tradition or versions of it from its core territories into areas that are deemed to be neutral, indifferent or even openly hostile. In Sikhism this task was carried out in part by the monastic orders of Udasis and Nirmalas and their sub-branches. From their secure bases in central Punjab they - particularly the wandering and itinerant ascetics tied to particular akhārās - fanned out into liminal zones, pilgrim centres and fair grounds to propagate the faith and recruit new adherents. 'These wandering ascetics' writes Darshan Singh in an article based on Giani Gian Singh's classic history of the Nirmalas 'attended almost all the Hindu fairs - big or small and made the Hindu masses conversant with the philosophy of the Sikh religion. It was the Nirmalas who championed the cause of Hinduism and became custodians of the faith ... They were the first persons who preached Gurmat in an organized manner.'³²In case their mission succeeded they would set up monastic establishments in what were once peripheral zones, ultimately paving the way for the incorporation of these areas into Sikh tradition.

In the history of Hinduism, Brahmans had once successfully performed this key role and similarly in Islam the different orders of Sufis acted as influential ambassadors of Islam. In this sense Sikh monastic personnel were treading a well trodden path. Structurally too, as in Hinduism, the ideal of renunciation allowed an individual to obliquely opt out of the collective body of believers and pursue his goal of salvation as an individual. As an ascetic he was free to experiment with doctrines and paths that were not so easily open to householders and those busy in fulfilling their caste obligations.³³

In addition to their function of opening up corridors beyond the frontiers of Sikh society, winning adherents to Sikhism and legitimizing ideals of

³¹Sulakhan Singh, "The Udasis in Early Nineteenth Century", p. 35

³²Darshan Singh, "How Did The Nirmalas Preach", *Journal of Sikh Studies*, Vol.5, 1978, p. 147-153. In 1819, 1831, 1843 on the occasion of the Kumbh melas at Hardwar the Nirmalas discoursed on Sikhism and in 1831 for the first time planted a Sikh standard there.

³³Louis Dumont, "World Renunciation in Indian Religions", *Religion / Politics and History in India: Collected Papers in Indian Sociology*, Paris, 1970, pp. 33-60

renunciation, Nirmala and Udasi scholars played a key role in the creation and diffusion of both sacred and secular knowledge. Some of the foremost Sikh educationalists, writers, historians, exegetes, transcribers, translators, and Ayurvedic medical experts in the nineteenth century were either Udasis or Nirmalas. Indigenous schools run by them in the countryside attracted students from a wide spectrum of social and denominational backgrounds. Sant Attar Singh (1867-1927), one of the most influential Sikh saints in recent times was educated at a Nirmala establishment in his native village Cheema in the princely state of Patiala.³⁴ Giani Gian Singh, a famous Sikh historian who authored over a dozen books on history that deeply influence Sikh consciousness, received his formal training and instruction from a well known Nirmala scholar Pandit Tara Singh Narotam.³⁵ Countless others - peasants, artisans and aristocrats - must have learnt their first letters, heard their first Sikh scriptures and learned their articles of faith from similar teachers. The Hungarian orientalist Dr. G.W. Leitner, best known for his indefatigable exertions in promoting indigenous learning, documented the contribution of these ascetic orders to local education.³⁶ In an entry on an Udasi school in the Bannu district he observed: 'There is a Gurmukhi school... attended by 80 pupils who read Gurmukhi with Bawa Amar Das, an Udasi Faqir. This school is attached to a Dharamsala. Instruction is given gratuitously.'³⁷ Akhārās in towns and cities formed a crucial link in the contemporary educational network. By thoroughly instructing students in languages, classics, scriptures, astrology and medicine they made possible the scholarship and knowledge for which the Udasis and Nirmalas were justly famous in the nineteenth century.

The other half of the traditional intellectuals included grānthīs, pujārīs, dhādhīs, rabābīs, rāgīs, giānīs and bhāīs - a sort of sacred support staff that performed different functions for the body of Sikh believers. In exchange of

³⁴Kulbir Singh, *Sardār*, Jullundur, 1967, pp. 46-47

³⁵Bhagat Singh, *Giani Gian Singh*, Patiala, 1978, p.10

³⁶G.W. Leitner, *History of Indigenous Education in the Panjab Since Annexation in 1882*, Patiala, 1971, first published Calcutta, 1883, part II, pp. 55, 78 and 82.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 177.

their services many of them, as in the case of previously mentioned groups, were granted alienated revenues.³⁸

Grānthīs were men well known for their ability to read the Sikh scripture and were widely patronised by Sikh aristocrats and religious establishments. Pujārīs were individuals responsible for ritual services in shrines.³⁹ Dhādhīs, itinerant musicians, performed mostly in pairs, one playing the tabor and the other a stringed instrument. They would sing heroic ballads at festivals and fairs commemorating battles and deeds of heroic Sikh figures from the past.⁴⁰

The last group of traditional intellectuals, the giānīs and bhāīs⁴¹, were significant cultural bearers of Sikh tradition, a role they largely performed by running educational institutions. In Amritsar, the holy city of the Sikhs, there resided several prominent families of giānīs, who according to the Sikh tradition had from the time of Gobind Singh acted as exegetes. Each generation of these giānīs, at a hospice close to the Golden Temple, instructed students into the mysteries of sacred scriptures, canons of textual interpretation and doctrines of theology. In case of doctrinal controversies, it was not uncommon that the Amritsar giānīs were consulted.⁴² The giānī households kept the Sikh oral

³⁸The National Archives of India has a substantial collection of files documenting the nature of such grants. For example see *Foreign Political Proceedings*, 3 April, 1850, no.280; "List of Jagirs granted to the establishment and to the great Sikh temple and four subordinate colleges", *Home Public Proceedings*, February 1881, nos.65-71.

³⁹An administrative paper (dastūr-al- amal) to run the affairs of the Golden Temple drawn up in 1859 by British administrators with the aid of a committee of influential Sikhs defined the role of the pujārīs: 'to look after the offerings, see the compilation of accounts, and other minor offices. Their rank is that of before the rababis and ragis, for this reason that the latter have no concern with the above important offices'. *Home Public Proceedings*, February 1881, nos.65-71.

⁴⁰The functions of this support staff in case of the Golden Temple are described in R.N.Cust, *Linguistic and Oriental Essays*, London, 1887, p.55.

⁴¹Often these honorific titles, primarily signs of learning, were interchangeable in the nineteenth century.

⁴²A reputed figure from the school of the giānīs, Giani Sant Singh (d.1832 A.D.), taught Bhai Santokh Singh (1788-1844), who wrote a voluminous popular history of the Sikhs, commonly known as *Sūraj Prakāś*. Similarly Giani Hazara Singh, a writer of text-books, translator and inspector of schools in Amritsar instructed Bhai Vir Singh, the celebrated Sikh intellectual and a luminary of the Singh Sabha. Hazara Singh also assisted M.A.Macauliffe the British civil servant who wrote the classic six-volume history of the Sikhs.

tradition alive. Also, their assistance was occasionally sought in securing the management of sacred shrines. Some even became personal advisers to Sikh rulers.⁴³

The bhāīs were not as highly specialised as the giānīs. In many villages, towns and cities of central Punjab they imparted secular and religious education by setting up Gurmukhi schools. Normally a child joined a Gurmukhi school at the age of five. Both boys and girls attended the same primary school. Initially the child was taught how to write, first on the ground and later on a wooden slab. This was followed by instruction in numerals and simple enumeration; signs for weights and measures were also taught. The general curriculum consisted of religious and secular texts.⁴⁴ The education was imparted by bhāīs and giānīs who themselves had undergone a rigorous training.⁴⁵ The income was '... derived from land, from the contribution of his fraternity, the endowment of his Dharamsala or from the presents of his pupils or of their parents ... Ranjit Singh was particularly liberal to them...'⁴⁶ Besides, the local jāgīrdārs made generous grants for the maintenance of schools in their localities. A survey in 1882 found out that there were 829 Gurmukhi schools in the Punjab (see table 5). In Amritsar there was a famous Gurmukhi school of Bhai Ram Singh. Here students from all over the Punjab on completion of their primary education, joined to specialise in '... Vyakran [grammar], Granth Kavya [poetics], Alankar [rhetoric], Poetry, Pingal

⁴³See the life history of Bhai Gurbaksh Singh Giani in *Chiefs and Families*, vol.1, pp.434-438.

⁴⁴In most schools the students were introduced to the following texts: Japjī, Rahirās, Arti-Sauhilā, Sidh Gosht, Unkār, Baibar, Adi Granth, Hanumān Nātak, Rāmāyana, Bhagvad Gitā, Janam Sākhīs, Vishnu Puraāna, Dasvan Aṣṭa Khaṇḍa and Aśvan Medhā. See G.W.Leitner, *Indigenous Education*, p.34.

⁴⁵'If a disciple wished to advance from studentship to fellowship, and become a Bhai... he had to study the two Granths, the Gurmukhi Grammar, Pingal (Prosody in Gurmukhi), Itihas (a Sikh application of the term to history), and arithmetic, and the elements of Sanscrit. The above were the compulsory subjects, but, if he wished to reach a higher grade, he would study the Niaya system of logic, the Vedanta and the Pratigant, which are all to be found in a translated or adopted form in Gurmukhi. Highest of all, however, ranked the "Gyani", the "Irfan", who could explain the mysteries of philosophy and religion in popular language, and would communicate them, as a preacher, to the people...' Ibid., p.32.

⁴⁶Ibid., p.35

[prosody], Literature, History, Niti [logic], Arithmetic, Astronomy, Lilavati [an indigenous text]...'⁴⁷

Table 5: Number of Gurmukhi Schools and Pupils in these Schools

<i>District</i>	<i>Number of Gurmukhi Schools</i>	<i>Pupils in Gurmukhi Schools</i>
Karnal	1	8
Sirsa	10	55
Ambala	7	66
Ludhiana	97	891
Jalandhar	50	579
Hoshiarpur	36	332
Amritsar	64	1263
Sialkot	29	394
Gurdaspur	8	98
Moaltan	11	203
Jhang	55	770
Muzaffargarh	9	73
Montgomery	48	537
Lahore	43	571
Gujranwala	35	81
Ferozepore	35	311
Rawalpindi	137	2,894
Shahpur	63	1,249
Jhelum	27	646
Gujrat	54	879
Kohat	3	41
Hazara	15	163
Dera Ghazi Khan	5	32
Bannu	14	221
Dera Ismail Khan	17	192
Total	829	12,254

Source: Adapted from G.W Leitner, *History of Indigenous Education in the Punjab Since Annexation*, Calcutta, 1882, p.14.

Any analysis of the Sikh community and its sacred hierarchy and channels of transmission in the nineteenth century must be located at the intersection of Guru lineages, holy men and traditional intellectuals. They played a key role in determining the social universe of the Sikh Panth and its traditions. Consequently, they were the first ones to perceive any challenges or threats to the Panth and it was they who translated its implications to the larger body of the believers.

⁴⁷Ibid., p.150.

The Foundation of the Amritsar Singh Sabha

Just as the Kuka Sikhs had once been enraged by the British switch in cultural codes as noted in chapter four, the Sikh traditional intellectuals, holy men and other figures mentioned in the preceding section were also affected by the transitions in social norms and cultural idioms under colonial rule. Indeed, it may be argued that the impact of British rule on their lives was far more complex and long lasting. As established representatives of an old order they received no sympathy from powerful British administrators like John Lawrence, the first chief commissioner of the Punjab, who looked upon them with suspicion and rancour. For him and those under his wing in the Punjab school of administration, the sacred hierarchy of the Sikhs epitomised a class of people who were parasites of the land, feeding off a surplus generated by hardy peasant proprietors and pre-empting any possibilities of progress because of their self-interest. They were, as far as the Punjab school of administration was concerned, best displaced - a worthy sacrifice in the cause of the British Raj, Christianity and enlightenment.

This mission was relentlessly pursued by the administrators until the 1857 Uprising, mainly by withdrawing revenue-free land grants, enacting new laws, discriminating against the indigenous educational system and dismantling the privileges of the sacred hierarchy. In the post 1857 climate there was a reversal in some of these policies but it was already too late to be setting the clock back. Never again would the Sikh sacred hierarchy exercise the great cultural, political and economic leverage which it had once enjoyed in such ample measure under the Lahore state. Not only was its world-view and cultural hegemony under siege, the economic basis of its existence in many cases had begun to be undermined.⁴⁸

But unlike the Kuka Sikhs, the Sikh traditional intellectuals did not venture into a violent headlong clash with the British regime. Instead, like similar groups across the Gangetic plains, they settled for a gradual, cautious and reflexive cultural dialogue with the new colonial order. These lengthy

⁴⁸The exact nature of the British impact on these groups in the ideological, social and economic domains, taking into account the post 1857 policy changes, is developed elsewhere. See my "Bhais, Babas and Gyans: Traditional Intellectuals in Nineteenth Century Punjab", *Studies in History*, vol.2, 1980, pp.33-62.

negotiations were carried out by engaging in polemical debates, establishing voluntary bodies and mastering the techniques of a print-culture by publishing a steady stream of journals, tracts, newspapers and books. The Punjab was already rife with mission stations and schools imparting western education; these new socio-cultural associations, many of them sponsored by the literati, brought the frontier province under British patronage. A major component in the making of these new ideological forces was the Christian church.

In the Punjab the Raj and the church advanced side by side, representing what Stanley Brush felicitously described as the 'Punjab evangelical entente'.⁴⁹ The two fused together for the glory of God and Queen. The first Christian mission station beyond Delhi was established at Ludhiana by John C. Lowrie in 1834. He was invited to this northwestern outpost of the British dominions by Captain Wade, the British political agent. Soon after annexation in 1849, missionaries moved into Lahore, the provincial capital, where a second major Presbyterian station was set up. To aid missionary efforts, British officials at Lahore helped found a Church Mission Association in 1852 under the Presidency of Sir Henry Lawrence, the then President of the Punjab Board of Administration. If there were any inhibitions in opening new mission stations these were visibly removed by the British triumph in the 1857-58 Uprising. Now church activities expanded at a rapid pace. By the 1880s virtually the whole province extending from Rawalpindi in the west to Delhi in the east was covered with mission establishments.

British officials showed their support by subscribing to mission funds and making public resources available for church use. Unlike Bengal, Madras and Bombay where the officials were somewhat wary of evangelical activities, in the Punjab they were not assailed by any doubts. Robert Cust, who had been associated with the Punjab administration since 1846 and moved on to be a judicial commissioner, stated in an autobiography intended for private circulation: 'Another important subject had to be handled firmly. I had belonged from the very first, 1843, to supporters of the principle, that it was our duty to Evangelize, and all leading Punjab officials were of the same school... After the Mutinies there were signs of a fanatical spirit, and a desire to

⁴⁹ Stanley Elwood Brush, "Protestants in the Punjab: Religion and Social Change in an Indian Province in the Nineteenth Century", unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1971.

introduce the Bible into state schools, to push Christians forward in Government-offices, to let the Missionaries interfere, to preach to the prisoners in Gaol.'⁵⁰The leading Punjab administrators - Henry Lawrence, John Lawrence, Robert Montgomery and Donald McLeod - saw hardly any differences between the goals of British rule and evangelism. In their eyes both stood for Christian civilization. This was aptly demonstrated in the Punjab Missionary Conference held at Lahore in 1862. Senior government officials freely intermingled with the missionaries and many of them were nominated to committees dealing with the formulation of appropriate strategies for converting the indigenous population. Donald McLeod, the President of the Conference, soon to be appointed the Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab, declared: 'If the Bible be the word of God and the books revered by the Hindus and the Mohammedan contain mere fables, then it must have been intended that the Christian rule prepare the way for the spread of the gospel'.⁵¹ The combination between the sahibs and the padres proved to be a formidable imperial alliance.

To effectively propagate the Gospel a two-pronged strategy was employed: publishing evangelical literature in the vernacular and opening mission schools. Publishing history was made when in 1835 the Ludhiana mission set up a printing press in the city. With amazing speed it began producing journals, tracts and pamphlets in Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, Persian and even Kashmiri. By 1838 it had already published 68,000 volumes.⁵² A decade later it annually released over six to ten million pages of vernacular literature. The creation of a communication infra-structure on this scale was only possible because of the outstanding linguistic skills of the mission personnel. The American Presbyterian John Newton published a Punjabi grammar in 1851 and three years later co-produced the first English-Punjabi dictionary along with his cousin Levi Janvier.⁵³ For many years the Ludhiana Mission Press was the proud owner of the only Gurmukhi type-faces in India. The communication

⁵⁰R.N.Cust, *Memoirs of Past Years of a Septuagenarian*, n.p., 1899, p. 73.

⁵¹*Report of the Punjab Missionary Conference held at Lahore in December and January 1862-63*, ed., by Edward Lake, Lodiana, 1862, p. 351, quoted by Stanley Elwood Brush, *op.cit.*, p. 189.

⁵²*Gazetteer of the Ludhiana District, 1888-9*, Calcutta, n.d., pp. 74-76.

⁵³G.A.Grierson ed., *Linguistic Survey of India, Vol.IX*, Delhi, 1968, first published, Calcutta, 1916, p.609.

skills of missionaries helped not only in the interaction with potential converts but played a creative role in the development and standardization of north Indian languages like Punjabi.

A significant channel for catechizing were the mission schools. Started at the same time as the first mission stations in the Punjab, the church established such an extensive network of schools that even the British state found it hard to compete with it. In a period of thirty years the British administration handed over fifteen state-run schools to mission management. In Rawalpindi, Ludhiana, Jalandhar and Ambala, for almost three decades the only schools where an anglo-vernacular education could be had, were owned by the church.⁵⁴ The inclusion of Bible classes in the curriculum, the constant deriding of heathen faiths and the ever-present spectre of conversion did not prevent parents from sending their children to church schools. This was not merely because of the lack of alternative facilities; their superior educational standards were an additional inducement. The missionaries were quick to grasp that 'the thirst was now for education in the knowledge of their new masters'.⁵⁵ But each time a student converted at one of the schools there was a public uproar accompanied by a dramatic drop in numbers. Even whole student populations are known to have deserted their institutions at such occasions.⁵⁶ Despite such resistance, the schools continued to provide a major catchment area for potential converts. The main attraction of these mission schools for the native population was their English education - a prerequisite for much coveted government jobs. In the race for secure employment, loss of faith became a possible cost of social mobility.

The Church also tried to gain converts through setting up model villages with modern farming facilities and opening well-equipped mission hospitals. Robert Clark of the Church Missionary Society made pioneering efforts in these

⁵⁴John C.B. Webster, *The Christian Community and Change in Nineteenth Century North India*, Delhi, 1976, p. 167.

⁵⁵H.M.Clark, *Robert Clark of the Panjab Pioneer and Missionary Statesman*, London, 1907, p. 62.

⁵⁶In the early 1870s this happened at Ruchi Ram Sahni's mission school in Dera Ismail Khan when three Hindu boys converted to Christianity. Soon after the local families withdrew their wards from the school. See Ruchi Ram Sahni "Self-Revelations of an Octogenerian", manuscript in possession of V.C.Joshi, Ford Foundation, New -Dellhi.

directions.⁵⁷ Outside the arena of institutional modes, in the domain of everyday life, the proselytizing exercise was conducted by gospel preachings at bazaars, village fairs and pilgrimage centres, particularly at the time of major seasonal festivals. Public discourses on the teaching of Christ were accompanied by the free distribution of vernacular literature. Having learnt their lessons from preaching in the streets, the missionaries made a swift leap into the privacy of homes by instituting *zenāna* missions. Lady missionaries were trained to visit the local women folk at home during the daytime when their men were away to work. This ingenious method earned the missionaries much notoriety. Evangelical labour was rewarded with some success. In the 1881 census 3,912 people registered their religion as Christianity. A decade later their number stood at 19,750, an increase of 410 percent.⁵⁸ A new faith had been added to the frontier society of the Punjab. Those charged with defending native religions had now to take the initiative of challenging a well organized church, backed in its initial years by the colonial state.

The Sikhs were greatly alarmed by the conversions to Christianity. The first Sikh convert to Christianity was Daud Singh, who while on a visit to Cawnpore was baptized by Rev. W.H.Perkins from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. Proselytizing a Sikh outside the Punjab however, did not carry the same value as gaining an adherent within the province. Fortunately for the missionaries they did not have to wait long for this to happen. In July 1853 Kaiser Singh, a Sikh granthī from a village outside Amritsar was baptized by Robert Clark 'taking the name of Shamaun i.e. Simeon'.⁵⁹ The church had much to celebrate: in less than a year of evangelical work it had managed to strike at the very roots of the Sikh universe - the holy city of Amritsar - and carry off a Sikh granthī as its triumphant reward. When in 1853 Maharaja Duleep Singh, the son of the mighty Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh, renounced his religion in order to become a Christian, the news greatly stirred the Sikhs. Even before the shock waves from this conversion could settle, members of the ruling family of Kapurthala, a Sikh princely state, declared their intention of embracing Christianity. If the upper end of Sikh society was so

⁵⁷For background see his biography, *op.cit.*, particularly pp. 226-267 and 270.

⁵⁸*Census of India, 1891, the Punjab and Its Feudatories, Part I, the Report of the Census*, by E.D.Maclagan, Calcutta, 1892, pp. xliv, 97.

⁵⁹H.M. Clark, *Robrt Clark of the Panjab*, p. 67.

susceptible, in the eyes of the missionaries the opposite end of the social hierarchy, the vast majority, must have appeared even more promising. The Sikhs had miserably failed in eradicating caste prejudices and the lower castes among them were denied equal ritual rights. For untouchable Sikhs, the evangelical message of social equality must have appeared highly attractive. Possibly in fear of rapid conversions, Sikh elites had started complaining against the evangelical threat from an early date.⁶⁰

Competing against the Christian missions for adherents were native bodies. The first of these, the Brahma Samaj was set up at Lahore in 1863.⁶¹ An importation from Bengal it primarily fulfilled the needs of Bengali babus who had followed the trail of the Empire into the Punjab. But many urban Punjabis faced with similar dilemmas and conflicts as Bengalis early in the century, saw a ray of hope in the syncretic ideology of the new organization, founded by Ram Mohan Roy in 1828. Unitarian Christianity, soaked with iconoclastic Hinduism and rational ethics was a heady mixture for those in search of refurbished life-styles. Branches of the Brahma Samaj were set up in Bunnoo, Multan, Rawalpindi, Amritsar, Rupar, Simla and Dera Ghazi Khan. Punjabis exhibited their enthusiasm initially by becoming Samaj members and later founding branches on their own. From a very early date several urban Sikhs were attracted to Brahma ideology. In Lahore Bhai Sunder Singh and Chatter Singh were among the active members of the local Samaj. In Dyal Singh Majithia, the Sikh millionaire, the Brahmans found a firm friend and financial backer, willing to stake his reputation for their cause. Prominent Brahma intellectuals - Keshab Chandra Sen, Debendranath Tagore - now included cities like Amritsar and Lahore in their lecture itineraries. By the 1860s the colonial encounter on the western frontier of the Raj had generated a prototype of the renaissance which had already been fostered, perfected and even partly jettisoned in the eastern corner of the Empire. It exemplified two converging trends - the swift transportation of colonial culture across the

⁶⁰ For instance see *Khālsā Akhbār* , November 6, 1886, p. 5

⁶¹ David Kopf, *The Brahma Samaj And the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind*, Princeton, 1979, pp. 320-321.

Gangetic plains and the urge of the people to experiment with all kinds of materials in order to fabricate a new civil society.⁶²

British administrators and European orientalists convinced of their *mission civilisatrice*, extended a patronizing hand to those Punjabis who were in the process of etching out new cultural maps for the province. As early as 1846 John Lawrence in his capacity as commissioner for the Trans-Sutlej territories showed determination to stamp out the inhuman custom of female infanticide. Over the next decade he was joined in his reformatory drive by influential members of the bureaucracy - Robert Montgomery, a judicial commissioner, G.F.Edmonstone, a financial commissioner, Charles Raikes, a commissioner of Lahore division, and Major H.B.Edwardes, the deputy commissioner of Jalandhar. In addition to routine bureaucratic efforts, such as producing well researched minutes, official circles imbibing the spirit of the times showed great imagination in dealing with infanticide. Lieutenant-Governor Donald McLeod launched the idea of an essay-competition, in which the best entry on how to curb infanticide would receive an award. Forty essayists responded to the call. These collective endeavours backed by official edicts making infanticide a punishable crime met with considerable success. By 1870s public opinion had been firmly mobilised against the ancient custom and it largely ceased to be practised.⁶³

Among orientalists, the leading figure in mid-century Punjab, was undoubtedly Dr. G.W.Leitner. A one time lecturer in Arabic, Turkish and Greek at King's college in London, he left England to take up work as an official interpreter in India. Within a year of his coming to Lahore from Simla in 1864 to take up the principalship of the Government college, he became a leading proponent of indigenous education, a defender of vernacular languages and a tireless champion of oriental scholarship.⁶⁴In 1865 this unusual man helped found the Anjuman-i-Punjab (or the Society for the Diffusion of Useful

⁶²On how these transformations and needs pressed on a young Punjabi in the Lahore of the 1880s see the fascinating autobiography of a Brahma intellectual Ruchi Ram Sahni, *op.cit.*, particularly pp. 127-140

⁶³For background to the anti-infanticide proceedings see *Selections From the Public Correspondence of the Administration For the Affairs of the Punjab*, vol. 1, no.6, Lahore, 1853, pp. 393-483.

⁶⁴Biographical details in J.H.Stocqueler, *A Review of the Life and Labours of G.W.Leitner*, Brighton, 1875.

Knowledge as it was called in English), which soon attracted to its membership European administrators, local notables and fledging professionals from all over the province. With an active membership of 300 it became from 1865 to 1872 a formidable forum for canvassing public opinion, channeling new thinking and offering advice to British policy makers. From the time of its inception it aimed at the 'diffusion of useful knowledge, the discussion of all matters of literary and scientific interest, and ... the free expression of Native opinion on all matters of social and political reform'.⁶⁵ In pursuit of these objectives the society effectively mobilized public opinion to set up a university in the Punjab, opened reading rooms, organized public lectures and essay-writing competitions on current themes, lobbied the government on behalf of its members, published a vernacular newspaper and started an agricultural company that unfortunately failed to take off.⁶⁶

Administrative intervention and orientalist initiative, however, could only launch limited reform. It was basically left to the Punjabis to respond to the massive social transformation in front of them. Even though ready-made indigenous models like the Brahma Samaj were available to cope with change, Punjabis found it hard to embrace them whole-heartedly. The influence of Christianity on Brahma ideology and its pluralistic creed made people wary of it. Ruchi Ram Sahni, a party to these developments, recalls in his autobiography 'a Brahma was looked upon as the most hateful of persons and ... the mere public profession of the faith was enough to seriously lower a man in the eyes of his community'.⁶⁷

Possibly to overcome Punjabi objections, the Lahore Sat Sabha (Society of Truth) was founded in 1866 by Lala Behari Lal, Pandit Bhannu Datta, Basant Ram, Novin Chandra Rai and S.P.Bhattacharjee. Similar in objectives to the Brahma Samaj, its proceedings were to be conducted in Punjabi. Theistic and eclectic like the Brahma Samaj, it was mistaken by some to be a branch of the latter. Despite the efforts of the Sat Sabha organizers to

⁶⁵Ibid., p.8.

⁶⁶The organization's activities are critically surveyed in J.P.Perrill, "Anjuman-i-Punjab As a Common Interest Association And Symbol of Social Change in Nineteenth Century Punjab", *The Panjab Past and Present*, vol. 16, 1982, pp. 343-370.

⁶⁷Ruchi Ram Sahni, "Self-Revelations", pp. 131-132.

take Punjabi sentiments into account, their efforts failed to win any sizeable support. In time Punjabis were to found their own societies reflecting their specific needs, character and changed circumstances.

In this general process of coming to terms with the changes generated by colonial rule, epitomised so well by the early socio-religious associations in the Punjab, the leadership of the Sikhs also re-engaged in stock-taking. This task acquired additional urgency for two reasons. First, when in 1872 the Kuka Sikhs staged their march to Malerkotla, many within the community were quick to perceive that this would sour the Sikh romance with the Raj. The damage done to Sikh credibility or rather loyalty needed to be undone quickly. Second, in 1873 four Sikh students at a Christian mission school in Amritsar declared their intention to convert to the new faith. Although, they were not going to be the first Sikh conversions to Christianity, each time conversions were publicly announced they created a traumatic experience for local communities. It was greatly feared that if students were to convert then the old faiths were no longer secure among the younger generations. This latest announcement to convert stirred Thakur Singh Sandhanwalia, a Sikh aristocrat, and Harsha Singh Dhupia, a *gīānī*, to convene a meeting of leading Sikh public figures and traditional intellectuals at Bunga Majithian adjoining the Golden Temple.

The response was overwhelming. 'Pujārīs, giānīs, grānthīs, Udasis and Nirmalas ...'⁶⁸ attended the first session. Prominent among the first participants were Baba Khem Singh Bedi, Kanwar Bikrama Singh, Giani Gian Singh, Bhai Bur Singh, Bhai Agya Singh Hakim, Bhai Amar Singh and Giani Hazara Singh. They all decided to set up a common platform by instituting the Sri Guru Singh Sabha, Amritsar. The dynamic of two forces - the changes injected into Punjabi society by British rule and the drive of the Kuka Sikhs to defend traditional cultural values - led to the formation of the Singh Sabha.

In the absence of any public manifestos, it is not easy to clearly establish the early goals of the Amritsar Sabha. But by looking at the pattern of its subsequent activities and the nature of its leadership, one may safely state that it aimed at securing the future of the community, recording its customs, acting as

⁶⁸Jagjit Singh, *Singh Sabha Lahir*, Simla, 1941, p. 15.

a channel for transmitting traditions and representing the Sikh cause before the colonial state. A long-time associate of the Sabha, Avtar Singh, commented, 'at that time it was deeply felt that efforts must be made to safeguard the ancient customs, rites and rituals of the Sikh community'.⁶⁹ To do so members of the Sabha frequently collected at Manji Sahib, a Sikh shrine on the periphery of the Golden Temple.

These enthusiastic meetings resulted in several new initiatives. First, Sabha activists engaged in defining the nature of Sikh traditions. A conviction surfaced, possibly under the influence of the colonial state, that aimed at codifying everything, it was thought that only by faithfully recording custom could the Sikh community survive the changes sweeping across the province. This preoccupation with tradition naturally spawned an interest in history and Sikh texts. Sabha activists were confronted with such controversial themes as the month and date of Guru Nanak's birth, the nature of life-cycle ceremonies and the composition of Sikh sacred literature. Their recommendations on these issues, as we shall see in detail later in this study, had to put it mildly a mixed reception. Some, like dating the biographical dates of the Sikh Gurus, were more readily accepted,⁷⁰ others, concerning life-cycle rituals, were highly contested.

Second, the Sabha added to the calendar of communal festivals by systematically commemorating the birth and death anniversaries of the ten Sikh Gurus. It is hard to tell if these anniversaries, or gurbūrabs as the Sikhs call them, were celebrated in the past or not. Even if they were the Sabha gave them a new lease of life by establishing the exact dates of their commemoration, spelling out the precise ritual tasks to be undertaken on the days of the anniversaries and making them part of the Sikh communal life.⁷¹

Third, the impulse to codify custom resulted in the writing of a monumental exegesis of the Ādi Granth, the first of its kind. The initiative was

⁶⁹Avtar Singh Vahiria compiler, *Khālsā Dharam Śāstr*, Amritsar, 1914, p. a, preface.

⁷⁰For background see Giani Sardul Singh, *Gur Pamālī*, Amritsar, 1893

⁷¹On how this happened see Giani Sardul Singh, *Gurmat Saṅbandhi Vyākhyān*, Amritsar, 1910, first published, 1904, pp. 247-252. Also see by the same author, *Gurbūrab di Vidhī*, Amritsar, 1898.

undertaken by Raja Bikram Singh of Faridkot in the 1880s.⁷² He commissioned Giani Badan Singh Sekhwan to produce the work. For over five years Badan Singh laboured on his brief. Later, in order to have the maximum consensus for the commentary, the Raja established a committee that included Baba Sumer Singh, Giani Harbhajan Singh, Giani Sant Singh, Giani Jhanda Singh, Pandit Hamir Singh Sanskriti, Pandit Balak Ram Sanskriti and Baba Bakhtawar Singh. But these individuals represented different schools of exegesis and no consensus could emerge during the life time of the Raja.⁷³ It was only after his death, in 1905 that largely under the pressure of Giani Badan Singh a commentary known as *Ādi Śrī Gurū Granth Sāhib Saṭik* was published. Popularly this work is known as the *Faridkot Tikā*.

Prominent among the functionaries of the new organization were Thakur Singh Sandhanwalia, Raja Bikram Singh, Baba Khem Singh Bedi, Kanwar Bikrama Singh and numerous other giānis and bhāīs. Thakur Singh the founder president of the Amritsar Singh Sabha belonged to a family which was reputed to be 'highest in rank and possessing the widest influence'⁷⁴ in the Punjab. Highly distinguished, heavily decorated, closely related to the Maharaja, Thakur Singh's family members, his grandfather Sardar Amir Singh and his uncle Attar Singh, held highly influential positions in the Lahore Darbar. His own father, Sardar Lehna Singh, enjoyed the title of *Ujal-Didar Nirmal Budh Sardar-i-Bawagar* (Resplendent presence, pure of intellect, the Sardar with marked prestige). The family had an enormous jagir worth six lakh rupees. The Sandhanwalias were the acknowledged 'head of all families between the Beas and the Indus'.⁷⁵

Thakur Singh was a young boy of thirteen years when the Punjab was annexed by the British. The new rulers did away with all the family's privileges and resumed a large portion of the jāgīrs.⁷⁶ An average person faced with a dramatic decline in family fortunes and inherited privilege would have

⁷²Khālsā Akhbār, 11 September, 1886, pp. 3-5.

⁷³Jagjit Singh, *Singh Sabha Lahīr*, p.30.

⁷⁴*Chiefs and Families of Note*, p.398.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Thakur Singh was left with an estate worth Rs. 5,565. In 1882, he asked the Government to sanction a loan of Rs. 70,000 to meet his debts. On being refused he turned his estate to the Court of Wards.

easily succumbed to the pressure of such altered circumstances. But Thakur Singh grew up to be a man of extraordinary abilities. In the whole of the Punjab he and another individual were the only two persons who knew the two classical languages, Arabic and Sanskrit. Fluent in Punjabi and Persian, he authored a work on diabetes and worked on a history of the Punjab. In 1865 he was appointed an extra assistant commissioner and could exercise judicial powers in Raja Sansi, his native place. His interest in Sikh affairs secured him a nomination on the General Committee for the administration of the Golden Temple.⁷⁷

A gifted orator, Thakur Singh easily inherited the family mantle of leadership. Full of energy and ideas, he could instil in others a sense of mission and control their destinies. As already noted, in 1873 he was instrumental in the foundation of the Amritsar Sabha. During his nine-month visit to London in 1885, Thakur Singh convinced his hapless cousin, Duleep Singh, of the need to renounce Christianity and restore Sikh Raj in the Punjab. From that day Duleep Singh was to know no peace.⁷⁸ For ten years Thakur Singh managed the affairs of the Amritsar Sabha and helped make it into a prominent organization which was to soon inspire a massive movement within the Sikh Panth.

If Thakur Singh is considered the founder of the Amritsar Sabha, Raja Bikram Singh, the ruler of Faridkot⁷⁹ was its leading patron. His exalted status, incessant interest in Sikh affairs and his generosity in contributing funds, made him an acknowledged head of the Sabha. Himself a scholar of Punjabi and Persian, he readily received learned men at his court. Faridkot became a centre of traditional intellectuals. In 1882 Bikram Singh was appointed a Fellow of the Punjab University. He was the first Faridkot ruler who made provision for his sons to receive an English education. Quick to

⁷⁷Jagjit Singh, *Singh Sabhā Lahir*, p. 14.

⁷⁸Background in Michael Alexander and Sushila Anand, *Queen Victoria's Maharajah Duleep Singh 1838-93*, London, 1980.

⁷⁹The Faridkot state had an area of 643 square miles and a population of 97,034 in 1881. In 1889 under a new land-revenue settlement Raja Bikram Singh became the owner of all land within the state, except 14 villages. The peasants were reduced to the status of either occupancy-tenants or tenants-at-will. Details in *State Gazetteers, Faridkot State*, vol. XVI A, Lahore, 1909. Also see Fauja Singh and R.C.Rabra, *The City of Faridkot*, Patiala, 1976.

realise the importance of education in the changed context, he set up an elementary school in the state. He was responsible for making education an integral part of the Sabha's programme.

In 1877 when the leading Sikh intellectuals denounced the German missionary Ernest Trumpp's translation of *Ādi Granth* as biased and distorted, Bikram Singh at once set up a special committee to prepare an authorised exegesis of the *Ādi Granth*. The total cost of the whole project was estimated at Rupees 175,000, all of which was subscribed by the Raja. He also spent large sums of money to have Sikh shrines constructed at several sites associated with the Sikh Gurus; among the better known are the shrines at Srinagar and Muktsar.⁸⁰ For his services the Raja was made the patron of the newly constituted Khalsa Diwan in 1882 which at one stage had thirty-six Singh Sabhas affiliated to it.⁸¹ One expects men like him to be arch conservatives. He surprised many when in 1898 he took a leading role in the polemics over the installation of electric lights within the precincts of the Golden Temple, the central shrine of the Sikhs. He vehemently rejected the claim that electrification implied reducing the sanctity of tradition, which required earthen lamps. Instead he offered Rupees 25,000 for the installation of electric lamps and on the occasion of Queen Victoria's Jubilee celebrations, the Sikh shrine switched over to electric lights.⁸²

A close friend of Raja Bikram Singh, Baba Khem Singh Bedi was among the founding members of the Amritsar Sabha. He belonged to a family which in the past held an eminent position in the Punjab. His great-grandfather, Sahib Singh Bedi was widely respected in the Punjab and even Maharaja Ranjit Singh sought his blessings. Khem Singh followed in the footsteps of his grandfather and soon had a reputation for being a man of miracles with

⁸⁰*Faridkot State*, p. 18

⁸¹Gurmukh Singh Chandhar, *My Attempted Ex-communication From the Sikh temples and the Khalsa Community at Faridkot in 1897*, Lahore, 1898, p. 2.

⁸²The debate over the electrification of the shrine is discussed in Harbans Singh, "Polemic Over the Electrification of the Golden Temple", *The Punjab Past and Present*, vol. 14, 1980, p. 59-62.

⁸¹Avtar Singh Vahiria, *Sauk Patr*, Lahore, 1905, p. 16. For a more detailed account of Baba Khem Singh Bedi and his family, see Munshi Sant Singh, *Bayan-i-Khandan-i-Bedian*, Urdu ms., 1965

immense spiritual resources.⁸³ With a large following in the Potohar area of North-West Punjab, his name was uttered as a divine incantation by many of his disciples. As a leading member of a Guru lineage he enjoyed the same reverence as the Sikh Gurus in the past. Bhagat Lakshman Singh, a school-teacher turned journalist, recounts in his autobiography:

The only Dharamsala worth the name, Bara Dari, was close to my ancestral house. Baba, afterwards Sir Khem Singh Bedi, halted at this Dharamsala whenever he visited Rawalpindi. Hundreds of people of all ages, men, women and children, flocked on those occasions to have his *Darshan*. ... It is very difficult to describe the enthusiasm he inspired. Though he could neither read or write (sic), he could recite the scriptural passages from memory. And the way he used this knowledge to enthuse his followers and indirectly add to his influence over them was simply wonderful. His figure was small and complexion rather dark. His eyes too were not very particularly bright. But he made up for all this by the costume he wore. He seems to have studied how to look grand and majestic. He rode out daily for *Shikar* [a shoot] with a hawk perched on his left hand. This position he carefully maintained even when presiding at the daily congregations. And if his idea was to actually look like the illustrious Guru Govind Singh, it may be safely stated that he succeeded in this endeavour to no small extent.⁸⁴

Baba Khem Singh Bedi's social status was established not only by the traditional standing of his family and his personal charisma, but also because of the active role he played in helping the colonial government to administer the Punjab, especially during the 1857 uprising. At this critical juncture: 'He [Khem Singh] escorted treasure, he assisted in raising men, horse and foot; he took charge of the jail during the withdrawal of the guards ... he accompanied the district authorities in almost all their expeditions against the insurgent tribes, and was always forward when there was fighting on hand'.⁸⁵

The harvest of this collaboration was rich: in 1879 Baba Khem Singh Bedi was selected for 'the honour of Companionship in order of the Indian Empire'; he was also made a magistrate, a member of the Legislative Council

⁸³ Avtar Singh Vahiria, *Sauk Patr*, Lahore, 1905, p. 16. For a more detailed account of Baba Khem Singh Bedi and his family, see Munshi Sant Singh, *Bayan-i-Khandan-i-Bedian*, Urdu ms., 1965

⁸⁴ Bhagat Lakshman Singh, *Autobiography*, Ganda Singh ed., Calcutta, 1965, p. 15.

⁸⁵ *Chiefs and Families of Note*, p. 276.

and a 'Knight Commander of the Indian Empire' in 1898.⁸⁶ He was actively involved in the organization, programme and ideology of the Amritsar Sabha. In 1882 he became the President of the Khalsa Diwan. In that capacity he sought to represent the views of the Sikh Panth, particularly on social and religious issues. It was largely due to his efforts and financial aid that schools for female education were opened in Rawalpindi, Jhelum and Gujarat.⁸⁷

Another founding member of the Sabha was Kanwar Bikrama Singh, the younger brother of the Raja of Kapurthala. He commanded vast resources and exercised considerable patronage. This was demonstrated during the Mutiny when he played a key role in holding the Doaba area for the British. Later he earnestly aided the British anti-insurgency campaigns in Oudh. For his loyal services he was richly rewarded with an estate in Akauna, which yielded Rs.45,000 a year. Later he gave these lands to the Kapurthala state and in exchange got lands in Bareilly and Lakhimpur to the value of Rupees 550,000 in perpetuity. The Kapurthala state treasury also gave him a grant of Rupees 60,000 annually.⁸⁸ Bikrama Singh was an honorary magistrate in Jalandhar and in 1879 was appointed honorary assistant commissioner. In the same year he was made a Companion of the Star of India and also the president of the newly created municipal board.

Bikrama Singh was a scholar of Sikh scriptures and a master of classical music. The ideology of the Sabha drew much from him. He was an advocate

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 277. Khem Singh Bedi owned a huge estate of 14,000 acres in Montgomery district. His other jāgīrs stood as follows:

1. In perpetuity:	
One fourth revenue of Basirpur Ilaka	Rs. 1,800
Jāgīr in Jullundur District	Rs. 2,500
2. For two lives:	
One fourth revenue of Basirpur	Rs. 2,800
3. For life:	
Fluctuating revenue due to canal irrigation	Rs. 2,000
Jāgīr in Jullundur	Rs. 2,675
Muafi in Hoshiarpur	Rs. 150
Muafi in Rawalpindi	Rs. 32
Total	Rs. 11,957

⁸⁷Nahar Singh, *Khālsā Bibīān te Sikh Istriyan dī Vidayā*, Moga, 1933, pp. 50-51.

⁸⁸The story of how Bikrama Singh dramatically improved his fortunes may be followed in *The Kuppoothullah Raj*, n.p., 1868.

of modern education for Sikhs, especially women. Due to his efforts a Singh Sabha was established at Jalandhar, of which he remained the president until his death in 1887.

Sanatan Sikhism

What was the religious outlook of these early Singh Sabha leaders and their co-religionists? If this question had to be answered in one word, the immediate reply would be that an overwhelming majority of them were rooted in Sanatan Sikhism. Our familiarization with contemporary Sikhism makes it very hard for us to gain access to the world of Sanatanists for it was so very different in principles, consciousness and ritual performances. The interpretations it placed on human action and human experience have only managed to leave a faint impression on Sikhism as we know it today. Its lack of exclusive and concrete ethnic markers makes it all the more difficult to map out its cultural territory with precision. The word Sanatan derives from Sanskrit and has the connotation of something that is ancient, almost timeless. The Sanatanist Sikhs therefore believed that their customs, rites and rituals had origins in the beginnings of time and were not to be effected by fluctuating circumstances. Custom in their eyes was a norm that had to be respected, followed and enforced. This vision of the centrality of custom exercised an abiding influence on Sanatan conceptions of the Sikh faith.

Consequently, when it came to defining who was a Sikh, the Sanatan Sikhs regarded custom as a concise, simple and readymade answer. Any person who accepted the teachings of Guru Nanak qualified to be a Sikh.⁸⁹ There were, however, primarily two kinds of Sikhs - sahadharis and kesdharis. The fundamental distinction between the two was that while the former did not have to undergo the initiation rite, the latter had to do so, as well as maintain the five external symbols of the faith. Moreover, for the kesdharis it was required that they strictly follow the rahit injunctions. It was expected that the sahadharis would at some future date, become kesdharis and by doing so enter a more evolved form of Sikhism.⁹⁰ But there was no rush to do so and what needs to be underscored here is that it was not mandatory for all

⁸⁹Avtar Singh Vahiria, *Sikh (Khālsā) Dharam Tat Darśan Arthāt Khālsā Dharam*, Amritsar, 1899, p. 1.

⁹⁰Ibid., p.2.

constituents of the Sikh Panth to uphold the kesdhari characteristics. There were thousands of Sikh families in the nineteenth century who had been sahadhari for several generations and their prerogative to call themselves Sikhs was no less than that enjoyed by others within the community.⁹¹

With such a pragmatic view of the Sikh tradition, Sanatan culture exhibited a similar attitude in handling matters concerning sacred scriptures, doctrines and social practices. While they considered the Ādi Granth to be the most sacred of the sacred texts, they also accorded an analogous status to the Vedas. Sardar Gulab Singh in a public lecture at the Guru ka Bagh in Amritsar announced 'Sikh faith is the true Sanatan religion. The four vedas are also the religious books of the Sikhs ...'⁹² Similarly, alongside the janam-sākhī and gur-bilās literature, the purānas and the the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata epics formed a common pool of history, knowledge and sacred tales for the Sikh masses.⁹³ The janam-sākhī stories about Guru Nanak were read with the same fidelity as the exploits of Krishna from the Mahābhārata. Doctrinal issues were debated and supplemented in the same breath with references to gur-bilās, vedas, purānas, smṛtis, śāstras and epics.⁹⁴ One implication of this was that

⁹¹This was for instance recognised by the influential Sikh manual, *Khālsā Dharam Sāstar*, Amritsar, 1914, p. gh (preface). Before the 1911 census the colonial state recorded the sahadharis as Hindus. This makes it hard to accurately estimate the number of sahadhari Sikhs in proportion to kesdhari. But due to a change in British perceptions and protests on part of sahadharis in 1911 they were denominated separately from Hindus and we get an approximate figure of 450,823. This amounts to 15.63 per cent of the Sikh Panth. See *Census 1911*. But by this time the Singh Sabha and the Arya Samaj had so vitiated the social environment that this figure most certainly does not reflect the actual sahadhari numbers in the nineteenth century.

⁹² *Khālsā Akhbār*, July 17, 1886, p. 5.

⁹³The janam-sākhīs are hagiographic literature narrating the life and teachings of Guru Nanak. Largely written in the sixteenth and seventeenth century they continue to exercise a profound influence on Sikh consciousness. For background see W.H.McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition*, Oxford, 1980. The gur-bilās is the generic name for a genre of Sikh literature written in the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century. It particularly describes the lives of the sixth and the tenth Sikh Gurus. For a survey see S.S.Hans, "Social Transformation and the Creative Imagination in the Sikh Literature", in S.Chandra ed., *Social Transformation and Creative Imagination*, New Delhi, 1984, p. 91-106.

⁹⁴For instance of this see Avtar Singh Vahria, *Sikh Khālsā Dharam Sidhānt*, Lahore, 1903, pp. 8, 17 and 25-26. A giānī in Rawalpindī regularly read from the Rāmāyana and Mahābhārta before his Sikh audience. See *Khālsā Akhbār*, May 20, 1898, p. 6.

such ancient concepts as cyclical time, the waging of war between demons and gods and the reincarnation of God in the form of avatars to stem evil and moral degeneration, commanded a wide audience among the Sikh public.⁹⁵ Avtar Singh Vahiria, the foremost exponent of Sanatan thinking, an activist of the Rawalpindi Sikh Sabha and a close associate of Baba Khem Singh Bedi, counted Guru Nanak among a long line of avatars including Ram and Krishna.⁹⁶ 'Just as a wave arises out of the sea and is then absorbed into it, similarly avatars are born out of Brahma [God] and on finishing their earthly mission are once again united with Brahma'.⁹⁷ Guru Nanak was one such avatar born to save people from the perils of ignorance and once again reveal the Sanatan faith that had been lost in an age of darkness - or so the Sanatanists believed.

Having accepted that Nanak was an avatar it is hardly surprising that many among the Sikhs took to idol worship, for that was a time-honoured Indian way of honouring avatars. According to a highly reliable contemporary observer, a pujārī working in the Golden Temple, one of the first large-sized idols to be installed at this premier shrine of the Sikhs was a metal casting of Guru Hargobind Singh, gifted by the Raja of Chamba during the reign of Ranjit Singh.⁹⁸ This was followed by another gold image of the sixth master below the Akal Takht and a minor idol of Guru Nanak within the inner sanctum of the main shrine. Large-sized idols were also housed at Baba Atal a well known shrine neighbouring the Golden Temple. In the 1880s the management of the Golden Temple mooted the idea of installing the idols of ten Sikh Gurus at the main entrance to the Sikh Mecca.⁹⁹ Already within the precincts of the Golden Temple pujārīs sat with stone idols instructing pilgrims to worship before

⁹⁵These themes for instance are illuminated at great length in Koer Singh, *Gurbilās Pātsāhī 10*, ed., S.S.Ashok, Patiala, 1967 (this text was written sometime in the first half of the nineteenth century), and Giani Gian Singh, *Pustak Khālsā Dharam Patit Pāvan Bhāg*, Amritsar, 1903. In the introduction to the book the author stated, 'The gurmaryādā stated here is backed with extensive proofs from the vedas', p.2.

⁹⁶Avtar Singh Vahiria, *Sikh Khālsā Dharm Sidhānt*, pp. 27-29.

⁹⁷Avtar Singh Vahiria, *Sikh (Khālsā) Dharam Tat Darśan*, p. 49.

⁹⁸*Khālsā Akhbār*, March 5, 1897, pp. 7-8.

⁹⁹*Khālsā Akhbār*, March 12, 1887, p. 4; January 15, 1887, p. 1 and January 29, 1887, p. 1.

them.¹⁰⁰ Similarly at the Akal Takht, the supreme seat of Sikh ecclesiastical authority, some pujārīs publicly worshipped idols.¹⁰¹

Along with the worship of idols, it was considered legitimate, as pointed out earlier, to worship members of Guru lineages. For an average Sikh there was hardly any difference between the Sikh Gurus and some of their charismatic descendants like Baba Khem Singh Bedi. In the words of a contemporary writer, it was expected of a Sikh to show the same allegiance to the leading representatives of the Guru lineages as that of 'a subject to his ruler'.¹⁰² As gurus, these individuals offered their disciples *gurmantras* for their spiritual elevation. Evidently the present day Sikh doctrine of Ādi Granth as Guru of the community was still far from fully subscribed to. As yet it was men from the body of Guru lineages, bhāīs, and holy figures who occupied this hallowed position.

The social universe of Sanatan Sikhism can best be summed up under the Brahmanical paradigm of *varṇāśramadharmā*.¹⁰³ According to this well known model there are four varṇas or castes and four āśramas or stages of human life.¹⁰⁴ Each individual is required to abide by the standards of his respective varṇa and āśrama, as codified in customary treatises. An authoritative manual on Sanatan Sikhism, published after prolonged deliberations stated:

From Brahman to Nai, including Chippe and Jhivara [Sudra sub-castes], all those who belong to the four fold caste system are not allowed to partake food cooked or touched by outcastes. This implies just as the four Hindu castes can be polluted by the untouchables; similarly in the Sikh Khalsa religion all persons belonging to the four castes can be polluted too. Those Sikhs who belong to the untouchable groups (like the Mazhabi, Rahtia and Ramdasia Sikhs) constitute a separate caste. These untouchable castes do not have the right to proceed beyond the fourth step in Sri Amritsar [at the Golden Temple]. Members of the high castes should take care not to mix with persons

¹⁰⁰ *Khālsā Akhbār*, March 12, 1887, pp. 4-5.

¹⁰¹ *Khālsā Akhbār*, January 29, 1887, p. 1.

¹⁰² Avtar Singh Vahiria, *Sikh (Khālsā) Dharam Tat Darśan*, p. 59.

¹⁰³ For one of the most explicit Sikh statements on this paradigm see *Ibid.*, p. 4 and 52.

¹⁰⁴ The four varṇas are: Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudras; and the four āśramas are brahmacarya, gārihasthya, vānaprasthya and sannyāsa.

belonging to the lower castes. If someone seeks to do so he forfeits his claim to belong to the high castes.¹⁰⁵

The violation of established caste rules, particularly the transgression of the purity- pollution antinomy and food taboos, invited punishment, penance, permanent ostracism from the community and sometimes even loss of inheritance. In chapter three I have shown how seriously the Sikhs took the purity-pollution dichotomy. An influential Sikh text warned the community against seven kinds of pollution.¹⁰⁶ Another manual written by a leading Sikh historian Giani Gian Singh, saturated with copious quotations from the vedas, purāṇas and smṛtis, spelled out the steps and methods to overcome numerous kinds of pollutions.¹⁰⁷

For Sanatan Sikhs the caste system and its taboos had undoubtedly become an integral part of the Sikh faith and they did all that they could to enforce it. Persons guilty of breaking caste rules were classified as *patits* and shunned by civil society.¹⁰⁸ The only significant departure from the Brahmanical caste structure among the Sanatan Sikhs was that the latter included the sudra castes among the superior castes, a group traditionally excluded from the so-called 'twice-born' castes. With the numerical domination

¹⁰⁵*Khālsā Dharam Sāstar*, Amritsar, 1914, pp. 321-322. This massive text had been in the making since late last century. But due to several exigencies and conflicting materials it could not materialise. Finally in 1908 under the auspices of Sodhi Ram Narain Singh, the head of the Anandpur Sodhis a text was compiled, part in print and part in manuscript form (see *Khararā Khālsā Dharam Sāstar*, Amritsar, 1908). This was circulated for revisions and approval among the five takhts, heads of Sikh shrines, leading traditional intellectuals and all those who were knowledgeable about Sikh customs and rites. Finally, when the text, the bulk of which was written by Aytar Singh Vahria, was published in 1914 it had the approval of three takhts - Damdama Sahib, Patna Sahib and Anandpur Sahib - and the following individuals: Sujan Singh Bedi head of the Una Bedis, Baba Gurbaksh Singh head of the Bedi lineage in Kallar, Baba Ujagar Singh of Rawalpindi, Baba Udai Singh Bedi, Man Singh, Mahant Narain Singh, Javand Singh Nihang, Giani Sardul Singh of Amritsar and Sodhi Ram Narain Singh.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, p. 413. On Sikh fears of pollution also see Bhai Hari Singh, *Bijai mukat Arthāt Dharam Sāstar*, Lahore, 1901, pp. 324-327.

¹⁰⁷See Giani Gian Singh, *Pustak Khālsā Dharam Patit Pāvan Bhāg*, Amritsar, 1903. First published in Lahore in 1895 this work had undergone four editions by 1903.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, pp.11-12.

of the Jats, a sudra caste in the Sikh community, it could perhaps not be otherwise.

The prevalence of the *varṇāśramadharmā* model among the Sikhs helps explain certain social modalities in the community that might seem enigmatic. First, it was due to the purity: pollution polarity, a core feature of the caste system, that Sikh untouchables were barred entry into major Sikh shrines. In the summer of 1900 when a group of out-caste Rahtia Sikhs tried to enter the Golden Temple, the manager of the sacred establishment, Sardar Jawala Singh, who also was the president of the Amritsar Singh Sabha, ordered their arrest.¹⁰⁹ The reformist Sikhs who accompanied them were abused and finally beaten up. For future reference an edict was issued that anyone, 'known to be friendly disposed towards the Rahtias should not be allowed to enter the precincts of the Darbar Sahib'.¹¹⁰ Because one of the defining characteristics of a sacred precinct in the eyes of the Sanatanists was its ritual purity it could not be allowed to be contaminated by those who were polluted, particularly the low-caste Sikhs. Second, though the Sikh ascetic orders appear on the surface to be at odds with Sikh doctrines, this is because they were a logical manifestation of the acceptance of the *varṇāśramadharmā* theory of life. Their anti-caste and anti-world principles complemented the highly stratified and worldly nature of Sikh society. In other words, a legitimate escape route existed in ascetic orders for those persons who desired to negate the structural and worldly concerns of Sikh society.

All this could no doubt be qualified. Sanatan Sikhism together with the caste system, acknowledged the kesdhari framework. Those who embraced it were expected to follow the rules laid down in the rahit-nāmās and not the Brahmanical codes. Theoretically, they were obliged to give up the caste system. In practice the kesdhari Sikhs may have found it hard to reconcile their religious injunctions with their social reality, for the two often pushed in opposite directions. After all the Sikh rahit-nāmās and the śāstras made an odd pair.

In everyday life the Sanatanist paradigm resulted in paradoxical mixtures, producing a kaleidoscopic Sikh society that by today's standards

¹⁰⁹*The Khalsa*, June 27, 1900, p. 3.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*

hard to bring into focus on . A Sikh contributor to an English weekly paper had this to say about it:

Have not our people relapsed into idolatry? Are not they seen worshipping hideous images of Hindu gods? Still more horrible is the fact that they are allowed in the precincts of the temple, which every Sikh holds dear to him. Are not our people seen worshipping Satis, Bhairon, Seetla [popular goddesses], Sakhi Sarvar, Guga peer [Muslim pirs] and company. Are not our people sunk grossly in Mantras [incantations] and Jantras [horoscopes] and similar beliefs? ... They listen to the stories of Krishna, see *Ras Lila* and pictures representing acts of Krishna ... They also worship the *lingam*, hear the story of this peculiar form of deity, with other stories like that of Mohini. They hear the story how Indra was cursed by Gautma and got thousand marks upon its body, which were subsequently transformed into eyes.¹¹¹

Clearly our contemporary Sikh observer is most displeased with the state of Sikh affairs. But the point is that the world he so pungently portrays and wishes into oblivion, was one Sanatanist Sikhs felt perfectly at home with . They were born into it and saw no compelling reasons to abandon their customs. Only those who had been converted to the logic of European enlightenment, among whom we must include our commentator, were keen to establish a uniform and rational society, free of what they regarded, like many of their British counterparts, as 'primitive' mentalities. The Sanatanists clearly did not support such a unilinear vision of progress. They took different lessons from their readings of history.

In their view of the world there were many facets of human life, and not all required direct intervention on part of the Sikh sacred authorities. For instance, what an individual did with his body, the way he conducted life-cycle rituals, and the celebration of seasonal festivals admitted different interpretations and did not call for uniform legislation. These matters were best left to customary conventions, to be regulated by such factors as clan, caste, and sect. A Jat Sikh need not perform his marriage rituals in the same way as a Khatri Sikh. An Udasi Sikh of course went to the extreme of not marrying at all. The Sanatan Sikhs had no objections to these diverse social practices. My argument is that the Sanatanists recognised the existence of several traditions within the Sikh Panth and multiple sources of authority. This view of the world

¹¹¹ *The Khalsa*, February 21, 1900, p. 7 continued in March 14, 1900, p. 7.

made it possible for the Sikh tradition to accommodate both the conflicting beliefs of folk Sikhism and co-exist with diverse elements from popular culture.¹¹² The ingredients of popular culture in the Punjab - benign and malevolent spirits, witchcraft, divine intercession, the ability of saints long dead to work miracles, the need to heed omens, the merit to be acquired through a pilgrimage, the uneven nature of time - were recognised as valid beliefs by Sanatan Sikhism. Similarly, contemporary vehicles of knowledge - myths, texts, narratives, folklore, plays produced by non-Sikh authors - were accorded a firm place within Sikh cosmology.¹¹³ The legends of Hīr-Rānjhā, Sassi-Punnun, Pūran-Bhagat and Sohni-Mahiwāl were an integral part of the Sikh folk tradition.

This pluralistic attitude, a sort of in-built tolerance, enabled the Sanatanists to face with great ease and grace such phenomena as dissent, social inversions and even the total abandonment of community norms via renunciation. By legitimising 'deviation' the Sanatanists not only ensured the vitality of the Panth but also significantly reduced the possibilities of conflicts with other religious communities. As a result of not belonging to a monolithic Panth the individual Sikh enjoyed wide religious freedoms. Most important, he had a vast terrain from which to choose his rites, rituals and beliefs. This is reflected, for instance, in the fact that if a Sikh so desired, he could in the same year go to a khānaqāh of a Muslim pīr like Sakhi Sarvar in western Punjab, undertake a pilgrimage to the Golden Temple in central Punjab and later visit Hardwar to take a dip in the holy Ganges. This sort of ritual exercise caused no ripples within the Sikh sacred hierarchy.

If we were to look at this collage through the eyes of British ethnographers like Richard Temple, would seem to be evidence of Sikhism in decline. But if we were to look at the same phenomena from the perspective of the Sanatan Sikhs, it exemplified the strength, richness and the actual state of nineteenth century Sikhism. The early leadership of the Singh Sabha was most at home with the traditions of Sanatan Sikhism and initially it was its doctrines that they largely sought to transmit.

¹¹²For folk-Sikhism see chapter two and for popular culture my "The Worship of Pir Sakhi Sarvar: Illness, Healing and Popular Culture in the Punjab", *Studies in History*, (forthcoming).

¹¹³*Khālsā Akhbār*, September 11, 1886, p. 6.

It was partly the Sanatan paradigm which made it possible for Swami Dayananda, the founder of the Arya Samaj in the Punjab, to be invited to the province by Bikrama Singh, a major functionary of the Amritsar Sabha. Again it was Sanatan Sikhism that led Sikh reformers like Bhai Jawahir Singh and Giani Ditt Singh to become leading members of the Arya Samaj and to have Muslim musicians perform at the Golden Temple. In the context of the present day doctrinal articles of Sikhism all this may sound like a fairy-tale, but once it formed an integral part of social reality in the Punjab.

Conclusion

Paradoxically, although the Amritsar Singh Sabha founded the Singh Sabha movement, the ideas, values, feelings, thought and symbols associated with the Sabha were in one respect hardly of its making. These emerged subsequently out of a different tradition and exemplified new needs - a theme that I will explore in the next two chapters. In the early phase of the Singh Sabha, particularly under the leadership of the Amritsar Sabha, a radical transformation in Sikh consciousness was not on the agenda. The primary goal was the continuation and conservation of those traditions perceived to be under seige as a result of British expansion in the Punjab and the changes that it brought about in quotidian life.

Chapter: Five

The Interpretative Process: The Expansion of the Singh Sabha

The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power.

M.Foucault, *Power/ Knowledge*, p. 52.

Six years after the inception of the first Singh Sabha in Amritsar in 1873, another Sabha was founded at Lahore. By this time the city of Lahore, a typical colonial metropolis, was fast replacing Amritsar as the premier urban centre in the Punjab. Other cities like Ludhiana, Jalandhar or Patiala were no match for the eminence of Lahore. They had neither the resources nor the imperial aura to successfully compete. Delhi, a potential rival to the eminence of Lahore, suffered a decline after the 1857 civil rebellions and only with the shifting of the colonial capital in 1911 was it beginning to recover some of its past glories. As the provincial capital, Lahore boasted some of the finest educational institutions in India, a large number of publishing houses, fine libraries, and numerous voluntary bodies keen on bridging the gap between the Orient and the West. It attracted a constant stream of visitors from other parts of India and Europe, many of whom spent their time lecturing and debating on cultural, economic and political themes.

Out of this city flowed ideas, men and institutions that were to redefine the lives of the people all over the frontier province. Ved Mehta by pooling oral histories from family members, many of them old-time Lahoris, successfully captures the charms of the city.

Ever since Daddyji could remember, he had been hearing about Lahore. Lalaji had always said that the fortunes of the family would be made there ("Aim your arrow at the Sky"), and Bhaji Ganga Ram had always talked about the city as the educational center of the world ... And now Daddyji had actually come to live in Lahore, the clamorous, clangorous city. Here there were whole streets of cobblers, weavers and potters, and there was an entire bazaar for every imaginable trade - one for metalworkers, one for carpetmakers, one for dyers, one for cloth merchants, one for dry grocers, one for goldsmiths and silversmiths, one for confectioners, one for savory cooks. There was even a whole city-within-a-city of courtesans, called Hira Mandi ("gem Market"), which was dead and deserted by day but by night was glittering and alive with the sound of music and laughter.

Behind the bazaars and lanes were rabbit warrens of *mohallas*, or blocks of tenement houses, opening on to squares that were entered by still narrow *gullis*, and these *mohallas* and *gullis* contained more life and variety than could be found in any village.¹

There is no mention here of factories, industrial smoke or the Dickensian landscape of England. It is a description that could easily fit many feudal cities. Despite the non-organic nature of urbanisation in pre-industrial colonial India, cities played a crucial role in creating and defining new ideologies and institutions. Young Punjabis, thirsty for new knowledge, eager to experiment with the offerings of the Raj and willing to embark on new careers flocked to Lahore in increasing numbers. Many among them like Ruchi Ram Sahni, Lajpat Rai, Gurmukh Singh, Bhagat Lakshman Singh, were destined to become prominent intellectuals, others in the anonymity of the city earned educational degrees that assured comfortable futures.

It is hardly surprising that the first Sabha was founded in the religious capital of the Sikhs and the second in a city that symbolised the new world in north-west India. By the late 1870s the Lahore and the Amritsar Sabhas had come to serve as models that inspired the setting up of similar institutions all over the province and even outside the Punjab. Between 1879 and 1884, on average six Sabhas were inaugurated annually. This chapter seeks to answer three fundamental questions, arising out of this exceptional expansion. First, what accounts for the phenomenal growth in the number of the Sabhas. Second, who were the men behind these associations. And finally, how were these Sabhas organized and what were their functions.

The Making of the New Elite and the 'Dialogic' Narration:

It is by now commonplace in histories of modern India, that colonialism fostered social groups who helped administer the bureaucratic and cultural apparatuses of the Raj. What is less unequivocally agreed is the possible typologies and the class nature of these colonial creations. The term 'middle-class' once used to be generally accepted as an adequate label to describe them. But over the years it has become apparent that the term is inadequate because of both historical and theoretical reasons. It derives from

¹V.Mehta, *Daddyji*, Oxford, 1972, pp. 35-36.

the European experience where the middle-class arose out of an industrial revolution. In India on the contrary the petty-bureaucrats and urban professionals, could at best only dream of industrialization, thus, this non-productive class could not appropriately be named middle-class.

A way out of this classificatory muddle was found by using indigenous categories like the Bhadrak, Chitpavan Brahmans and Kayasthas - the upper castes in Bengal, Maharashtra and United Provinces respectively - three of the first castes to take to western education and join the new urban professions.² But once again detractors are quick to point out that these categories are largely constructs of British epistemology and do not fit with the empirical realities of Indian society. Indigenous caste groups like the Bhadrak and the Chitpavan Brahmans were made up of a vast variety of people and could simultaneously include urban notables, domestic help and the unemployed in their ranks. There is no way that the self-interests and perceptions of such diverse elements could coalesce. Furthermore, apart from the tremendous internal diversity, it was hard to speak of caste elites when in province after province elite groups were made up of multicasite constituents. Other efforts to conceptually represent these groups have run into similar problems. To call them 'professional western-educated elements', 'intelligentsia' or 'lower middle-class' (petty-bourgeoisie)³ as has been done recently by several authors, only betokens the complex problem of class characterization, without in any way bringing us closer to a solution.

Clearly, and not without reason, no widely recognised category is available to encircle the initial manpower of the Raj. It was a strange Macaulyan melange that included landed gentry, lawyers, teachers, doctors, journalists, subordinate government officials and merchants. In most social situations, but particularly in colonial societies, it is hard to come across pure-blooded classes. Only by stepping away from the doctrinal orthodoxies can we better appreciate the nature of hybrid classes. As James Scott so forcefully puts

²For usage of these indigenous categories see J.H.Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in A Plural Society*, Berkeley, 1968, A.Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism*, Cambridge, 1968, C.Dobbin, *Urban Leadership in Western India*, Oxford, 1972.

³For these usages see C.Bayly, *The Local Roots of Indian Politics*, Oxford, 1975, p.236; S.Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*, New Delhi, 1973, p. 513 R.G.Fox, *The Lions of the Punjab*, Berkeley, 1985, pp.125-27.

it : '...the concept of class as it is lived is nearly always an alloy containing base metals; its concrete properties, its uses, are those of the alloy and not of the pure metals it may contain. Either we take it as we find it or we abandon the empirical study of class altogether'.⁴ With these considerations in mind, I will be using here the term new elites to encompass all those who had access to anglo-vernacular education and print-culture.

These two terms anglo-vernacular education and print-culture call for some further gloss. Anglo-vernacular education is emblematic of an educational process that combined a knowledge of vernacular languages with English education, that was first imparted at mission and state schools, and later at educational institutions set up by the new elites themselves.⁵ It produced men who were at least bilingual, if not polyglot. But even though the colonial machine churned them out by the hundred, they were still a privileged minority in a society where 93 per cent of the people were illiterate. In 1891 only 19,274 out of an approximate population of twenty-three million Punjabis could speak and write English.⁶ Bilingual skills and western education became a form of capital in a colonial society that could be effectively used to acquire power, privilege and the ability to strike political bargains. Such a use of literacy will become increasingly apparent in the course of this work. The monetary advantages of school and university education are reflected in the wages paid out to the members of the provincial bureaucracy. In 1886 there were 292

⁴J.C.Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, New Haven, 1985, p. 44.

⁵The term anglo-vernacular is not being used here to refer to a schooling in what were considered in the nineteenth century as non-English schools. The term seeks to highlight the language skills.

⁶*Census 1891*, p. 253 and p. lxix, Abstract 61.

Punjabis belonging to the Subordinate Executive Service (including judicial service) receiving monthly salaries ranging from 150 to 1,000.⁷

The term 'print culture' was coined by McLuhan, to distinguish cultures based on oral and scribal knowledge from societies where ideas begin to be reproduced through the mechanics of the printing press.⁸ In McLuhan's schema a 'print culture' is one where a book becomes a commodity. It is exchanged and circulated like any other commodity in a market. To the book he adds other print commodities: tracts, journals and newspapers. What impact the printing press had on Indian society is unfortunately still largely a neglected area and calls for much further empirical research. Despite these limitations I will risk a few propositions on the impact of the printing press in India. First, it enabled communications across different local and social groups. For instance, a person or an organization in Amritsar with the aid of the printing press had the potential to reach another person or organization in Rawalpindi, provided of course there was an interest in what was being transmitted. A line of communications was opened that could gradually encircle hundreds if not thousands of people and the 'printed book [becomes] not merely a source for ideas and images, but ... a carrier of relationships'.⁹ Second, the printing process, at least initially encourages homogenization: by standardizing scripts, lexicons and grammatical rules, by promoting a uniformity in tastes and by

⁷*Proceedings of the Public Service Commission, Punjab*, vol.1, Calcutta, 1887, (hereafter *P.S.C.*)p. 69. Following were the differentiated salary scales:

<u>Official Rank</u>	<u>Salary in Rupees</u>
Extra Assistant Commissioner	
Grade 1 to 7	800 to 250
Tahsildars	
Grade 1 to 4	250 to 150
Settlement Superintendents	
Grade 1 to 4	250 to 150
Extra Judicial Assistants	
Grade 1 to 5	500 to 1,000
Munsiffs	150 to 250

Source: *Ibid.*, p.27. In 1886 there were a total of 323 appointments in these posts.

⁸M. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, London, 1962. I am aware of the charges of technological determinism levelled against McLuhan. No such theory is being proposed here and 'print culture' is viewed as part and parcel of the total social framework.

⁹N.Z. Davis, "Printing and the People", *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, Stanford, 1975, p. 192.

encouraging linear modes of thinking. Third, unlike an oral culture where there is often a temporal and spatial proximity between those who transmit messages and those who consume them, print culture negates the need for such proximity. In effect often it removes the authors of printed texts from the realm of direct public contact and endows them with an anonymous power to circulate their messages in a way that may be the envy of any scribe or oral performer.

Having pointed out the changes entailed in a transition from oral to 'print culture', I must also hasten to add that for the period covered by this work oral modes of communication continued to be important. The travelling missionary, the local saint and the new urban politicians continued to rely on oral communications. Even a rising rate of literacy does not imply that all people are reading books or newspapers. The ability to read does not imply the desire to acquire a book. But overall, 'print culture' did introduce significant changes and no one was more aware of these than the British state which from a very early date maintained a very tight rein over what was being printed. It was this access to the mechanics of the 'print culture' that was to make the new elites so formidable and their discourses so authoritative.

These elites were new not so much in terms of their social origins but in their social functions and, more importantly, in the instruments of transmission they appropriated. Many of them came from families and castes that enjoyed high ritual standing and controlled social resources not available to others. There were also men who did not have such privileged backgrounds. However, the proportion of these newer men compared to the former was still small. Together, they were emerging as a power-bloc the like of which had never existed before in northern India. In pre-British society there had never been one social group that the sole rights to generate cultural meanings and define people's lives. For centuries a broad ensemble of professional groups - bards, genealogists, storytellers, healers, minstrels, shamans, local saints, diviners, among others - had mediated cultural conventions. Historically tied to particular clans, castes, and localities they had elaborated a myriad of little traditions that were largely kept alive through oral texts. During key events in the *rites de passage* a wide variety of social codes, myths and legends were

communicated through oral statements by the traditional cultural bearers.¹⁰ The result was a plurality of social visions and practices, centered in numerous peasant communities.

But in colonial Punjab for the first time there emerged a restless new elite that cut across kin ties, neighbourhood networks and even caste affiliations. It was soon to monopolise the right to represent public moralities and social values. Initially supported in this task by the British administrators, it was later backed by the lethal armies of advancing capitalism - commercialization and rapid communications - that eventually swept aside many of the older professional groups that had in the past underwritten and communicated local culture. What follows is an historical account of the ascendancy of this new elite, a key factor that partly helps explain the phenomenal expansion of the Singh Sabha's in the late 1870s.

The need for lower level government functionaries, in particular to maintain land revenue records, and a desire to advance British cultural hegemony, led to the setting up of an official educational system in the province. The first government school in central Punjab was opened at Amritsar in the summer of 1851 with an annual grant of Rupees five thousand.¹¹ The Amritsar school provided instruction in English as well as in oriental languages. The subjects of study included English, arithmetic, geometry and geography. Within a year the daily attendance at the school increased by 50 per cent.¹² Its offering of English proved particularly popular, for earlier the local gentry had to depend on the services of a few private tutors to instruct their children in the language of the sahibs. Now this responsibility was shouldered by the government school. The *Punjab Administration Report* for 1851 noted with self-satisfaction: 'The progress in this department [English] is considerable, as might have been expected from a strong desire of learning

¹⁰Background in my "The Worship of Pir Sakhi Sarvar: Illness, Healing and Popular Culture in the Punjab", *Studies in History*, forthcoming.

¹¹H.R.Mehta, *A History of the Growth and Development of Western Education in the Punjab*, Lahore, 1929, p. 18 (hereafter *W.E.P.*).

¹²G.W.Leitner, *Indigenous Education in the Punjab*, Lahore p. 157 (Hereafter *I.E.*).

envinced by many parties at Umritsar previous to the establishment of the school'.¹³

On the model of the Amritsar school, government-sponsored schools were opened at Rawalpindi, Gujrat, Shahpur, Multan, Jhelam and Jalandhar. By 1856 there were thirty-five such schools.¹⁴ The same year an educational department with a director-general, two inspectors, eleven deputy-inspectors and seventeen sub-deputy inspectors was set up in the Punjab. The new department, funded by a one per cent cess on the landowners, set up 563 schools in one year, of which 456 were located in the villages. In addition, Normal schools were set up at Rawalpindi and Lahore to train teachers. The new educational facilities proved to be extremely popular. In a despatch the deputy commissioner of Jalandhar remarked about a new '... school at Kurturpoor. The late Guru Sadha Singh had paramount influence there, and objected to a Government school being established in the town. Since his death the people themselves have come forward and petitioned for one, and there is now a small school of fifty boys.'¹⁵ The expansion and growing popularity of the new educational system is reflected in table 6.

Table no. 6: Number of Government Schools and Students Enrolled, 1856-1860.

	1856-57	1857-58	1858-59	1859-60
Schools	583	1,465	2,188	1,876
Scholars	13,610	19,505	38,211	45,686

Source: *Appendix to Education Commission Report. Report by the Panjab Provincial Committee with Evidence Taken Before the Committee and Memorials Addressed to the Education Commission*, Calcutta, 1884, p.8.

Twice in mid-century Punjab there was a massive surge in colonial manpower needs: once after the 1857 civil rebellions and the second time in 1866 when the Punjab ceased to be a non-regulatory province. These

¹³Ibid., p. 157.

¹⁴Y.B.Mathur, *British Administration of Punjab*, n.d., p. 80 (Hereafter B.A.).

¹⁵G.W.Leitner, *I.E.* , p. 17.

developments, discussed below, promoted further expansion in Punjab's educational institutions. In the eyes of the British administrators the 1857 experience clearly demonstrated who were the friends of the Raj and who the foes. The Punjabis had shown their loyalty to the colonial masters and the Hindustanis, those beyond the Punjab showed their ingratitude by directly rebelling or aiding the cause of the insurgents. As this reasoning gained ground among the policy makers they increasingly wished to reward their Punjabi allies by opening to them posts and professions which had once been manned by non-Punjabis.¹⁶

It was easy enough to implement this Punjabization policy in the army, police and other areas that called for no special educational skills. How thousands of Punjabis were recruited to British forces is too well known and calls for no repetition here. But when it came to other professions such as medicine, teaching and higher government jobs it was another matter. There was a great shortage of skilled local personnel in these areas. From the very beginnings of colonial rule in the Punjab, these posts had been largely taken up by the Kayasthas from the North Western-Provinces and Baidyas and Brahmans from the Bengal Presidency, who were among the first to experience colonial rule.¹⁷ Also, in areas of higher administration, as Andrew Major

¹⁶This change in British policy is reflected in a memorandum circulated by Montgomery the then judicial commissioner to divisional commissioners: 'Whatever argument there might have been for filling, at the beginning of our rule, some of the higher posts with Hindoostanees (though their number was clearly limited, and on this subject I shall address you in a few days), there could be no reason for filling the ranks of the Police and Jail Establishments with Poorbeeah Burkundauzes.

There is, moreover, at present, no reason for continuing them in employ, when their brethern in the Army behaved so treacherously to our Government; and I request that measures be taken for gradually dispensing with their services; and that, in future, no Hindoostanee be entertained in the Judicial Department without your special sanction ...

It is both right and politic that we give employment to the people of the country, who so loyally have stood by us at this crisis ...' *Lahore Chronicle*, 22 July, 1887, p. 461, quoted in I.J.Kerr, "The Punjab Province and the Lahore District, 1849-72", unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Minnesota, 1975, p. 362

¹⁷Background in Kenneth W.Jones, "The Bengali Elite in Post-Annexation Punjab: An Example of Inter-Regional Influence in Nineteenth Century India", *Indian Economic Social History Review*, vol. 3, 1966, pp. 376-93.

correctly reminds us, it was for political reasons initially undesirable to employ Punjabis.¹⁸ Consequently non-Punjabis were preferred for government jobs.

Now, to break the monopoly of the outsiders it was deemed essential to train local men in civil professions and higher education. In 1860 a Medical School was opened at Lahore.¹⁹ Education at this institution was divided into two programs. One trained native or junior doctors who were taught for a period of three years largely through the medium of Urdu. The other course was for five years and was taught in English. Successful candidates from this latter course were awarded a Licentiate in Medicine and were eligible for appointments as sub-assistant surgeons with the government.

The next major landmark in the development of western education in the Punjab was the opening of a government college at Lahore in 1864. Its students could sit for the First Arts degree and the Bachelor of Arts degree examinations conducted by the Calcutta University, of which the college was an affiliate. The college curriculum, according to Bhagat Lakshman Singh, a student there, included courses on '... Arithmetic, Algebra, Euclid, Trigonometry, conic sections, Logic, Economics, English, Persian, History, and Physics and Chemistry'.²⁰ Under the principalship of G.W. Leitner, whose contribution to learning has been previously noted in chapter four, the college was to emerge as a major influence in the making of the new elites. In the end the whole college environment - the European curricula, the staff, the debating clubs and societies, the reading rooms and boarding houses - resulted in separating its student population from all those who could not attend such elite institutions.

The concerns and sensibilities of this new generation become partly apparent in the autobiography of Ruchi Ram Sahni, an alumnus of the college and later a teacher there:

Here I need only mention that in the junior classes at the Government College he [Sagar Chand] taught us Milton's

¹⁸A.J. Major, "Return to Empire: The Sikhs and the British in the Punjab, 1839-1872", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, The Australian National University, 1981, pp. 190-92.

¹⁹The following information is from Y.B. Mathur, *B.A.*, p. 95.

²⁰Bhagat Lakshman Singh, *Autobiography*, Ganda Singh, ed., Calcutta, 1865, (Hereafter *Autobiography*), p. 71.

“Paradise Lost”, Book II. As a class we were quite satisfied with his teaching, for he explained everything required for passing the examination and removed all our “difficulties”. But what about reading the poem for its own sake and enjoying it as a piece of English literature. What about the thrill at the majestic flow of its measured periods, its superb portraiture of the personality of Satan as the very rival of God? The occasion and the setting of the poem, the rapid survey of the history and philosophy of the Christian Doctrine and, above all, the living, speaking picture of the “Lady Milton” herself invoking her “Heavenly Muse” - all these and great many other things that will readily occur to every student of literature who has read and re-read the poem; I for one missed in our study of “Paradise Lost” with our teacher at college ... A few selected poems and pieces of prose literature taught in the manner in which I had the privilege of studying at the Adhiwal school are enough to create in a young man a real love and admiration for English language as a noble vehicle of thought and feeling.²¹

These were perceptions from the very apex of Punjabi society; only a small percentage of Sahni's contemporaries could have shared such enthusiasm for the English language. But it was such literary zeal that was to set the new elites as a class apart. Between 1864 and 1876, 84 Government College students passed the First Arts degree, 25 the Bachelor of Arts and seven the Masters of Arts examinations conducted by the Calcutta university.²²

In 1866 the much celebrated personalized justice of the Punjab school of administration, which under the Punjab Civil Code (1853) had made no provision for separate judicial officials or pleaders, came to an end.²³ Already in 1859, the code for the civil procedure had been partially accepted in the province and in a few more years the whole code, in conformity with other regulations as well as the Indian penal code, was fully subscribed to. As a result of these changes a chief court was established in 1866. The elaborate legal codes and an extensive judicial network created a second wave of employment in the province. Judicial officers, subordinate assistants, lawyers, pleaders and clerks were all in demand. For professional education in law a

²¹R.R.Sahni, “Self-Revelations”, p. 69.

²²J.F.Bruce, *A History of the University of Punjab*, Lahore, 1933, p. 43.

²³The changes in the Punjab laws and the expansion of local judiciary can be followed in Y.B.Mathur, *B.A.*, p., 17-40.

school was set up at Lahore in 1868 by the Anjuman-i-Punjab, but it was only from 1874 that it could conduct university examinations in law.²⁴

The move for the final addition to the British educational apparatus in the Punjab started in the 1860s under the auspices of the Anjuman-i-Punjab. Its leading spokesman and organizer, Leitner, called for the setting up of an Oriental University in the Punjab that would resuscitate indigenous learning and impart western knowledge through the vernaculars. But initially all that the movement succeeded in attaining was a University College in 1870, with a promise from the government that it would be turned into a university in the near future. To this new college were affiliated the Oriental College, the Government College and the Medical School.²⁵

By the early 1870s the British educational infrastructure was in place and, considerably supplemented by missionary enterprise, actively vying with government agencies in the founding of new schools and attracting prospective students. Three predominantly Hindu castes - Khattris, Aroras (these two included a very small proportion of the Sikhs), and Baniyas - with their urban concentration, mercantile profits, and a long history of staffing former bureaucracies, benefited the most from the British educational facilities. In 1891 their literacy rate was seven times higher than the average for all castes.²⁶ They exhibited a similar lead in the knowledge of English. Although they were less than eight per cent of the total population, approximately 34 per cent of those who could speak and write English came from their ranks.²⁷ An over-representation of these castes in government jobs and urban professions like law, medicine and engineering followed from their educational dominance. Socially dominant groups thus acquired new sources of privilege and prestige in a colonial society.

The anglo-vernacular education and 'print culture', as noted earlier, became the prime weapons in the exercise of domination by the new elites. In

²⁴S.M.Latif, *Lahore*, Lahore, 1892, p. 319. On law education in the 1880s see Lajpat Rai, *Autobiographical Writings*, V.C.Joshi ed., Delhi, 1965, pp. 21-22 and 33.

²⁵G.W.Leitner, *I.E.*, p. vi.

²⁶R.G.Fox, *Lions of the Punjab*, p. 126.

²⁷*Census 1891*, p. 253 and p. lxix, Abstract 61.

1855 by government fiat Urdu replaced Persian as the official language. This single decree was to constitute a field in which many ideological wars would be fought in the future, but its most immediate result was that it ensured the growth of an elite with bilingual skills. Even those who were interested in subordinate official positions had to acquire a proficiency in Urdu besides their mother tongue. The small minority that aimed its sights above the lower reaches of the administration had to learn English as well. In a society where the great majority of the people were illiterate, such language skills alone qualified their speakers to become members of an elite group.

In addition their position was further buttressed by access to a growing 'print culture'. Christian missionaries took the lead in introducing the printing press to the Punjab. In 1836 when John Newtons and James Wilsons, newly arrived American Presbyterians were leaving Calcutta for their assignment at Ludhiana, the Reverend William H.Pierce from the Baptist Mission Press presented them with an old wooden printing press, paper and ink. As neither of the two missionaries travelling up country knew anything about printing matters, they were accompanied by a Bengali compositor trained under Pierce. With these rudimentary beginnings, a press was started at Ludhiana that soon became a thriving establishment producing millions of pages of evangelical literature in the vernaculars.²⁸

The monopoly of the missionaries over the powers of the printed word appears to have been broken fairly early. By the early 1850s, besides a few native entrepreneurs who set up printing presses at Lahore, Bhera and Kapurthala, the colonial administration started a well equipped press in the Lahore jail.²⁹ The growing opportunities in a newly colonised region attracted printing and publishing talent from beyond the province. Among the first to read the signs of changing needs was Munshi Muhammad Azim the 'father of the press in the Punjab'.³⁰ A diligent student at the Delhi College, Azim on turning twenty took to a career in printing. He joined the Delhi Gazette Press in 1835 as a compositor and rose to be the foreman of its printing crew. Following Punjab's annexation he took a big leap forward. With the financial

²⁸E.Davis, *Press and Politics in British Western Punjab*, Delhi, 1983, p. 21.

²⁹Ibid., p. 30.

³⁰S.M.Latif, *Lahore*, p. 342.

backing of several Europeans he launched from Lahore an English weekly, the *Lahore Chronicle*. Almost at the same time Harsukh Rai, a Kayastha from the North-West Provinces started the *Kohi-i-Nur*, the first Urdu newspaper in the Punjab. Despite the risks inherent in being an innovator it proved a successful venture. Later its publisher also took to printing texts, pamphlets and other materials in the vernaculars.

Although non-Punjabis dominated the publishing world for the first decade of the colonial rule, Punjabis did not let the lag develop any further. Already staffing the printing presses, they next entered local publishing. The life of Diwan Buta Singh exemplifies this trend. A one time retainer of the notorious Maharani Jindan, the affluent Diwan was seen with great suspicion by the British administrators. His name figured prominently in the Multan rebellion and later in the so-called Prema conspiracy that aimed at eliminating the British resident at Lahore. Fearing his influence and capacity to stir trouble the colonial administration removed him to an Allahabad prison. On being finally released in the mid-fifties he returned to Lahore and quickly gained his former eminence. In 1866 Buta Singh, adept in Persian, Urdu and Gurmukhi, started the first law journal of the province: *Anwar-ul-Shams*. This was followed by two newspapers: the *Aftab-i-Punjab*, an Urdu weekly, and *Khālsā Parkāś*, a Punjabi weekly newspaper. It is interesting to note here in passing that the editor of the Urdu weekly, Sheikh Faqir Muhammad had once served as an apprentice at the Kohi-i-Nur press.³¹ By the 1860s a pool of local editors, journalists, calligraphists, printers, compositors and binders was emerging in Lahore.

Buta Singh opened branches of his publishing business at Peshawar and Ajmer. In the latter city it printed the *Rajputana Government Gazette*. If the literature produced by the Kuka Sikhs is correct, then Diwan Buta Singh was the first person to bring out a printed edition of the Ādi-Granth. In mid-century Punjab there were at the most approximately 3,000 hand written copies of the Ādi Granth.³² Print technology had the ability to produce them by the hundreds. Such innovations powerfully convey the changes entailed by an

³¹N.G.Barrier and P.Wallace, *The Punjab Press, 1880-1905*, Michigan, 1970, pp. 10-11.

³²Nahar Singh, *Nāmdhārī Itihās*, Delhi, 1955, p. 56.

expanding 'print culture'. It could at least reinforce if not generate new ties among the faithful.

Several indices point towards the growing importance of 'print culture' in the province. In 1864 there were 30 presses; by 1883 their number had risen to 104 - a 71.5 per cent rise in less than two decades.³³ The figures for newspapers repeat a similar story. Between 1880 and 1884 the average number of newspapers was 39.20. By the quinquennial 1900-1904 the average was 141.80.³⁴ There was approximately a five fold cumulative increase in the number of books published between 1875 and 1880 (see table 7).

Table 7 : Cumulative Total of Books 1875-80

<i>Language</i>	<i>Books in 1875</i>	<i>Total by 1880</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Urdu	439	2,529	45.1
Hindi	161	745	13.3
Punjabi	154	784	14.0
Sindhi	...	8	0.1
Jatki	...	1	
Kashmiri	...	1	
Pashto	8	81	1.4
Sanskrit	22	111	2.0
Arabic	79	317	5.7
Persian	77	380	6.8
English	39	237	4.2
Polyglot	46	416	7.4
Total	1,025	5,610	100

Source: *Census 1881*, Abstract, 63, p. 160

The fascination printed books began to have for the new elites of the Punjab is reflected in the reminiscences of Bhagat Lakshman Singh, particularly when he writes for the 1870s: 'Both of my cousins, Rai Bahadur Bhagat Narain Das, M.A., and Bhagat Ishwar Das, M.A., were in those days receiving instruction in the Government College at Lahore. Their library books filled any number of almirahas... in course of time we had a big library consisting of any number of valuable books on any number of subjects... Before I was seventeen I had finished the *Mysteries of the Court of London* in, perhaps, four beautifully

³³H.R.Mehta, p. 63.

³⁴N.G.Barrier and P.Wallace, *The Punjab Press*, p. 165.

bound volumes, and the *Mysteries of London* in twelve volumes, equally well printed, before I was twenty years old.'³⁵

Hitherto the elites had substantially relied on other groups to communicate and transmit cultural codes. Now by gaining proficiency in the mechanics of 'print culture', members of the new elites - lawyers, teachers, journalists, rural gentry - appropriated both the channels of communication and more importantly, the signifiers these generated. This control gave them an unprecedented sway over the production of symbols, texts and stories - elements out of which any culture is created. Armed with their new skills and print gadgetry, the elites in the Punjab directed their resources to etch out a novel cultural map for the Punjab that would define their aspirations and reflect the changed environment in the province. The canvas for this map was made out of borrowings from the European enlightenment, particularly rationalism, Comteian positivism and utilitarianism of the John Stuart Mill variety. This was however, no simple imitation, copying or transference. It represented what M.Bakhtin has called the 'dialogic narrative': a different trope from a dialogue or debate, representing 'a polyphonic discourse based on tellings, retellings, or references to important cultural narratives'.³⁶

Bakhtin's concept of 'dialogic narrative' makes us sensitive to the complexities, ambiguities, paradoxes and variations inherent in any culture. These features get even more accentuated in a milieu of cultural transition under colonialism where indigenous discourses compete against imperial narrations, leading to an expanding range of translations, tellings and retellings of oral and written texts before common audiences. In nineteenth century India there was not just Mill, Bentham and Voltaire but also Upanishads, Shāstras and Granths. Many conflicting and simultaneous readings of these texts were possible, each rendition being dependant on who was reading them, in what state and with what purpose. Thus we can best understand the sub-culture of the new elites if we recognise, to put it crudely but simply, that they were not just engaged in

³⁵Bhagat Lakshman Singh, *Autobiography*, pp. 19-21.

³⁶M.Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, M.Holquist ed., Austin, 1981. The quote is from E.M.Bruner and P.Gorfain, "Dialogic Narration and the Paradoxes of Masada", in E.M.Bruner ed., *Text, Play and Story*, Washington, 1984, p. 68.

aping the west, but exploring and constructing avenues to come to terms with the altered historical situation.

This 'dialogic narrative', resounding with many melodies, was partly sponsored by a series of socio-religious movements like the Singh Sabha, the Arya Samaj and the Brahmo Samaj, launched under the new elites. While these movements emerged, consolidated and reproduced themselves under the cultural hegemony of the Raj, they actively stripped, emptied and reterritorialized this imperial master code for use by Indian society. The writings of Mill or Voltaire were not just enscribed on *tabula rasas*. Instead they were actively discussed, examined and scrutinised and made into a 'dialogic narrative' producing diverse actions, ideologies and texts. An aspect of this active reading is well represented in a passage from the autobiography of R.R.Sahni:

The remarkable books, as they appeared both to Guru Datt and myself, we also read together in our spare hours in the College verandah, or rather the Vestibule. These were Mill's "Utilitarianism" and Bentham's "Theory of Legislation". They were, of course, not included in the College course, but that was of little consideration for both of us. We read and re-read Mill's small book line by line, or paragraph by paragraph, discussing, arguing, differing or agreeing in the end, as we went along. Now and again, we could not 'do' more than a sentence or two in the course of an hour, for either we could not agree as to what the author's real meaning was or, for some reason, the whole time was taken up with the discussion about all the implications of the passage or how far we could ourselves accept his lead. Now and again, we would deliberately take up our stand on opposite ends, so as to be able to thrash out a point as well as we could ... Sometimes, these discussions were attended by elderly persons from the city interested in one or another of the contestants. Now and again, the debates became quite animated and even heated ...³⁷

The constitution of the Lahore Singh Sabha in 1879, followed by the massive expansion of the Sabhas all over the Punjab, was part of this 'dialogic process'. Along with other domains it led to the recasting of Punjabi civil society, the assertion of new elites and, at the same time, a search for alternatives by the populace.

³⁷R.R.Sahni, "Self-Revelations", p. 75.

Reconstituting Elite Sub-Culture: The Boom in the Sabhas

Less than five years after its formation the Amritsar Sri Guru Singh Sabha, the first such Sabha, exhibited signs of fatigue. A collectivity of leading Sikh chieftains, landed gentry and their dependants, it was prone to intense factionalism and frequent contests for supreme leadership. The need of the hour was not a body preoccupied with purely transmitting traditions, but an organization capable of feeling the pulse of the new elites, committed to the mechanics of 'print culture' and willing to shape the 'dialogic process'. The Amritsar Sabha did not fulfil any of these roles. For the young Sikhs from the new elites, largely born in post-annexation Punjab and brought up under the shadow of the Raj, the Amritsar Sabha appeared dormant.³⁸

It was no match for the spectacular success of the newly founded Arya Samaj. Started by a peripatetic Swami by the name of Dayananda at Lahore in 1877, it proved so popular that within a month its membership shot up by 300 per cent. This success was followed by the setting up of a library and a Sanskrit school. By the time the Swami was ready to leave the Punjab in July 1878 following a fifteen-month sojourn, he had founded eleven Samajes, stretching from Rawalpindi to Jalandhar. The Lahore Samaj became a model for the subsequent Samajes. It was the largest, wealthiest and most talented of the new societies.³⁹ The ideology of the Samaj, based on direct social action, proved irresistible for the new elites. It envisioned a Hinduism free of polytheism, superstition, idolatry, child marriage, evil priests and social decadence. The reformatory zeal of the Arya Samaj initially attracted many Sikhs, several of whom became leading members of the Lahore branch. Among them were Dit Singh, Jawahir Singh and Maya Singh. What the Samaj managed to achieve in barely fifteen-months on several fronts including a new ideology, organization and membership, the Amritsar Sabha had failed to attain in six years. Its leadership was mostly made up of men who had no background in anglo-vernacular education and the intricacies of 'print culture'. Coming from established social classes such as the landed aristocracy and

³⁸The first annual report of the Lahore Sabha went to the extent of suggesting that the Amritsar Sabha only existed on paper. See *Report Sri Guru Singh Sabha Lahore 10 April, 1880*, p. 6 (hereafter *L.R.1880*).

³⁹K.W.Jones, *Arya Dharma*, New Delhi, 1976, p. 44. This is the most comprehensive account of the Arya Samaj in the Punjab.

traditional intellectuals, they were incapable of voicing the aspirations of an embryonic class. In fact, many in the Amritsar Sabha looked down upon the parvenus.

Within a year and three months of Swami Dayananda's departure from the Punjab, the Sikhs at Lahore set up a Sabha at the province's capital. The impetus for the new Sabha came from two teachers - Gurmukh Singh and Bhai Harsa Singh, both working at the Lahore Oriental College. Since they were instrumental in reshaping the Singh Sabha and were to play leading roles in the Sikh affairs, their early biographical details are instructive. Born of a humble family of Chandhar Jats in April 1849, Gurmukh Singh was fortunate that his father, a cook in the royal household of Kapurthala, was much liked by Kanwar Bikrama Singh, a prince with ample talent and considerable personal wealth. The scholarly prince took great personal interest in the upbringing of Gurmukh Singh. After receiving education at a local school in Kapurthala, the promising lad was sent to Lahore, the intellectual centre of the province. Here he joined the newly opened Government College. By the time he graduated from this prestigious institution, there were still very few Punjabis with university degrees.⁴⁰ Almost immediately in 1877 he was appointed as an assistant professor of mathematics at the Oriental College.⁴¹

The Oriental College had emerged out of a Sanskrit School established in Lahore in 1863 and maintained by financial subscriptions from the gentry. Later the school was taken over by the Anjuman-i-Punjab, which added to it the Arabic, Persian and Gurmuki departments and converted it into a college. In 1870 it became a part of the University College.⁴² Divided into two sections - the school department and the college department - the institution had two objectives: 'The revival of ancient Oriental learning, and the imparting of instruction in Western Sciences and general knowledge through the standard vernaculars of the Province'.⁴³ It was the only institution in the country where students could qualify for formal diplomas in Gurmukhi. These were of three kinds: Giani or the highest proficiency; Vidvan or the high proficiency and

⁴⁰In 1885 there were only 95 Punjabis with a B.A. degree and 26 with M.A's. H.R.Mehta, *W.E.P.*, p. 50.

⁴¹*Khālsā Akhbār*, September 30, 1898, p.5.

⁴²S.M.Latif, *Lahore*, 1892, p. 275.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p.275.

Budhiman or the proficiency.⁴⁴ Besides Gurmukhi the college taught courses in philosophy, political economy, history, geography, literature and the natural sciences.

As a young twenty-eight year old college teacher, Gurmukh Singh was widely noted for his literary and linguistic skills. He translated books on history, physical geography and optics into Hindi and also wrote what must have been among the first text-books on astronomy and political economy in Hindi.⁴⁵ At the college Gurmukh Singh developed a close association with Harsa Singh Arora. When in 1877, the institute started a Gurmukhi department, Bhai Harsa Singh, who belonged to a well known family of granthīs from Tarn Taran, was asked to take charge of the new section. He proved his merit by starting a comprehensive Gurmukhi program that included the study of Ādi Granth, janam-sakhīs, gur-bīlas literature and courses on grammar, prosody, drama, philosophy and law. By 1881 there were seventeen students studying for the Gurmukhi diplomas and scores of other students were studying the language and its literature as an optional subject. To overcome the shortage of textbooks in Punjabi, Bhai Harsa Singh translated Lethbridge's *History of India* into Gurmukhi and for his lectures on geography used Blochman's book on the subject.⁴⁶

The friendship that developed between Gurmukh Singh and Bhai Harsa Singh proved to be a boon for Sikh affairs. Lahore was already crowded with associations propagating education and experimenting with new cultural conventions. On 1st November, 1879, the Bhai addressed a Sikh congregation at gurdwara Janam Asthan in Lahore, on the occasion of the fourth master's birth anniversary.⁴⁷ In his speech, after narrating the mission of the Sikh Gurus, the Bhai recounted the recent history of the community, laying emphasis on the foundation of the Punjab University College and the teaching of Gurmukhi at its affiliate institute - the Oriental College. He concluded his address by pleading with his co-religionists to set up an association in Lahore that would ensure the propagation of education and religion among the Sikhs.

⁴⁴G.W.Leitner, *I.E.*, p. 115.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 107 and 109.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁴⁷Summary of the speech available in *L.R.1880*, pp.5-9.

It was an early note on a theme that would be increasingly enunciated among the faithful in the coming years.

The Bhai could hardly have chosen a better moment to mount his plea. The response was instant. Twenty-five Sikhs, including Gurmukh Singh, backed his call. Other enthusiasts included government employees, merchants and scholar publishers.⁴⁸ Next day, on second November 1879, a Singh Sabha was founded at Lahore. It was decided to conduct the proceedings of the Sabha on every Sunday; the choice of the day was possibly a concession to the predominantly merchant and urban professional membership of the new body. Sunday was a free day for such members and it would have been relatively easy for them to take part in the deliberations on that day.

In line with other contemporary organizations the Sabha adopted formal rules for membership and appointed office-bearers. Diwan Buta Singh, a publishing magnate, became the president, Gurmukh Singh, a secretary, and Harsa Singh, Ram Singh and Karam Singh became members of an executive committee. But the new Sikh elites were as yet too miniscule to float a fully independent organization of their own. For any initiative of theirs to fully succeed, support from the leadership of the existing Sabha was essential. Gurmukh Singh, the co-sponsor of the Lahore Sabha and its first secretary, was fully conscious of this factor and from the very start sought co-operation from the Amritsar group. Khem Singh Bedi was made a member and for its second meeting the Lahore Singh Sabha invited Thakur Singh Sandhanwalia to attend the proceedings. In April 1880 the association between the two Sabhas was put on a firm footing by inaugurating the Sri Guru Singh Sabha General; Amritsar and the Lahore bodies were both declared to be its branches.⁴⁹ It was proposed for the future that as new Sabhas were formed elsewhere, they could be affiliated to the General Sabha, and a committee would be found to represent all such Sabhas.

In the early 1880s the active membership of the Lahore Sabha stood at 268.⁵⁰ Unlike the functionaries of the Amritsar Singh Sabha, the leaders of the Lahore Sabha were fully aware of the importance of 'print culture'. On 10

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 14

⁴⁹Jagjit Singh, *Singh Sabhā Lahir*, p. 22.

⁵⁰*L.R. 1880*, pp. 16-24.

November 1880, barely a year after the Sabha's inception, Gurmukh Singh started publishing a weekly paper, the *Gurmukhī Akhbār*, in Punjabi. Harsa Singh joined his colleague as a co-editor. Besides covering current affairs, the paper also broadcast the Sabha's ideology and a weekly summary of its activities. According to Jagjit Singh, an official historian of the Sabha, Gurmukh Singh was dissatisfied with the fact that the *Akhbār* in its newspaper format could not be easily kept by readers for future reference.⁵¹ So a year later he started editing a monthly journal the, *Vidyārak*. It had six aims: exegesis of the Ādi Granth, a history of the Khalsa Panth and biographies of the ten gurus, an exposition of the Sikh rituals, news on education, instructions on reform and book reviews.⁵²

In April 1882, on the occasion of a provincial darbar, Sikh Maharajas and the landed aristocracy assembled at Lahore. Gurmukh Singh earnestly canvassed their support and succeeded in raising rupees 7,000 to set up a printing press.⁵³ In 1883 the Khalsa Press was opened at Lahore. To its growing stable of newspapers the Sabha added two more: the *Khālsā Gazette*, an Urdu weekly in 1884, and the *Khālsā Akhbār*, a Punjabi weekly, in 1886. The latter was to become the most important Sikh paper in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. A monthly journal, *Sudhārak*, was also launched by Gurmukh Singh in 1886. Behind the continuous expansion of the Lahore Sabha in the 1880s stood three men: Jawahir Singh, Giani Dit Singh and Attar Singh of Bhadaur. The first two once contributed to the success of the Arya Samaj in the Punjab; on joining the Lahore Sabha some time in 1886 they were to play leading roles in recasting of the Sikh consciousness.⁵⁴

Among the Singh Sabha leaders, Bhai Jawahir Singh Kapur (1859-1910) stands out as a notable example of the kind of men who constituted the

⁵¹Jagjit Singh, *op.cit.*, p. 23.

⁵²*Ibid.*

⁵³S.S.Ashok, *Panjab dīān Lahirān*, Patiala, 1974, p. 100.

⁵⁴According to Kenneth W. Jones', *Arya Dharma*, pp. 137-138 the two left the Samaj in 1888. But already by 1886 Jawahir Singh was a Secretary of the Lahore Sabha and Dit Singh a speaker on its public platforms. It is possible that the two at the same time maintained contact with the Arya Samaj as well. But it seems more likely that they had left the Samaj by 1886, much before the virulent attack by Pandit Lekh Ram and Lala Guru Datta on Sikhism at the anniversary celebrations of the Lahore Arya Samaj in 1888.

new elites. His biographical details distinctly represent many of the features that I have associated with an évolu  class: the high ritual standing of an upper caste; a bureaucratic job, anglo-vernacular education, familiarity and use of 'print culture' and an active promotion of new voluntary associations. Bhagat Lakshman Singh called him 'the most learned Sikh of his time'.⁵⁵ Born in 1859 at Amritsar to a family of granth s at the Golden Temple, hardly anything is known about his early upbringing, except that as a disciple of a Gulabdasi preacher Jawahir Singh travelled extensively when still very young with his religious preceptor.⁵⁶ At the age of seventeen, he joined the accounts department of the Sind-Punjab and Delhi Railway Company at Lahore. Administering railroad offices was to become a life-long vocation and in his later years Jawahir Singh rose to be a superintendant of the North-West Railways.⁵⁷

In 1877 when Swami Dayananda visited the Punjab and an Arya Samaj was founded at Lahore, Jawahir Singh became a member of the new society. There was nothing in the ten principles of the Samaj, based on monotheism, omnipresence of God and a universal morality preaching love, justice and truth, that in any way conflicted with Sikhism, least of all with its Sanatan strand. While the Samaj was still in its infancy and needing to overcome several obstacles, particularly a growing opposition from the Hindu orthodoxy, Jawahir Singh took up in 1878 the position of Samaj secretary. It is remarkable that he came to occupy this high post when he was only nineteen years of age and continued to serve in it for the next five years.

Always keen on experimenting with new ideas, he never allowed his enthusiasm to wane. The lack of an indigenous college in Lahore led him along with a group of Arya Samajists to float the scheme of the Dayananda Anglo-Vedic College. In 1883 he became the secretary of the fund raising committee for the College. Sometime in the next two years, Jawahir Singh, the most influential Sikh in the Arya Samaj and a close associate of many of its leaders, left the Samaj for reasons that still remain somewhat unclear. But it is most likely that the breach occurred as a result of an increasingly hostile attitude

⁵⁵Bhagat Lakshman Singh, *Autobiography*, p. 58-59.

⁵⁶Jagjit Singh, *Singh Sabh  Lahir*, p.

⁵⁷Teja Singh, "Bhai Jawahir Singh-Arya Samaj-Singh Sabha", *The Panjab Past and Present*, vol.7, 1973, pp. 84-95.

adopted by many of the Samaj leaders, particularly Lala Guru Datta, Pandit Lekh Ram and Lala Murli Dhar towards Sikhism.⁵⁸ At the same time Sardar Bikrama Singh and Attar Singh of Bhadaur seem to have convinced Jawahir Singh that he could better utilize his untiring zeal for reform and education within the Sikh community. Early in 1885 Jawahir Singh became a member of the Lahore Singh Sabha. The same year he was appointed a fellow of the Anjuman-i-Punjab in recognition of his services in promoting education and literature.

During the winter of 1886 Jawahir Singh was nominated by the Lahore Singh Sabha to put forward its views to the Public Service Commission, which was then meeting at Lahore. The evidence he submitted reveals both his own thinking and the approach of the Sabha to public affairs. While generally Jawahir Singh pleaded for a more flexible system of recruitment to the covenanted civil service that would lead to a greater Indian representation in the elite service, he was also unwilling to concede entry to all and sundry. In answer to a question by Mr. Stokes, a commission member; 'Would [he] exclude men of low caste?', Jawahir Singh answered 'yes'. When further pressed and asked if he would exclude them altogether, the Sabha's nominee, finding himself cornered, somewhat revised his position and responded:

Not altogether. They [the Sabha] would leave it to the Government to decide. By men of low caste I mean men of the lower middle class, and below that I mean the people whose manners and habits might not be suitable. A man of low social status might be able to pass a purely intellectual test, but might not be desirable otherwise; while in a system of patronage you can secure men of almost equal ability and education and also men of influence.⁵⁹

Two points merit attention from this brief statement. First, Jawahir Singh and the Sabha were not keen on competition from the lower castes or lower order, for posts in the highest echelons of the colonial administration. In fact they feared the masses. Second, even when the Sabha leadership in its public pronouncements censured the caste system, in private the masks often dropped and caste did not appear to be that bad, especially if it could help in

⁵⁸For a dramatic account of Jawahir Singh's schism with the Arya Samaj see Kenneth W. Jones, *Arya Dharma*, pp. 137-138.

⁵⁹ *P.S.C.*, vol.1, p. 186

safeguarding privilege. The Lahore Sabha, at least initially was a vehicle for promoting the sub-culture of the new elites and men like Jawahir Singh performed the role of articulating the needs of those elites.

A man of varied skills, including a renown for writing books on religious philosophy and social problems, Jawahir Singh remained throughout his life most at home on management boards or as a member of voluntary bodies. For several years he was the chief-secretary and vice-president of the Khalsa Diwan Lahore; from 1892 to 1906 he occupied the position of the secretary of the Khalsa College Council; in 1899 he was appointed by the Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab as a member of the provincial text book committee; in 1904 he became a Fellow of the Panjab University and at the same time served on the managing committee of the Punjab Public Library.

Giani Dit Singh (1853-1901), a childhood friend of Bhai Jawahir Singh from his Gulabdasi phase, became a leading ideologue of the Singh Sabha. One man can rarely change the course of history, but without Dit Singh the Sabha may have been a rather different body. Author, publisher, journalist, public speaker, preacher, polemicist par excellence, Dit Singh remained unrivalled in his command over 'print culture'. By one count he wrote at least forty-two books and scores of articles in the vernacular press.⁶⁰ In 1877 during Dayananda's visit to Lahore, Dit Singh met the Swami and on three different occasions entered into *khandan-mandan* or polemical debates with him on the nature of God, the creation of the universe and the infallibility of the Vedas. Although the Giani in his own account of the debates does not admit to having come under the influence of Dayananda⁶¹, it is quite obvious from contemporary evidence that he flirted briefly with the Arya Samaj.⁶² At about the same time, Dit Singh entered the Oriental College as a student and subsequently joined the college staff as a lecturer in Gurmukhi. Here he came into close contact with the Lahore Singh Sabha's leaders, particularly Gurmukh Singh, and soon became an influential member of its inner circle.

⁶⁰Daljit Singh, *Singh Sabhā dā Maudhī*, Amritsar, n.d, pp. 71-79.

⁶¹Dit Singh, *Merā ate Sadhū Dayānanda dā Saṁbād*, Lahore, 1900.

⁶²Bhagat Lakshman Singh, *Autobiography*, p. 58. Dit Singh's biographer Daljit Singh too notes his subjects participation in the Arya Samaj.

By the mid eighteen-eighties Ditt Singh could be often heard at the meetings of the Lahore Sabha, voicing his opinions on Sikh history, theology and doctrines. Having established a firm reputation as an outstanding orator, he turned to writing and published an unceasing stream of literature on the lives of the Sikh Gurus, the need for social reform and proselytizing, Sikh legends of martyrdom, definitions of 'true' Sikhism, 'authentic' Sikh ritual practices and diatribes against folk Sikhism.⁶³ He became the Sabha's expert on contesting the terrain of customary culture. His grasp of 'print culture' first earned him the position of an editor of the *Khālsā Akhbār* in 1893 a post that he retained until his death in September 1901, and later a membership of the Khalsa Press Committee.⁶⁴

Sir Attar Singh of Bahadur was probably the most enigmatic figure in the Singh Sabha movement. Unlike Jawahir Singh or Ditt Singh he belonged to the feudal gentry of Malwa and might have been more at home in the renaissance cities of Italy than in his native Punjab. Related to the Phulkian princes in the Cis-Sutlej states, Attar Singh controlled a large estate in the Barnala tahsil under the suzerainty of the Maharaja of Patiala.⁶⁵ Close in his social origins to the leadership of the Amritsar Sabha, Attar Singh chose to become a lifelong supporter of the Lahore Singh Sabha and gave liberally of his time, money and contacts to advance its cause.

From an early age Attar Singh showed a great eagerness for reading and an unusual aptitude for picking up new languages. His father, Kharak Singh, a

⁶³The best known among these works are the following 18 publications: *Srī Gūru Nānak Prabaudh*, Lahore, 1890; *Darpoke Singh*, Lahore, 1895; *Naklī Sikh Prabaudh*, Lahore, 1895; *Rāj Prabaudh*, Lahore, 1896; *Gūru Arjan Chārittra*, Lahore, 1896; *Sultān Puāra*, Lahore, 1896; *Sikh Bachche dī Sachī Sahidī*, Lahore, 1898; *Durgā Prabaudh*, Lahore, 1899; *Kalghīdhar Upkār*, Lahore, 1899; *Dharam Darpan*, Lahore, 1900; *Gurmat Artī Prabaudh*, Lahore, 1900; *Tāraā Singh Vaīe dī Sāhidī*, Lahore, 1899; *Bhai Botā Singh jī Sāhid*, Lahore, 1901; *Mirān Kotīe Mahtāb Singh dī Bahādri*, Lahore, 1900; *Miran Manaut*, Lahore, 1902; *Pammā Prabaudh*, Lahore, 1906; *Sabeg Singh dī Sahidī* (Martyrdom of Sabeg Singh), Lahore, 1911; *Singhniān de Sidak*, Lahore, n.d.; *Guggā Gapaurā*, Amritsar, 1976, reprint, first published at Lahore by Ditt Singh's son Baldev Singh in 1902

⁶⁴Background in an obituary published in the *Khālsā Akhbār*, September 13, 1901, pp.5-6.

⁶⁵For a detailed history of Attar Singh's lineage see Lepel H. Griffin, *The Rajas of the Punjab*, New Delhi, 1977, reprint, first published, Lahore, 1870, pp. 277-299.

man of deep religious convictions, sent his son to Benares, the centre of classical learning, to complete his formal education. By the time he returned from this ancient city, he was fluent in five languages: Gurmukhi, Sanskrit, Persian, English and Urdu. Well versed in music, philosophy, history and the arts, he took an active interest in the province's public affairs. He excelled in historical research and was one of the first Punjabis to become a member of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1869 and later of the Royal Asiatic Society, London. In 1873 the Kuka civil rebellions prompted him to research on the reasons for the insurgency. After consulting the writings of Bhai Ram Singh and an apocryphal text called *Sau Sākhīān*, Attar Singh concluded that the Sikhs were basically loyal to the Raj but it was the circulation of prophecies wrongly attributed to Guru Gobind Singh that prompted them to rebel. As he succinctly put it: 'A prophecy worked up, Government disregarding, may be more potent for disturbance than fifty years of authority over them [the Sikhs]'.⁶⁶ His findings were so well received by the colonial administrators that they encouraged him to publish the results of his research and a translation of the *Sau Sākhīān* anthology in English.⁶⁷

Attar Singh's profound knowledge of Sikh traditions, together with his overall appreciation of Indian culture, his personal contacts with many leading Punjabi figures and his possession of the best equipped private library in the province, made him a much sought after person among the upper echelons of the provincial bureaucracy. His advice was often sought on religious, social and political matters. For his part Attar Singh readily sounded out the administration on potential political flash points and prepared exhaustive

⁶⁶Sir Attar Singh, *Political Suggestions, Information and Other Services of Sir Attar Singh K.C.I.E., Chief of Bhadaur, Attar Singh Papers*, p. 2

⁶⁷This resulted in, *Sakhi Namah; Sakhee Book, or the Description of Gooroo Gobind Singh's Religion and Doctrines*, Benares, 1873. In addition to this Attar Singh published two other works in English, *Travels of Guru Tegh Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh*, Lahore, 1876 and *The Rayhit Nama of Prahlad Rai, or the Excellent Conversation of the Duswan Padsha and Nand Lal's Rayhit Nama, or Rules for the Guidance of the Sikhs in Religious Matters*, Lahore, 1876.

reports on current affairs for submission to high officials.⁶⁸ Such earnest loyalty won him several titles and sinecures from the colonial administration.⁶⁹

Soon after the Lahore Singh Sabha was founded, Attar Singh became a member. He was close to both Gurmukh Singh and Ditt Singh and in fact helped the latter in securing a job at the Oriental College. Jagjit Singh in his history of the Sabha argues that without the financial assistance of Attar Singh the Khalsa Press and the newspapers started by the Sabha may not have survived.⁷⁰ In order to promote the activities of the Sabha and its ideology Attar Singh helped start a Singh Sabha at Ludhiana in 1884 and in turn became its first president.⁷¹ His three other prominent positions within contemporary Sikh organizations included a presidentship of the Khalsa Diwan Lahore in 1889, the vice-presidentship of the Khalsa College Establishment Committee and the trusteeship of the College Fund. From the late 1880s onwards Attar Singh played a key role in the foundation and promotion of the college.

Backed by an active leadership and an enthusiastic membership, the Lahore Singh Sabha successfully fashioned a pattern of elaborate activities and rituals. The annual highlight was a *jalsā* or meeting. One such meeting in February 1887 lasted for three days.⁷² There was a grand opening on the 25th, with an evening procession that started outside gurdwara Janam Asthan. Led by a temple functionary prominently carrying a Sikh standard, the front of the procession was made up of hymn singing members of the Sabha. They were followed by a Sikh crowd that kept swelling as the group wound its way through the residential quarters and city roads of Lahore. Those who could not participate on the road, climbed on rooftops or came up to shopfronts to catch a glimpse or hear a note of the chanting. After three and a half hours of pitched singing, accompanied by crescendos of drums and cymbals, the Sikh spectacle finished outside the same sacred shrine from where it had begun. It was powerful theatre for the cause of solidarity. Participants and spectators alike

⁶⁸For instance see his letter to Secretary, Punjab Government, 25 August, 1887, in Attar Singh Papers, p. 21.

⁶⁹Loke Nath Ghose, *The Modern History of the Indian Chiefs, Rajas, Zamindars*, Calcutta, 1879, p. 13.

⁷⁰*Singh Sabhā Lahir*, p. 75

⁷¹*Khalsā Akhbār*, June 19, 1896, p. 7.

⁷²The following account is based on the *Khālsā Akhbār*, March 5, 1887, pp. 3-7.

were able to reaffirm common symbols, offer allegiance to sacred principles, transcend social distinctions and stake claims to urban space.

On the second day, the meeting took on a different colour. The Sabha retreated from public gaze into the relative privacy of a Sikh shrine for a seventeen hour marathon of singing, scriptural readings, exegesis, lectures on history and theology, lamentations and analysis of current events. The deliberations opened at five in the morning with a recitation of *āsā-dī-vār* - a mixed composition by the first two Sikh gurus. This lasted for three hours and gave ample time for participants to arrive for the activities of the day ahead. The next hour was taken up by Jawahir Singh, the then secretary of the Sabha, who expounded on select passages from the *Ādi Granth*. At nine the assistant secretary of the Sabha, Basant Singh, expressed his concern for the defects that had crept into Sikhism. When he stopped lecturing on this much discussed theme at ten, it signalled the start of devotional singing for an hour, which in turn was followed by a two hour break. The afternoon session of the society started with a reading from the scripture and soon after Gurmukh Singh addressed the audience on theology. When he finished his lengthy speech at five, Giani Dit Singh, widely known for his oratory, delivered a lecture contrasting the former state of Sikhism with its present conditions. The major conclusion drawn from this historical intervention was that the Sikh community was enervated and faced certain decline unless the Sikhs urgently united to revive their Panth.

On hearing this, Jawahir Singh stood up and resolutely informed his audience: 'In case you are interested in knowing the true state of Sikh religion, undertake a visit to the countryside. There you will find how Sikh traditions are going amiss. Our first responsibility ought to be the reform and correction of folk Sikhism.'⁷³ The Sabha's secretary followed his exhortation by a detailed account of the Sikh faith in rural tracts. With this critique, the meeting came to a close at 8 p.m. For the next two hours, Sabha leadership met with representatives of other Sabhas who were in Lahore especially to attend the annual deliberations. In this late evening get-together old contacts were renewed, new members inducted into the Sabha network, plans made for

⁷³Ibid., p. 5.

future ventures and regional members canvassed for pressing causes before the Sabha.

On the closing day of the Sabha's annual proceedings, many of the previous day's activities and themes were repeated. Once again the society's session started at five and was followed by devotional singing, readings from the *Ādi Granth* and lectures. The day's key speaker was Maya Singh, the current editor of the *Khalsa Gazette*, an Urdu paper largely devoted to Sikh issues. The Bhai, a leading journalist, had extensive knowledge of Sikh history and had first-hand experience of the latest developments within the Panth.⁷⁴ His opinions commanded wide respect in urban circles. In the afternoon, the Sabha's office bearers reported on the past year's activities and Pratap Singh, the treasurer, gave an account of the society's financial affairs, particularly the money spent from the school and the amrit fund. Preceding the last speech of the day, Dit Singh made a passionate appeal to the assembled public for subscriptions to the fund being collected to construct a building to house the Singh Sabha. It must have taken unusual commitment, deep religiosity and close identification with the community's interests to spend two full days in deliberations, lectures and prognostications.

Such annual proceedings were only one link in a long chain of deliberations and ritual theatre hosted by the Lahore Sabha. Each calendar year was well punctuated with smaller local meetings,⁷⁵ weekly meetings on every Sunday and celebrations of anniversaries linked to the Sikh Gurus. The Sabha membership also kept in close touch through informal gatherings. The Lahore Sabha set the tone for similar societies across Punjab.

⁷⁴Bhai Maya Singh was initially a member of the Arya Samaj. Like Bhai Jawahir Singh and Giani Dit Singh he left that body in the mid-1880s to join the Lahore Singh Sabha. In 1888 he became a secretary of the Lahore Sabha and soon after a superintendent of the Khalsa Boarding House, Lahore. In the 1890s when the *Khālsā Akhbār* was restarted Maya Singh was appointed as a manager.

⁷⁵For a report on one such meeting see *Khālsā Akhbār*, October 9, 1886.

Sabhas were established at district headquarters, capital cities of Sikh princely states, market towns and large villages.⁷⁶ They were often unable to match Lahore's urban environment, considerable resources and the knowledge of its leadership. But now a model was available for emulation and the activists in the provincial Sabhas strove to bring their local organizations in line with this ideal. To begin with, many of the local Sabhas adopted the same constitution and membership rules as the Lahore Sabha.⁷⁷ In conformity to the metropolitan paradigm they convened annual and weekly meetings, organized processions, marked the anniversaries of the Sikh gurus, employed missionaries to propagate the faith, kept in touch with other societies, printed and distributed Sikh histories and literature and often backed the official line as it emerged from Lahore.⁷⁸ Leaders from the Lahore society were often invited to attend and address local conventions. In August and September 1886 Gurmukh Singh undertook what may be classed as a grand tour of the provincial Sabhas.

From Amritsar I reached Jalandhar and from there to Kapurthala, where the Sikhs have established a Singh Sabha, that seeks to promote religious consciousness and education within the community. I spoke to Colonel Jawala Singh the president of the local Sabha concerning mutual issues particularly the problems surrounding the Khalsa Diwan ... En route to Simla, I briefly halted at Jalandhar to take a look at the Singh Sabha. In Simla the Sabha members have diligently constructed a four storey high dharamsala ... On 6th September the special congregation there was attended among others by raises, municipal commissioners, the executive committee of the Singh Sabha and an European judge of the Chief Court. Unfortunately the viceroy who was specially invited to attend the convention was unable to do so on account of an illness. The

⁷⁶Ten years from the date of the Lahore Sabha's foundation at least 38 Sabhas had been established in the following places: Jalandhar, Ludhiana (1884), Attari, Daudpura (1886), Ajmer, Khumano, Kohat (1887), Chamkaur Sahib (1887), Jhansi (1887), Kalka, Lidhran, Maghiana, Saludi, Tiska (1888), Lahore (1879), Rangoon, Hoshiarpur, Rupar, Ouetta, Sakhar, Jaunpur, Tarn Taran, Nadrai, Sialkot, Ambala, Mode (1886), Khanna, Bhinder (1886), Simla, Jalupur Khera (1886), Rajpura, Patiala, Ferozepore (1887), Simla, Rawalpindi, Faridkot, Amritsar (1873) and Kapurthala. The year in parentheses when indicated stands for the year of foundation.

⁷⁷For example the Ambala Sabha, see *Khālsā Akhbār*, 12 February, 1887, p. 7. A fascinating account on the establishment of a local Sabha at Gujjarkhan is available in Bhagat Lakshmasn Singh, *Autobiography*, pp.107-109.

⁷⁸The proceedings of these local Sabhas are well documented in the *Khālsā Akhbār*. For example for an annual meeting of the Tarn Taran Sabha see the papers issue of January 15, 1887, p. 8, for

highlight of the evening was the presentation of a letter of recognition to Karam Chand, the manager of the Singh Sabha and the secretary of the dharamsala. An accountant by profession he was instrumental in the construction of a building to house the Singh Sabha. Since he was being transferred from Simla, Sabha members were keen to have a special congregation in his honour. From Simla I reached Ambala and from there journeyed to Patiala. A Singh Sabha has been established here for some time and soon it will be constructing its own building. I stayed in Patiala for three days and delivered a lecture each morning. On the last day the congregation was so crowded that there was no room for the public to sit... On leaving Patiala I went to Nabha.⁷⁹

The sudden and rapid growth in the number of the Singh Sabhas prompted many of its leaders to seek ways of uniting the growing societies into a single organization. The Amritsar General Sabha of 1880, mentioned previously, was the first step in forging a united front. In April 1883 the General Sabha was reconstituted by founding the Khalsa Diwan at Amritsar. Its patron was Bikram Singh, the ruler of Faridkot; Attar Singh and Bikrama Singh were vice-patrons, Baba Khem Singh Bedi was president, while the manager of the Golden Temple, Man Singh, became a vice-president and Bhai Gurmukh Singh and Ganesa Singh its two secretaries. It would have been hard to find a more disparate group of office-holders. Princes, landed gentry and commoners, all collected on one platform because they believed in the same God. But this happy arrangement fell apart in less than three years; worshipping the same God is not always incentive enough for all mortals to unite.

The lack of a consensus on ideology, conflicting cultural outlooks and the perpetual clashes among the oligarchs prevented the Khalsa Diwan from turning into a representative body of the Sikhs. Instead, in 1885, it split and there emerged a rump Khalsa Diwan at Amritsar led by the powerful Baba Khem Singh Bedi.⁸⁰ He succeeded in securing the loyalty of six or seven Sabhas. A new Khalsa Diwan was set up at Lahore in 1886, principally under

⁷⁹*Khālsā Akhbār*, September 25, 1886, p.7, continued in October 2, 1886, pp. 5-6.

⁸⁰The best source for understanding the split remains Gurmukh Singh, *My Attempted Excommunication From the Sikh Temples And the Khalsa Community at Faridkot in 1897*, Lahore, 1898. Also see chapter eight.

the leadership of Gurmukh Singh and with the firm backing of at least 30 Sabhas. However, the unending feuds between the Lahore and Amritsar Diwans, led many Sabhas away from both organizations, to start functioning on their own. Moreover, the discord delayed the foundation of the Khalsa College by a decade and led to the closure of the Khalsa Press and the *Khālsā Akhbār* in 1889.

Conclusion

To recapitulate: I have argued in this chapter that the sudden and striking expansion of the Singh Sabhas in the 1880s cannot be understood entirely in terms of the internal dynamics of Sikh society, but can be explained by taking into account the rise of the new elites, the creation of modern channels of communication and a radically-changed system of education. Such changes - often referred to under the all embracing rubric 'modernization'- were disproportionately weighted in favour of the elites, particularly the mercantile and service sectors of the society. The Sabhas initially gave expression to the cultural aspirations of an évolué class and helped generate its sub-culture. In doing so the Sabhas were in no way exceptional but formed a part of the long chain of social processes that swept across the sub-continent, albeit with different time cycles, under colonial rule. A Sabha here, a Brahmo Samaj there, an Arya Samaj in one province, a Prathana Samaj in another - all these movements in the end helped reconsolidate the hold of the elites over Indian civil society by generating new texts, selective traditions, symbols, myths and ceremonials. As the lines from Foucault, cited at the beginning of this chapter, state power and knowledge are part of the same discourse. The next chapter endeavours to show how the Sabha combined these two facets in its ideology and, more importantly, how the elites tried to turn the rest of Sikh tradition into a mirror image of themselves.

Chapter Six

A New Social Imagination: The Making of the Tat Khalsa

Religion, like art, *lives* in so far as it is performed, i.e., in so far as its rituals are “going concern” ... For religion is not a cognitive system, a set of dogmas, alone, it is meaningful experience and experienced meaning.

V. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, p. 86.

However much the Sri Guru Singh Sabha intellectuals in the 1880s wished to start from scratch in their onerous task of reconstituting an elite subculture, history prevented them from exercising this option. Sikhism was by this time a faith more than three hundred years old, possessing a rich legacy of myths, rites and texts. These traditions could not just be wiped away. The trouble was that while these intellectuals detested many of the day to day practices of Sikhism, particularly as enshrined within Sanatan Sikhism, they adored the theory behind the religion. For instance, while they were uncomfortable with idolatry, priesthood, casteism, worship of popular saints and veneration of Guru lineages, they were at the same time extremely proud of the textual emphasis on monotheism, equality of men and women, traditions of martial prowess and the rahit injunctions. To overcome the ever-widening gap between theory and practice they invented the powerful idea of the Tat Khalsa. The word Tat denotes the basic elements out of which the universe is created and Khalsa in popular usage signified the pure ones.

According to the literature of the Sabha these unalloyed elemental Sikhs (or the Tat Khalsa), first emerged in the eighteenth century, the golden epoch of Sikhism, but faced with the lures of an opulent kingdom under Ranjit Singh and the stranglehold of Brahmanical Hinduism, these heroic forefathers of the Sikh tradition disappeared. As a result of this downfall an idea reminiscent of the fall in Christian thought, the community came close to extinction. The lesson to be derived from this unidimensional historical trajectory was simple and obvious: now, in the 1880s, all Sikhs should imitate and emulate the older Tat Khalsa and by doing this as a duty help in the regeneration of the fallen community and the creation of a new moral order. With historical hindsight it is easy to see that this was to be the most powerful myth in the history of modern

Sikhism, one that continues to hold a profound fascination for the adherents of the faith. Having constructed the myth, the Sabha intellectuals went on with the task of elaborating more clearly the ambiguous elements of the Tat Khalsa.

Defining Tat Khalsa orthodoxy was one thing, making the new definitions stick was an entirely different matter, particularly when the new norms were diametrically opposed to prevailing Sanatan Sikhism. This chapter is concerned with studying how Tat Khalsa discourse was articulated and how it came to be widely accepted, almost as if a natural fact, by the Sikh public in the early twentieth century. Underwriting the Tat Khalsa's authoritative discourse were a series of factors: the colonial state, the British army, the collapse of customary culture and the new political configuration in the localities.

Sikhizing the Sikhs

The Singh Sabha intellectuals were deeply convinced that for Tat Khalsa thinking to gain ascendancy it was of paramount importance to transcend two denominators: the terrain of customary usages and undisciplined attitudes towards the human body. The ideology and practices associated with the former were believed to erode the autonomy of the faith, and the immense diversity in patterns of bodily etiquette (many Sikhs shaved their heads and others kept their hair unshorn), stalled the emergence of a corporate Sikh identity. To acquire a total acceptance for Tat Khalsa epistemology, it was deemed essential to reform and streamline rebellious elements that conflicted with its vision of the world. Only by accomplishing this task could the Khalsa step into the twentieth century, or so the representatives of the new elites believed. Usurping the generation of cultural meanings in the domain of customary culture and making Sikh modes of bodily etiquette more uniform can be said to constitute the historical and ideological axes of the Singh Sabha for over four decades.

The most notable features of customary culture in mid-century Punjab were: a repertoire of ubiquitous saints, pervasive beliefs concerning benign and malevolent spirits, witchcraft, divine intercession, the ability of saints long dead to work miracles, the need to heed omens and the boons of making a pilgrimage to the shrine of a saint. It hardly comes as a surprise that one of the

first cultural conventions to come under fire from the Sikh reformers was the wide-spread practice of worshipping popular saints like Sakhi Sarvar and Gugga Pir, described in detail in chapter two. In a polemical tract Giani Dit Singh, the foremost ideologue of the Tat Khalsa discourse, and probably the only major Singh Sabha leader who had first-hand knowledge of peasant religion, formulated the *raison d' être* for opposing the worship of Pir Sakhi Sarvar among the Sikhs.¹

An exploration of the tract's formulations, meaning and implications will be helpful in substantiating our argument. Written in verse, a forte of Dit Singh's, the tract is an exchange of views between a character styled Guru ka Singh and votaries of Sakhi Sarvar. The author portrays the former as fluent, articulate and aggressive and the latter as slow-witted, conventional and timid. Their respective positions on the worship of Sakhi Sarvar are made obvious through repetitious statements concerning ritual, belief and practices. Dit Singh's ire at the worship of the Sakhi Sarvar by the people of Punjab in general, and the Sikhs in particular, was based on four principal reasons. First, undertaking a pilgrimage to the Pir's shrine at Nigaha led to the intermixing of different religions and castes, resulting in the violation of social codes which proscribed such intermixture. Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus, Jats, Brahmans and Chamars all ate together freely during the period of pilgrimage and addressed each other as brothers. (It is ironic that Dit Singh, an untouchable himself, took to censuring inter-caste commensality). The fact that the pilgrims were guided by a Muslim Bharai was in Dit Singh's viewpoint even more reproachable. Second, the miracles worked by Sakhi Sarvar were hardly unique. Many commoners in the province without any supernatural endowments had succeeded in working similar miracles. Besides, in many instances Sarvar had failed to perform any miracles for the benefit of his disciples. Consequently, according to Dit Singh's vision of the world, the undistinguished saint was hardly worthy of worship. Third, the worship of Sakhi Sarvar denied belief in one omnipresent God. Fourth, since Sarvar was a Muslim, adherents of other faiths should not worship him. In the concluding sections of the tract Dit Singh sums up his advice for readers of his text:

¹Dit Singh, *Sultan Puāra*, Amritsar, first published, Lahore, 1896. Between 1896 and 1898 this work underwent three editions and a total of 2,000 copies were published. This was something of a publishing feat for the late nineteenth-century Punjab. Figures from *Khālsā Akhbār*, April 7, 1899, p. 8.

Sarvar was no Pir. He possessed no powers of miracle
Tales of his miracles are mere inventions to snare people.²

This wholesale philippic against Sarvar had a far reaching impact on Sikh consciousness. Its most dramatic manifestation is from the case of Dani, a Jat Sikh lady, who according to a popular legend was cured of barrenness as a result of Sarvar's blessings. Ironically, in the late nineteenth century, when the descendants of a son born to Dani through Sarvar's intercession read Dit Singh's invective against the Pir, it had such a profound impact on them, that they renounced allegiance to the family saint. Twenty-five out of the forty-five families claiming descent from Dani undertook the Khalsa baptism. Subsequently these newly initiated households addressed a letter of gratitude to Dit Singh, expressing an indebtedness to his writings for guiding them on to the right path.³ Dit Singh's barbed text was widely used by the Tat Khalsa publicists, who read from it at Sikh assemblies and apparently succeeded in convincing their audience of the futility of Sikhs following a Muslim pīr.⁴

Similar critiques were offered against Gugga Pir and other popular saints visited by large crowds, particularly to heal illness or seek boons.⁵ The authoritative discourse represented the worship of saints as a sign of credulity, superstition, sacrilege and above all un-Sikh behaviour.⁶ The thrust of the printed word against visiting pīrs, undertaking pilgrimage to their shrines or seeking their intercession for mundane affairs was matched by what may be called persistent eradication campaigns. Sabha activists undertook periodic tours of the countryside, particularly on the occasion of local festivals associated with the pīrs and admonished all those who had assembled to participate in the proceedings. One such campaign was reported in a newspaper in the winter of 1886 under the heading 'A Joyful News':

²Ibid., p.45.

³See *Khālsā Akhbār*, October 27, 1899, p.6.

⁴*Khālsā Akhbār*, July 29, 1898, p. 7.

⁵For Dit Singh's invective against Gugga Pir see his *Gugga Gapura*, Amritsar, 1976, first published, 1902.

⁶Such a position is for instance clearly enunciated in the *Khālsā Akhbār*, February 14, 1896, pp.6-7; March 6, 1896, p.6; July 14, 1899, p.7; July 22, 1898, p.8; October 27, 1899, p. 6; and *The Khalsa*, January 10, 1900, p. 3 and March 10, 1900, p. 8, and Bhai Attar Singh, *Bhauṁdū Sikh Parbaudh*, Amritsar, 1906, p. 3.

It is a matter of great gratification that Sabha members do not waste their time in frivolous activities. We have recently received news that on the occasion of the popular Gugga Naumi fair at village Kaudi in the Patiala state, Sabha activists spoke out against Gugga Pir and the holding of the fair. Among the Sabha members who canvassed public opinion at the fair we must name Jiwan Singh Chaudhri, Bhai Suchet Singh secretary Singh Sabha Rajpura, Bhai Ranjit Singh secretary Singh Sabha Dadupura and Chandan Singh a well known preacher. Through their incisive speeches they convinced thousands of peasants that Gugga was a mythical figure, purely a creature of imagination without any history. He need not be followed. Instead they should all worship one Akal Purakh [the immortal God], whose glory is inscribed in each and every word of the Adi Granth. The *Khālsā Akhbār* prays for the success of all those brave Sikhs who are earnestly trying to eradicate the evil customs prevailing in the community.⁷

The self-congratulatory tone of this report is highly revealing. Couched in a language of cultural superiority it clearly shows how the new elites were seeking to transform peasant religion. In the summer of 1896 Giani Thakar Singh,⁸ widely respected in the Majha belt for his piety and learning, prevailed on the entire Sikh population of village Sarli in the Amritsar district to renounce their age-old veneration for Pir Sakhi Sarvar. In a large public gathering, these former followers of Sakhi Sarvar were administered the pāhul and undertook to strictly adhere to the Khalsa code of conduct in the future.⁹

As well as undisguised hostility towards venerating pīrs, the Khalsa code entailed hostile polemic against all other forms of popular worship. Village gods, local shrines, ancestral spirits, holy nature spots, and devīs like the small-pox goddess Sitala were all ridiculed and proclaimed to be

⁷*Khālsā Akhbār*, 6 November, 1886, p. 7.

⁸Thakar Singh played a prominent role in the Singh Sabha affairs. A close associate of Bhai Mohan Singh Vaid and Giani Sardul Singh, he wrote several books on Sikh martyrs. In 1895 he helped found a Singh Sabha at village Dhotian in the Tam Taran tahsīl and in 1896 another one at Sivi. The Giani was instrumental in the spread of the newly introduced life-cycle rituals and convening innumerable mass assemblies to baptize Sikhs. Bhai Jodh Singh a leading Sikh theologian took pāhul from him. Thakar Singh was often a key speaker at the ritual proceedings organized by the Sikh army units.

⁹*Khālsa Akhbār*, July 24, 1896, p.6. For other campaigns organized against Sakhi Sarvar see the *Khālsā Akhbār*, July 22, 1898, pp. 8-9.

powerless.¹⁰ The new elites exhibited no keenness for understanding why many among the Sikh peasantry embraced these alternate forms of worship. Possibly the gap between elite and popular thinking had widened to such an extent that the question of understanding the rationale behind peasant religion did not even arise. As far as the elites were concerned, no multiple religious loyalties henceforth were to be permitted. All sacred devotion was to flow in only one direction: Sikh shrines. Bhai Vir Singh a leading Sabha personality aptly summed up this new thinking in his first Punjabi novel *Sundarī* published in 1898:

Look at yourself and see whether or not the decline of the Sikh nation is caused by your very own hands. Leaving your God and your true Gurus, you worship stones, trees, idols, tombs and saints. Forgetting Sikh religion, you rot in another religion. Turning your back on the true Gurus you teach someone else's religion to your offspring too. Your children will grow to be half baked like you- Sikh on the head, Brahmin around the neck and Muslim below the waist.¹¹

Similarly, attendance at seasonal agrarian fairs, listening to folk songs, singing licentious songs by females (particularly in the days preceding a wedding) - elements that were responsible for popular creativity and solidarity - invited the censure of the new elites. These forms of popular entertainment were judged to be immoral, backward, obscene, evil, wasteful, archaic and a mockery of pious sentiments.¹² Festivities in the rural tracts were an integral part of the life of the peasantry. These calendrical periods reflected the rhythms of an agrarian life. But now they were viewed by a section of the society as occasions for uncontrollable bouts of drunkenness, indecent

¹⁰For an articulate statement on these lines see Dit Singh, *Naklī Sikh Prabaudh*, Amritsar, 1974, reprint, first published, Lahore, 1895, particularly pp. 19, 32, 58, 96-97 and 107-108. A similar position is represented in a dialogue between two females published in the *Khālsā Akhbār*, October 30, 1886, pp.4-6. For articles specifically critical of Sitala goddess and festivities in her honour see *Khālsā Akhbār*, July 1, 1887, pp.7-8; November 3, 1888, p.6 and April 14, 1898, p. 8. Also see an anti-Sitala speech delivered by Sant Jowala Singh before a Sikh audience in Rawalpindi, reported in the *Khālsā Akhbār*, October 7, 1898, p. 7.

¹¹*Sundarī*, Amritsar, 1972, quotation translated by S.S. Dulai "The Political Novel in Panjabi", in Yogendara Malik, *Politics and the Novel in India*, Leiden, 1975, p. 51.

¹²For Tat Khalsa's objections against melās or seasonal fairs and singing of folk legends like that of Hir-Ranjha, Mirza-Sahiban see Giani Dit Singh, *Gugga Gapura*, pp. 32-33.

displays, eve-teasing and other forms of deviant and even criminal behaviour. Since a large number of these festivities were inextricably linked to life-cycle anniversaries of local saints and deities, the reformers further viewed them as tilting the balance of religiosity against the canons of the Sikh great tradition. Many Sabhas despatched paid missionaries and their office-holders to the sites of these rural fairs with the aim of 'educating' and 'reforming' the erring peasantry in attendance.¹³ Pilgrimage to festivities on the banks of holy rivers, undertaken by a wide variety of people at the time of certain solar eclipses considered auspicious, did not have the approval of the Tat Khalsa.¹⁴

Intolerance towards popular festivities and pilgrimages was matched by an equally vehement disdain for customary forms of family entertainment: song, dance and music. It was as if the disciplinary logic that first impelled the invasion of public space subsequently led to the seizure of private space. Narain Singh Nanda, a contemporary reformer, voices part of the background and rationale that prompted the zeal against household entertainment:

In this moment of general reawakening earnest efforts are afoot to rid the community of all those unhealthy customs that have so far prevented our progress. It is also my aim and duty to do something in support of these reforms. We notice that at the time of weddings all females, young and old, start singing such deplorable songs that they would put even the devil to shame. The Bhands [popular entertainers] who are notorious for using abuse and obscenities in their performances would find it hard to compete with the shameless language of these songs. What is amazing is that these lewd compositions are sung by the females in the presence of their male kin and family patriarch, in front of whom they would normally go veiled ... This despicable behaviour is most regrettable and reformers must take urgent steps to stop these bawdy songs.¹⁵

The reformers amongst the new elites were unhappy with the fusion of gaiety, abandonment and the occasional ritual inversions through female speech acts aimed at male domination. In their blueprint for a new culture they sought

¹³See *Khālsā Akhbār*, October 1, 1887, pp. 3-4. In 1887 the members of the Daudpur and Rajpura Singh Sabhas collectively proceeded to a village in the Khanna *tahsil*, where a fair was held in the honour of Gugga Pir, and remonstrated the public for attending the festivities.

¹⁴See Hari Singh, *Bijai Mukht Dharam Sāstar*, Lahore, 1901, pp. 373-75.

¹⁵*Khālsā Akhbār*, August 28, 1886, p. 2.

to replace these Rabelaisian features by puritanism, asceticism and restraint - characteristics that in due course were to become the hall-mark of the Tat Khalsa. The similarities with what Weber called 'this worldly asceticism' are strikingly obvious. The reformists also vigorously attacked as un-Sikh such long-established practices as consulting astrologers, casting horoscopes, belief in omens and divination, and receiving charms and amulets.¹⁶ According to them these practices had absolutely no sanction in the Sikh sacred scriptures and had only contributed towards the Hinduization of the Sikhs. In a peasant society astrology, divination and charms act as a science of forewarning, providing protection against malevolent forces and securing good physical and psychological health. But in the rhetoric of the reformers astrology performed no useful function and was merely one more instance of debilitating Hindu superstitions. Kahn Singh, the most erudite among the Tat Khalsa thinkers, in an essay on Sikh tenets, fulminated against all sorts of superstitions among the Sikhs and backed his polemics with an extensive passage from the influential writings of Bhai Gurdas (1587-1636):

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 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 superstition obtain happiness and salvation.¹⁷

The Tat Khalsa were particularly bitter about any custom that even remotely smacked of Hinduism and quite often anything that did not strike their fancy could be easily relegated to that blanket label Hindu. Belief in omens and astrology thus became one more instance of Hindu influence. Such labelling climaxed in the long run with the category Hindu becoming a term of opprobrium in the Sabha's literature.

¹⁶For this see Hari Singh, *op.cit.*, pp. 375-378 and Bhai Gurmukh Singh Updeshak, *Vihār Sudhār*, Lahore, 1910, p. 3-4.

¹⁷Sardar Kahn Singh, "Some Light on Sikh Tenets", in M.Macauliffe et al, *The Sikh Religion*, Calcutta, 1958, p. 152.

One other prominent feature of customary culture - ritual fasting - invited the repeated censure of the intolerant reformers.¹⁸ It was fairly common among females from a wide spectrum of socio-economic backgrounds to undertake fasting at calenderical intervals, particularly at the time of *aštami* (the eighth day in the bright fortnight of the Indian lunisolar calendar), *ekadaśī* (the eleventh day in the bright fortnight) and *puranmaśī* (full moon). A great majority of unmarried women often fasted with the aim of securing a good husband and among married women the convention was adhered to for the general welfare of their husbands. Fasts were also undertaken on the fulfilment of a vow. At the close of the last century the Tat Khalsa leadership declared fasting to be anti-Sikh and one reformer even went so far as to suggest that women who fasted ought to be thrown out of their homes.¹⁹ While this extreme advice does not appear to have attracted any serious attention, fasting was increasingly viewed with great hostility, particularly by men.

In displacing folk practices of magic, worship and entertainment, the Tat Khalsa were not aiming at the creation of a secular society, where questions of religious allegiance would become a matter of individual choice, but at redefining the entire phenomenology of Sikhism and what it implied to be a part of that tradition. The religious practices and idioms sponsored by the new elites were not purely modern innovations, but often a complex reordering of cultural equipment whereby certain segments of the tradition were dismantled, while others were reasserted. It is this process of conscious selection and disaggregation of the complex web of tradition which must be emphasised and explained, for the selected tradition unquestionably provided the key features in the construction of the neo-Sikh moral community and its social definitions. The Tat Khalsa was not interested in contesting the practice of worship per se, but only wanted the faithful to abjure worshipping popular saints. The Sabha's polemics were not directed against the sacred, but only demanded the reconstitution of the sacred. Clearly this was no simple passage from tradition to modernity, as is often stated in the historical literature, but a highly complex cultural process marked by continuities, antinomies and unresolved tensions.

¹⁸For outright pronouncement against fasting see *Panch Khālsā Rahit Nāmā*, Bhasaur, 1907, p. 21.

¹⁹Bhai Attar Singh, *Bhauṁdū Sikh Parbaudh*, Amritsar, 1906, pp. 3-4.

Despite the great ambiguity and diversity in this process of religious reaggregation, it is possible to provide a general account of religious systematisation under the Tat Khalsa. Three core doctrines - Guru, Granth and Gurdwara - that may be simply called the three G's became the foci of neo-Sikhism. The three G's became the litmus test of what came to be considered as genuine Sikh practices. The standing of a Guru in Sikh history has been a perennial problem and a source of considerable discord. While Guru Nanak, the initiator of the tradition, was able to ensure the continuity of his teachings by choosing a successor to his position, this measure also paved the way for an endemic controversy among future contenders. Successions are rarely peaceful when the inheritance of resources is at stake. Although the Sikh orthodox tradition takes a particular pride in proclaiming a distinct line of nine sacred masters succeeding Nanak, it is remarkable that none of them attained their rank uncontested. There was always a melee of rival claimants to this august seat of religious authority. Even when Gobind Singh the tenth Guru is said to have finally put an end to the institution of human Gurus, there never was a lack of candidates who went on claiming the Guruship. From the orthodox viewpoint such claims were heretical and destructive of communal solidarity, but all the same they received ample public support. Thus in mid-century Punjab, besides the well known instance of Bhai Ram Singh who was seen by many as a successor of the Sikh Gurus, there were also many lesser known men from a plethora of Guru lineages who staked claims to a similar status. The followers of Baba Khem Singh Bedi often spoke of him as the thirteenth Nanak.

In virtually all agrarian societies where the bulk of the population is daily engaged in a gruelling struggle for livelihood, there will be a class of religious virtuosi (to borrow a word from Max Weber signifying full-time religious personnel), who need not dirty their hands with profane pursuits. It is to this group of sacred specialists endowed with a high degree of holiness, purity and charisma, that the mass of the people turn for spiritual edification and divine intercession. The Tat Khalsa intellectuals were not prepared to look at these religious virtuosi with the Weberian logic of the division of labour. Since all mortals were in their eyes endowed with the same human attributes it was sacreligious to elevate some persons to a superior religious status and worship them. Only God and his ten worldly messengers were worthy of such special

attention. Repeatedly the Tat Khalsa leadership drove this point home through speeches, texts and public campaigns.²⁰

The universalistic ethic in the teachings of the Sikh Gurus, together with what I have called the anti-structural pole of Sikhism, helped legitimize, at least momentarily, their offensive against all those who claimed to be gurus and the individuals who supported such claims. But in the long run the tension between the egalitarian thrust of Sikhism and the prophetic figures claiming guruship remained unresolved, as noted in the following chapter.

An interdiction on following living gurus was acceptable as a theological principle, but how were people to cope with the woes of mundane life? An abstract universalistic God was too distant and the Sikh Gurus were not accessible to intercede directly on behalf of their followers. The Tat Khalsa solution to this dilemma was simple and in line with an evolving theological principle: the *Ādi Granth* as a sacred repository containing the writings of the Sikh Gurus could perform all the functions of not only the religious virtuosi, but also of exorcists, medical personnel and other rural healers. In any human emergency a person could now turn to the magic of the *Granth*. Sardul Singh, a leading *giani* of Amritsar and a well-known Sabha activist compiled a sort of trouble-shooting manual listing 270 verses mostly from the *Ādi Granth*.²¹ Each verse was endowed with a special power, much like a *mantra*. The incantation of some ensured the fulfilment of a wish, others contributed to success in a new venture and still others could be invoked for general welfare. A brief inventory of what could be attained through the incantation of verses reflects the mode in which the *Granth* came to be perceived at the close of last century. The recitation of verses from the Sikh scripture, with special attention to ritual propriety, led to curing sickness, wounds, aches and melancholy, overcoming poisonous snake bites, helping acquire fame, wealth, political office, education and will power, assisting in the defeat of enemies, gaining victory in fights and court cases; making profit in trade and agriculture; inducing rainfall, negating

²⁰For an early elaboration of this view point supported by verses from the *Ādi Granth* see *Khālsā Akhbār*, 19 February, 1887, p. 3 and 9 April, 1887, p. 5.

²¹Sardul Singh compiled, *Sardhā Pūran*, Amritsar, 1905, 2nd edition, first published 1891. The author attributes the text to the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh. This was of course an unfounded assertion and certainly put forward to enhance the legitimacy and sacred power of the work.

karma and unlucky astral combinations, overcoming the fear of *bhūts*, *churels*, *dains* and nightmares, securing release from prison, locating lost items, defending oneself against the wiles of women, making a proper and blissful connubial arrangement and controlling one's spouse.²² This is only a small sample of the power of the sacred words. Virtually anything could be done or attained by a ritual incantation.

Sardul Singh's text is excellent evidence of the changes being wrought by the Singh Sabha reformers. It signalled the call for Sikh withdrawal from sacred sources seen as belonging to others - Muslims, Hindus or customary culture. Above all the reformers wanted Sikhs to renounce what they thought were paramountly Hindu conventions: visiting shamans, undertaking pilgrimages to sacred rivers, believing in human gurus, worshipping goddesses like Sitala. Only by ceasing these customs -or so the Singh Sabha preachers informed their public - could Sikhs be true to their faith and shine in their pristine purity. The Tat Khalsa must look for sustenance and solutions within the Sikh scripturalist tradition and not be contaminated by the shadow of Hindu beliefs or acts. It was argued that those who looked for external aid were apostates. In the Tat Khalsa view of the world the Granth was the rightful heir of the ten Sikh Gurus.²³ It took precedence over all other sacred texts: Vedas, Gitā, Purāṇas and even the Dasam Granth. It also surpassed all kinds of diviners and their skills to work miracles: saints, bhaīs and members of the Guru lineages. The changing perceptions of the Ādi Granth are reflected in a popular novel by Bhai Vir Singh, a prominent Sabha intellectual.²⁴ It records an episode where a reading from the Sikh scripture leads to the desired objective of stopping incessant rainfall. In future, as discussed in section two of this chapter, the Granth was to play a key role in all the life-cycle rituals. Two of the leading contemporary newspapers - the *Khālsā Akhbār* and the *Khālsā Samāchār* - devoted a whole page virtually every week to the teachings of the

²²Ibid., pp.267-287.

²³This principle was constantly reiterated in innumerable articles in contemporary newspapers and was invariably backed by a dictum from the Sikh ardās: 'By the Command of the Timeless Creator, was the Panth promulgated/ All Sikhs are hereby commanded to own the Granth as their Guru'. The same position was advanced in Bhai Thakur Singh Giani, *Gurmat Amrit Prakaś*, Amritsar, 1899.

²⁴Vir Singh, *Bābā Naudh Singh*, Amritsar, 1968, first serialized from 1917 to 1921, p. 28.

Granth. In 1895 the Singh Sabha Khumanno choose the Ādi Granth to be its president.²⁵

The ten Sikh Gurus and the Granth became the centre of the Tat Khalsa universe. An editorial in the leading organ of the Tat Khalsa, the *Khālsā Akhbār*, asked its readers: 'Will the Beloved of the Khalsa Oaum, the firm followers of the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, ever accept any one else as a Guru except the ten Gurus and the Ādi Granth?'. The answer was 'Never'.²⁶

From this point it was only a short step towards the reconstitution of Sikh sacred space, for if the Granth was such a powerful device it could hardly be housed in any ordinary or (according to the Tat Khalsa) polluted space. The centrality of the Sikh Gurus and the unrivalled status of the Granth had been intermittently mulled over in the pre-Singh Sabha period, though never systematized in the way the Tat Khalsa proceeded to do. But redrawing the sacred boundaries of the Sikh shrines had never before been on the agenda of any reformers and perhaps this marked one of the most significant departures from existing conventions.

In the early 1880s the Tat Khalsa earnestly began to reconstitute sacred space by boldly initiating three measures: first, a campaign against certain seasonal fairs held within the precincts of the Sikh shrines; second, the removal of non-Sikh icons from the Sikh sacred centres and finally, making a strident call for the reform of the temple management and insisting that only persons of known piety and unblemished character be employed as shrine staff. Each of these initiatives that radically altered Sikh sacred boundaries and signalled the start of the Tat Khalsa control over sacred space, can be illustrated with examples.

A major Sikh shrine in the *tahsīl* of Tarn Taran had become the site of a popular monthly fair, widely known in local parlance as *Masyā dā melā*. For the Jat Sikh peasantry of the Majha it blended entertainment, trading and religious devotion into one ritual occasion. But for the Tat Khalsa reformers it represented vulgar displays, eve-teasing, prostitution, crime and ultimately the

²⁵*Khālsā Akhbār*, August 16, 1895, p. 7.

²⁶*Khālsā Akhbār*, April 9, 1887, p. 5.

pollution of sacred space.²⁷ The Tarn Taran Singh Sabha, backed by other Sabhas in the province launched a concerted campaign to wipe out the fair from the calendar of local festivities and restore the sanctity of the sacred precincts. An annual report on the Sabha's activities vividly captures misgivings about the fair and the landscape it was seeking to uproot:

In the Tarn Taran gurdwara a highly repugnant and distressing custom could be observed every month at the time of Masya [the last day of the dark fortnight in the lunar calendar]. The notorious Masya fair at this shrine was rated among the most immoral gatherings in the whole of the Punjab. On the appointed day of the festivities drunks freely roamed around the sacred precincts making a 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. People were invariably jostled, pushed and robbed. Violent brawls a common feature at the fair resulted in many people receiving serious injuries. And finally in front of the holy shrine's main gateway prostitutes freely danced and sang vulgar songs.²⁸

Having graphically portrayed what it considered as depraved conditions, the report went on to highlight the Sabha's success in rectifying the situation:

At last after a series of campaigns and a great deal of exertion the fair at the Tarn Taran shrine was reformed and made credible. The sacred precincts that were once crowded with unworthy people, were turned into a site for religious congregations and devotional singing by parties of pious Sikhs. The profane sentiments widely exhibited on the occasion were substantially reduced. The drive for reform succeeded in purging the troublesome and abhorrent Masya fairs and turned them into a useful ground for the dissemination of authentic Sikh values. Also, the temple precincts that were lined up with shops and businesses at the time of the fair, were removed. These commercial enterprises a source of income for the local municipality used to soil the temple grounds.²⁹

The long-running campaign for reconstructing sacred space also resulted in close attention being given to what was on display within the Sikh shrines. Tat Khalsa leadership was quick to perceive that visually and symbolically Sikh

²⁷For an early note on these lines see *Khālsā Akhbār*, August 21, 1886, p. 2.

²⁸*Sankhep Ripaurṭ Ate Niyam Upniyam*, Tarn Taran, 1937, p. 6.

²⁹Ibid.

temples did not reflect the doctrines elaborated by them.³⁰ For instance, anyone walking around the Golden Temple would come across a motley of idols near the steps of the sacred tank that represented non-Sikh deities. Close to a popular spot within the shrine called Dujkh Bhajani Di Beri a painting represented Guru Gobind Singh attending the Devi (a female goddess) with an outstretched hand, waiting to receive a double-edged sword from her.³¹ In the opening decades of the present century a heated campaign in the defence of their removal indicates the Tat Khalsa's great passion for sacred space, a feature that in many respects laid the foundations of the Akali movement of the 1920s. As early as the 1880s the Singh Sabha representatives condemned a move by the manager of the Golden Temple to install the idols of the Sikh Gurus outside the main entrance to this most holy of Sikh shrines.³² The temple management, frightened by the prospects of public controversy quickly dropped the plan.

In later times, whenever rumours circulated suggesting that the shrine personnel were keen on installing idols, the Tat Khalsa was quick to point out how such a move would constitute a gross transgression of Sikh doctrines. The constant avowal of iconoclasm in the Sabha's literature and a growing sentiment favouring a distinct Sikh identity, appears to have contributed to a change of heart, at least among a few of the temple administrators. On the 2nd of May 1905, Arur Singh the headstrong manager of the Golden Temple ordered the removal of a large number of idols from its precincts. This single measure precipitated a fierce public controversy all over the province with members of the Singh Sabha, the Arya Samaj, the Brahmo Samaj and several other key socio-religious organizations which leapt into the fray. In addition, the general public, particularly the Sikh soldiers, exhibited a keen interest in the lively proceedings.

In less than a month, two distinct positions crystallized over the idol controversy: one side supported Arur Singh and the other chose to vilify him. The Tat Khalsa aligned with the temple manager and advanced a series of reasons for backing his fiat. These merit close attention if the changing vision

³⁰ See *Khālsā Akhbār*, March 12, 1887, pp. 4-5 and March 5, 1897, pp. 7-8.

³¹ *Khālsā Akhbār*, February 12, 1897, pp. 6-7 and March 5, 1897, p.5. For Guru Gobind Singh's possible associations with a Devi cult see W.H. McLeod, *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*, Oxford, 1976, pp. 13-14.

³² *Khālsā Akhbār*, January 29, 1887, p.1.

and constitution of sacred space among the Sikhs is to be firmly understood.³³ First, it was argued that it was for Sikhs to decide what they did with their sacred shrines. Members of other religious communities had no logical, historical or moral right to dictate to Sikhs on how they should conduct their affairs. The Tat Khalsa were particularly incensed by what was generally seen to be Hindu interference and more particularly Arya Samaj meddling in Sikh affairs. The motives of Samaj spokesmen who argued for the retention of the idols within the shrine were highly suspect, because on earlier occasions when their own members had ventured to trample or smash idols, there was no outcry against their profaning activities. Second, there was no place for idol worship in the teachings of the Sikh gurus. Third, it was stated that when anti-Sikh forces raided the shrine in the past, only Sikh blood was shed in great abundance to preserve its sanctity. Also, it was Sikh resources and wealth that went into the making of this magnificent temple. A writer for the weekly paper *Khālsā Samāchār* summed up the Tat Khalsa's fears; had Arur Singh not acted in time, the shrine's space would have soon been pressed into performing Arya Samaj rituals, carrying out atheist propaganda and staging all sorts of public entertainment.³⁴ Clearly, for the Tat Khalsa far more was at stake in the removal of the idols than the right of a few to worship these images. The neo-Sikhs were fighting one of their first public battles for the eventual take-over of the entire temple space and its resources.

Those opposed to the Tat Khalsa position (the Arya Samaj protagonists occupied the front ranks), were equally ingenious in their arguments. First, they stated that the idols had been in the temple from the time of its inception. Even under the Sikh misls and the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh no one had demanded their removal. Therefore, it was an established custom to house idols within the Golden Temple precincts. Second, a vast majority of Sikhs staunchly believed in idol-worship and it would have been contrary to their religious rights to take away images. And finally, such a move, it was claimed, would seriously harm Hindu-Sikh relations in the province. When mere

³³The following arguments and counter-arguments are based on articles in the *Khālsā Samāchār*, particularly see the following issues: May 24 1905, pp.3-7; May 31, 1905, pp.3-5; June 7, 1905, pp.1-3; June 14, 1905, pp.3-5; June 21, 1905, pp.3-7; July 5, 1905, pp.3-5; July 26, 1905, pp.3-6; August 2, 1905, p. 12 and August 23, 1905, pp. 3-4.

³⁴ June 21, 1905, p. 4.

polemic did not prove sufficient in settling the dispute, the pro-idol publicists despatched a petition to the British administration, affixed with 13,000 signatures asking for the retention of the idols. Simultaneously an eleven member delegation waited on the Maharaja of Nabha to request his help in reversing the decision, but he appears to have ruled out any direct intervention.³⁵

Although the issue was finally resolved in the winter of 1905 in favour of Arur Singh, something of a foregone conclusion given the changing nature of contemporary Sikhism, the controversy further embittered Hindu-Sikh relations and led Sikhs to demarcate their sacred boundaries in a way they had never done in the past. This acrimonious public debate on the idol-question signalled a growing interest among the Sikh populace in issues related to sacredness and the control of temple space. The Rikabganj movement in the second decade of the twentieth century which protested against the demolition of a shrine wall in New-Delhi was a direct outgrowth of this increasing concern with sacred space.

The interest in the outward form of the Sikh shrines also entailed a close scrutiny of what was happening inside them. The British administration, despite its professed commitment under Act XX of 1863 to stay aloof from the management of the shrines, was wary of risking unmediated Sikh control over their central sacred resource. As a result, officialdom instituted a committee made up of loyal Sikhs, and, following a precedent set up by Maharaja Ranjit Singh, appointed a manager to supervise the day-to-day affairs of the Golden Temple. The deputy commissioner of the Amritsar district was supposed to take an active interest in what was happening at the shrine and to commend the manager and other committee members to the provincial government.³⁶ But the arrangement proved unsatisfactory, in particular because it often provoked bitter conflicts between the management and the temple staff over the distribution of the offerings and the appointment of new personnel. The Tat Khalsa ideologues did not like these bickerings, which often turned into lengthy court cases and brought a bad name to the community and harmed the sanctity of

³⁵*Khālsā Samāchār*, June 7, 1905, p. 3.

³⁶Background in Ian J.Kerr, "British Relationships with the Golden Temple", *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 21, 1984, p. 139-151.

their premier shrine.³⁷ To rectify this unsavoury situation, many of the Tat Khalsa began to demand public accountability from both the management and the temple staff.³⁸ Papers like the *Khālsā Akhbār* gave ample coverage to the internal management of the Golden Temple and proposed in their editorials that only Sikhs who were true to the rahit be allowed to have a say in its management committee.

We appeal before the Khalsa community and the government that the present committee for the management of the Golden Temple is neither based on the principles of the Khalsa panth nor on government legislation. If this committee was constituted on the basis of the Khalsa religion, then its membership would have been made up of only the Khalsa. But at the present this is not the case as Raja Harbans Singh a committee member is a Hindu, who professes beliefs contrary to that of a Khalsa, for instance idol worship. Similarly the deputy commissioner another committee member is a Christian. What benefit can accrue to the Khalsa community from having a Hindu Raja and a Christian deputy commissioner on the management body of its shrine? It is rather ironic that the gurdwara belongs to the community but its management is presided over by a deputy commissioner ... As pointed out previously the setting up of such a committee is in contravention of government legislation. The administration is not supposed to interfere in religious matters. Yet, a government official has been appointed as the president of a Khalsa gurdwara ... Therefore we implore both the Khalsa community and the administration that this committee be improved and reconstituted. Oh Khalsa! When will you wake up to your religious duties? Do you not care for your sacred shrines?³⁹

In the mid-1880s these were novel demands, running the major temples had always been the prerogative of the rulers and not the ruled. Both the government and the manager were, to put it mildly, hardly pleased with the far reaching implications spelled out by such radical-sounding demands as direct Sikh control over Sikh sacred space. The administration could do little to prevent such stirrings because its own rules encouraged religious communities to run their own establishments. The seeds for the future reconstitution of the

³⁷ See *Khālsā Akhbār*, August 11, 1888, pp. 5-6.

³⁸ See *Khālsā Akhbār*, October 2, 1886, pp. 3-5; November 20, 1886, pp. 3-5; December 4, 1886, pp. 5-7 and December 1, 1886, pp. 4-7.

³⁹ *Khālsā Akhbār*, January 1, 1887, pp. 3-5. For similar demands also see the following issues: September 4, 1886, p.7; November 27, 1886, pp. 4-5 and January 8, 1887, pp. 3-4.

Golden Temple management and that of other major shrines were sown in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and it was only a matter of time before the Tat Khalsa would wage an all-out battle to push out what it saw as a corrupt, irresponsible and Sanatan religious establishment.

The foundation and the tremendous expansion of the Singh Sabhas all over the Punjab, each freely conducting ritual services and often constructing new temples, had firmly established a subterranean principle: the Sikh public was fully qualified to handle the extraordinary power of the sacred and manage its manifestation in the form of holy shrines. In fact the power of the sacred was greatly enhanced if it was properly administered. There was no space for special ritual intermediaries in Sikh theology and the Tat Khalsa took great pains to confirm this doctrine through its practice of conducting ritual services and its oft-repeated rhetoric that all Sikhs have a right over the community's sacred resources.

To sum up so far: the Tat Khalsa's sustained campaign for reconstituting sacred space established an unprecedented nexus between the Sikhs and their shrines. Formerly, sacred space for the Sikhs had been highly diffuse and encompassed village sacred spots, tombs of pīrs, establishments of sundry holy men and a wide variety of other religious centres. The Tat Khalsa initiative put an end to this diffuse former state and sacred space came to be concentrated solely in Sikh shrines. By directing all sacred resources into Sikh temples the Tat Khalsa made the gurdwaras into Sikh corporate symbols *par excellence*. Such a fundamental transformation obviously also led to changes in the popular conceptions of pilgrimage and devotion. It came to be considered impious and heretical to visit non-Sikh sacred establishments. The pilgrimage to the shrines of Sakhi Sarvar, once highly popular among the Sikhs, was now taboo and those who continued with it had to do so surreptitiously. All boons could now be acquired by visiting the gurdwaras, particularly the Golden Temple. Add to these changes the repeated emphasis on the doctrine of the Gurus and the Granth and it becomes easy to see how the Tat Khalsa were busy writing a new vocabulary, grammar and syntax for Sikhism. In order to be what British officials were fond of describing as an authentic Sikh, it became mandatory to adhere to the G trinity.

The Struggle Over the Appropriation of the Body and *Rites de Passage*

It may be said of most religions that they have been concerned not only with the spiritual elevation of their adherents but also with the regimen of their bodies. The human body is an immensely rich cultural resource, often pressed into service by religions to represent fundamental doctrines and communicate spiritual precepts and behavioural codes through the imposition of rules governing bodily denial and indulgence. 'The body', writes Turner 'is a site of enormous symbolic work and symbolic production. Its deformities are stigmatic and stigmatizing, while at the same time its perfections, culturally defined, are objects of praise and admiration ... our body maintenance creates social bonds, expresses social relations and reaffirms or denies them'.⁴⁰ Ideologies and ideological control aimed at social cohesion work not purely at the level of consciousness but also embrace the management of bodies in their discursive ambit. The conjunction of body and ideology at one level creates complex webs of power relations and at another level endows religious communities with an ensemble of enduring symbols. Most importantly, control over the body is part of a social, political and religious struggle. Put another way, the body is both the site of conserving power and an instrument of rebelling against those power relationships.

In Sikh tradition, at least from the time of Gobind Singh, efforts have been afoot to employ the body as a powerful symbolic system reflecting Sikh beliefs and ideals. But for almost two centuries after 1699, the date on which the idealized version of the Khalsa is said to have been inaugurated (the one with the five external symbols of the faith), no single doctrine on body management can be said to have attained complete hegemony within Sikhism. As previously argued in chapter four, those who did not maintain the external symbols of the faith and those who did had virtually equal rights to call themselves Sikhs. It was left to the Singh Sabha and its main protagonists, the Tat Khalsa, to change the equilibrium between Khalsa and non-Khalsa appearance and to reconstruct the environment of the body, making it into the single most important symbolic expression of corporate Sikhism. This

⁴⁰Bryan S. Turner, *The Body and Society*, Oxford, 1984, pp. 190-191.

transformation was achieved by rigidly enforcing the external symbols and codifying life-cycle rituals.

Fortunately for the Singh Sabha, sometime in the nineteenth century (or possibly in the eighteenth), there emerged an extensive body of literature called the *rahit-nāmās* or manuals of conduct. Although very little is known about their exact origins, their authorship or the nature of their audience, one central theme in this literature was a repeated emphasis on purging the Sikh tradition of what were considered non-Sikh practices.⁴¹ The Sabha leadership, keen on strengthening the Sikh ethnographic insignia, further consolidated the *rahit-nāmā* tradition by arguing that only those individuals who upheld the *rahit* injunctions, particularly the rules on external appearance and the Khalsa initiation, had the right to call themselves Sikhs.

Since such a claim was hard to prove historically (those who had refrained from maintaining the five symbols and not undergone the Khalsa initiation had been equally called Sikhs), the Tat Khalsa encouraged the rewriting of history. This was done through two kinds of texts - histories of martyrs and historical fiction. In popular biographies written in Gurmukhi and often distributed free of charge by a growing set of Sikh cultural associations, Sikh heroic figures from the eighteenth century were shown to have been punished, tortured and killed for desiring to retain their cultural markers.⁴² With the aid of the printing press, the names of the Sikh martyrs - Bhai Tara Singh, Bhai Mani Singh, Bhai Bota Singh, Sardar Mahtab Singh, Bhai Taru Singh, Sardar Subeg Singh, Baba Dip Singh and Baba Gurbaksh Singh - became household names among the Sikh families in the province. Martial bravery was the most salient of the meanings generated by such tales of martyrdom, but underneath their bloody surface lay a corpus of multivocal

⁴¹For a historical survey of this literature see the seminal article by W.H.McLeod, "The Problem of Panjabi *rahit-nāmās*", in S.N. Mukherjee ed., *India, History and Thought. Essays in Honour of A.L.Basham*, Calcutta, 1982, pp. 103-126.

⁴²N.G.Barrier who has extensively studied and documented the vernacular literature of the period under study notes : 'Sikh writers and societies published hundreds of poems and short accounts on how Sikhs had suffered under Muslim rule (the term generally used was *Muslim*, not Mughal). The detailed and frequently gory accounts must have had a lingering psychological effect on a generation without first hand contact with pre-British Punjab.' See his *The Sikhs and their Literature*, Delhi, 1970, p.xxxviii.

signata , conveying among other things the ideal Sikh modes of bodily comportement.

The life history of Bhai Taru Singh, as narrated in a work on Sikh martyrs written by Bhagat Lakshman Singh, a prominent Singh Sabha publicist, is particularly instructive in understanding the causes for which the biographies of the martyrs were being enlisted. According to his biographer Bhai Taru Singh lived in the eighteenth century when the Mughal rulers did not allow Sikhs the freedom to practice their religion. 'They [the Sikhs] were declared outlaws. Their heads were sold like tigers, wolves and snakes'.⁴³ During this oppressive period, Bhai Taru Singh, a pious Sikh, incurred the enmity of a Khatri resident of his village who betrayed him to the authorities. The Bhai was soon after taken to Lahore, the provincial capital, where his steadfast efforts to defend his faith earned him the wrath of the governor, who ordered that the Bhai's head be clean shaven. Having stated the context of the Bhai's persecution, Lakshman Singh concludes:

So the *keshas* (long hair) of a Khalsa were the *keshas* of the Rishis [sages] of old. They were an emblem of all the glory that had attached for ages to the name of the Rishi. To part with the *keshas* was to part with this emblem, which reminded the Khalsa of their high origin, and of the lofty ideals which their noble progenitors had loved to live up to. Now Bhai Taru Singh was a true Khalsa, thoroughly imbued with the spirit of the age. He could not submit to the insult. The Subah's [governor's] minions pinioned him and caught hold of his head and the chin; but the barber found it difficult to bring his hand near the Bhai. With one shake of his head, he would push back his assailants and make them whirl on the ground like so many tops. A shoemaker was then sent for, to try his skill with his tools and scrape off the Bhai's head; but he, too, proved a failure. At last the services of a carpenter were requisitioned for the fell deed. With one stroke of his adze, he cut off Bhai Taru Singh's head which was triumphantly exhibited throughout the town.⁴⁴

The messages embedded in such didactic literature were simple and straightforward: if the Sikhs in the eighteenth century could uphold their five k's, even when they had to lay down their lives in their defence, why should contemporary Sikhs lack the will to follow their illustrious forefathers. Only those who stuck to the glorious heritage of the heroic epoch deserved to be

⁴³Bhagat Lakshman Singh, *Sikh Martyrs*, Madras, n.d., p. 114.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 147-148.

called Sikhs. In other words those who were minus the five k's - for instance the Udasis, the Nirmalas and the Sahajdharis - were not Sikhs. They had failed to live up to the high standards of the past and therefore should be stripped of their rights to community membership.

The martyr's blood provided the Tat Khalsa with an unlimited potential to recast the facade of Sikhism in a form highly desirable in the nineteenth century. In the novel (a genre imported from Europe), they discovered a dramatic medium to relay their rearranged historical transcripts to the Sikh public. Bhai Vir Singh, a leading figure of Punjabi letters, was the first master craftsman to employ the structure of the new literary form to further the Singh Sabha's ideology. He devoted all his four novels - *Sundarī* (1890), *Bijay Singh* (1899), *Satwant Kaur* (1900), and *Bāba Naudh Singh* (serialized from October 1917 to December 1921), to the propagation of the Sikh code of conduct, in particular the initiatory rite and the five appurtenances. The first three are located in the eighteenth century and the last in the British Punjab, but each was written as if it was a history of the Sikhs.

Like the popular tracts before, the nineteenth century novels of Bhai Vir Singh are aimed at recording how the Sikhs suffered in defence of their unique identity. Page after page of his fiction is packed with gruesome details of torture, executions, the slaying of children and the live roasting of Sikhs. The eighteenth century remnants of the Mughal state are shown to be bent on destroying the external symbols of Sikhism, while the Sikhs are ever willing to sacrifice anything in order to uphold them. Only through such deep allegiance to their external symbols, Vir Singh seems to be arguing, did the Sikhs manage to survive the eighteenth century. A similar dedication to the overt signs of the faith was demanded of his readership at the turn of the nineteenth century, to ensure the continued survival of corporate Sikhism.

In all four of Bhai Vir Singh's widely-read novels, there is enacted the Khalsa ceremony of pāhul. For instance Bijay Singh the hero of the second novel was a convert from Hinduism. Greatly touched by the heroic deeds and distinctive valour of the Sikhs, he accepts the Khalsa initiation and renounces his old name, Ram Lal, together with his previous religion Hinduism. Similarly, in the third novel, *Satwant Kaur*, a Muslim Agha Khan is converted to Sikhism and becomes Alamba Singh. This episode once again allows the

novelist to introduce the rite of baptism and thereby to comment on both the importance of this ceremony and its potential to radically transform the personality of an individual. From being effete, immoral and evil a person could, by *pāhul*, be transformed into an heroic, moral and highly virtuous person.

The repeated emphasis on the initiation rites in the Sabha's literature succeeded in turning the baptism into the most salient of the Sikh *rites de passage*. British observers in the nineteenth century had always been struck by how rarely the Sikhs underwent the rite of initiation.⁴⁵ Even on those rare occasions when the rite was practiced, it took two major forms: *charṇ pāhul* and *khañde dā pāhul*.⁴⁶ In the former there was no need to uphold the five k's. Only with the latter was the maintenance of the five external symbols and adherence to the *rahit* injunction mandatory. Like so much else in Sikh cultural praxis, the Tat Khalsa permanently altered the former options and declared *khañde dā pāhul* as the canonical mode of initiation for Sikhs. As a consequence the Sahajdhari, Nirmalas and Udasis who largely partook of *charṇ pāhul* initiation came under immense pressure either to take *khañde dā pāhul* or detach themselves from the ranks of Sikhism.

Having reified the outward symbols of the faith by reconceiving the past and attaching an unprecedented importance to its objective form in mid-century Punjab, the Tat Khalsa activists soon became conscious that this alone was insufficient to safeguard an exclusive Sikh identity. Any control they may have acquired over the body by insisting on the centrality of the five k's, and thereby over the ethos of the community, was considerably diluted in the realm of the life-cycle rituals. Religion is among other things a system of meanings through which individuals interpret and act on the world around them. These meanings often get expressed in rituals that communicate correct modes of

⁴⁵For instance R.W.Falcon stated: 'the tendency is always in less essential matters to revert to the practice of the ancient religion: take for example the great slackness there is at the present time in taking the *pahul*, very many who call themselves Singhs in the Singh tracts, omitting to take the *pahul* though adopting the surname and keeping some of the observances' *Handbook on Sikhs for Regimental Officers*, Allahabad, 1896, p. 21 (Hereafter *Handbook*).

⁴⁶Detailed account of the rite and the procedures to be followed for the ceremonial are available in Avtar Singh Vahiria compiler, *Khālsā Dharm Sāstar*, Amritsar, 1914, pp, 116-138. Also see A.H.Bingley, *Sikhs*, Patiala, 1970, reprint, first published Simla, 1899, pp. 95-96.

behaviour, moral imperatives, and distinctions between sacred and profane times, places, objects and events. Total control over the body, from its first to its last breath, required the intervention of religion and an appropriation of life-cycle rituals. The Tat Khalsa thinkers were confident that if this could be achieved, it would be a tremendous boon for corporate Sikhism and ensure the permanence of Sikh identity. On the one hand, such a development would negate many of the internal social, economic and affective differences among Sikhs, and on the other it would bring organized religion into relationship with the key experiences of everyday life. Each Sikh would then carry his religious identity into the most fundamental moments of his or her life and by doing so further buttress the symbolic universe of the Sikh community. But there was a vast barrier to be breached before such thinking could be put into practice and its dividends reaped. The great majority of Sikh households, as will become clear from the following ethnographic description, performed their passage rites according to the long established conventions of customary culture or the respective customs of their *barādārī* and caste groups.

Among Sikhs from the Khatri and the Arora castes, when a woman was pregnant, a ceremony called *ritān* was performed in the fifth or the seventh month.⁴⁷ The pregnant woman received a new set of clothing for the occasion as well as sweets from her mother, and the females from the *barādārī* assembled to dress her up in the gifted clothes and to share the sweets. On the birth of a son there was much rejoicing and exchange of gifts. The doors of the house were decorated with leaves from the *siris* (Acacia Sirissa) tree, and among the Jat Sikhs the image of an outspread hand was made with red dye on the outside walls of the house and an iron ring tied over the doorpost. Six days after the birth, the family priest or *purohit* was called to cast a horoscope for the newly-born child. For a thirteen-day period of the post-natal phase the mother was kept in seclusion because she was considered to be polluted. On the eve of the thirteenth day, the females of the household started the purification rites by smearing the walls and floors with a mixture of mud and cowdung; the earthen vessels which had been used during this period were then smashed and all metal vessels thoroughly cleansed. On the day itself the *purohit* lit a sacred fire in the

⁴⁷The following account of the life-cycle rituals is largely based on R.W.Falcon, *Handbook*, pp. 48-54. A.H.Bingley, *Sikhs*, pp. 93-107 and *Punjab State Gazetteers Phulkian States : Patiala, Jind and Nabha*, Lahore, 1909, pp. 231-237.

house and sprinkled members of the household with holy water from the Ganges. The ritual cleansing over, the child was named either by a Sikh *granthī*, who after appropriate prayers, opened the *Ādi Granth* at random and used the first word of the first line of the page to coin a name, or more frequently by a Brahman who used his almanac to find a name.

Compared to the rituals of birth, the proceedings for a marriage were far more complex. There was an immense variation in ceremonial not only among the different castes of Sikhs, but also within caste groups and among Sikhs of different localities. Generally among the Jat Sikhs, the village Nai or Brahman *purohit* would as a first step act as a go-between (*lagī*) opening negotiations between two households which could lead to an eventual marriage. If the discussions were successful, a betrothal ceremony would follow, when the go-between would be ceremoniously received by the boy's family and he would put a mark on the brow of the future bridegroom and give him money and sugar from the girl's family. The actual time for the marriage was fixed by astrologers after consulting the horoscopes of the boy and girl.⁴⁸ Two or three months before the wedding a letter called a *Sahī Chithī*, announcing the exact date of marriage, was dispatched by a Nai on behalf of the girl's household. The days preceding a wedding were punctuated with several rites and observances: the beating of drums, singing and dancing, the propitiation of the nine planets, the tying of cotton threads on wrists and ankles and the worship by the bridegroom at an ancestral shrine and before a *jhand* (*Prosopis Spicigera*) tree.

On the appointed day the bridegroom, accompanied by a *barāt*, or a wedding procession made up entirely of men, reached the bride's place. It was considered inauspicious for the procession to reach the scene of the wedding before sunset. On arrival the visitors were received by the girl's kin with loud singing and the beating of drums. Often, if the families could afford it, dancing girls were asked to participate in the rejoicing. The same night, after the feasting, the bridegroom was led to a special enclosure and the following ceremony called the *pherā* or circling of the fire was performed.

⁴⁸The most favourable season for marriage was spring but marriages could also be performed in the following months: Māgh, Phagaṇ, Baisākh, Jeth and Hār. The months considered inauspicious for marriage were Pauh, Kattak and Chet.

A place was first marked off with four upright stakes joined by cross-pieces of wood at the top and the inside. This was covered with a red cloth called a *vedī*. Inside this enclosure were placed two red seats for the bridal couple. The pair were seated and the Brahman who was going to perform the marriage rites marked the ground with a square divided into compartments, each representing a particular deity. These were worshipped in the name of the couple and the Brahman recited *ślokas* from the *Śāstras* asking the bride's parents to give up their daughter in marriage. A small fire was lit and the Brahman tied the hem of the girl's head-scarve to a piece of cloth, which was placed over the shoulders of the bridegroom. Guided by a relative, he led the bride four times around the fire, which, as a deity, stood witness to the marriage. The bride then came to the front and walked around the fire three more times while the officiating priest recited verses from the sacred texts. The marriage was then complete and the couple left for the boy's house accompanied by the Nai's wife. But the marriage was not consummated; after spending a few days in the bridegroom's house, the bride returned to her parents' place where she resided until she was finally made over to her husband at a ceremony called *muklavā*, separated from the actual wedding by an interval of two, three, five, seven or nine years, depending on a decision by the girl's parents.

Much as in case of marriage ceremonial, the Sikhs lacked any distinctive mortuary rite that could be described as a charter of corporate identity. 'Sikhs' wrote Falcon, an officer with the British army, 'follow the Hindu custom of dying upon the ground and of burning their dead, the dying person being lifted off the bed just before death and placed upon the ground'.⁴⁹ After death the corpse was carried to the funeral grounds on a wooden bier by a relay of four men, followed by a procession made up of kinsmen and close associates. When the funeral procession reached half-way to the funeral grounds, water was sprinkled round the bier and the son or closest agnates smashed an earthen vessel on the ground. If the deceased happened to be an elderly person, a brass vessel was thrown on the ground and the mourning was replaced by rejoicing. On reaching the cremation ground a pile of logs was

49R.W.Falcon, *Handbook*, p.53.

erected and the corpse laid on it.⁵⁰ Five balls of rice called *piṇḍa* were then placed on the corpse and the heir, taking a sacred torch lit by a Maha Brahman or an impure funeral priest, lit the wooden pyre. Following the cremation, all those who had joined the funeral procession took a bath to get rid of the pollution. The bones that remained unburnt, called *phul*, were collected on the third or the fourth day after the cremation and the bereaved household made arrangements either to take them personally for consignment to the river Ganges or send them in charge of the family Brahman. The period of mourning was eleven days for a son and three days for other agnates who had participated in the funeral rites.

In cases where the deceased had died from unnatural causes such as hanging, drowning, poisoning or snake bite, or when death occurred prior to his being shifted from a bed to the ground, close relatives went to Pihewa, a place in Ambala district, and there performed obsequies with the mediation of a Brahman. If this was not done, it was believed the relatives would be haunted by the spirit of the dead person in the form of a *bhūt* (if the deceased happened to be a male) or of a *churel* (if female). The eleventh day after the death saw the end of the period of pollution and was marked by the beginnings of the post-cremation rituals or *śrāddha*. Balls of rice, ghee and sugar (termed *piṇḍa dān*) were either fed to a crow or immersed in a river. Occasionally too, a vessel of water was hung on a pipal tree. Later kinsmen, friends of the bereaved and an odd number of Brahmans were given food. The *śrāddha* ceremonies were often repeated on each anniversary of the death. The object of such mortuary rituals was to earn merit for the deceased and reduce his sufferings.

In the eyes of the Tat Khalsa the *rites de passage* described above were completely anti-Sikh in nature and had brought about the degeneration of Sikhism and its increasing assimilation into Hinduism. As life-cycle rituals are often statements of group identity and help generate communal solidarity, the Tat Khalsa launched an all-out campaign to abolish the so-called Hindu customs and replace them with the Khalsa rites. Between 1884 and 1915 at least twenty-four manuals were published on how the Sikhs ought to arrange their

⁵⁰For the description of a funeral procession for an old Sikh see R.E. Parry, *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, London, 1921, pp. 34-35.

life-cycle rituals (this estimate does not include the *rahit-nāmā* literature and the polemical literature on the *rites de passage*). A large proportion of these guides concerned marriage rituals. Even when these books disagreed on the precise historical origins of these customs or the correct steps in a particular rite, most of them derided existing ceremonials. Since the new rituals radically departed from the pre-Singh Sabha phase and also played a fundamental role in etching Sikh cultural boundaries, it is worth describing them in some detail.⁵¹

Soon after a child was born, a set of five verses from the *Ādi Granth* was to be recited. Ten to twelve days later, five Sikhs were supposed to prepare amrit and administer it to the newly born baby in the presence of the *Ādi Granth*. This done, the parents repaired to a *granthī* and asked him to name the child by consulting the *Ādi Granth*, as described previously. There was no need to consult a Brahman or a *purohit* in the naming process. Also, it was undesirable to place amulets around the child or consider the mother to be in any way polluted. The pre- and post-natal practices from customary culture or described as Hindu rites in the idiom of the contemporaries, were simply discarded. All Sikhs - Jats, Khatris, Mahzbis - were required to perform the same rituals without any reference to their caste or *bārādārī* traditions.

Having transformed the birth rituals, a similar change was effected in marriage arrangements. Since Nais and the Brahmans came to be portrayed as cheats and parasites in the Sabha's literature, it was recommended that the preliminary marriage negotiations be carried out without their intervention. When discussions were successful, they were to be followed by a simple betrothal ceremony. The date for the wedding was to be arrived at without consulting astrologers, and all months of the year were decreed to be auspicious for the occasion. Such old practices as asking Brahmans to officiate in the proceedings, using Nais to convey the letter announcing wedding, arranging for dancing-girls, Bhands and Mirasis to participate in the wedding procession, were decreed to be anti-Sikh. When the wedding procession arrived at its destination it was not to be greeted with loud music or other forms of welcome,

⁵¹Unless otherwise stated the following account is based on Bhai Suraj Singh Pracharak, *Gurmat Kaj Bivhār*, Lahore, 1913. Suraj Singh was a well known Tat Khalsa publicist and from 1900 onwards regularly wrote on Sikh history, rituals and lives of contemporary Sikhs. He produced approximately eleven books.

but with piously recited verses from the Ādi Granth. The initial proceedings were to be concluded with the Sikh ardās. The final marriage ceremony, commonly referred to as Anand, was to be performed by the couple four times circumambulating the Ādi Granth and not going around any fire. While this was being done, a set of four verses from the Ādi Granth, composed by the fourth Guru Ram Das, were to be recited. This did away with the ancient custom of reciting from the Śāstras and other non-Sikh sacred texts.⁵²

The Tat Khalsa were also unwilling to leave death alone. Though the body is transitory it is also a means of projecting powerful social symbols. The environment of the corpse was seen to have as much potential for communicating communal identity as the body of a living person. If a death occurred, the following acts were deemed objectionable: transferring a dead body from the bed to the ground, placing a lighted lamp on its hand, the bereaved family, agnates and friends wailing and lamenting the departed. These widespread practices were judged to be Hindu and therefore of no import to the Sikhs. For Sikhs, the manuals on passage rites recommended that the corpse be washed and dressed, with particular care being taken to have all the five k's on the body of the deceased. At the cremation ground, before the wooden pyre was lit, the Sikh ardās and a liturgical text, *Kirtan Sohilā* (a collection of five hymns, three of them by Guru Nanak and one each by the fourth and the fifth Gurus), were to be recited for the peace of the departed soul.

While the body was being consumed by the fire, it had been conventional for the chief mourner to break the skull with a stick from the bier. The Tat Khalsa banned this practice from a Sikh funeral as it was considered to be in breach of the Khalsa mortuary rites. But their loudest opposition was reserved for two aspects of the former mortuary rites: transporting the unburnt bones to the river Ganges for consignment there and the convening of a *śrāddha* ceremony. Sikhs were told to consign the ashes and bones to any nearby river, tank or canal and not hold any *śrāddha* ceremony; such ceremonies were seen as

⁵²Extensive background on ritual procedures in Taihal Singh, *Gurmat Rīṭī Anusār Vivāh Bidhī*, Lahore, 1903; Udhām Singh, *Vivāh Padhṭi Patī Parikarmā*, Amritsar, 1908 and Suraj Singh, *Khālsā Vivāh Bhāg Bidhī*, Amritsar, 1912.

bringing no merit to the deceased and only fattening the parasitical Brahmans.⁵³ The only rite Sikhs were supposed to perform was an uninterrupted forty-eight-hour recitation of the Ādi Granth.

In order to encourage the widespread acceptance of these changed rituals, leading Sikh newspapers freely gave space to publicising any *rites de passage* performed by a Sikh household in accordance with the new prescriptions, or what came to be called *gurmaryādā*. The large number of notices published on the life-cycle ceremonies in contemporary papers from as early as 1886 also tell us of the Tat Khalsa's growing success in bringing about a transformation in Sikh consciousness of ritual practices. What were initially changes introduced by a small minority gradually came to be accepted by the Sikh public at large. Significantly in October 1909 the Imperial Legislative Council by legislating the Anand Marriage Act, 1909, considerably boosted the Tat Khalsa position on *rites de passage*.⁵⁴ This Act for the first time legally codified a Sikh ritual, thereby providing Sikh separatism with government recognition. When there was opposition to the passage of this Act, thousands of Sikhs signed petitions, pamphleteers produced an unending stream of tracts and leading Tat Khalsa newspapers were packed with articles in defence of the Act.⁵⁵

A single argument was reiterated by the supporters of the Anand mode of marriage: the non-Anand form of marriage was Hindu (often the word used was Brahmanical), and Sikhs did not want to have anything to do with such alien customs.⁵⁶ The public avowal of this stand hastened the demise of Sanatan Sikhism and the Tat Khalsa moved from the periphery to the centre of the Sikh tradition. A substantial majority of Sikhs had by the first decades of the twentieth century come to be aware of themselves as a distinct community, a consciousness that was once fostered by the new elites, but began to be increasingly reciprocated at the mass level early this century; 1909 therefore can

⁵³For an extensive broadside against the Śrāddh rites see *Khālsā Akhbār*, September 18, 1886, pp. 3-5.

⁵⁴See K.S.Talwar, "The Anand Marriage Act", *The Panjab Past and Present*, vol., 2, 1968, pp. 400-410.

⁵⁵For a forceful defence of the Anand marriage ritual see Sardar Ajmer Singh, *Ānand Vivāh Par Vīcār kā Khaṛḍan*, Amritsar, 1908.

⁵⁶See Mohan Singh Vaid, *Gurmat Viraudh Binās*, Amritsar, 1908.

be viewed as a watershed in the history of modern Sikhism and this is one reason this study closes with that year.

The ritual changes introduced by the Tat Khalsa ultimately came to be inserted in the rahit-nāmās. In the present state of research it is not possible accurately to date the rahit-nāmā literature, but in 1910 and 1931 respectively the Chief Khalsa Diwan, and the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee set up a commission to formulate a new rahit-nāmā and the performance of the life-cycle rituals was made an integral part of the rahit. This had not been the case with most of the former rahit-nāmās and was a radical innovation⁵⁷ The changes introduced by the latest rahit-nāmā titled, *Sikh Rahit Maryādā* and published in 1950, were a tribute to the far-reaching implications of Tat Khalsa thinking on the construction of personhood within the Sikh community during the present century.

I have argued that between 1880 and 1909 the body was made a principal focus of symbolic concern and a central means of projecting ideological preoccupations. Through a cluster of rituals, mainly associated with life crises and transitions, the body became an 'overdetermined' image of historical, personal and communal identity and exclusiveness. Although Guru Gobind Singh may be said to be the first person within the Sikh tradition to recognize the semiotic potential of the body to manifest the power of corporate imagination, it took an interval of almost three centuries and a decisive intervention by the Singh Sabha activists before this sign-vehicle was fully harnessed. While the Ādi Granth lent legitimacy to this bodily system, it also communicated the centrality of the Ādi Granth in the life of the faithful from birth to death. By mediating in the life experiences of the Sikhs the body and the Ādi Granth mutually reinforced one another. The public demonstration of the meaningful relationship between the two made them key cultural markers of

⁵⁷The following well known rahit-nāmās contain no reference to the rules of passage rites (i.e., birth, marriage, death): The *Rahit-Nāmā of Prahlad Rai* (or Prahlad Singh); The *Rahit-Nāmā of Nand Lal*; The *Tankhāh Nāmā of Nand Lal*; The *Rahit Nāmā of Desa Singh* and The *Rahit Nāmā of Chaupa Singh*. There is a brief mention of passage rites in the following rahit-nāmās but no detailed exposition: The *Rahit-Nāmā of Daya Singh*; *Prem Sumārg* and *Sau Sākhiān* (unlike the Tat Khalsa, this apocryphal text backs the post-mortuary *śrāddh* ceremonies). It is probable that rahit-nāmās that record *rites de passage* are of a later date compared to the ones which do not. For a further discussion see chapter three.

the community. Scriptural truths and corporeal existence were made isomorphic and pointed towards the same objective: Sikh corporate identity and the independence of the Sikh religious community.

An autonomous symbolic universe has always been a prerequisite for the cultural -religious identity of any supra-local religious community. The Tat Khalsa completed this task for the Sikhs. While the roots of the drive for this cultural autonomy may be traced back by some scholars to Guru Nanak, the reasons for its consolidation certainly lie entangled in the social history of late nineteenth century Punjab. Rituals, as much as any other force, play a role in societal change and in the generation of communal solidarity. The oft-repeated rhetorical statement '*Ham Hindu Nahin*' (We are not Hindus) now had a subjective basis; what it lacked was supplemented by further innovations.

Symbolic Reformulation: Turning Innovations into Traditions

The Tat Khalsa were determined to tear the Sikhs away from any moorings they may have had in what was seen to be the amorphous sea of Hinduism. The radical changes introduced in the life-cycle rituals were deemed to be insufficient to make a firm distinction between Sikhs and non-Sikhs. Additional innovations were made in dress, language, annual calendar and dietary taboos to provide the Sikhs with a distinctive symbolic universe. By the turn of this century these innovations were clothed in the garb of tradition and Sikhs became endowed with a powerful separatist symbolism. One of the principal arguments of this study is that ethnic consciousness and religious communities are not merely primordial residues but have a concrete history that can and must be followed step by step if our aim is to see beyond mystifications. The Tat Khalsa's desperate bid to saturate the Sikhs with new symbols of consciousness, stretching from modes of clothing to the vicissitudes of time in ritual, provides us with an ideal illustration of this diachronic process.

The symbolic potential of the human body to communicate social distinctions can rarely be surpassed, but on occasions it may be equalled by modes of clothing. The Tat Khalsa launched a ferocious onslaught against all those Sikhs who wore the *dhoti* - a garment widely used by the men and worn

around the waist. To wear a *dhotī* was interpreted as an affront to Sikh identity. Equally, men who had their ears pierced to wear ornaments were scorned.⁵⁸

Some Tat Khalsa leaders with a more militant vision of Sikh identity demanded that women tie turbans. At a school supported by the Bhasaur Singh Sabha Babu Teja Singh made it mandatory for girl students to wear saffron coloured turbans.⁵⁹ From 1898 onwards he refused to administer *pāhul* to any female who did not wear a turban. Like many other elements of the Tat Khalsa ideology, legitimization for women to wear turbans was sought from history. The genealogy of the custom was traced back to Guru Gobind Singh. The new-look Sikhs, it was hoped, would stand out in civil society. By clothing the community in a mode distinct from the rest of the population, the Tat Khalsa hoped to erect definite cultural boundaries between Sikhs and non-Sikhs.

The next step in this grand design for a unified Sikh identity was the call for support of a Sikh calendar and the fashioning of an exclusive festive cycle for the community. The way human societies convert time into systematic calendrical cycles has always had a strong bearing on personal and collective identity. In pre-Singh Sabha days, Sikhs apart from using the ubiquitous Bikrami calendrical system (starting in 57 A.D.), employed the Nanakshahi dating - a calendar that commenced in 1469, the natal year of Guru Nanak. But the use of the Nanakshahi year was more of an oddity rather than a widespread convention. The Tat Khalsa leaders were incensed by Sikh reliance on the Bikrami dating and the lunar calendar: for them it was another sign of the all-pervasive Hindu domination over the Sikhs. Leading Tat Khalsa papers like the *Khālsā Akhbār* and the *Khālsā Samāchar* emblazoned the Nanakshahi year on their front pages. Similarly, other publications - books, tracts and pamphlets - began to increasingly use the Nanakshahi year to announce their date of print. However, for time to be pressed into making statements about personhood it was simply not enough to make changes in the procedures of calendrical dating. A year is apart from such things as climatic changes, made up of numerous festivals and rituals: the periods of repose, saturnalia and activity. To their

⁵⁸See Bhai Attar Singh, *Bhaundū Sikh Parbaudh*, Amritsar, 1906, p. 1 and 14, Taihal Singh, *Gurmat Rītī Anusār Vivāh Bidhī*, Lahore, 1903, p. 78 and *Khālsā Rahit Prakaś*, (hereafter *Rahit Prakaś*), Bhasaur, 1908, pp. 21 and 30.

⁵⁹Lal Singh, *Adutī Jīvan Britānt*, n.p., n.d., pp. 104-107.

annoyance the neo-Sikhs quickly became aware that the Sikhs had been participating for centuries in festivities which they judged were Hindu in origin, intent and ritual: Lohri, Holi, Dassehra, and Diwali.

Conscious of the Herculean effort needed for directly disengaging the faithful from the cycle of these customary festivities, the Tat Khalsa initially seized the second best alternative: the elaboration and acceptance of what would amount to be an exclusively Sikh time-cycle. Four initiatives were introduced to attain this goal of time-management. First, Sikhs were asked to start their new year from the first day of the month of Baisakh (April-May) - the day of the spring festival of Baisakhi in the Punjab - instead of the usual first day of the month of Chetra (March-April).⁶⁰ In order to firmly inscribe the Baisakhi day in Sikh consciousness as the appropriate start for the new year, a vocal section among the Tat Khalsa argued that the community had all along been compounding an error by accepting the full moon day of Kattak (October-November) as the day of Guru Nanak's birth.⁶¹ The Guru, it was claimed, was actually born on the first day of the month of Baisakh. If this historically unfounded assertion had come to be widely accepted it would have loaded the Baisakhi festivities with powerful affective associations and pious sentiments. Consequently the Sikhs would have ushered in a new year in a month and on a day different from Hindus. Second, the Singh Sabhas took to marking the anniversaries of the Sikh gurus, particularly the birthdays of the first and the tenth gurus. On these days the Sabha establishments convened special meetings and took out public processions. In December 1888 the Singh Sabhas under the initiative of Gurmukh Singh began to lobby the provincial administration to declare the anniversaries of the Sikh gurus public holidays.⁶² Initially the government agreed to grant a holiday for the birth anniversary of Guru Nanak in select districts of the Punjab and later a similar holiday was declared for the birth anniversary of Guru Gobind Singh.⁶³ In a further elaboration of the Sikh calendrical cycle the Khalsa Tract Society started publishing greeting cards in

⁶⁰See *Rahit Prakāś*, pp. 46-48.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, p. 64-69.

⁶²See *Khālsā Akhbār*, December 15, 1888, p. 1 and Max Arthur Macauliffe, *The Sikh Religion*, vol.1, Oxford, 1909, p. lxxxvi.

⁶³*Khālsā Samāchār*, December 20, 1905, p. 6.

Gurmukhi to mark the anniversaries of the Sikh gurus.⁶⁴ Third, proposals were put forward to substitute the current lunar calendar with a solar calendar.⁶⁵ Fourth and finally, a sustained campaign was launched to prevent Sikhs from taking part in festivals like Holi and Diwali. These were deemed to be un-Sikh festivities and an effort was made to replace them with innovations that would be commemorating key events from the Sikh past. Babu Teja Singh made the most systematic proposals along these lines.⁶⁶ For instance he argued that Sikhs should not be celebrating Holi at Anandpur but instead observe the Baisakhi festivities, for on that day Gobind Singh had founded the Khalsa panth at Anandpur.⁶⁷

To the evolving inventory of Sikh separatist symbols a significant addition, one with perhaps the most far-reaching implications, was made by turning the Gurmukhi script and the Punjabi language into emblems of Sikh identity. In mid-century Punjab the majority of the people in the province - Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs - spoke a welter of Punjabi dialects without any religious distinctions. The Sikhs had no exclusive claims over Punjabi except for the fact that the Ādi Granth was written in the Gurmukhi script, one of the several scripts in which Punjabi was written. But the compositions in the Granth are a melange of various languages, often coalesced under the generic title of Sant Bhasha. Guru Gobind Singh from whom the Tat Khalsa derived much of its inspiration, was certainly far more proficient in Braj and Persian, than in any form close to Punjabi. When the Sikh movement finally succeeded in capturing state power, no particular enthusiasm was displayed for Punjabi. The court language continued to be Persian. At the Golden Temple for much of British rule all official correspondence was carried out in Urdu.⁶⁸ It is ironic that two of the leading manuals on Tat Khalsa thinking, that have played a major role in transforming Sikh self-definitions, were initially published in Hindi.⁶⁹

⁶⁴The cards were advertised in the *Khālsā Akhbār*, November 6, 1896, p. 2 and May 12, 1899, p. 9.

⁶⁵*Rahit Prakāś*, pp. 46-48.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 42-46.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

⁶⁸*Khālsā Samāchār*, September 28, 1904, p. 9.

⁶⁹See Kahan Singh Nabha, *Gurmat Parbhākr* (1893) and *Gurmat Sudhākar* (1898).

However, when in the 1860s an increasing number of Muslim elites proclaimed Urdu as their mother-tongue and militant Hindus pushed for Hindi to be an official language in northern India, the Sikhs found themselves in a conundrum: if other communities in the making were going to be sanctimonious about particular scripts and languages, then where did the Sikhs stand on the same issue? Could they be seen to be lacking in similar linguistic fervour? Their answer to this dilemma was swift and firm: Sikhs would champion the cause of Punjabi, particularly written in the Gurmukhi script. Once this stance was taken Sikh ambivalence towards Punjabi was permanently over. They were to become its most zealous crusaders. In 1882 when the Hunter Commission on Indian Education met at Lahore, the Singh Sabha representatives submitted to it a lengthy memorandum in support of Punjabi and Gurmukhi characters.⁷⁰ The submission contested the claims made in favour of Urdu or Hindi for administrative and educational purposes. It concluded by asking for Punjabi to be 'made into a medium of instruction upto the end of the secondary education'.⁷¹ This was perhaps the first time in history that the Sikhs had come out publicly in defence of the Punjabi language. In the following three decades the Tat Khalsa, in association with the Singh Sabhas, took a series of measures - opening schools for the teaching of Gurmukhi, developing Gurmukhi fonts for printing, producing literature and textbooks in Gurmukhi and pressing the administration to introduce Gurmukhi in government schools - in order to foster the use of what came to be considered as the sacred language of the Sikhs.

The press and public forums were freely used to proclaim the distinct superiority of Punjabi over Hindi or Urdu as the lingua franca of the people in the Punjab. It was argued that the progress of the province was not possible without the advancement of Punjabi.⁷² In making such public professions on behalf of Punjabi, obviously far more was at stake than the nexus between script and religious identity; employment opportunities, supremacy of

⁷⁰"Memorial from Sri Guru Singh Sabha, in favour of Punjabi, to the Honourable W.W.Hunter, L.L.D., C.I.E., President of the Commission", in *Report of the Panjab Provincial Committee of the Education Commission; with Evidence Taken Before the Committee and Memorials Addressed to the Education Commission*, (hereafter *E.C.*), Calcutta, 1884, pp. 563-566.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, p. 566.

⁷²See *Khālsā Akhbār*, December 6, 1895, p. 6 and December 20, 1895, p. 5.

denominational educational institutions and political hegemony all came to be closely aligned with the language controversy in the second half of the nineteenth century. Given the import of language in determining the fortunes of a community many among the Tat Khalsa intellectuals became anxious to make it obligatory for Sikhs to know how to read and write in Gurmukhi. This was partly achieved by including the learning of Gurmukhi as a part of the *rahit*.⁷³ Such unprecedented loyalty to the cause of Punjabi ended by inextricably tying up the future of the Sikhs with the fate of the Punjabi language.

The final thrust to the Tat Khalsa's forceful definitions of a distinct Sikh identity was provided by the inculcation of a dietary taboo. According to some of the *rahit-nāmās* the Sikhs were only permitted to consume meat if the animal had been killed with a single stroke of the sword (the slaughtering process was named *jhatkā*). But this injunction, for reasons that remain unclear in the present state of research, was honoured more in the breach than in practice.⁷⁴ The Singh Sabhas set about changing this lax attitude towards the rules of food and claimed that it was sinful for Sikhs to eat meat not killed in the prescribed mode.⁷⁵ The *rahit-nāmās* provided a ready-made legitimacy to this claim. As a result dietary discipline, as much as temporality or modes of clothing, became a part of the Tat Khalsa's conceptualisation of Sikhism.

The Social Locus of Imagination

The grand campaigns of the Tat Khalsa to bring about a fundamental transformation in the popular consciousness of Sikhism and their considerable success in attaining this objective raises two sets of inter-related questions: what prompted the radical change in the lexicon, grammar and syntax of the Sikh tradition and what factors made this unprecedented change possible. From the evidence and arguments adduced so far, particularly in chapter five, it is

⁷³For instance see *Panch Khālsā Rahit Nāmā*, Bhasaur, 1907, p. 15, Bhai Suraj Singh Pracharak, *Gurmat Kāj Bivhār*, p. 24 and *Rahit Nāmā* anthology, published by Bhai Pratap Singh and Sunder Singh, Amritsar, 1921, p. 47.

⁷⁴A Tat Khalsa preacher was greatly shocked when he discovered how freely the Sikh public consumed non-*jhatkā* meat. See his report in the *Khālsā Akhbār*, July 22, 1898, p. 9.

⁷⁵For instance see the report on the annual proceedings of the Singh Sabha Ghanuri Kalan, *Khālsā Akhbār*, July 22, 1898, p. 8.

possible to state that the new elites' unceasing efforts to formulate and create a sub-culture for themselves was a major force behind the Tat Khalsa's construction of a new Sikh identity. The necessary structure for such a transformation was provided by the far-reaching impact of British colonial rule on urban and rural society in the Punjab, for example commercialization and the emergence of a new educational apparatus. To the factors already listed in accounting for the changing nature of religion we may add four more: the collapse of customary culture, the role of the colonial state, employment trends and finally the framework of local politics.

It did not take the new elites long to become conscious of the fact that if their campaign for reform and their efforts at injecting a new definition of Sikhism were to fully succeed, they needed to challenge the legitimacy and widespread influence of customary culture and in addition undermine the authority of all those social groups - Bhats, Bharais, Mirasis, Nais, Bhands and Dums - who played a key role in the creation and transmission of this culture. These professional groups had virtually become endogamous castes and were widely patronised by all classes, ranging from the landed aristocracy to the peasantry. Their patrons received similar cultural codes and were communicated a wide variety of myths, legends and rituals, particularly during key events in the life-cycle. In the view of the Tat Khalsa it was customary culture and groups responsible for transmitting its values that could be blamed for the dissolution of what they thought were the original ideals of the Sikh community. In exchange for their services the Nais, Mirasis and other similar groups were entitled to customary obligations on part of their patrons, rendered both in cash and kind.

To undermine the power of customary culture and its personnel the new elites deployed two strategies. First, they labelled customary culture as Hindu and gradually loaded it with pejorative and impious connotations. Those who participated in it were seen as anti-Sikh and thereby causing the decline and degeneration of the Sikh community. Second, they started withdrawing their patronage from groups like the Nais, Mirasis and Bhands and encouraged others to follow suit. In the Sabha's literature members of these professional groups who had survived as an integral part of a peasant society for many

centuries, were depicted as parasites, cheats and tricksters.⁷⁶ Fortunately for the new elites, the socio-economic changes unleashed by colonial rule, particularly the emergence of a market society and of land as a valued commodity, began to undermine the economic resources that guaranteed the survival of these groups. The case of the Nais - a key group in the transmission of culture - serves as an informative example in understanding the processes of cultural mediation and the fate of such groups under colonial society. The rising fortunes of the Tat Khalsa and the decline of the Nais as we will see below, were closely interconnected.

Unlike the Jats or Khatris, who brought much fame to the Punjab and attracted the attention of ethnographers and historians, the zāt of the Nais never attained the sort of distinction which would make them prominent in the annals of the province. Undistinguished in war or commerce, they could only lay claim to their reputation for the outstanding services they rendered to other castes in the Punjab. According to a widely prevalent legend in the province, the Mughal emperor Akbar once asked Birbal to bring him a slave who charged no wages. Birbal brought a Nai, whom the emperor asked to deliver a message to Kabul. The Nai set out at once on the task without asking for reward, wages or even provisions for his trip.⁷⁷ It was this zeal to serve their patrons which Nais could claim as their chief virtue. There was no village or town in the Punjab without one or more households of Nais. Distributed all over the Punjab in 1881, fifty-five per cent of them were enumerated as Muslims, six per cent Sikhs and the rest Hindus.⁷⁸

D.J.Ibbetson the premier ethnographer of the Punjab, after some hesitation included the Nais among the minor professional castes in his report of the 1881 census of the province. The hesitation arose from the dual role of the Nais, as ritualists and menials. Ibbetson noted:

Many of them are in some measure allied to the priestly class, they have functions to perform in connections with weddings and similar ceremonies, they receive customary fees for the performance of those functions, and they are invested with a sort of quasi-sacred character. On the other hand, they have many

⁷⁶Giani Dit Singh, *Naklī Sikh Prabaudh*, Amritsar, 1974, reprint, first published Lahore, 1895, pp. 98-100.

⁷⁷ *Glossary 3*, p.140.

⁷⁸ Denzil Ibbetson, *Panjab Castes*, Lahore, 1916, p.231.

points in common with the menials; their social status is very low, and many of them are retained by the villagers on the same footing as ordinary village servants, their rights and duties being regulated by custom.⁷⁹

In his capacity as a menial, a Nai's chief business was to shave and shampoo his clients' hair, cut their nails, prepare tobacco for the village rest-house, cook on festive occasions and attend upon village guests. As a ritualist he conducted the preliminaries in match-making, accompanied the emissaries who concluded a betrothal, and transported messages from one village to another, especially when these concerned news of auspicious events like the birth or the dates of weddings. During wedding ceremonies his role was second only to that of a Brahman. The distribution of gifts during a birth or wedding was also carried out by a Nai. His role in conducting the life-cycle ceremonies, particularly matchmaking, meant he was most knowledgeable about the intricacies of *barādārī*, the patrilineal-descent groups within which marriages were arranged, and of *vartan bhajī*, the local practice of reciprocal exchange of gifts. Occasionally a Nai acted as the village surgeon, and he commonly performed circumcision. The myths, legends and other standard phrases uttered by a Nai during his ritual performances helped to reinforce and perpetuate popular culture.

Despite his low caste status, the Nai held a rather special position in the local social hierarchy. As a confidant of the local notables he was privy to delicate matters often affecting the balance of local power. His matchmaking manoeuvres could enhance or diminish the prestige of a family or even a whole *barādārī*. The extensive travelling undertaken by a Nai in pursuit of his ritual tasks, and contacts with others from within his caste in the region, gave him access to much useful information concerning what was happening in the outer world and linked him to a vast network of patronage. The skills of a Nai were highly esteemed by contemporaries. A current proverb had this to say about them: 'The jackal is the sharpest among beasts, the crow among birds, and the Nai among men'.⁸⁰

The Nais' low caste position and their high ritual status resulted in an interesting paradox. To reconcile the contradiction between the two aspects,

⁷⁹ Ibid., p.230.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p.231.

Punjabi society adapted what Victor Turner calls 'rites of status reversal'.⁸¹ The inversion of social roles consisted in generally addressing the Nai as *thakur* or *rajā* and his wife as *rani* in speech acts. An instance of ritual inversion is reported from Kapurthala where on the death of a patron, women mourners addressed the family Nai as *rājā* and his wife as *rāni*, and lamented bitterly in their presence.⁸² Similarly, at betrothals and weddings the Nai was entitled to a seat in the presence of the *barādāri*, a privilege denied to other low castes. The purpose of the verbal and ritual inversions was to mask the menial functions of the Nais and stress their central roles as ritualists.

Conceptually, the role of the Nais and the network of social relationships they embodied can best be understood in the context of the *sepidari* system or what in the all-India context has been made famous as the *jajmani*. Under the *sepidari* system, households from different caste groups entered into dyadic relationships to provide services to each other.⁸³ At the centre of such networks were the propertied groups who controlled the main economic resource of the province: land. A household of artisans, servants or ritualists (called *sepidars* in the local parlance) would enter into a contract with a propertied household and render services in return for a fixed percentage of the semi-annual harvest. What percentage of the crop a *sepidar* received at the summer or autumn harvest depended on the nature of his service and the state of the harvest. For instance, in the Doaba, a Nai received one-fourth of a *seer* of every maund of grain at the time of harvest and a small amount of *gur* every year.⁸⁴ All kinds of goods and services, including rents, were commonly paid in grain rather than in cash. Most of the economic activity in the province was encapsulated in the *sepidari* system. Even the *sepidars* entered into similar contracts among themselves. Thus the Nai would also provide his services to other non-landowning castes and instead of a percentage of the crops would receive a fixed amount of grain.

⁸¹ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Chicago, 1968, chs.3-5.

⁸² H.A.Rose, *Glossary*, Vol.1, p.110.

⁸³ For detailed descriptions of the *sepidari* system in the Punjab see Z.Eglar, *A Punjabi Village in Pakistan*, New York, 1960, pp.28-41, and T.Kessinger, *Vilyatpur 1848-1968*, Berkeley, 1974, pp.54-8.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.56.

The sepidari relationships between two households were established over several generations and inherited by the descendants of the families who had initially entered into the contract. A breach in the unwritten contract was construed to be a violation of honour and dignity, two fundamental social values in Punjabi society. The relationship between the households was not purely an economic one : it was a moral and social bond with mutual obligations, tying together patrons and clients from different castes into a community. Thus a Nai was part of the sepidari system and his chief role was that of a ritualist and cultural mediator.

It is well established in historical literature that Punjabi society in the second half of the nineteenth century underwent profound socio-economic change.⁸⁵ The Dalhousian revolution in communications, the commercialisation of the rural economy, the rise of new market towns and trading networks, the establishment of schools and colleges to train native collaborators in British modes, the new civil codes based on legal codes instead of customary sanctions, the unprecedented irrigation projects to turn barren lands into granaries - all these transformations dramatically altered the nature of Punjabi society. Punjabi schoolboys in their curricula were made to memorise the new changes as blessings of the British Raj. Amongst the earliest victims of the Raj's blessings was the sepidari system.⁸⁶

Customary social relationships were gradually replaced by market relationships - a transformation well documented in Tom Kessinger's exemplary study of a village community in the Doaba. The social and moral obligations which were hallmarks of earlier arrangements had hardly any meaning in the changed context where market forces increasingly dictated social equations. While wages were formerly paid in kind as a fixed percentage of

⁸⁵ For instance see H.K.Trevaskis, *The Land of Five Rivers*, Oxford, 1928; Y.B.Mathur, *British Administration of the Punjab*, Delhi, n.d.; Himadri Banerjee, "Agrarian Society of the Punjab 1849-1901", Ph.D thesis, University of Calcutta, 1976; S.C.Mishra, "Commercialization, Peasant Differentiation and Merchant Capital in Late Nineteenth-Century Bombay and Punjab", *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol.10, October 1982, pp.3-51; and R. G. Fox, "Urban Class and Communal Consciousness in Colonial Punjab: The Genesis of India's Intermediate Regime", *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 18, 1984, pp. 459-89.

⁸⁶ This process was by no means unique to Punjab. Similar developments in the fate of sepidari-like systems have been noted by historians in other parts of India. For Maharashtra, see Ravinder Kumar, *Western India in the 19th Century*, London, 1968.

the harvested crops, under the new monetary arrangements wages were commuted into cash and determined annually. To go back to our example of the Nai, his ritual tasks were now increasingly rewarded in cash. The following table shows the cash payments he received from his patrons under the market economy:

Table 8: Ritual Fees Received in Cash by a Nai

Name of Ceremonial Occasion	Fees
<i>Ritan</i>	Annas 8 to Rupees 1
<i>Mundan</i>	Rupee 1 or some paisas
<i>Janeu</i>	Ditto
<i>Mangni</i>	Rupees 2.50
<i>Sanachitthi</i>	Annas 8
<i>Bann</i>	Couple of paisas
<i>Shant</i>	Annas 4
<i>Ghori</i>	Rupee 1
<i>Tei Talai</i>	Up to Rupee 1
<i>Phera</i>	Rupee 1
<i>Bari</i>	Couple of paisas
<i>Khat</i>	Rupees 2
<i>Suhi</i>	Couple of paisas
<i>Pagris</i>	Couple of paisas or Rupee 1

Adapted from : *Punjab States Gazetteers Phulkian States. Patiala, Jind and Nabha*, Lahore, 1909, p. 73.

Nais and other communities who previously transmitted customary culture were gradually marginalised and the revenue-free land grants some of them had earlier enjoyed were resumed by the colonial state which perceived them as non-productive. In fact some British administrators thought of introducing laws prohibiting the participation of Nais in ritual occasions like weddings. Their role was largely taken up by journalists, teachers, lawyers and clerks who used their privileged positions and intermediate status under the Empire to displace what many of them considered a primitive, irrational and backward culture.

The gradual dissolution of the sepindari system, a central means by which the people of the Punjab regulated their social, economic and cultural relations, contributed to the disintegration of customary culture. At the same time, the elite culture was supported and fostered by the Raj and its powerful

allies. As noted previously a great majority of those who generated, participated in and diffused the elite culture now received their education in non-indigenous schools, had an ability to communicate in English and worked in government offices or urban professions, particularly law, journalism and teaching. To disseminate their newly-acquired values, beliefs and ideologies, the Punjabi elites utilized printing presses, newspapers and new literary genres like the novel. Communities like the Bharais, Mirasis and Nais who had a key role to play in the transmission of customary culture, primarily oral, had virtually no role to play in the communication codes constructed by the elite culture. The new culture, for instance, had fewer and fewer uses for the ritual services of a Nai. Messages could now be communicated through letters carried by the postal department; in an emergency the Nai was no match for the telegraph. In 1856-57 the imperial postal department in the Punjab carried 343,641 letters. By 1864-65 this number had increased to 99,904,951. Similarly the number of telegraph offices rose from fourteen in 1869 to thirty in 1875 and the length of telegraph lines during the same period rose from 761 miles to 2,374 miles.⁸⁷ In the last quarter of the nineteenth century marriages were increasingly arranged through new networks, as for example those of the Arya Samaj. Newspapers too were soon put to a similar use when matrimonial announcements began to appear in their columns. An advertisement inserted in the weekly English paper *The Khalsa* read: 'Wanted a suitable match for a Middle passed Sikh girl of respectable family aged 12 years. The applicant should be of good character and of respectable family and his age should not exceed 20 ...'⁸⁸ New marriage rites as enunciated by the Tat Khalsa and other organizations like the Arya Samaj made the role of a Nai redundant in the marriages organised by members of the new association.

The decline of the Sepidari system and the rise of a new market rationality permanently crippled all those professional groups, including the Nais, who had once actively helped in transmitting customary culture. The new elites immensely benefitted from these transformations which, among other things, helped to further enlarge their power to generate cultural meanings and symbols. The market economy provided limitless ammunition for their cause

⁸⁷ Y.B.Mathur, *British Administration of Punjab*, pp.127-9.

⁸⁸ *The Khalsa*, January 31, 1900, p.7. For another such notice see *Khaāsā Akhbār*, 10 May, 1895, pp.1-2.

and ensured that their assault on customary culture would be a spectacular success. Without aid from the armies of social change - commercialization, expansion in communications and a new educational infrastructure - it was highly unlikely that reformers would have succeeded in Sikhizing the Sikhs to the extent that they did. Quite often they may have even been unaware of how the underlying transformations in economy and society were abetting the transformation of how Sikhism was defined.

I am arguing that in place of collapsing customary practices of worship and leisure, the Tat Khalsa recommended that all social life be henceforth conducted within parameters it defined. The Mirasis, Bhats, Nais were to have no say in its constitution or transmission. The fortune of the cultural notations expounded by the Tat Khalsa were further boosted by the policies and institutions of the state.

The colonial state's most profound and direct influence on the evolution of the Sikh faith in mid-century Punjab undoubtedly flowed out of the British army. Soon after the conclusion of the first Anglo-Sikh war in 1846 two Sikh regiments were raised from the newly annexed trans-Sutlej territories.⁸⁹ This trickle of the Sikh peasantry into the armed forces of the Empire quickly turned into a regular stream in the years following the annexation of the Punjab. The governor-general Lord Dalhousie, a shrewd politician impressed by the fighting qualities of the Sikhs and in an effort to stem both the potential for insurrection and unemployment in the central Punjab, encouraged Sikh recruitment to the Punjab Irregular Force, the Military Police and the regiments of John Company.⁹⁰ This initiative paid rich dividends when the Sikhs fought side by side with the British during the 1857 Uprising. After this date no further proof of Sikh valour or fidelity was required: the colonialists were convinced the Sikhs 'loved fighting for fighting's sake',⁹¹ and they ought to be recruited to the army without any inhibitions. Thus the Punjab was turned into

⁸⁹Sir George MacMunn, *The Martial Races of India*, London, 1933, first published Edinburg, 1912, p. 254.

⁹⁰Background in Dolores Domin, *India in 1857-59*, Berlin, 1977, pp. 105-117.

⁹¹Major-General Vincent Eyre, "The Sikh and European Soldiers of our Indian Forces", a lecture March 1, 1867, p. 8.

the army barracks of the Raj and the Sikhs became the most formidable human resource of the imperial fighting machine.

On being enlisted a Sikh recruit was asked to undergo the initiation rite and it was mandatory for him to maintain the external symbols of the faith. Regiments employed granthIs to conduct Sikh ritual observances and commanding officers ensured that there was no breach of the Khalsa symbols. There was a deep conviction within the army hierarchy that the martial prowess of the Sikhs mystically flowed out of their religious observances and beliefs.⁹² It was greatly feared that if the Sikh traditions were not upheld, then the ability of the Sikh soldiers to act as a fighting machine would rapidly deteriorate.⁹³ Unmindful of the complex nature of the Sikh tradition and of the immense spectrum of doctrines and practices among the Sikh public, the philistine commanders of the army enforced an extremely narrow, functional and mechanistic definition of the Sikh faith. Only those who carried the five symbols were deemed to be genuine Sikhs. In a manual written for army officials, the author R.W.Falcon stated : 'The followers of Guru Govind Singh, that is to say Singhs, the members of the Khalsa; these are the only Sikhs who are reckoned as true Sikhs now-a-days. The best practical test of a true Sikh is to ascertain whether calling himself a Sikh he wears uncut hair and abstains from smoking ' ⁹⁴

When the Sikh soldiers from the British regiments proceeded on furlough or retirement to their hamlets, they brought home with them a distinctive image of what it meant to be a Sikh. Bravery, loyalty, scripturalism and membership of an exclusive religious community were among the most prominent characteristics instilled into them. Since the image of Sikhism cultivated by the army blended so well with the image upheld by the Tat Khalsa on who qualified to be a Sikh, it is no wonder that Sikh soldiers became the

⁹²Ibid., p.7 and D.Petrie, "Secret C.I.D. Memorandum on Recent Developments in Sikh Politics", reprinted in *The Panjab Past and Present*, vol. 4, 1970, pp. 308-309.

⁹³See John J.H.Gordon, *The Sikhs*, Edinburgh, 1904, p. 228 and *Khālsā Akhbār*, October 11, 1895, pp. 3-4 and February 14, 1896, p. 7.

⁹⁴R.W.Falcon, *Handbook*, p. 15.

staunchest supporters of neo-Sikhism.⁹⁵ Having attained a certain amount of social distinction and being seen by rural society as men knowledgeable about the norms of the world outside the village, the views of these soldiers commanded considerable respect in the countryside. In a peasant society their life-style became a source of admiration and emulation.

In addition to their role in the transmission of Tat Khalsa ideology, Sikh soldiers also actively participated in the activities of the Singh Sabha. It was not unusual for Sabhas to have army personnel among their founders or as members of their executive committees. In 1898 for the first time a Sikh unit, Company Number 14, after taking permission from the commanding officer, founded its own Singh Sabha.⁹⁶ Next year, another Sikh unit, Company Number 45, set up a Singh Sabha at its base in Multan.⁹⁷ A large proportion of the subscribers to the Sabha papers like the *Khālsā Akhbār* came from the army. At times an entire regiment would collectively contribute towards the expenses of Singh Sabha projects.⁹⁸ Some of the middle-ranking soldiers even took to funding the publication of Sabha literature. Subedar Maluk Singh paid the entire printing expenses for a manual on life-cycle rituals.⁹⁹ In sum, the army became a life-line for Tat Khalsa thinking, finances and institutions.

The colonial state's buttressing of Tat Khalsa identity was continuously reinforced by the way British administrators had become accustomed to perceiving Indian society. The indigenous society was above all seen to be made up of homogeneous religious communities: Islamic, Hindu and Sikh. Even when the colonial rulers did not consciously aim to divide and rule, an epistemology founded on the premise that the most fundamental cleavages in the society they governed stemmed from religion, helped foster communal consciousness. The colonial state's fetishistic attitude towards the indices of denominational affiliation, encouraged the different constituents of civil society

⁹⁵For the highly affable relationship between the Sikh soldiers and the Singh Sabha leadership see the biography of Giani Ditt Singh by Daljit Singh, *Singh Sabhā dā Maudhī*, Amritsar, n.d., p. 61-65. Also see *Khālsā Akhbār*, February 23, 1900, p. 2.

⁹⁶*Khālsā Akhbār*, December 30, 1898, p. 7 and June 2, 1899, p. 8.

⁹⁷*Khālsā Akhbār*, June 23, 1899, p. 8.

⁹⁸For instance Company Number 14, donated Rupees 125 to the Sunam Singh Sabha. See *Khālsā Akhbār*, June 24, 1898, p. 8.

⁹⁹See Bhai Suraj Singh Pracharak, *Gurmat Kāj Bivhār*, Lahore, 1913.

riven by internal differences of caste, class and region to scramble for government resources and patronage on the basis of supra-local religious affiliations. If officialdom's largesse was to be had at the cost of courting religious identities and mystifying intra-communal differences, the new elites were not unwilling to adhere to the monolithic categories of the rulers. Employment in the subordinate bureaucracy, education and municipal politics with an expanding franchise led to a scramble for the shrinking resources of an underdeveloped economy.

The Sikhs in mid-century Punjab had a reputation for being boorish and illiterate. Their access to higher education and employment opportunities was severely restricted by their preponderantly rural residence and agricultural pursuits. Civil service jobs in the infrastructure created by the Raj and positions in the educational institutions run by the missionaries and the government largely went to Hindu service and commercial castes. Members of these caste groups, long resident in the cities and with ancient traditions of servicing administrations and running sophisticated commercial enterprises, had a clear edge over the Sikhs. Statistics on education during the 1870s do not include the caste break-down, but from the report of the Education Commission appointed in 1881 it is evident that the bulk of the students in secondary and higher education came from Hindu commercial castes like the Khatris, Aroras, Baniyas and Brahmans.¹⁰⁰

However, given the limitations of government figures on denominational returns, as discussed in chapter four, and the proclivity of the census authorities to indiscriminately lump disparate populations into homogeneous religious communities, all contemporary data to do with religious representation must be read with great caution. With these drawbacks in mind, it may be pointed out that in the early 1870s, although Hindu traders and the Brahmans numbered only 10 percent of the province's population they contained in their ranks 57 percent of all literate Punjabis and 55 percent of all English speaking Punjabis.¹⁰¹ It is thus not surprising that they also dominated government posts and urban professions. The Brahmans and the commercial

¹⁰⁰N.G.Barrier, "Punjab Politics and the Disturbances of 1907", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Duke University, 1966, pp. 1-17.

¹⁰¹Ibid., pp. 16-17.

castes held over 80 percent of the superior appointments. The same castes dominated western medicine, engineering and law. Among the 67 assistant surgeons employed by the British there were 9 Muslims and 52 Hindus. The Hindus included 20 Khattris, 13 Brahmans, 7 Aroras and 7 members of minor trading castes.¹⁰² An idea of Sikh representation in the civil service and the new urban professions may be had from the data listed in a directory published by the Khalsa Tract Society (see table 9). Since there is nothing to compare these figures with, it is hard to judge their accuracy.

Table 9, Sikh Professionals in 1900.

Rank or Occupation	Number
Gazetted Officers	23
Gazetted Tehsildars	11
Naib Tehsildar	27
Bar-at-Law	6
First Class Lawyers	10
Second Class Lawyers	16
Forest Department	2
Salt Department	1
Post Department	3
Education Department	4
Total	103

Source: *Khalsa Directory*, Amritsar, 1900, pp. 12-16.

As agriculturists the Sikhs found it hard to acquire the western education which came to determine patterns of employment as well as the development of an urban professional class. The census commissioner in his 1881 report laconically observed: 'The Sikhs are the most uneducated class in the Punjab'.¹⁰³ The acquisition of an English language higher education

¹⁰²Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁰³*Census Report 1881*, pp. 38-39.

demanded a lengthy stay in town, for which the Sikh public was ill-equipped.¹⁰⁴

Whatever the objective limitations of these figures, one thing is certain: by the late nineteenth century, there was a growing sentiment among sections of the Sikh population that they belonged to a community distinct from the rest of the population and members of their religion were grossly under-represented in state institutions. The changes in Sikh self-perceptions are reflected in an address presented to the Maharaja of Patiala, asking for his financial assistance to set up an educational institution for the community:

In peace times, the Sikhs mostly are land cultivators and artisans - poor men for the most part - and the light of western education and civilization has not reached them in their remote and ignorant villages ... It is owing, however, to no want of energy on the part of the Sikhs, that they have failed more largely to take advantage of these institutions, as may be seen from their readiness to join board and indigenous schools near their homes; but partly because of their traditionary surroundings (mainly

¹⁰⁴The rural linkages of the Sikhs become clear from the following table:

	Agriculturalists	Percentage	Non-Agriculturalists	Percent
age				
Muslims	6,728,000	58.79	4,716,000	41.21
Hindus	2,211,000	33.61	4,368,000	66.39
Sikhs	1,508,000	65.79	784,000	34.21

Adapted from: H. Calvert, *The Wealth and Welfare of the Punjab*, Lahore, 1927, p.269.

agricultural), and partly because of their poverty, Sikh boys have hitherto found little opportunity for joining the larger Schools and Colleges, and thus working their way to intellectual, moral and material advancement. The result is that the Sikh community is very poorly represented in the learned professions, and in posts of honour and responsibility in the Civil administration ... the purely secular education imparted in public schools is calculated, under existing circumstances, to slowly obliterate the distinctive characteristics of the Sikhs, to check the development of the qualities which enabled them to attain so proud a position, and to merge them finally in the general mass of the surrounding population. ¹⁰⁵

The surfacing of these sentiment of Sikh separatism and of underrepresentation in the ranks of the new elites, fired the collective aspirations of the Sikhs, who agitated continuously for more and more government favour.

For its part, the administration had, as early as the 1850s, selected army recruits in the Punjab on the basis of religious affiliation.¹⁰⁶ The powerful bureaucracy in Calcutta had spelt out in fine detail how many Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus were allowed to be recruited for each regiment. In the case of civilian appointments, Barrier has argued that due to the pervasive influence of the Punjab school of administration and the pre-British heritage, the manning of the province's civil service was governed by strict religious neutrality.¹⁰⁷ But by the 1880s he admits this principle of an open labour market where the most competent would secure a job was astutely dropped in favour of official intervention, principally to increase Muslim numbers in the civil service. A section of the Punjab cadre, particularly in the western and the eastern districts of the province, had for long been arguing that urban Hindus had been unduly advantaged from the start and it was essential for good-will and political stability to employ a greater number of Muslims. They were a sizeable majority in the province and anyway should be preferred over the exploitative and wily Hindu commercial castes. In 1886 under lieutenant-governor James Lyall these

¹⁰⁵Bhai Jawahir Singh secretary Khalsa College Deputation to W. Bell secretary, Khalsa College Establishment Committee, September 15, 1890, pp. iv-v, in Sundar Singh Majithia private papers, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

¹⁰⁶See Dolores Domin, *India in 1857-59*, pp. 105-17.

¹⁰⁷N. Gerald Barrier, "The Punjab Government and Communal Politics, 1870-1908", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 27, 1968, p. 523-539.

arguments won favour; a confidential circular was issued instructing officers to hire more Muslims until some sort of balance could be achieved between Hindu-Muslim employees. By 1904, due to a disclosure of employment circulars, the official policy of bolstering Muslim numbers had become public knowledge. Even before the publicity surrounding the administration's preference for Muslims, it was not hard to gauge the administration's fears and views on the place of religion in Indian society. The miniscule new elite among the Sikhs was not going to rest until officialdom performed similar tinkering on their behalf, to correct what was seen to be a massive Sikh lag in education and jobs.

In 1882 the Lahore Singh Sabha put forward the Sikh case before the Education Commission. It was argued that due to the excessive concentration of the Sikh population in the rural tracts, they had been seriously hampered in their ability to acquire higher education. 'The majority of the Sikhs live in villages (for they live twelve times more in villages than in towns or cities) and the majority of the Hindus live in towns or cities: now, supposing that most of the Hindus and most of the Sikhs that live in towns or cities receive education respectively, then it can be easily inferred that the majority of the Hindus are under instruction and the majority of the Sikhs are illiterate.'¹⁰⁸The memorial was signed by Baba Khem Singh Bedi, Sirdar Man Singh, Bhai Main Singh and Gurmukh Singh. A strong plea was advanced for special official protection of Sikh interests and the need of a special policy that would enhance Sikh numbers in institutions of higher education. Such lobbying became a major preoccupation of the Sikh leadership in the late nineteenth century Punjab.

In 1886 when the Public Service Commission commenced its sittings in the Punjab, Sabha personnel got together to seek greater government representation in the civil service. Three basic points were emphasised: examinations to the covenanted civil service should be held simultaneously in England and India; the age limit for the competition should be raised from nineteen to twenty-three; Sanskrit and Arabic should be given the same weighting as Latin and Greek.¹⁰⁹These recommendations, it was believed,

¹⁰⁸"Memorial from Sri Guru Singh Sabha", in *E.C.*, p.564. Also see page 496-504.

¹⁰⁹*P.S.C.*, pp.185-86.

would help boost Sikh recruitment to the public service. If this could be attained, there would be no place for Jawahir Singh's 1892 lament that there was 'unfortunately , no well-to-do middle class among the Sikhs'.¹¹⁰ The new elites among the Sikhs were earnestly equipping themselves in the 1890s to secure a place in the sun.

But those who wanted to bargain with the imperial authorities or block competition from members of other religious communities, now had to push for a uniform Sikh identity. It was hard lobbying the government for greater Sikh representation when some Sikhs informed the census officers that they were Hindus, while others freely undertook pilgrimages to the shrines of Muslim pīrs. If one was going to curry government favour, and there were few alternative options available for social mobility in a colonial society outside state patronage , a standardized identity had to be the first item on the agenda of any leaders who chose to speak on behalf of the community.

The expansion in local self-government as a result of Lord Ripon's 1882 Resolution on Local Self-Government opened up another arena for power contests among the new elites. Although the administration's intention in enfranchising a larger number of people and reducing officially nominated members on municipal boards was to quell the possibilities of any urban political dissensions and keep the local bodies solvent, the move resulted in further reinforcing religious consciousness. Municipalities had the power to tax town populations, authorize expenditures on public works and introduce by-laws affecting civic life. They could also influence the tone of religious life by demarcating the boundaries of sacred shrines, allocating space for slaughter houses and butcher shops and supervising the organization of religious fairs and processions. Any control over municipal resources could endow a faction or a group with real leverage over local power. Municipal boards became a source of authority, patronage and honour. Through them friends could be rewarded and foes punished.

Conscious of these potentialities, urban notables employed all sorts of stratagems to get elected as municipal commissioners. Electoral appeals based on religion became a major draw card for many of the contestants. Once again in

¹¹⁰Bhai Jawahir Singh to W.Bell, *op.cit.*, p.iv.

the electioneering, the Sikhs with their overwhelming majority resident in the villages had the odds stacked against them. In 1883-84 out of 96 municipalities Hindus had a majority on 72 committees, Muslims a majority on 12 and Sikhs were a majority on only one. Even this was no honour, for the Sikh lead was confined to the small town of Tarn Taran. In 12 local bodies there were as many Hindus as Muslims.¹¹¹ Sikhs obviously did not count in the urban politics of British Punjab. This fact may have greatly annoyed those among the Sikhs who were extremely conscious of Sikh eminence and political leadership in the days of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. But they were impotent in the context of the demographic arithmetic of urban Punjab.

In 1892 the importance of the municipal boards further increased when their members became voters for candidates to the provincial council. The expanding influence of municipal commissioners made competition for the post extremely stiff. Questions of faction, caste and community became subjects of major debate among the electorate. For urban Sikh leadership to compete it was of paramount importance that the faithful think of themselves as a cohesive community. If such a premise could be firmly established, it was thought Sikh candidates would stand a better chance of victory.¹¹²

Having listed the factors that prompted Tat Khalsa identity under the Raj it needs to be added that their significance should not be unduly exaggerated. There simply was no one to one correspondence between employment or municipal elections and the changing Sikh consciousness. For instance the nature of the Sikh *rites de passage* was already shifting prior to British rule, that is long before issues like the proportion of Hindus, Sikh or Muslims in government employment became matters of public debate and lobbying. The

¹¹¹N.Gerald Barrier, "The Punjab Government and Communal Politics", p. 538.

¹¹²The life of Bhai Mohan Singh Vaid (1881-1936), a municipal commissioner for many years in Tarn Taran and a leading spokesman of the Tat Khalsa in the region clearly shows how the political configurations at the local level influenced Sikh perceptions. A close associate of leading Tat Khalsa figures like Bhai Vir Singh, Takht Singh, Dit Singh, Sunder Singh Majithia and Trilochan Singh, Mohan Singh Vaid played a leading role in promoting Punjabi, redrawing sacred boundaries, reshaping life-cycle rituals and defending Tat Khalsa from Arya Samaj attacks. Details in Munsha Singh Dukhi, *Bhāī Sahib Bhāī Mohan Singh jī Vaid*, Amritsar, n.d., particularly see pp. 197-200, 213-217 and 227-230.

reformist Nirankari movement from the time of Baba Darbara Singh in the 1850s had been pushing for an Anand-like marriage ceremonial among the Sikhs. In fact for some of the transformations in Sikhism, pre-colonial factors were often as crucial as the social changes unleashed by the Raj. Therefore, as will shortly become clear, it will not do to single out the colonial state as an instrument for stamping Sikhism with a new consciousness and an altered symbolic universe.

In a recent work, the social anthropologist R.G.Fox, influenced by the work of British marxist scholars, particularly Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson, has rigorously argued that Sikh identity as we know it today was a creation of the colonial state. In the opening chapter he succinctly states his hypothesis: 'British rulers, in pursuit of their colonial interests through means dictated by their own cultural beliefs, foreshadowed the reformed Sikh, or Singh identity, propounded by the Singh Sabhas'.¹¹³ In other words, British conceptions and imperial needs fused to generate the values and signs associated with the Singh Sabha movement. There are two fundamental problems with such a thesis: it ignores currents and positions within the pre-British Sikh tradition and often comes close to identifying Sikhism as a product of the colonial state. In what follows I will briefly examine these points in some detail.

As previously hinted in this chapter and also in chapter two, there was a trend in pre-colonial Sikh tradition, particularly as manifested in the *rahit-nāmā* literature, that enunciated a Sikh identity, quite similar to the one promulgated by the Singh Sabhas under the Tat Khalsa (what Fox terms the Singhs or the Lions). The *rahit-nāmās* visualized a considerably deritualized Sikhism, shorn of polytheism, idolatry and Brahmanical dominance. But above all, and on this point there was solid agreement in the *rahit-nāmās*, compared to certain disagreements on other elements of doctrine, a Sikh had to maintain the five symbols of his faith. The British may have 'foreshadowed' the Singh Sabhas in their insistence on baptism and their obsession with the external symbols of the faith for Sikh soldiery, but both the colonial state and the Sabha were preceded in this insistence by the *rahit-nāmās*. No account of the evolution of

¹¹³R.G.Fox, *Lions of the Punjab*, Berkeley, 1985, p. 10.

Sikhism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is complete without reference to the evolving *rahit* tradition.

Having shown how there is a complete absence of any reference to the *rahit-nāmā* literature in Richard Fox's account, it remains to be shown how there was no single British perception of Sikhism. The colonial state was not a homogeneous entity, a view shared by Fox¹¹⁴ - it was a patchwork of conflicting strands, propelled in different directions by political exigencies and by the manoeuvring of opposed class interests. This complex nature of the colonial state had a profound influence on its social, economic and religious policies and encouraged the rise of multifaceted opinions and policies within it. For instance, in the first two decades after the Punjab's annexation, the colonial government of India as part of its general policies insisted that administration relinquish its control over Sikh shrines like the Golden Temple; at the same time the British army was furthering its image of Sikh identity and feeing Sikh *granthīs*, while the provincial administration in the Punjab was pressing to retain control over major Sikh shrines. Moreover, evangelical district officers like R.Cust, confident that Sikhism was on the decline, were simultaneously drafting policies to push it towards its final demise.¹¹⁵ Such conflicts over policy remained an inherent feature of British rule. It was not at all easy for one institution of the state to alter the thinking of another organ of imperial rule.

Even when Fox momentarily retreats from his argument that the colonial state actively sponsored what he calls Singh identity, and concedes that the state also gave a subsidy to what amounted to non-Singh identities, he is unable to explain why this was so.¹¹⁶ While the colonial state's backing of Singh identity is neatly explained by reference to the army, biological determinism, cultural choices and Orientalism of the Edward Said variety, no explanation is forthcoming for why alternative Sikh identities were nurtured. Having locked himself into this puzzle, Fox is compelled to fall back on the Akali polemics for a solution. In the 1920s the Akalis had argued that the British bureaucracy embraced shrine officiants because they were toadies. Richard Fox accepts this

¹¹⁴Ibid., pp. 155-158.

¹¹⁵These different positions within the colonial state can be followed in Ian J. Kerr, "British relationships with the Golden Temple", *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol.21, 1984, pp. 139-151.

¹¹⁶R.G.Fox, *op.cit.*, pp. 158-159.

argument and suggests that in backing temple managements, the administration 'willy-nilly' also had to 'subsidize' non-Sikh values. While this position carries weight for the second decade of the twentieth century, it cannot fully explain British support for the temple officiants in the second half of the nineteenth century. They were by no means pusillanimous toadies for the entire period of colonial rule and in fact if the state was looking for loyal servants they could not have found better candidates than from among the early Tat Khalsa. The political controversy launched by the prospects of Duleep Singh's return to the Punjab in the 1880s illustrates the respective positions of temple management and the Tat Khalsa towards the colonial state.

In 1886, Thakur Singh Sandhanwalia, the founder president of the Amritsar Singh Sabha, a mainstay of Sanatan Sikhism, returned from a nine month visit to London and launched an agitation for restoring the Punjab to Duleep Singh, the youngest son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.¹¹⁷ Duleep Singh was at this time a titled English squire with a large estate in England. Faced with immense economic hardships and snubbed by the British government he planned to stake a claim to rule the Punjab.¹¹⁸ Thakur Singh styled himself prime-minister of the kingdom of Lahore and received a seal from his cousin Duleep Singh to act on his behalf. He urged with the Sikh maharajas and the feudal gentry to support Duleep Singh's cause. Raja Bikram Singh, Baba Khem Singh Bedi, Giani Sumer Singh and many others were suspected of giving their tacit support.¹¹⁹ In 1885 Bawa Nihal Singh, a member of the Amritsar Singh Sabha wrote an Urdu book, *Khursid-i-Khālsā*, in support of Duleep Singh. Udey Singh, the president of the Nanak Panth Parkash Sabha, on the occasion of Guru Nanak's birth anniversary celebrations, publicly displayed a picture of Maharaja Duleep Singh. The occasion was attended by a representative of Raja Bikram Singh. The British government saw in all these activities signs of possible sedition.

¹¹⁷ Lord Dufferin to Viscount Cross, July 14, 1887, in Ganda Singh ed., *Maharaja Duleep Singh Correspondence*, (hereafter *G.S.*), Patiala, 1972, pp. 424-425.

¹¹⁸ For background see Micheal Alexander and Sushila Anand, *Queen Victoria's Maharajah Duleep Singh 1838-93*, London, 1980.

¹¹⁹ Colonel P.D. Henderson to C.L. Tupper, April 14, 1888, in *G.S.*, p. 528.

The movement for the restoration of Duleep Singh struck a sympathetic chord among the temple officiants. For them he symbolised a world, in whose construction, they had once participated, but which now was rapidly dissolving under the forces unleashed by the British administration. Lord Dufferin, the viceroy, stated in his communication to England :

To circulate Dalip Singh's letters and to further his cause among the Sikhs, foremost are the *Granthies* of four principal Sikh shrines priests, in hopes of large jagirs, have at the suggestion of Thakur Singh, put a misconception on the passage of the Granth which to suit and further Dalip Singh's cause is now being so translated that according to Nanak Dalip Singh will be the second founder of Sikh religion, and that his rule will extend 3,000 miles north of India. This is being quietly preached to the Sikh soldiers in the British service. They are being all exhorted to remain in readiness for the time of its fulfilment is at hand.¹²⁰

A contented peasantry in the Punjab showed no interest in the misconstrued passage of the Granth. The British authorities would not allow Duleep Singh to go beyond Aden. Thakur Singh, along with his family, was compelled to take refuge at Pondichery in French territory. Here, waiting for his grandiose dreams to materialise he was soon to die in relative obscurity. With Thakur Singh dead, Duleep Singh was forced to turn back from Aden and with hardly any response from the Sikhs, the movement for Duleep Singh's restoration petered out. The Tat Khalsa leadership of the Lahore Singh Sabha exhorted the Sikhs to remain loyal and broke their ties with the Amritsar Singh Sabha. Representatives of 30 Singh Sabhas followed suit and professed support of the newly constituted Khalsa Diwan under the aegis of the Lahore Singh Sabha. This sudden turn of events, the hostility shown by Tat Khalsa organizations and the fear of government reprisal compelled the supporters of Duleep Singh, among whom the most prominent were the leaders of Sanatan Sikhism and temple officiants, to beat a hasty retreat. Clearly Fox's argument that the British state backed non-Singh identities because of their loyalist position does not apply for the whole period of colonial rule. Non-Singh identity, as much as Singh identity, had no in-built allegiance for the Raj.

To conclude this section the Tat Khalsa identity was a complex amalgam of the pre-British evolution of Sikhism and social transformations under

¹²⁰Lord Dufferin to Viscount Cross, July 14, 1887, in *G.S.*, p. 424

colonialism. Instead of looking for traces of a uniform British design that underwrote the Tat Khalsa identity, it is far more crucial to study the rise of the new elites, the form of their power struggles, their need for a meaningful and rational cultural idiom and the fate of customary culture. In this chapter I have focused upon the external factors that shaped the Tat Khalsa identity, in the following chapter I will examine the internal mechanisms that translated Tat Khalsa thinking into the dominant value system of the Sikh community.

Conclusion

The cultural circle inaugurated by the Tat Khalsa finally closed with a fundamental change in the modes of imagination, feeling and experience among the Sikhs: all vertical ties based on customary culture, maximal lineages, sects and castes began to be broken and substituted by the more approved lateral relationships, which gave rise to the brotherhood of the Khalsa. Freed of idolatry, polytheism, the pervasive influence of Muslim pīrs, Brahmanical presence in rituals, as well as possessing distinctly Khalsa life-cycle rituals, corporeal appearance and exclusive sacred space, along with doctrines of monotheism, scripturalism and the divine nature of Sikhism, the protagonists of this new idiom could now convincingly claim the Sikhs were an independent, homogeneous and separate religious community without any relationship to Hinduism or Islam. But those who were excluded from this new cultural circle or who objected to this new idiom of imagination within the community were not willing to accept the changes lying down. They fought back through polemic, gestures and organizations. But, without the backing of the silent armies of social change they were fighting for a lost cause. Hitherto in the annals of the Singh Sabha their story has remained largely untold. The final chapter looks at this war of imaginations and concludes with a study of the impressive weaponry that supported the Tat Khalsa.

Chapter Seven

Resistance and Counter Resistance

...however dominant a social system may be, the very meaning of its domination involves a limitation or selection of the activities it covers, so that by definition it cannot exhaust all social experience, which therefore always potentially contains space for alternative acts and alternative intentions which are not yet articulated as a social institution or even project.

Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 252.

The chequered history of the Sikh movement for over three hundred years had not generated an all-embracing single definition of who was a Sikh. The Tat Khalsa through a series of innovations, purges and negations supplied this definition in less than three decades. They endowed the Sikhs with their own texts, histories, symbols, festivities, ritual calendar, sacred space, life-cycle rituals, in short a meaningful universe, separate and radically different from other traditions. The Sikhs could now confidently lay claim to being an exclusive pan-local religious community. This phenomenal transformation was by no means a unanimous act. It invited as much applause as it engendered derision, and the enthusiastic emulation of the new paradigm was matched by an equally forceful disdain.

This chapter looks at how the meanings, definitions and ideology enunciated by the Tat Khalsa were contested and how the new face of Sikhism sought to overcome this resistance. Within Sikh tradition the most sustained opposition to the Tat Khalsa came from two quarters: Sanatan Sikhism and sections of the Sikh peasantry. The Tat Khalsa's efforts to counter this resistance were aided by a burgeoning number of educational institutions, religious associations and voluntary bodies. The final section of the chapter surveys the support network that went into enhancing the authority of the new discursive practices.

Sanatan Sikhism versus the Tat Khalsa

The Tat Khalsa's monotheism, iconoclastic sentiments, egalitarian social values and standardized Sikh identity did not blend well with the polytheism, idol-worship, caste-distinctions and diversity espoused by Sanatan Sikhism. In the early years of the Singh Sabhas, particularly the 1870s, the

hostility between these two radically opposed views of the world was mild and without rancour. Two reasons may account for this. First, the Tat Khalsa position was still in embryonic form and second, the Sanatan leadership was confident of accommodating changed perceptions within the existing framework. But by the early 1880s it became increasingly clear that the co-existence of the two weltanschauungen would prove impossible given the Tat Khalsa's ceaseless efforts to totally destroy all that Sanatan thinking represented.

The clash between the Sanatan Sikhs and the Tat Khalsa first came to the fore in the winter of 1883 when Baba Khem Singh Bedi, as president of the Khalsa Diwan, proposed that in the future all Singh Sabhas be called the Sikh Singh Sabhas.¹ The change in names was no trivial matter: as often happens in history the fight over semantics came to symbolise wider issues and positions: what Sikhism stood for in mid-century Punjab and what it was to become by the close of the century. The name Sikh Singh Sabha became the focus of an effort to attract all those Sikhs into the organization who had not undergone the Khalsa initiatory rite - namely the Sahajdharis, Nirmalas and Udasis. The title Sikh Singh Sabha was deemed deficient, for it was seen to encompass only the Khalsa Sikhs who adhered to the rahit and the five symbols of the faith. The Tat Khalsa representatives in the Khalsa Diwan were bitterly opposed to Khem Singh Bedi's initiative and in the face of mounting pressure the Baba agreed to drop the motion at the annual meeting of the Diwan in April 1884. This was the first taste of organizational defeat for Sanatan thinking.

Before the storm over name changes was over a new controversy rapidly engulfed the warring parties: did members of Guru lineages have the right to use a cushion (*gadelā*) while sitting in the presence of the Ādi Granth or not. Sanatan Sikhs answered in the affirmative and the Tat Khalsa leadership demanded that in accordance with the egalitarian principles of Sikhism all men be seated equally before the Granth. The debate over the right to use a cushion came to be known as the *gadelā* controversy and Baba Khem Singh Bedi's insistence on using a cushion made him a test case. As the conflict raged in

¹Background in Gurmukh Singh, *My Attempted Excommunication From the Sikh Temples and the Khalsa Community at Faridkot*, Lahore, 1898, pp. 1-3 (hereafter *MAE*)

the 1880s it came to symbolise what Sikhism stood for in mid-century Punjab and transmutations it was to undergo by the close of the century.

In November 1885 Gurmukh Singh raised the *gadelā* question at a meeting of the Khalsa Diwan. When he demanded that Khem Singh Bedi stop seating himself on a cushion in the congregation, his opponents, particularly the ruler of Faridkot Bikram Singh, responded by asking for Gurmukh Singh's expulsion from the Diwan. To their absolute amazement an overwhelming majority of the delegates supported him.² This skirmish, coupled with the politicking on behalf of Maharaja Duleep Singh, as discussed in the previous chapter, were the immediate reasons behind the split in the Khalsa Diwan. But eventually the division was not just over the naming controversy, the *gadelā* issue, or even the supposed class differences between the Sanatan Sikhs and the Tat Khalsa. The roots of the discord lay deeply embedded in values, rituals, symbols - in brief the entire gamut of cultural norms in Punjabi society in general and Sikh communities in particular. Issues like the *gadelā* controversy provided a convenient camouflage for deliberating on fundamental concerns : what was the nature of Sikh doctrines, who was to interpret these doctrines, what was the role of guru lineages in defining the Sikh tradition, were Sikhs Hindus, or a separate religious community? In responding to these questions the Sanatan Sikhs publicly articulated their stand and preferences.³

Most Sanatan energy was spent in defending the time-honoured convention of Sikhs venerating and following living gurus. The bond between master and disciples was viewed as sacrosanct and inviolable. When the Tat Khalsa protested that there was no room for such a practice in Sikh doctrines and all devotion ought to be reserved exclusively for the Ādi Granth, Sanatan

²Ibid., pp. 6-7.

³The credit for doing so with erudition and great zeal must go to Avtar Singh Vahiria, a close associate of Baba Khem Singh Bedi and Raja Bikram Singh. Unfortunately nothing is known of his early years. Sometime in 1886 he shifted from Rawalpindi to Amritsar and started taking an active role in Sikh affairs. In 1887 he drafted a new constitution for the rump Khalsa Diwan at Amritsar and soon after became its secretary. During his stay at Amritsar he also edited the Urdu newspaper *Gurmūkhī Akhbār* and the Punjabi weekly *Sri Gurmat Parkaśak*. In the 1890s as Sanatan Sikhism increasingly came under attack, Avtar Singh turned into its most zealous defender and wrote approximately eight major works expounding and defending its tenets. Single handed he tried to match the writings of the Tat Khalsa stalwarts like Dit Singh and Mohan Singh Vaid.

thinkers pointed out how the guru tradition had helped in the survival, spread and propagation of Sikhism over the centuries. This incontrovertible claim could not be set aside and may account for a certain Tat Khalsa ambivalence on the issue. Ultimately they were compelled to accord recognition to all those human gurus - called saints in the twentieth century - who advocated the values of neo-Sikhism, but they refused to side with those who dared preach Sanatan principles.

For Sanatan Sikhs there was absolutely nothing wrong with Sikhs venerating non-Sikh deities, saints or idols. In November 1899 Avtar Singh Vahiria informed his audience at a meeting ground close to the Golden Temple that Sikhs should worship the goddess Durga without any inhibitions.⁴ This assurance came at the height of a controversy in which men like Ditt Singh had been taking great pains to demonstrate that Guru Gobind Singh never worshipped Durga and that it was against the precepts of the Sikh gurus to worship idols.⁵ Similarly, whilst the Tat Khalsa leadership pleaded with the Sikh public to abolish the caste system, the Sanatan Sikhs came to its defence. When the neo-Sikhs claimed that the Sikh gurus wanted to eradicate the caste system, Sanatan writers countered that none of the Sikh gurus had married outside his caste and marriage arrangements had been strictly governed by caste rules.⁶ This fact was used to buttress the claim that the founders of the Sikh faith were not against the caste system. In recognition of the purity : pollution dichotomy Sanatan manuals of conduct listed ritual procedures for cleansing those individuals who had been accidentally polluted.⁷ As part of Sanatan caste regulations untouchable Sikhs, commonly known as Mazhabis were forbidden to enter the inner precincts of the Golden Temple and bathe in the sacred tank.⁸

⁴See *Khālsā Akhbār*, November 10, 1899, p. 2 and November 17, 1899, p. 2. For a systematic defence of idol-worship among the Sikhs see Avtar Singh Vahiria, *Sikh (Khālsā) Dharam Tat Darśan Arthāt Khālsā Dharam*, Amritsar, 1899, pp. 47-50.

⁵See Ditt Singh, *Durgā Parbaudh*, Lahore, 1899.

⁶Bawa Narain Singh, *Sikh Hīndu Hain*, Amritsar, 1899, p.21-22.

⁷Avtar Singh Vahiria compiled, *Khālsā Dharam Śāstar*, Amritsar, 1914, p. 413-424 (hereafter *KDS*).

⁸Ian J. Kerr, "British relationships with the Golden Temple", *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 21, 1984, p. 145.

In the domain of the life-cycle rituals the Sanatan Sikhs were willing to revise some of the older rituals but still showed considerable resistance against any total transformation. The most radical concession the Sanatan Sikhs made to Tat Khalsa thinking was the admission that there was no need for ritual officiants like Brahmans or *purohīts* to negotiate between the families of a couple to be married.⁹ But when it came to the actual marriage ritual there was an absolute insistence on the need for the couple to circumambulate a fire and an avowed rejection of the Anand ceremonial, central to which was, among other things, the substitution of fire by the *Ādi Granth*. This innovation was rejected on two grounds. First, it was stated that there was no evidence of the Sikh gurus ever having performed their marriage rituals according to the Anand procedures.¹⁰ Second, it was claimed that major Sikh texts like the *Dasam Granth*, *Gur-bilās* and *Sau-Sākhī* contained no reference to the Anand marriage rites. Instead they only cited instances of weddings performed by walking about the fire.¹¹ The Anand mode of marriage in the Sanatan literature was traced back to the Nirankari Sikhs and ridiculed as a bizarre innovation, at the most fifty years old and of no intrinsic worth compared to the virtues of the customary rite. Avtar Singh Vahiria went to the extent of stating that if a couple was married through the Anand rite they would become brother and sister, rather than husband and wife.¹²

When a person was dying, Sanatan Sikhs vouchsafed that there was no need to place a lighted lamp on the palm. However, there was considerable disagreement on the performance of other funerary rites. They supported the right of the bereaved family to take the unburnt bones for immersion to the river Ganges.¹³ Contrary to the Tat Khalsa rejection of the *Śraddha* ritual the Sanatan Sikhs deemed it to be essential. Four major reasons were listed in its support: first, the offerings of food made during the rite reached the departed person, second, feeding people on the occasion was a form of charity, thirdly, the rite

⁹Avtar Singh Vahiria, *Khālsā Sudhār Tarū*, part 8, Lahore, 1901, pp. 383-395.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 344-351 and 409. The Tat Khals ideologues of course countered this argument by tracing back the genealogy of the Anand rite to Guru Ram Das. See Taihal Singh, *Gurmat Rīti Anusār Vivāh Bidhī*, Lahore, 1903, pp. 1-6.

¹¹Avtar Singh, *Khālsā Sudhār*, p. 412.

¹²Ibid., pp. 445-450.

¹³Ibid., pp. 362-370.

was a sign of respect for ancestors and finally, it was a mode of honouring the wishes of family elders.¹⁴

As for the Khalsa initiatory rite, Sanatan leadership right up to the 1910s kept insisting that it was not mandatory for all Sikhs and that it was as permissible to be a Sahajdhari, Nirmala or Udasi as it was to become a Khalsa Sikh. Each tradition within the ambit of Sikh experience was to be permitted its own initiatory rite.¹⁵ This position was radically different from that of the Tat Khalsa who flatly insisted that the only way to be a Sikh was by taking up the Khalsa initiation.

In seeking to protect existing conventions and defy Tat Khalsa innovations, Sanatan Sikhs became the natural allies of the personnel working in shrines and other sacred establishments. In their turn the support staff at Sikh gurdwaras was closely aligned to Sanatan ideology. When the Tat Khalsa ventured to seize sacred space they were to encounter a stiff and bloody resistance that was to last until the mid-1920s.

In order to broadcast their ideology Sanatan Sikhs began to make increasing use of print culture, once an exclusive preserve of the new elites. Sometime in the mid-1880s they succeeded in appropriating the weekly Urdu newspaper *Gurmūkhī Akhbār*, published from Amritsar (this may have been as a result of the split in the Khalsa Diwan, Amritsar). It was once a major organ of the Lahore Singh Sabha and the Tat Khalsa. In 1886 the Punjabi weekly *Sri Gurmat Parkāśak* began to be published from Amritsar under the editorship of Avtar Singh Vahiria. Its chief aim appears to have been to direct a constant volley of fire against Tat Khalsa leadership and its ideology.¹⁶ In addition, the press was freely used to publish theological treatises and manuals on *rites de passage*.

To counter the expansion of the Tat Khalsa infrastructure and its ideological penetration the Sanatan leadership prepared a three-pronged strategy: barring Tat Khalsa activists from the major Sikh shrines particularly the four

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 466-475.

¹⁵KDS, pp. 115-147.

¹⁶I have not been able to find any issues of this paper but its contents were reproduced at great length in the *Khālsā Akhbār*.

takhts ¹⁷, constantly harassing prominent Tat Khalsa leaders, and founding organizations that would further Sanatan goals. For anyone interested in bringing about a change in modes of perception, thought and experience among the Sikhs it has always been crucial to address the faithful from within the ambit of the sacred shrines. In the minds of the people the discourses associated with the shrines were stamped with authority and sanctity, facets not shared by idioms enunciated outside sacred space. The four *takhts*, it may be recalled, had the power to issue *hukam-nāmās* which were binding on the faithful. Conscious of the immense advantage in speaking to the public through the sacred establishments, the Tat Khalsa tried hard to gain entry into the portals of sacred space. The Sanatan Sikhs, conscious of what neo-Sikhs were striving for, prevented them from acquiring a ready-made legitimacy for their cause through the portals of sacred space and the personnel who managed them. As early as 1886 Gurmukh Singh, chief secretary of the Khalsa Diwan and the foremost Tat Khalsa leader was prevented from addressing a Sikh congregation at Manji Sahib in Guru ka Bagh, close to the Golden Temple. His account of the whole episode is worth quoting at length:

I arrived at Guru Ka Bagh, at seven in the morning. It was gratifying to see that a large number of people had already collected close to the podium. The Singh Sabha meeting was going to be well attended ... However, shortly the steward of the Golden Temple accompanied by a police sergant arrived at the scene. On seeing them I instantly realized that in case I was going to speak, they were going to arrest me. In my thoughts I began to wonder why I was being counted alongside Kukas, Nirmalas, Arya Samajists, Brahmos, bad characters, traitors, murderers and thieves. It had obviously become a criminal act for a Khalsa Sikh to speak about his religion or the teachings of the ten gurus at the Guru ka Bagh ... Just as I was engaged in contemplating over these matters, my hosts asked me to start my lecture. On this the steward in a harsh tone informed us that there should be no meeting or lecture. His words were a signal for everybody that there will be no speech this morning and the people began to leave ... I would like to warn the Singh Sabha organizers, that in case they go to Amritsar to address a

¹⁷At the turn of the century formally there were only four *takhts* located at Amritsar, Anandpur, Nanded and Patna, however, increasingly a shrine at Talwandi, Damdama Sahib, came to be considered as a *takht* as well. For instance see *KDS*, 1914, p. k. This manual lists five *takhts*. The emergence of the fifth *takht* may have had something to do with the rivalry between the Malwa and Manjha Sikhs. The fifth *takht* is located in Malwa.

congregation they should exercise great caution, otherwise they may be insulted and put under arrest.¹⁸

Two features of this incident deserve particular attention. First, it was no ordinary Tat Khalsa publicist who was stopped from addressing a congregation. Gurmukh Singh was a major Sikh leader and commanded an extensive network of connections through the Lahore Singh Sabha and the Khalsa Diwan. Second, the meeting place where he wanted to speak was not located in the precincts of the Golden Temple. But for Sanatan Sikhs all this did not seem to make any difference. They did not want the Tat Khalsa, even at the periphery of the sacred establishments. With the passage of years this attitude did not alter and in fact the resistance to the Tat Khalsa's efforts to gain an entry into the shrines became even more hotly contested. Almost two decades after Gurmukh Singh was ejected from Guru ka Bagh, in 1907, Babu Teja Singh received similar treatment at the hands of the Damdama Sahib temple functionaries, in Bhatinda, a small town in the princely state of Patiala.

In 1907 the Bhatinda Singh Sabha members called for a convention to commemorate the Baisakhi festival.¹⁹ Sabha representatives and lay Sikhs were invited from all over Malwa, particularly from Patiala and Ferozepore, to participate in the proceedings. Most eminent among the participants was Babu Teja Singh, a leading Tat Khalsa figure well known for his role in initiating major controversies concerning sacred scriptures, doctrines and rituals. In fact it is highly likely that the whole meeting was convened at the prompting of Teja Singh. On the eve of the Baisakhi day, Sabha activists began to assemble at the Damdama Sahib shrine. But they were curtly informed by the shrine personnel that they would not be allowed to hold a meeting within the precincts of the sacred establishment. This unexpected announcement by the Sanatan management greatly shocked the Sabha members. With nowhere else to go they asked Lala Chajju Ram, the secretary of the Bhatinda Singh Sabha and a member of the provincial administration, to intervene and impress on the shrine personnel the need for an appropriate venue for the meeting. Even though the request came from a prominent citizen of the town, it was politely refused. Disappointed and bitter, the Sabha activists and others who had collected for the

¹⁸ *Khālsā Akhbār*, August 28, 1886, pp. 4-5.

¹⁹ The following account is based on *Sālāne Dīvān dā Saṅkhep Virtānt*, Amritsar, n.d..

special congregation were compelled to spend the night wherever they could. Next morning, on the Baisakhi day, the Tat Khalsa convention was held in the open grounds neighbouring the Damdama shrine. At the same time the Sanatan management of the shrine issued the following proclamation:

(1) Any offerings made by the members of the Singh Sabha at Sikh shrines be refused. (2) No Sabha meeting should be allowed to be held within the precincts of the Damdama Sahib *takht*. If any such meeting is attempted prompt measures should be taken to disperse it. (3) Singh Sabha members are unable to properly conduct *rites de passage*. (4) There should be no intermixing or commensality with Singh Sabha members. They are guilty of the worst kind of heresy and should not be pardoned at any *takht*. Nirmalas are a part of us and are not to be excluded. (5) Singh Sabha members do not belong to the Guru lineages and as such have no entitlement to the resources of the Sikh sacred establishments. Any person who mixes with them will be deemed guilty of misconduct. (6) All those who transgress these sacred orders will be judged to be members of the Singh Sabha organization.²⁰

By the turn of the century Sanatan Sikhs ensconced within the shrines began to issue an increasing number of such hostile edicts.²¹ The effort clearly was not merely to bar the Tat Khalsa from gaining access to sacred space but also to discredit them totally in the eyes of the Sikh public by labelling them as heretics and evil-minded people. Such judgements, coming from the most sacred of the Sikh establishments and respected authorities, were to exert immense psychological pressure on Sabha activists and others keen on imbibing the ideology of the neo-Sikhs. The issuing of encyclicals was matched by direct action against the Tat Khalsa leadership.

In 1885 a sustained public campaign was launched to expel Gurmukh Singh, one of the most active Tat Khalsa organizers and ideologues, from the Khalsa Diwan. When this move failed he was threatened with physical violence. Fearing for his life, Gurmukh Singh was forced into hiding at Jalandhar.²² In 1887 at the instigation of Khem Singh Bedi and Bikram Singh he was served by Man Singh, the manager of the Golden Temple, with an edict

²⁰Ibid., pp. 4-5.

²¹For another instance see *The Tribune*, August 1, 1905, p. 5.

²²Gurmukh Singh Chandhar, *MAE*, p. 10.

of excommunication.²³ Sanatan Sikh emissaries went around major Sikh centres to publicise the encyclical.²⁴ But worse was still to come.

By the mid 1880s the *Khālsā Akhbār*, a Tat Khalsa publication, had carved for itself the position of a leading Sikh publication. It largely published social and cultural news and aimed besides to inform the Sikh public on what was correct doctrine, ritual and practice. The success of this paper must have been a source of considerable envy for the Sanatan Sikhs. Their own ideological arm, the paper *Gurmūkhī Akhbār*, was comparatively ineffectual. In the spring of 1887 Giani Dit Singh, the editor of the *Khālsā Akhbār*, wrote a play *Svāpan Nātak* and published parts of it in the April 16th, 1887 edition of the paper.²⁵ The allegorical nature of the play and repeated punning made the text susceptible to varied interpretations. Although Dit Singh's intention in publishing the paper appears to have been to lampoon the general state of affairs within the Sikh community, Sanatan Sikhs took umbrage.²⁶

Bawa Udey Singh, a nephew of Baba Khem Singh Bedi and an employee of Bikram Singh, filed a defamation suit against Dit Singh. He put forward the plea that the play, besides disparaging him, poured ridicule on Baba Khem Singh Bedi, Raja Bikram Singh, Giani Jhanda Singh, Giani Sant Singh, Sarmukh Singh Bhalla, Giani Badan Singh, Avtar Singh Vahiria and Man Singh - all leading Sanatan Sikhs.²⁷ The plaintiff's case was initially successful and Dit Singh was fined rupees 51 by the lower court. But in an appeal to the divisional judge the earlier decision was reversed and Dit Singh

²³Gurmukh Singh refused to accept the legality of the order, since according to him it was issued at Faridkot and only subsequently affixed with a stamp of the Golden Temple. He suggested that for the order to have any validity it had to be first issued by the Golden Temple authorities. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁴For a list of places and shrines visited by these emissaries see Jagjit Singh, *Singh Sabhā Lahir*, Ludhiana, 1974, first published Simla, 1941, p. 39. The same work also reproduces a copy of the edict issued against Gurmukh Singh. See pp. 39-40.

²⁵The entire text of the play based on a manuscript copy has been recently published, Dit Singh, *Svāpan Nātak*, Amritsar, 1976.

²⁶On how Dit Singh personally interpreted the play see his two articles in *Khālsā Akhbār*, June 18, 1887, p. 2 and July 1, 1887, pp. 4-5.

²⁷The libel proceedings were widely covered in the *Khālsā Akhbār*. Specially see the following issues: July 16, 1887, pp. 6-7; November 26, 1887, p. 7; December 10, 1887, pp. 6-7; December 24, 1887, pp. 5-6 and January 21, 1888, pp. 6-7.

was acquitted²⁸ Although the Sanatan Sikhs failed to convict against Dit Singh, the effort and expenses involved in the defence ultimately led to the closure of the Khalsa press and *Khālsā Akhbār* in 1889.

Unable to contain the expanding cultural hegemony of the Tat Khalsa by constant rankling and frequent skirmishes the Sanatan Sikhs set out to found and sponsor organizations favourable to their view of the world. In 1886 they tried to revive the rump Khalsa Diwan at Amritsar by drafting a new constitution and appointing a new set of office-bearers. Raja Bikram Singh became the patron of this new body and Baba Khem Singh Bedi its president. Its other important functionaries were Man Singh, in charge of the Golden Temple, Bhai Gulab Singh and Bhai Ganesa Singh, both associated with the Golden Temple too. Another association that formally tried to further the Sanatan ideology was the Nanak Panth Parkash Sabha under the presidency of Udey Singh. But the basic strength of Sanatan values, as previously pointed out, came from the Sikh personnel at the major Sikh shrines and sacred establishments.

What were the long term consequences of the Sanatan resistance to the Tat Khalsa thinking and their transformations in religious ritual? First, the Sanatan stance both implicitly and explicitly contributed to a defence of the beleaguered customary culture and peasant religious beliefs. There was no stigma attached to worshipping before a variety of deities, visting the shrine of a pīr, asking for the intercession of a holy man to solve mundane problems, consulting astrologers, necromancers and magicians or undertaking ritual fasting. The world was seen to be made up of benign and malevolent forces and it was left to human beings to enter into beneficial transactions with them as far as they could. In this sense, despite the populist rhetoric of the Tat Khalsa, the Sanatan Sikhs were far more closely aligned to peasant beliefs and rituals than their elitist opponents.

Second, the Sanatan Sikhs were, by opposing the Tat Khalsa innovations in life-cycle rituals and insisting on the continuation of certain rites like the post-mortuary śraddha seeking to adhere to models of agnatic authority

²⁸An extensive extract from the judgement is reproduced in Gurmukh Singh Chandhar, *MAE*, pp. 21-28.

and the values embodied in maximal lineages. In their construction of personhood, social relations and power distribution they wanted to follow the norms of lineage or caste instead of the horizontal ties of a religious community. Since the Tat Khalsa *rites de passage* and body management would have destroyed a social order based on kinship and in its place foisted a structure based on a cohesive religious community, the Sanatan Sikhs did their utmost to resist these changes. In this sense it was no blind defence of tradition but the sign of an active will to stall the emergence of a new idiom that would replace loyalties and allegiances based on kinship by religious solidarity and communal cohesiveness.

Third, the Sanatan Sikhs with their polysemous definition of who was a Sikh had no trouble in recognizing the great diversity and ambiguities within the Sikh faith. In their eyes the Nirmalas, Udasis, Suthresashis, Sangatsaihbies, Mihansahies and Nanakpanthis all equally qualified as Sikhs. Given this heterogeneous background it is hardly surprising that in the late 1890s, at the height of a controversy as to whether the Sikhs were Hindus or not, Sanatan leadership declared them to be Hindus. The first to do so publicly was Baba Khem Singh Bedi. In 1897 the Sanatan Hindus invited him to a large public meeting at the Town Hall, Lahore, to commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. At this gathering he supported a resolution that Sikhs were a part of the Hindu community.²⁹ At the turn of the century as the Tat Khalsa rhetoric that Sikhs were not Hindus grew increasingly shriller, Khem Singh repeatedly informed his audiences across the province that Sikhs were Hindus. To the discomfiture of his opponents, he was joined in this by the Sikh rulers of Patiala and Faridkot.³⁰

But when the Sanatan Sikhs used the term Hindu to encompass the Sikhs, it possessed meanings rather different from those we understand today. On the one hand it was for them an ethno-territorial category applying to the people who inhabited the sub-continent; on the other hand it was an umbrella word encompassing a body of indigenous religious beliefs as distinct from exogenous religions like Islam or Christianity.³¹ The most sophisticated among

²⁹ *Khālsā Akhbār*, February 19, 1897, p. 6.

³⁰ *The Khalsa*, May 30, 1900, p. 5.

³¹ *KDS*, pp. 24-27.

the Sanatan Sikhs were conscious that Hinduism was at best a collage made up of conflicting rituals, doctrines and practices. There was no single sacred text, deity or ritual specialist shared by all the people known as Hindus. This polysemic nature of Hinduism was declared to be its greatest virtue and the Sikhs, it was argued, were one of the numerous traditions (the word used was panth) that constituted the Hindu mosaic. A favourite analogy of Sanatan Sikhs to express the intertwined status of Hinduism and Sikhism was that Sikhism was like a wing within a large inn called Hinduism.³² It shared the same foundation and courtyard but had its own separate rooms and terraces. Thus it could simultaneously be distinct from and in unison with Hinduism. In support of this view the Sanatan Sikhs cited the history of the Sikh tradition. It was stated that if the Sikh gurus had been keen on making the Sikhs into a separate religious community they would have endowed its adherents with beliefs, life-cycle rituals, festivals and symbols radically different from that of Hinduism. Since they did not do so, their only intention in initiating the Sikh tradition, it was argued, was to remove the social and moral evils that had seeped into the fabric of Hindu society.

This was a position diametrically opposed to Tat Khalsa thinking. It further polarized Sikhs into two hostile camps and this estrangement was to work itself fully out during the Akali movement in the 1920s. In denying the original and distinctive nature of the Sikh faith the Sanatan Sikhs became the worst enemies of the neo-Sikhs and they came to be viewed as a part of the Arya Samaj and other Hindu bodies that also refused to accept the Sikhs as an autonomous religious community. In the long run the Sanatan resistance only strengthened the Tat Khalsa resolve to fight back, as described later in this chapter.

Resistance by the non-elite³³:

I have noted one form of resistance - the resistance that threw up powerful leaders, persuasive intellectuals, a string of organizations and

³²Ibid., p. 31.

³³I am using the term non-elite as a shorthand for the peasantry, agricultural labour and artisans both rural and urban.

expressed itself in arenas recognized and defined by established culture. But there was another form of resistance that did not manifest itself in the same manner as Sanatan Sikhism. Its history remains unwritten principally for two reasons. First, it is hard to write about this second form of resistance because it is not represented in published sources and archival records. The unlettered peasant or the village artisan neither had the resources nor the interest to record formally his objections and acts of opposition. And what is without formal organization or fails to find mention in contemporary newspapers is often ignored by historians. Second, history is pervaded by what Sider calls the 'hydraulic model of popular involvement in social change'.³⁴ In the explanatory logic of this schema people find themselves under pressure in one domain of their lives and emerge in another totally changed and transformed. As a result the issue of resistance simply does not arise. The elitist bias of the 'hydraulic' model sees the common people incapable of defining their lives or possessing the ability to contest the definitions imposed on them by others.

During the period that new elites were engaged in articulating their ideas and setting up organizations to further their ideology the non-elite often defied aspects of their cultural norms. The following section is an attempt to document this challenge, as far as possible, given the absence of sources and the biases contained in elite records. The most explicit evidence of resistance from the non-elites comes in the form of folk sayings. With the extension of Singh Sabha activities from urban centres to the countryside there surfaced a certain hostility to its efforts to stem public entertainment; particularly dancing, fairs and singing. One saying that became current in the last quarter of the nineteenth century stated: 'The Singh Sabhias may die, as they do not allow *giddā* (a Punjabi dance form) to be performed at public places'.³⁵ Equally derisive was the following couplet that satirized those individuals who joined the Singh Sabha organization: 'When the barn is emptied of grain/ What better can you do

³⁴G.Sider, *Culture and Class in Anthropology And History: A Newfoundland Illustration*, Cambridge, 1986, p. 4.

³⁵*Mar jān singh sabhiā sath vich giddā nā pāṅ den*. Information based on a personal conversation with the late Fauja Singh.

than turn a Singh Sabha?'.³⁶ But probably the most radical expression of resentment against Sabha personnel and ideology comes from a 1902 coinage - Singh Safā, meaning that with this new institution everything to do with the Sikhs will be destroyed.³⁷

Apart from these tropes of resistance, the non-elite expressed their opposition by refusing to adhere to the doctrines enunciated by the Tat Khalsa or participate in rituals prescribed by the neo-Sikhs. Even after three decades of Singh Sabha onslaught against Pir Sakhi Sarvar, in the 1911 census 79, 085 Sikhs defiantly returned themselves as followers of the Pir.³⁸ They continued expressing their devotion through periodic rites of veneration and by undertaking an arduous pilgrimage to the saint's shrine in Dera Ghazi Khan. Restricted in temporal and spatial horizons, people living in rural tracts, unlike urban inhabitants, have always shown reservations when it comes to monotheistic beliefs. To deal with a natural world made up of spirits, wild animals and other unruly elements they have historically found it more meaningful and rewarding to propitiate their own deities and saints. In the early 1970s, almost a century after the inception of the Singh Sabha movement, a sociologist studying the religious beliefs in a Malwa village was greatly struck by the popularity of Gugga Pir among the Sikh population.³⁹ For orthodox Sikhs raised in the traditions of the Tat Khalsa this was clearly heretical, but in the eyes of the peasant followers of Gugga Pir they were simply structuring their life experience according to their own norms and definitions.

³⁶*Jadon muk gai gharan vichon dane, Ban gai singh sabhiā*, cited in Harbans Singh, *Origins of the Singh Sabha* in Harbans Singh and N.Gerald Barrier eds., *Panjab Past and Present Essays In Honour of Dr. Ganda Singh*, Patiala, 1976, p. 281.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸See *Census of India, 1911, Punjab, Part II*, by Harkishan Kaul, Lahore, 1912, p. 39. The number of Sikhs who continued to follow the Pir informally may have even been greater than can be seen from the census figures.

³⁹'The worship of Gugga is again very common in this region and in some villages one comes across more than one temple dedicated to this deity. In this village, however, this deity has no temple. Its worship takes place in the month of July when *sevian* (a thread like boiled preparation of flour) are offered to the deity outside the village and then distributed to the children.' P.S.Jammu, "Religion in a Malwa Vilage", in J.C.Webster ed., *Popular Religion in the Punjab Today*, Delhi, 1974, p. 90.

It is unfortunately hard to gauge from available sources how much more widespread the belief in popular saints must have been in the early twentieth century, despite Singh Sabha endeavours to wean people away from such unorthodox praxis. But these two illustrations, from Sakhi Sarvar and Gugga Pir, help us to understand that there was no simple transition from what were considered un-Sikh practices to Sikh practices under the Tat Khalsa. The cultural implements offered by the new elites were invariably scrutinised, challenged, readapted and at times totally rejected by common people in the rural sector and by those at the periphery of social existence.

The most spectacular sign of the success of popular opposition to the Tat Khalsa hegemony comes from the domain of the festive cycle. The neo-Sikhs, as stated previously, carried out a persistent campaign against Sikhs participating in festivals like Holi and Diwali. But the people refused to abandon festivities inextricably linked to the agrarian cycle and the North Indian culture.⁴⁰ To renounce Holi celebrations, for instance, would have implied giving up a period of carnival, a time when indigenous society tolerated role reversal and inversion of rigid social norms. Of all the groups within civil society the non-elites were most unwilling to forgo this festival for it was a time of the year when they could take center stage without any fear of reprisals and drop all social masks. If the definitions of Sikh communal life had been totally left to the Tat Khalsa, the community today, would have been minus both the Holi and the Diwali festivities.

In combating the highly rational, linear, universal and self-denying thrust of the Tat Khalsa ideology the non-elites displayed a strong desire to retain the poetic, cyclical, parochial and indulgent nature of customary culture. Defiantly they stuck to their beliefs in magic, sorcery, intrusive spirits, exorcists, spells, witchcraft, prophecies and cults in honour of popular saints. This may not always have been the result of deep reflection and self-conscious practice, but in the end by steadfastly adhering to their past conventions, what the elites were to call superstitions, the non-elites were able to contest some of the cultural rules associated with the Tat Khaslsa and in doing so prevent a rupture between the way in which they experienced everyday life and their

⁴⁰For a defence of the customary festive cycle see Bhai Nidhan Singh, *Khālsā Rahit Prākāś Yā Khāñḍan Mañḍan*, Ludhiana, 1908, pp. 12-13.

cultural norms. The Tat Khalsa's cultural vision heavily imprinted with positivism, utilitarianism and the protestant ethic, was of little relevance to the life-experiences of artisans, poor peasants, landless labour and rural poor. The rejection by most people of elite values was therefore not based on any romantic nativism on the part of non-elites but was a forceful endeavour to strike a correspondence between their existential predicaments and available cultural resources.

The opposition expressed by the non-elites may not always have been systematic; when noted in contemporary sources it seems erratic, diffuse and, piecemeal. But it appears so only because of our received notions of what constitutes resistance. It is expressed not only in the domain of politics, as conventional social science theory would have us believe, but can come to cover a wide range of positions encompassing time, space, body, ritual, sign and language - in brief any human artefact. Only by probing the multidimensional nature of resistance, particularly in its everyday manifestations, can we become aware of how dominant cultural definitions are breached. Such contestation takes place as much in the domain of religion as any other human sphere. Religion therefore is not simply a cementing agency, but can also be a powerful means to challenge existing rules, institutions and dominant ideas.

Tat Khalsa Consciousness: From Institutions to Everyday Life

By the early twentieth century Tat Khalsa thinking and innovations came to exercise formidable influence on the day-to-day life of Sikhs. The Sanatan cause and parts of non-elite resistance began to be gradually neutralized and the notion of Sikhs as an autonomous religious community endowed with their own history, signs, space and traditions came into increasing circulation. What accounts for the extraordinary success of the Tat Khalsa idiom? In many ways this entire thesis is an endeavour to answer this key question and by doing so also account for the reification of religion in Indian society. As already indicated in chapter six, the social forces unleashed by British colonial expansion into the Punjab - the revolution in communications, the commercialization of the agrarian economy, the new modes of education and the incorporation of the province into the global

economy - brought about a radical transformation in the social structure and consciousness of the people. Out of these changes there emerged new social groups and new cultural meanings. One of these groups - referred here as the new elites - confronted by alien values and a world in flux, began to invent a sub-culture suitable for the colonial environment. In chapter seven I looked at how the new elites among the Sikhs, convinced of the veracity of their sub-culture, tried to turn it into a universal culture for all Sikhs. In this task they were aided by certain changes in the pre-colonial Sikh tradition, the British army, the collapse of customary culture and the altered political configurations. However, the factors listed so far to explain the success of the Tat Khalsa discourses and definitions are largely structural. They touch on social forces not directly amenable to Sikh initiatives. My main concern here is to describe the educational, cultural and organizational apparatus instituted by the Tat Khalsa. As will become evident, these institutions were eventually to inject the new definitions into the everyday life of the faithful and by doing so alter the very perception of religion, society and culture among the Sikhs.

Conscious of the role education played in the socialization of an individual, the Singh Sabhas from a very early date showed a keen interest in sponsoring schools and colleges where the curricula would help instil Tat Khalsa values among pupils. It was felt that these objectives could not be attained from within the educational establishment. Sikh students attending missionary schools had shown a tendency to convert to Christianity and those who attended government institutions ran the risk of being anglicized. Bhai Jawahir Singh expressed the Tat Khalsa fears about contemporary education when he stated '... the purely secular education imparted in public schools is calculated, under existing circumstances, to slowly obliterate the distinctive characteristics of the Sikhs, to check the development of the qualities which enabled them to attain so proud a position, and merge them finally in the general mass of the surrounding population'.⁴¹

To prevent the Sikh merger into the 'general mass of surrounding population' a euphemistic reference to the Hindus and Muslims, the Lahore

⁴¹Bhai Jawahir Singh, secretary Khalsa College deputation, Patiala to W.Bell, secretary Khalsa College Establishment Committee, Lahore, September 15, 1890, in Sundar Singh Majithia papers (hereafter S.S.M.papers), Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

Singh Sabha in the 1880s set up a Gurmukhi school at Lahore under Bhai Partap Singh.⁴² Its aim was to impart Punjabi education in the Gurmukhi script. At about the same time Attar Singh set up a school in his native Bahadur to impart education in Gurmukhi. But these were only minor manifestations of a much larger goal. The need of the moment according to many of the Sabha leaders, impressed by the example of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh and a similar initiative at Lahore under the auspices of the Arya Samaj, was a Sikh college that would fuse the best in western education with Khalsa ideals. In a 1883 meeting at the residence of Lala Sant Ram in Amritsar, the Amritsar General Sabha, made up of the Lahore and Amritsar Singh Sabhas, adopted a resolution for the establishment of a Sikh college.⁴³ In the same year that leading Sikh figures assembled at the Lawrence Hall, Lahore, agreed to submit a memorandum to Sir Charles Aitchison urging the need to set up a college for the Sikh community.⁴⁴ Over the next six years nothing concrete was achieved because of the constant squabbles between the Tat Khalsa and the Sanatan Sikhs. Although both sides conceded the need for greater education among Sikhs, the discord was over who would control the new educational institutions and, to an even greater extent, over what would be the content of the courses taught at these Sikh centres of learning. While the Sikhs fought out their differences, the Lahore Samaj, with the backing of similar societies across northern India, set up the Dayanand Anglo-Vedic School in Lahore in 1886, and then later in 1889 started a college which was to soon become a leading educational institution in the province. A strong feeling began to surface among the Sikh elites that not only were they going to fail in competing with Hindus and Muslims for jobs in the bureaucracy and urban professions but they were also going to lose in their struggle to assert their cultural independence.

⁴²G.W.Leitner, *History of the Indigenous Education in The Punjab*, Calcutta, 1883, reprint Patiala, 1971, p. 94.

⁴³Ganda Singh, *A History of the Khalsa College Amritsar*, Amritsar, 1949, p. 4 (hereafter *HKC*).

⁴⁴This Lahore meeting was attended among others by the following personalities: Baba Khem Singh Bedi, Bikrma Singh, Man Singh manager Golden Temple, Captain Gulab Singh of Attari, Harnam Singh of Kharar, Bhai Bhagat Singh granthi of Golden Temple, Bhai Mihan Singh rais, Bhagwant Singh Bhadur, Sujan Singh rais, Malik Khazan Singh, Lehna Singh rais, Chanda Singh and Lala Daulat Ram. See *Ibid*.

The Muhammadans, deeply impressed with the dangers to which their community was exposed for want of an education suited to modern requirements, have established at Aligarh an excellent college with suitable arrangements for boarders. They have also founded schools in various parts of the country, where secular and religious education is given; and they have offered scholarships open to those who cannot afford to pay for their education. The Arya Samaj has collected large sums of money, which have been subscribed by persons of the middle and lower classes, for the maintenance of an Anglo-Vedic School and College at Lahore, where boarders are received and subjected to supervision, and where the students obtain a modern education in conformity with the principles of the Arya Samaj.

Whilst other communities have shown themselves alive to the necessity of special effort, nothing has yet been done to meet the moral and intellectual requirements of the Sikhs, who are doomed in a few years, if they do not bestir themselves, to lose their distinctive character, and to be no longer recognisable as a separate people.⁴⁵

Rankled by the fear of being completely overwhelmed by other communities in the race for cultural, political and economic supremacy, Bhai Jawahir Singh, Bhai Gurmukh Singh and Sir Attar Singh, leading members of the Khalsa Diwan Lahore, set up the Khalsa College Establishment Committee in February 1890. Made up of 121 members, the Establishment Committee at its second meeting in Lahore elected the following office-bearers: Colonel W.R.M. Holroyd, president, Sir Attar Singh and Dharam Singh, vice-presidents, W.Bell, secretary, Dr. Dalip Singh, joint secretary, Bhai Sobha Singh and Bhai Harbhagat Singh, assistant secretaries.⁴⁶ In addition an executive committee of 25 members, including the office-bearers, was formed for the general management of the institution. These members were charged with a series of difficult tasks: enlisting support for the college project, raising subscriptions, choosing an appropriate site, drafting rules for the proposed school and college and determining the structure of education at what was destined to become a premier Tat Khalsa enterprise. Often to effectively discharge these duties, small ad-hoc sub-committees were set up.

⁴⁵Bhai Jawahir Singh, secretary Khalsa College deputation, Patiala to W.Bell, secretary Khalsa College Establishment Committee, Lahore, September 15, 1890, in S.S.M.papers.

⁴⁶*The Khalsa College Abstract of Proceedings of the Late Khalsa College Establishment Committee And the Council of the Khalsa College, Lahore, n.d., pp. I-II (hereafter AOP).*

First signs of support for the college project came in September 1891 when Maharaja Rajendra Singh, the ruler of the Patiala state, agreed to subscribe rupees 165, 000 towards the establishment of the College. This announcement by the most powerful of the Sikh princes was followed by offers of subscriptions from the states of Nabha, Kapurthala and Jind - all under Sikh rulers. The munificence shown by royalty was matched by the Sikh landed gentry who, full of fervour also donated large sums of money for the college.⁴⁷

The Sikh public and the Singh Sabhas expressed their support by setting up sub-committees to raise funds. Initially, these committees were set up at Patiala, Ludhiana, Ferozepore, Jalandhar, Amritsar, Lahore, Gujranwala, Sialkot and Peshawar. Subsequently similar bodies were set up at Ambala, Gurdaspur and Rawalpindi. In little over two years, by April 1892, the Khalsa College Establishment Committee had succeeded in raising rupees 564, 500. ⁴⁸ The bulk of the money was prudently invested with banks and the government bonds.

As a first step towards the foundation of the college, a Khalsa school was opened in Amritsar in October 1893. In line with Tat Khalsa thinking Punjabi was chosen as the medium of instruction up to the middle school examination. Starting with only nine boys, the school succeeded in enrolling 187 students by the end of the first year.⁴⁹ Since most of the Sikh population

⁴⁷Subscription by Sikh princes and landed gentry for the Khalsa College Endowment and Construction Fund.

	Rupees
1.Maharaja of Patiala	160,000
2.Landed gentry of Patiala State	60,733
3.Raja of Nabha	81,000
4.Landed gentry of Nabha state	30,000
5.Raja of Jind	81,000
6.Raja of Kapurthala	100,000
7. Landed gentry of Kapurthala	30,000
Total	542,733

Source: AOP.

⁴⁸"Report on the Opening of the Khalsa School at Amritsar on 22nd October 1893", in S.S.M.papers, p. x.

⁴⁹Ganda Singh, *HKC*, p. 28.

resided in the countryside a boarding house was attached to the school a year after its inception. The plan for the religious instruction of the boarders explicitly reveals what was expected of the students who chose to attend this new educational institution which in so many ways had come to reflect Sikh aspirations. To begin with it was mandatory for every boarder to undergo the Khalsa initiation.⁵⁰ Every day the boarders were expected to spend at least one hour in *nit-nem* or reading the portions of Sikh scriptures appointed for daily recitation. By the time a boarder reached the middle school examination he had to complete one reading of the entire *Ādi Granth*. On every Sunday, as well as the anniversaries of the Sikh Gurus, the superintendant of the boarding conducted his wards to the Golden Temple. This blue print for resident scholars of the Khalsa school and later the Khalsa college was soon to envelop the entire Sikh population. The Tat Khalsa leadership, by inserting their interpretation of Sikhism into the religious training of the Sikh students, many of whom were to play a central role in the community's affairs, ensured that its discourse would eventually become the most authoritative and powerful in the Punjab. It left no space for alternative readings of Sikhism : Udasi, Nirmala and Sahajdhari. Their views of what constituted a Sikh were totally excluded from the religious curriculum.

In April 1892 the Khalsa College Establishment Committee was dissolved and replaced by a governing body called the Khalsa College Council. Made up of over a hundred members, it elected an executive committee of thirty and spent the next four years supervising construction plans, hiring teaching staff and deciding the course of studies. In the summer of 1897 when the first batch of students at the Khalsa School had cleared their entrance examinations, the Khalsa College under the principalship of Vere O' Ratigan appeared to be ready to receive them for the Intermediate classes. But in less than two years it became apparent that the transition from school to college had been too swift and the infra-structure of an efficient institution for higher education was completely lacking. The college council was plagued by dissensions, there was a great paucity of funds and the construction for the main college building had

⁵⁰The following account is based on *Ibid.*, and *Prospectus of the Khalsa College Boarding House*, Amritsar, 1896.

yet to begin.⁵¹ On top of all this the haughty attitude of the college secretary, Bhai Jawahir Singh, made it very hard for the management to secure the services of well-qualified staff. Dr. J.C.Oman, a highly competent educationalist with over twenty years of teaching experience at the Government College, Lahore, was forced to resign as principal after a mere fourteen months because of a fracas with Jawahir Singh. By 1902, when the college came close to the verge of collapse, the Tat Khalsa leadership, with the helping hand of the colonial administration, made a determined bid to give the institution a new lease of life. The energetic Sundar Singh Majithia replaced the lackadaisical Bhai Jawahir Singh as college secretary and a much smaller and far more effective management body was established. Once again the Sikh princes, gentry and the peasantry were approached to contribute funds for their languishing educational institution. The new initiatives soon began to yield results. The financial situation of the college improved immensely, student numbers shot up, the construction of the main building was undertaken in earnest, and staff appointments were increasingly made on merit. In 1905 Bhai Jodh Singh, one of the most influential Sikh theologians this century, was appointed as a lecturer in Sikh religion. Although the college management never approached the ideal, the place gradually turned into a major centre for the dissemination of Tat Khalsa values.

In the many years it took for the Khalsa College to be established on a firm footing, many of the local Sabhas were busy founding and developing schools where Sikh students would be able to combine the advantages of an English education with a knowledge of Tat Khalsa norms. From the mid 1880s to 1905 ten Sikh schools were established at Rawalpindi, Gujranwala, Sukho (Rawalpindi district), Syyad (Rawalpindi district), Pindigheb (Attock), Kahut, Anandpur (Hoshiarpur district), Ferozepore, Patiala and Tarn Taran (Amritsar district).⁵² Reflecting on the importance of these schools the Sikh historian Teja Singh stated: 'The Sikh schools were not only dispensers of education, but they also served as strongholds of Sikhism wherever they were established.

⁵¹Background in Ganda Singh, *HKC* and Teja Singh, "Khalsa College, Amritsar", *Essays In Sikhism*, Lahore, 1944, pp. 150-151.

⁵²Background in Teja Singh and Nanak Singh, *Silver Jubilee Book*, Amritsar, 1935, pp. 130-135 and *Khālsā Akhbār*, January 24, 1896, pp. 4-5 and July 24, 1899, p. 7.

Even the Singh Sabhas , which were organized for propagating reform, could not compete in popularity with the schools'.⁵³

The best known among these new educational ventures was the Sikh Kanya Mahavidyala at Ferozepore. Founded in 1890 as a minor school by Bhai Takht Singh, it was taken over by the local Singh Sabha in 1892 and turned into an exclusive school for girls.⁵⁴ In the late nineteenth century education for females was still a novelty and only five students joined when the Ferozepore school opened its doors. The curriculum in the early years was largely made up of instruction in Gurmukhi, readings from Sikh sacred texts and lessons in embroidery and cooking. The ideal Sikh female was one who could read and write, was knowledgeable about the Sikh past, able to perform all household duties, respectful and obedient to the wishes of her husband, and able to bring up children in accordance with the Tat Khalsa definitions of the Sikh faith.⁵⁵ The school at Ferozepore was founded primarily to further these values. At the turn of the century major changes were made in the structure and organization of the school. A boarding house was opened to accommodate out of station students free of charge, a teacher was employed to teach English and it became possible for students to take the official middle school examinations.

The rising popularity and success of the school attracted students from as far as Agra and Rawalpindi. In 1915 when Caveeshar, a Sikh political activist, visited the school he noted there were 312 students on its rolls and between 1908 to 1914 a staff of 45 persons taught a total of 1,608 students.⁵⁶ But the greatest success of the school lay in its becoming a model for

⁵³Teja Singh, "The Singh Sabha Movement", *Essays in Sikhism*, pp. 142-143.

⁵⁴Bhai Takht Singh (1860-1933), was a prominent Tat Khalsa leader in the Malwa region. A close associate of Bhai Gurmukh Singh, Babu Teja Singh, Giani Dit Singh and Bhai Vir Singh he studied at the Oriental College, Lahore from 1885 to 1890. On his return to Ferozepore he dedicated his life to the running of a girl's school and was greatly helped in this goal by his wife Harnam Kaur. Despite massive financial constraints and the usual factional infighting Takht Singh succeeded in making the Ferozepore school into a household name for female education. His zeal for education and the constant privations he had to endure in support of this cause earned him the title of 'living martyr'. Details in Nahar Singh, *Khālsā Istri āte Sikh Bibiana dī Vidyā*, Amritsar, 1931, pp. 69-80.

⁵⁵See Karam Singh, *Srī Matī Bībī Harnām Kaur*, Amritsar, 1907, p. 33-35 and 38-39.

⁵⁶S.S.Caveeshar, *The Sikh Studies*, Lahore, 1937, p. 161.

subsequent schools for female education among the Sikhs and the students it turned out were stamped with a distinctive Tat Khalsa image. At last the neo-Sikhs possessed a powerful resource to influence the females whom they always considered to be more susceptible to non-Sikh influences and customs.

Parallel to the growing network of educational institutions that went into supporting and disseminating the Tat Khalsa ideology there grew up a long chain of ancillary organizations that further bolstered the new interpretations of the Sikh religion (See table 10).

Table 10: Tat Khalsa Cultural, Religious and Economic Associations, 1886-1908

<i>Name</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Year of inception</i>
Khalsa Vidyarthi Sabha	Lahore	1888
Khalsa Vidyarthi Sabha	Amritsar	1888
Khalsa Tract Society	Amritsar	1894
Khalsa Young Men's Association	Lahore	1896
Khalsa Dharam Parcharak Sabha	Rawalpindi	1897
Central Khalsa Orphanage	Amritsar	1904
Tat Khalsa Pustak Parkashak Jatha	Peshawar	1904
Khalsa Handbill Society	Lahore	1908
The Punjab and Sindh Bank	Amritsar	1908
Khalsa Istri Dharam Parcharak Sabha	Amritsar	not known
Sikh Book Club	Peshawar	"
Sri Guru Khalsa Vidyarthi Sabha	Tarn Taran	"
Khalsa Panth Parkashak Society	Amritsar	"
Khalsa Sat Sangat Sabha	Amritsar	"

Source: Compiled from *Khālsā Akhbār*, *Khālsā Samāchār* and *Khālsā Directory*, Amritsar, 1899.

The most important among these supportive bodies were the Khalsa Tract Society, the Khalsa Youngmen's Association and the Khalsa Handbill Society. The first of these was set up in 1894 by Bhai Vir Singh, author, publisher, journalist and a leading exegete.⁵⁷ Fashioned after the highly visible and vigorous Christian associations for the propagation of the gospel, such as the North Indian Tract and Book Society, the Khalsa Tract Society published pamphlets on a range of themes: the state of the Sikh community, biographies of Sikh gurus, commentaries on Sikh scriptures, promotion of Punjabi language and Gurmukhi script, the impact of Christianity and the defence of indigenous culture, the eradication of superstitious beliefs and the efficacy of Sikh prayer, scriptures and shrines.⁵⁸ Cheaply priced and written in simple prose, the society's publications were distributed in hundreds of thousands all over the Punjab. By 1902 as many as 192 items had been published and approximately half a million copies of these distributed to the public.⁵⁹ The bulk of the tracts, more than ninety percent according to an estimate made by Harbans Singh, were written by Bhai Vir Singh.⁶⁰ The society's activities were largely funded by a body of subscribers who remitted a membership fee in lieu of which they received all publications free of charge.

Two of Khalsa Tract Society's works published at the turn of the century, called *Khālsā Directories*, are indicative of how such organizations were busy transforming the ground rules of the Sikh tradition. These directories published an extensive list of Sikh landed aristocrats, urban professionals, merchants, petty officials in the colonial administration, traditional singers and exegetes.⁶¹ Such lists were unprecedented in the entire

⁵⁷Biographical details and role in Sikh affairs is discussed in my "Literature and Society: An Approach to the Novels of Bhai Vir Singh", unpublished M.Phil thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 1981, pp.16-34.

⁵⁸For background and the literary form employed in these tracts see Harbans Singh, *Bhai Vir Singh*, New Delhi, 1972, pp. 30-33.

⁵⁹Estimate based on *Khalsa Tract Society dā Report*, 1902, Amritsar, 1903, pp. 33-35, quoted in N.G.Barrier, *The Sikhs and their Literature*, Delhi, 1970, p.xxxi.

⁶⁰Harbans Singh, *op.cit.*, p. 32.

⁶¹See *Khālsā Directory*, Amritsar 1898, and *Khālsā Directory*, Amritsar, 1899

history of the Sikhs and could not even have been conceived in the past when the categories Sikh, Hindu and Muslim were highly fluid. But in the 1900s these directories became an integral part of a conscious drive to formulate a distinct identity for the Sikh community and construct exclusive channels of communication among its constituents. The fact that the Sikh landed gentry may have had more in common with their Muslim or Hindu counterparts was simply ignored; instead what was self-consciously highlighted were their relationships and roots in a Sikh universe. By overlooking caste, class and linguistic ties the directories projected the horizontal solidarity of the Khalsa community.

Much as the Khalsa Tract Society was modelled after the societies for the propagation of the gospel, a Sikh Young Man's Association influenced by a similar sounding Christian venture was set up at Lahore in 1896. Instrumental in the founding of this body was a large group of Sikh students engaged in various studies at different educational institutions in the city of Lahore: the law school, the Dayanand Anglo-Vedic College, the medical college and the arts school. The organization set itself three major objectives: (1) Deliberations on the religious, political and educational needs of the Sikh community and, when required, the presentation of these needs before members of the Sikh community. (2) Enhancement of the solidarity of Sikhs, particularly Sikh students. (3) Encouragement and support of the use of Gurmukhi in education and publication of the principles of the Sikh religion through a programme of publications.⁶² In pursuit of these goals the thirty-nine member association elected a president, secretary, treasurer and three member publications committee.⁶³ Once again, like the Khalsa Tract Society, the very idiom and notion of setting up an organization exclusive to Sikh students was something totally new and was emblematic of the growing success and penetration of the Tat Khalsa ideology.

A significant addition to the complex framework of societies and associations that went into supporting the Tat Khalsa initiatives was made in 1908 with the start of the Khalsa Handbill Society at Lahore. It undertook to print and circulate free of cost handbills on social and religious subjects,

⁶² *Khālsā Akhbār*, June 26, 1896, pp 7-8.

⁶³ See *Ibid* and *Khālsā Directory*, Amritsar, 1899, pp. 161-162.

particularly with the aim of influencing Sikhs living in the rural tracts and weaning them away from what it considered were un-Sikh practices. In less than two years it managed to publish 398,000 handbills in Gurmukhi and 10,000 each in Hindi and Urdu.⁶⁴ The organization's secretary in a bi-annual report specified with a certain amount of exaggeration the benefits of the society's publications: A large number of Sikhs have ceased participating in evil social customs, at many places educational institutions have been established, the custom of wearing jewellery is on the way out and finally, as a result of reading the handbills, thousands of men and women have been attracted to Gurmukhi.⁶⁵ The materials produced by the society were invariably composed in the form of didactic tales which delivered in conclusion social or religious morals often backed by quotes from the Sikh scriptures.

The role of these burgeoning organizations was further supplemented by itinerant *updeśaks* or preachers. Under the auspices of the local Singh Sabhas these preachers would travel in the Sabha's area of influence and instruct their audiences on what were correct doctrines and ritual practices. In addition they would raise funds for Sabha activities and gather the faithful for the Sabha's meetings and other ritual occasions, e.g., the days commemorating the birth or death anniversaries of the Sikh gurus. Within a short time they built up a two way information system under which they would, on one hand, transmit the Tat Khalsa ideology particularly to the Sikhs resident in rural tracts and, on the other, relay the state of the Sikh faith at the grass root level to the leadership of the community.⁶⁶

Behind the increasing success of Tat Khalsa ideology, institutions and peripatetic preachers there stretched a long line of Singh Sabhas from Peshawar in the west to Agra in the east and from Srinagar in the north to Karachi in the South. By 1900 there were at least 113 Singh Sabhas (see Appendix 1) spread over major urban centres, small market towns and large village settlements. There never was much of an organization to direct and coordinate the affairs of these ever increasing number of Sabhas. The Khalsa Diwan Lahore which came close to performing such a role dissipated much of its energy and its

⁶⁴Figures based on *Khālsā Handbill 1908-1910*, Lahore, 1910, p. 1.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶On how this system functioned see the reporting by Lal Singh Updeśak in *Khālsā Akhbār*, July 22, 1898, p. 9.

resources warding off the rump Khalsa Diwan at Amritsar and its Sanatan leadership. Towards the close of the nineteenth century a second generation of the Tat Khalsa leadership had emerged and they increasingly voiced their ire at the lack of an effective central Sikh organization. In the winter of 1898 Sundar Singh Majithia, an aristocrat from Amritsar, and Chanda Singh, a prominent lawyer at Ferozepore, addressed an open letter calling for the establishment of a new organization for the Sikhs.⁶⁷ They registered strong dissatisfaction with the way the Khalsa Diwan Lahore had been functioning and pointed out that it had failed to meet even once over the last fourteen months. This was the first public call for streamlining Tat Khalsa organization.

The need for such changes became even greater with the death of Bhai Gurmukh Singh in 1898 and that of his close associate Dit Singh in 1902. The sheer energy, enthusiasm and zeal of these two men had provided a kind of substitute for a well-oiled organization. But with them gone there was very little left to hold the Sabhas together. The result was the foundation of the Chief Khalsa Diwan at Amritsar in 1902. Initially only 29 Singh Sabhas joined the new body with Bhai Arjan Singh of Bagrian as president and Sardar Sundar Singh Majithia as secretary. As the popularity and credibility of the Diwan increased a greater number of Sabhas came to be affiliated to it.

The Chief Khalsa Diwan, however, was not there to give a new cultural orientation to the Sikhs but purely build on the ideological foundations laid down in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. It fulfilled the task of consolidating a tradition in the making. Following the directions set out by the Tat Khalsa intelligentsia, the Diwan strove to promote the use of Punjabi in the Gurmukhi script, rid Sikhism of what were considered Brahmanical accretions, establish clear-cut boundaries between Sikhs and non-Sikhs, oust Sanatan management from Sikh shrines and build up a massive network of Sikh educational institutions.⁶⁸

Conclusion:

⁶⁷See *Khālsā Akhbār*, October 28, 1898, p. 6-7 and November 4, 1898, p. 6.

⁶⁸For background see Teja Singh, "The Singh Sabha Movement", *EIS* pp. 139-144 and S.S.Narang, "Chief Khalsa Diwan- A Study of Socio-Religious Organization", *Journal of Sikh Studies*, vol. 8, 1981, pp. 102-117.

Resistance is intrinsic to all spheres of human experience, and despite its reputation as a cohesive social force religion is no exception. The Sanatan opposition to the Tat Khalsa's vision of the world and the refusal among many of the non-elite to abide by the standards of the neo-Sikhs is a clear illustration of this fact. In certain historical circumstances, particularly in periods of intense social change, the conflicts within a society come into the open, visible for everyone to see and record. At the same time, there are situations when such conflicts remain hidden from the public gaze and their clandestine nature fails to leave behind any obvious historical evidence. All this is obviously a continuing process, but it becomes particularly exacerbated when new ideologies are enunciated. This is the reason why the relationships between Sanatan Sikhs and the Tat Khalsa became so embittered. The Tat Khalsa, by formulating new doctrines of what Sikhism ought to represent, challenged all existing definitions of belief and being within the pluralistic Sikh tradition. However, such precepts would have remained marginal as long as they did not evoke any response from the public. The moment they did so, even in the form of a contest, the battle for the minds and hearts of the people began. Eventually, to pursue the metaphor of battle further, the Tat Khalsa succeeded in scoring a series of victories over their opponents because they were aided both by the fundamental changes undergone by Punjabi society under colonial rule and by their own initiative, organization and appropriation of resources. By founding a string of publishing houses, cultural bodies, schools, colleges, orphanages and clubs the Tat Khalsa endeavoured to insert their definitions of religion and community into the day-to-day life of the Sikhs. Through this it became possible not only for a mass of people to experience themselves as Sikhs in the fashion desired by the Tat Khalsa, but non-Sikhs also increasingly began to visualise the Sikhs as a distinct group. What had begun as a possibility, a potential manual for effectively organizing social life, turned into a cultural reality, a social fact immersed at the level of everyday life. This transition crystallized in two distinct phases: in the first, many Sikhs saw themselves as the Tat Khalsa; in the second the Tat Khalsa became accepted as Sikhs. When this process finally reached a climax it resulted in either the subordination of all other identities within the Sikh tradition or their complete estrangement from it. Such a transition would however have never materialized, without the Tat Khalsa intervention at the level of quotidian life and their establishment of an extensive cultural, economic and religious apparatus.

Conclusions

This study has endeavoured to rethink the whole concept of universal religious communities as applied to Indian society, particularly during the nineteenth century. In the study of religion it is quite common to employ the categories 'Sikh', 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' as if these were self-explanatory classifications. One of the fundamental conclusions of this work is that there is nothing natural or self-evident about these categories; rather they are specific constructions rooted in a particular historical epoch. Religion had never been reified in Indian society as it had in Europe. It was a crucial part of life but not something that could be disembodied and then objectified. The way people experienced reality, their modes of imagination and the vehicles through which knowledge was represented, did not consist of references to an all-India community of believers. From the 'peculiar' nature of religion in Indian society, there flowed an important consequence: the religious categories 'Hindu', 'Muslim' and 'Sikh' were ambiguous and fluid. These categories did not possess any pure form and historically it is often more precise to speak in terms of a simultaneity of religious identities rather than distinct universal religious collectivities.

In the nineteenth-century, Punjabi social and ritual practices were largely governed by the rules applying to households (*ghar*: literally house, here household), maximal lineages (*barādārī*), clans (*got*), and caste (*zāt*). What an individual did with his or her life, the values that guided him or her in this universe, the cultural equipment through which he or she interpreted daily experiences, the control over land, labour and patronage and the distribution of power, were determined not so much by the framework of a single religious community but by what *barādārī* or *zāt* a person belonged to. Moreover, from the domestic domain to the politico-jural domain, access to material and ideological resources depended on a person's ability to establish genealogical rank or to influence those who had it. Such a mode of existence is reflected not only in the ethnographic and historical texts, but also in the myths, legends and folklore of the Punjab. The popular folk songs of *Hir-Ranjha*, *Mirza-Saihan* and *Sassi-Punnun*, recited by minstrels all over the province, illustrate both the existence of clan rules and how conflict, retribution and bloodshed followed when these rules were violated. Often questions of honour and shame

within the lineage were of far greater importance than religious loyalties. For the greater part of the last century, interpersonal transactions among people in the Punjab were not therefore simply an extension of their religious traditions, but embedded in a complex idiom of kinship, patron-client relationships and asymmetrical reciprocity. Universal religious communities, as has often been assumed, are not a key to understanding the pre-British society.

When it came to religion, people belonged to disparate sacred traditions (*sampradāya*) headed by an individual or several members of a lineage. Each tradition generally possessed a distinct history, a set of rituals, a certain number of sacred shrines, a social code and occasionally bodily signs of distinction. Religious instruction, initiation and distribution of boons were the key responsibilities of the persons who commanded a tradition. A large body of followers hailing from a broad spectrum of social backgrounds would attach themselves to the head or heads of a tradition who were often known by one of the following honorifics: *gurū*, *pīr*, *sajjāda-nishīn*, *bhāī* or *bābā*. In the current state of research it is hard to specify what exactly were the self-perceptions of the members of a sacred tradition and how they viewed those outside it. Nevertheless, one major conclusion is possible. Asking an individual in mid-century Punjab if he was a Sikh, Hindu or Muslim was epistemologically an absurd question. The more relevant question would have been what sacred tradition he belonged to.

The pluralistic framework of the Sikh faith in the nineteenth century allowed its adherents to belong to any one of the following traditions: Udasi, Nirmala, Suthreshahi, Khalsa, Sangatsaihbīe, Jitmalie, Bakhtatmlie, Mihansahie, Nanakpanthi, Ram Raia, Baba Gurditta, Baba Jawahir Singh, Guru Bhag Singh, Nihang, Kalu Panthi, Ram Dasi, Kalu Baba, Nirankari, Kuka and Sarvaria. Many of these Sikhs shaved their heads, freely smoked tobacco and hashish and were not particular about maintaining the five external symbols of the faith. In the absence of a centralized church and an attendant religious hierarchy, heterogeneity in religious beliefs, plurality of rituals, and diversity of life styles were freely acknowledged. A pilgrimage to the Golden Temple could be supplemented with similar expeditions to the Ganges at Hardwar or the shrine of a Muslim saint. Attending seasonal festivals at Benares or Hardwar was in no way considered a transgression of prevailing Sikh doctrines, whatever teleological studies may assert today. Contemporary

vehicles of knowledge - myths, texts, narratives, folklore and plays produced by non-Sikh authors - were accorded a firm place within the Sikh cosmology. Far from there being a single 'Sikh' identity, most Sikhs moved in and out of multiple identities, defining themselves at one moment as residents of this village, at another as members of that cult, at one moment as part of this lineage, at another as part of that caste, and at yet another moment as belonging to a sacred tradition. The boundaries between what could be seen as the centre and periphery of the Sikh tradition were highly blurred. There simply was no single source of authority within the Sikh tradition and several competing definitions of what constituted a 'Sikh' were possible.

However, in the late nineteenth century a growing body of Sikhs took part in a systematic campaign to purge their faith of what they saw as Hindu accretions and as a Brahmanical stranglehold over their rituals. The result was a fundamental change in the nature of the Sikh tradition. From an amorphous entity it rapidly turned into a homogeneous community. And of all the competing entities, symbols and norms that went into constituting the long history of the Sikh movement, it was the Khalsa sub-tradition that succeeded in imprinting its image on the 'new' community. The Udasis, Nirmalas, Sangatsahibie - a complex motley of traditions - came to be seen as deviants. With the active displacement or subordination of many of the Sikh sub-traditions, a single Sikh identity began to crystallize in the first decade of this century. In contemporary literature this new identity was given the name of the Tat Khalsa and those within the Sikh tradition who were opposed to its vision of the world came to be known as Sanatan Sikhs. One of the conclusions of this study is that the differences between the Tat Khalsa and Sanatan Sikhs did not simply have to do with class differences, as has often been assumed, but were rooted in radically opposed views of the world. Doctrinally, Sanatan Sikhism was inherently ambiguous, contaminated and plural. It presented its adherents with a wide variety of choices to determine what they did with their rites, festivals, body management, language and social organization. The Tat Khalsa disowned this pluralistic tradition and enunciated an orderly, pure and singular form of Sikhism. Sikh dealings with miracle saints, goddesses, sorcerers, village sacred spots and clan rites came to be viewed with great hostility and in the end were censured. The faithful were compelled to direct

their religious sentiments exclusively towards Sikh sacred resources: for instance the Ādi Granth, the gurdwaras and the Gurmukhi script.

The point is that while formerly there never was a standard Sikh identity, under the Tat Khalsa's aegis such an identity came to be forged for the first time. The boundaries between what was Sikh and what was non-Sikh were no longer blurred, the Tat Khalsa had 'framed' the community. By making extensive additions to the evolving rahit-nāmā texts, the Tat Khalsa formulated an authoritative definition of who qualified to be a Sikh. The new rituals, definitions and texts produced by the Tat Khalsa made it possible for the Sikh public to think, imagine and speak in terms of a universal community of believers united by uniform practices. The rules of household, lineage, clan and caste that had governed many inter-personal transactions in the past were gradually breached, and there arose a vision of an undifferentiated community. However fleeting its presence may have been, its impact was to be increasingly experienced in the everyday life of the people in the province.

The Tat Khalsa's conscious drive to negate other traditions and monopolise the history, imagination and experience of the Sikh people becomes understandable in the light of four major developments. First, in the pre-British period the powerful Khalsa tradition was already engaged in a contest to dislodge other traditions and impose its own vision of the world on them. This is most clearly reflected in the rahit-nāmā and gur-bilās literature. Despite the problems in dating these texts exactly and the considerable variation in their doctrinal content, collectively they do express a fundamental urge among the Khalsa Sikhs to create a separate Sikh identity. In the *Gur-bilās Cheevin patśahī*, a text written sometime in the early nineteenth century, the author instructs Sikhs to visit only Sikh shrines and read Sikh scriptures to overcome the exigencies of life. This advice can be read as an effort to stop Sikhs from undertaking the highly popular pilgrimages to the shrines of pīrs like Sakhi Sarvar and the incantation of *mantras* from non-Sikh sacred sources. The object of all this was to make Sikhs rely on the sacred traditions of the Khalsa and by doing so erect boundaries between the Khalsa and the non-Khalsa. The rahit-nāmā works, more than any other texts, devote themselves to enunciating uniform rites, symbols and doctrines for the Sikh people. Therefore neither the journey towards nor the message of a separate Sikh identity under the Tat

Khalsa was new; what was novel was the manner in which past traditions were disaggregated, recombined and rearticulated in the late nineteenth century.

Second, the colonial state and its institutions played a significant role in the emergence of a homogeneous Sikh religion. In order to govern an alien society the British administrators were compelled to invent a series of categories to index the indigenous population. Without doing so they would have found it impossible to govern the Empire. In order to extract revenues, recruit men to staff the civil service and strengthen the state's power of coercion the colonial rulers needed to devise means of representing the Indian population. Out of these needs flowed not only a series of well known taxonomies like 'martial races', 'criminal tribes', 'agrarian castes' but also categories 'Hindu', 'Muslim' and 'Sikh'. Overlooking the immense variation and complexity of the Indian religious experience, the colonial rulers indiscriminately lumped the disparate sacred traditions under single generic terms. In the case of Sikhs, the British administration, supported by Orientalist scholarship, went one step further and decided that of all Sikh traditions only the Khalsa tradition was authentic; the rest were either spurious or Hindu accretions. This interpretation was turned into a yardstick for state patronage. All Sikhs who sought recruitment to the British army had to undergo the Khalsa baptism and uphold the five symbols of the Khalsa. By rigidly upholding these traditions the regimental officers greatly boosted the fortunes of the Khalsa tradition. And the census officers, by forcing people to identify themselves as Hindu, Sikh or Muslim, further supported the efforts of those who were keen on establishing clear cut religious boundaries.

Third, the drive for a standard Sikh identity can be traced back to the need of the new elites for a sub-culture that would befit their changed surroundings. The political, economic, but most importantly the cultural changes fostered by the Raj, impelled the Sikh elites to rewrite the social grammar of their society. By engaging in a 'dialogic' process they fashioned a cultural code that combined new readings of the *Ādi Granth*, *janam-sakhis* and *gur-bilās* with indigenous exegesis on the writings of Comte, John Stuart Mill and Descartes. The sub-culture of the new elites did not mesh well with existing Sikh sacred traditions, which were polytheistic and covered a wide spectrum of beliefs and ritual practices. These elites favoured a more uniform and homogeneous Sikh religion. To achieve this goal and impose their

definitions of the Sikh faith they established a string of cultural associations, opened educational institutions and gained a virtual monopoly over the channels of communication. The creation of a separate and new cultural identity can be an important step in the fight for leadership and authority. In the 1880s, with the start of an intense intra-elite rivalry for jobs in the administration and urban professions, religious ideology provided a useful means of elbowing out those who were perceived as adversaries.

Fourth, the emergence of a corporate Sikh identity was a sort of dialectical process. Just as the Sikhs had begun to conceive of themselves as an undifferentiated ethnic group, Hindus and Muslims were also undergoing similar transformations in imagination, experience and cultural organization. Movements like the Arya Samaj among the Punjabi Hindus and the Aligarh movement among the Muslims in the United Provinces reflected aspirations similar to those of the Singh Sabhas. The foundation of a Muslim college in one part of the country encouraged a similar development among the Hindus in another and ultimately the Sikhs did not wish to lag behind what Muslims and Hindus were doing.

In sum, a separate Sikh identity cannot be explained simply by referring to the British policy of divide and rule or the compulsions of elite politics. It resulted from a complex evolution. In many respects it pre-dates both separate electorates and intra-elite competition. This important fact has often been ignored by scholars who want to lay blame for the formation of communal identities exclusively at the doors of the Raj or hold the elite groups guilty of generating communalism in order to gain socio-economic domination. If we are interested in locating the basis of communalism in India, then we have to look as much at the domain of religion as explore political and economic spheres. It would be a mistake to treat religion merely as a reflection of more powerful social forces. How the sacred came to be reconstituted in nineteenth century India is a key to unravelling the complex relationships between politics and religion in the history of modern India.

The study of religious change and the formation of a new paradigm of Sikhism also suggests certain general conclusions concerning the social construction of meaning and the dissemination of values. The study of religion can benefit a great deal by combining the theoretical insights of social history

and anthropology. While historians have generally been concerned with issues of power and the way religion serves as an ideology for the advancement of particular class interests, anthropologists have studied how human societies communicate some of their most cherished values, for instance the distinctions between nature and culture, through sacred myths, rituals and space. Where history provides a significant pragmatic dimension in the study of religion, anthropology can help unravel the semantic aspects of religion, particularly in the area of ideology.

It has often been thought that ideologies are transmitted through institutions like the family, schools, church, newspapers and literature. If the ethnohistorical approach adopted here is correct, then the study of the formation and distribution of ideologies also requires that we look at several other domains, particularly corporeality, *rites de passage*, festive cycles, sacred space and architecture. The fact that a couple to be married circumambulates a fire or a sacred scripture makes an immense difference to what kinds of messages are being transmitted by this key ritual. Similarly, the arrangement of sacred space or the conventions of body management are significant pointers to the values a group holds for itself and seeks to communicate to those it sees as outsiders. In the present case, indices like corporeality, sacred space and rituals, assume an even greater importance because the Sikhs are a highly symbolic people. Without attending to their symbolic tropes it is not possible to explain how and why the Sikhs came to see themselves as a uniform community of believers at the turn of the century.

Appendix

A List of Singh Sabhas Up to 1900

<i>Place</i>	<i>Year of Inception, when known</i>
1. Amritsar	1873
2. Lahore	1879
3. Sarkar (Jalandhar district)	
4. Sohana	1900
5. Lyallpur	1898
6. Saharanpur	
7. Sadhora (Ambala district)	
8. Singhpura (Gurdaspur district)	
9. Sohla (Amritsar district)	
10. Harpalpur (Patiala state)	
11. Kapurthala	
12. Kulim (Malaysia)	
13. Kidaha (Malaysia)	
14. Khemkaran (Lahore district)	
15. Gurdaspur	
16. Chakwal (Jhelam district)	
17. Tarn Taran (Amritsar district)	
18. Bhagowal (Gujrat district)	
19. Muktsar (Ferozepore district)	
20. Randhawa (Sialkot)	
21. Lucknow	
22. Lahore	
23. Ludhiana	1884
24. Sunam (Patiala state)	
25. Hargobindpur	
26. Kahuta (Rawalpindi district)	1899
27. Sukho (Rawalpindi district)	
28. Datta Khel	1899
29. Bialul (Rawalpindi district)	1899
30. Quetta	1890

31. Gharuan (Patiala state)	
32. Bilga (Jalandhar district)	
33. Sikhwala (Ferozepore district)	
34. Bagumajra (Ambala district)	1900
35. Wazirabad	
36. Saranda (Malysia)	
37. Sahiwal	
38. Jalandhar	
39. Jhelam	
40. Nararu (Patiala State)	
41. Dadan Khan	
42. Darul (Patiala state)	
43. Ponch (Poonch territory)	
44. Ferozepore	
45. Bagrian (Ludhiana)	
46. Dipalpur (Montgomery district)	
47. Kasuli	1894
48. Sivi	1896
49. Tatla (Gujranwala district)	1896
50. Delhi	
51. Karnal	1896
52. Sangrur	
53. Jacobabad	1897
54. Maumnabad	1898
55. Bhawalpur	
56. Dagshahi	
57. Bhaun (Jhelam district)	1898
58. Peshawar	
57. Jandraka (Montgomery district)	
58. Morinda (Ambala district)	1898
59. Bishnadaur (Jhelam district)	1898
60. Ghanuri (Patiala state)	
61. Gujjarkhan (Rawalpindi district)	
62. Hongkong	
63. Sayyidwala (Montgomery district)	
64. Kakkarval (Patiala state)	

65. Dinga (Gujrat district)	
66. Kohat	1887
67. Montgomery	
68. Dera Khalsa (Rawalpindi district)	
69. Dhariwal	1895
70. Nago Ke (Amritsar district)	
71. Agra	1895
72. Budala	1895
73. Gilgit	
74. Sri Nagar	
75. Dhoitian (Amritsar district)	
76. Penang (Malaysia)	
77. Sabathu	1895
78. Chupal	1894
79. Mehraj (Ferozepore district)	
80. Ghila (Rawalpindi district)	1895
81. Mahendargarh (Patiala state)	1895
82. Gujranwala (Ludhiana district)	
83. Kaluwal (Sialkot district)	1896
84. Badowal (Ludhiana district)	1896
85. Multan cantonment	
86. Jind	1896
87. Ambala cantonment	
88. Sabathu	
89. Timawal	
90. Jandraka (Montgomery district)	1896
91. Daudpura	1886
92. Ajmer	
93. Khumano	
94. Chamkaur Sahib	1887
95. Jhansi	
96. Kalka	
97. Lidhran	
98. Maghiana	
99. Saludi	

100. Tiska	1888
101. Rangoon	
102. Hoshyarpur	
103. Rupar	
104. Sakhar	
105. Jaunpur	
106. Nadrai	
107. Sialkot	
108. Mode	1886
109. Khanna	
110. Bhinder	1886
111. Simla	
112. Rawalpindi	
113. Faridkot	

Glossary

Ādi Granth: the *Gūru Granth Sāhib*, sacred scripture of the Sikhs compiled by Guru Arjan in 1603-4.

akhaṇḍ pāṭh: 'unbroken reading'; an uninterrupted reading of the entire contents of the *Ādi Granth* performed by a relay of readers.

akhārā: monastic establishment.

amrit: lit. 'nectar'; the water used for baptism in the initiation ceremony of the Khalsa.

Ārati Sohilā: a selection of hymns from the *Ādi Granth* sung by devout Sikhs immediately before retiring at night, and also at funerals.

Ardās: the Sikh prayer.

āśrama: A stage of life, traditionally four: student, householder, forest-dweller, and renoucer.

bāoli: a large masonry or brick well with steps leading down to the water.

barādarī: a brotherhood.

barāt: wedding procession.

Bhagavad Gītā: The 'Song of the Lord', forms part of the sixth book of the *Mahābhārata* and contains Krishna's teaching and revelation to the warrior Arjuna.

Bhāī: 'Brother', a title applied to Sikhs of acknowledged learning and piety.

bhāṇā: Divine Will.

bhūt: evil spirit.

brahmin: The priestly class or a member of the priestly class, charged with the duties of learning, teaching and performing rites and sacrifices.

charṇ pāhul: baptism with water in which the guru's toe has been dipped.

chhūt: impurities.

churel: female evil spirit.

Darbār: the royal court.

Dasam Granth: 'the Book of the Tenth [Guru]', a collection of writings attributed to Guru Gobind Singh.

ḍāyaṇ: sorceress.

Devī: a goddess. Used to refer to thousands of local goddesses as well as to the consorts of the great gods and the Great Goddess called Devī or Mahādevī.

Dīvālī: Festival of Lights, celebrated by Hindus and Sikhs in the lunar month of Kattak.

Doābā: the plain tract of central Punjab in between rivers Beas and Sutlej.

Durgā: One of the names of the Devī as consort of Siva.

gadelā: cushion.

gaū: cow.

ghar: house, household.

giānī: a reputed Sikh scholar; a Sikh theologian.

got: exogamous caste grouping within the zāt.

granthī: a 'reader' of the *Gūru Granth Sāhib*, the functionary in charge of a gurdwara.

gur-bilās: hagiographic literature on the lives of the Sikh Gurus emphasising their heroic qualities. Most works in this genre date back to the late 18th and early 19th century.

gurdwara: Sikh temple.

gurmattā: 'the mind, or intention, of the Gurū'; expressed in a formal decision made by a representative assembly of Sikhs; a resolution of the Sarbat Khālsā.

Gurmukhī: lit., from the mouth of the Gurū; the script in which Punjabi language is written.

gurū: religious teacher, preceptor.

Gurū Panth: the presence of the eternal Gurū in an assembly of his followers.

Harimandir: 'the Temple of God', the central Sikh shrine in Amritsar commonly known as the Golden Temple.

holī: a spring festival.

hukam: order.

hukam-nāmā: a decree; a list of instructions.

izzat: honour, prestige, status.

jag: ritual.

jāgīr: an assignment of land revenue in lieu of salary.

janam-sākhī: hagiographic narrative, especially of the life of Guru Nanak.

jātherā: ancestral shrine.

jhatkā: slaughtering of an animal with a single stroke of the blade.

jhūth: impure foods.

kabr: grave.

kārdār: an official or a revenue collector.

Khālsā: the Sikh order, brotherhood, instituted by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699.

khānaqāh: Sufī hospice where a *pīr* teaches his disciples.

khānde dā pāhul: the Khalsa rite of initiation.

kīrtan: the singing of hymns particularly from the *Ādi Granth*.

lāgī: village menials and artisans, a match-maker.

laingar: the kitchen attached to every gurdwara from which food is served to all regardless of caste or creed.

mantra: a sacred formula or utterance; a prayer.

Mājhā: the area of central Punjab lying between the Beas and Ravi rivers.

Mālwa: the plain tract extending south and south-east of the Sutlej river, more precisely the area covered by the districts of Ludhiana, Ferozepore and the princely states of Patiala and Nabha.

masyā: the last day of the dark fortnight in the lunar calendar.

mazār: shrine or tomb of a saint.

melā: a fair, especially a religious festival or fair to which people often come great distances on pilgrimage.

misk: Sikh military bands of the eighteenth century.

mleccha: a term for people who consume beef, inveigh against vedas or are devoid of a holy character.

muhurta: auspicious hour.

nakṣatra: lunar mansion or asterism.

Nāzim: the governor of a province.

panchāyat: council.

panj kakke: the 'Five K's', the five external symbols which must be worn by all members of the Khalsa, so called because all five begin with the initial letter k. The five symbols are: *keś* (uncut hair), *kaṅghā* (comb), *kirpān* (dagger), *karā* (steel bangle), and *kachh* (a pair of breeches).

panth: lit. path. System of religious belief and practice. The form 'Panth' designates the Sikh community.

piṇḍa: The balls of rice and other grains used ritually in rites for the dead.

pīr: teacher of the Sufi path or a popular miracle saint.

pīrkhānā: minor shrines of Muslim pīrs.

Purāṇa: One of the eighteen collections of ancient stories which preserve tradition of myth, legend and rite.

pūraṇmāśī: the full-moon day of the Hindu lunar calendar.

purohit: family priest.

rāgī: a musician employed to sing in a gurdwara.

rahit: the code of discipline of the Khalsa.

rahit-nāmā: a recorded version of the Khalsa code of discipline.

Sahaj-dhārī: A Sikh who neither accepts baptism into the Khalsa nor observes its code of discipline.

samādh: tombs associated with Sikh and Hindu holy men.

sanātan: ancient, eternal. Used here to refer to the pluralistic and polycentric mode of Sikh tradition in the nineteenth century.

saṅgat: assembly, religious congregation.

Sarbat Khālsā: the entire Khalsa, an assembly of Khalsa Sikhs.

śrāddhā: rites for the dead performed after cremation to nourish the deceased for passage to the world of ancestors.

sūba: a province or primary division of an empire.

tahsīl: a revenue collecting division within a district.

takht: throne, one of the Panth's centres of temporal authority.

tīrath: a sacred place, a place of pilgrimage.

ulamā: learned man, in particular, one learned in Islamic legal and religious studies.

updeśak: preacher.

varṇa: lit., colour; one of the four classical groups into which castes are organized.

Veda: Wisdom, knowing. The sacred literature considered to be revealed.

vartaṅ bhājī: reciprocal gift giving between kin.

zāt: endogamous caste grouping.

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