



religions

Exploring Gender and Sikh Traditions

Edited by

Doris R. Jakobsh

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Exploring Gender and Sikh Traditions

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Editor

Doris R. Jakobsh

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Editor

Doris R. Jakobsh
Department of Religious Studies,
University of Waterloo,
200 University Avenue West Waterloo
Canada

Editorial Office

MDPI
St. Alban-Anlage 66
4052 Basel, Switzerland

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About the Editor

Doris R. Jakobsh is Professor at the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Waterloo, Canada. She has degrees from the University of Waterloo, Harvard University and the University of British Columbia. Professor Jakobsh is the author of *Relocating Gender in Sikh History: Transformation, Meaning and Identity*, OUP (2003, 2005) and *Sikhism*, University of Hawaii Press (2011). She is the editor of *Sikhism and Women. History, Texts and Experience*, OUP (2010) and *World Religions - Canadian Perspectives: Eastern/Western Traditions*, Nelson (2012, 2013). With Opinderjit Kaur Takhar, Jakobsh is currently editing a book project entitled *Global Sikhs: Issues, Challenges and Responses from the twenty-first Century Community*. Professor Jakobsh has authored numerous journal articles and chapters and was a founding member of the Steering Committee Member of the Sikh Consultation of the American Academy of Religion.

Preface to "Exploring Gender and Sikh Traditions"

As with all books, this volume is the culmination of many months of writing, editing, resubmission and finally, publishing. I am grateful to the many fine scholars who contributed to the Special Issue and to those who take the time and considerable energy to review. This selection of chapters is of a very high quality, given the careful attention given to each chapter by the many reviewers scattered across the globe. Many thanks to the various editors with whom I worked so closely on the journal *Religions*.

This volume focusing specifically on gender and Sikh traditions is the first of its kind in Sikh Studies and is thus setting a standard for many more works to come. Every scholar knows that we stand on the shoulders of those who earlier explored the arenas of study that we are here examining; this is certainly the case with the subject matter at hand. My sincere wish is that these chapters contribute to an ever-deepening chorus of scholarship on gender and Sikh traditions.

Lastly, I need to express my gratitude to those who inhabit the field of Sikh Studies in the academy. I have found a welcoming and caring home community among you. As always, my deepest love to my rock and inspiration, Paul Roorda. Kaira and Jesse Jakobsh, you have always, and will always, give me hope.

Doris R. Jakobsh

Editor

Editorial

Introduction to the Special Issue: Exploring Gender and Sikh Traditions

Doris R. Jakobsh

Department of Religious Studies, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, ON N2L 3G1, Canada;
djakobsh@uwaterloo.ca

Gender analysis has not received a great deal of attention within Sikh Studies (Jakobsh 2003). On the other hand, a small number of scholars have spent years, sometimes decades, exploring issues under the rubric of “women and/in Sikhism”. Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh’s (1993, 2005) ground-breaking work immediately comes to mind in terms of flinging open wide the doors to feminist approaches in Sikh Studies. *Sikhism and Women. History, Text, Experience* (Jakobsh 2010) was an important milestone in bringing together varied voices to address the paucity of scholarship in this area. The primary task at that point in time was locating scholars who were sufficiently engaged in the study of women and Sikhism to contribute to the project. Over the past decade, research on women and the feminine within Sikh Studies has grown. As an important part of these developments, scholarly inquiry has increasingly come to recognize that the category “woman” is problematic. “Woman” is not unitary, differences clearly exist in terms of inequalities (Brah 1991). Moreover, as many of the chapters in this volume demonstrate, Sikh feminisms are also emerging. This is evident in the deepening and increasing rigorous of theoretical and methodological approaches in scholarship. Paradigm shifts are coming to the fore, as in, for example, feminist-inspired Sikh activism.

However, similar to transitions within academia at large that have seen the need to replace Women’s Studies departments with Gender Studies, it has seemed appropriate, even necessary, to move from a somewhat singular ‘women’s focus’ to one of gender vis-à-vis the study of Sikhism. The transition from women’s studies to gender studies also reflects changes in the ways in which issues of gender and sexuality have been woven into interdisciplinary studies. Gender studies invite a broader, more inclusive range of identities beyond the traditional binary of ‘male’ and ‘female’. In other words, an understanding of gender as socially constructed invites analysis of a spectrum of gender identities. This Special Issue includes an examination of masculinity and male bodies, for they too are built and constructed on social systems, cultural and religious beliefs, and myths.

Gender studies, in line with women’s, masculine and feminist studies, generally begin with a deconstruction of patriarchy, identifying subordinate-dominant relations and structures between individuals. It does so within an understanding that there are numerous forms of discrimination and power structures that concurrently create a multiplicity of oppression. The feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1990) identifies this complexity of inegalitarian structures as ‘historical interstructuring’. Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) delineates a similar, but even wider-ranging notion of ‘intersectionality’ to address the many layers and often simultaneous forms of oppression, alongside the pervasive power structures that create these forms of subjugation. Intersectionality has become the basis of an increasingly systematized production of contemporary discourses on feminism and gender analysis, as shall be seen in varied contributions in this volume.

Further and indicative of the *raison d’être* of this Special Issue, the intersectional spaces of gender and religion are also in need of examination, based on an understanding that religions too are socially constructed. Far from being *sui generis*, static and homogeneous entities, as far too often portrayed in world religions textbooks, religious traditions instead



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are constantly and consistently changing in response to historical, cultural, and social contexts. Religion itself is best understood as “mediated, administered, lived, contested and adapted by socially situated agents, just like other forms of culture—and in relation to them” (Bailey and Redden 2011, p. 3). From this perspective, when “the” Sikh religious tradition is examined in terms of practices, ideologies, rituals, notions of identity—both historically and within the contemporary milieu—we can only conclude that “a” Sikh tradition does not exist. Instead, there are numerous forms thereof as this contestation and process of adaptation takes place. For this reason, Sikhism in this volume is presented as “Sikh traditions” or “Sikhisms”.

When I initially sent out an informal “call” to fellow scholars in Sikh Studies about a potential Special Issue of *Religions*, potentially entitled “Exploring Gender and Sikh traditions,” the responses were overwhelmingly positive. To effectively understand difference, social relations and inegalitarian structures vis-à-vis Sikh traditions, I invited contributions from a wide range of disciplinary and creative theoretical approaches to Sikhs and gender construction. Furthermore, I put forward that this venture would offer the opportunity to move beyond traditional and historically primary foci of the study of Sikhism, namely, textual/scriptural study, philosophy and theology, and turn instead to what has, at least with regard to Sikh Studies, been vastly understudied and often misunderstood—that which is often identified as “lived religion”. The notion of lived religion and here, “lived Sikhisms”, allows for an expansion of what is understood as religion, religiosity, piety and devotion, in order to pay greater attention to everyday practices, narratives, and performances as they address the complexity and multiplicity of “being” Sikh; in other words, what Sikhs are “doing” in all manner of variance, as opposed to what the texts are “saying”. Moreover, with a shift in focus from the predominance of the text, scholars can more readily attend to materiality, gender, sexuality, senses, the body, power relations and other material conditions (Chidester 2000). Lived religion moves from binary oppositional understandings of what constitutes “the secular” and “the religious”, including what Hall identifies as “tensions and the ongoing struggle of definition.” Practices or religious performances bear the “marks of both regulation and what, for want of a better word, we may term resistance” (Hall 1997, pp. viii–ix). Resistance is a priori to gender and feminist analysis, as is the notion of agency in understanding how oppressive systems, including religions, are confronted, and challenged, whether as patriarchy or beyond. New ways of conceptualizing religion include a necessary critique of the privileging of belief systems over practices, stemming closely from notions of colonial, European and Christian exceptionalism. Moving toward more fluid religious boundaries, without rejecting the traditional historical, theoretical, and textual approaches that have largely defined Sikh Studies, invites counterhegemonic visions of what constitutes religions and/or Sikhisms.

In the original call for papers for this Special Issue of *Religions*, each contributor was asked to consider the following questions: How has gender been constructed within Sikh traditions? How is gender being constructed within historical or contemporary Sikhisms? Over the next year, a diverse group of scholars from across the globe answered these queries with a wide range of intellectually stimulating, challenging and sometimes deeply personal responses. Some of the scholars in this issue have already made significant contributions to the study of Sikhisms, women and gender studies. However, a good number of contributors are emerging scholars within Sikh Studies. Overall, there is a significant diversity in terms of disciplinary and theoretical approaches, alongside geographical locales.

1. Ethnographic Perspectives

This Special Issue begins with scholarship based on ethnography. Ethnographic approaches, though categorically diverse, generally include a focus on meaning-making in the process of learning about, in this case, “religious people” (Sikhs), as opposed to simply “studying” religious people. As such, ethnographic studies encourage creative frameworks to understand the intersections of gender construction and lived religion. Toril Moi (2015) has warned against approaches within feminist studies (and gender studies, one could add)

becoming excessively abstract, bogged down by over-theorizing and overgeneralizing—in essence, no longer applying or relating to individuals' lived realities and concrete experiences. As many of the studies in this issue show, ethnography is particularly suited to explore and describe what is taking place in ordinary people's lives.

A central aspect that comes to the fore in this issue is that of agency—agency in the construction and reconstruction of roles, attitudes, and practices as they pertain to Sikh traditions. Kamal Arora's work, opening this section, examines religious expression and piety in a Delhi gurdwara known as Shaheedganj Gurdwara in Tilak Vihar, the "widow's colony" in West Delhi. Tilak Vihar became a place of refuge for surviving wives of the approximately 3500 Sikh males who were routinely killed after the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. Shining a light on the complexity of gender and religion, Arora examines the male-administered Sikh space that has over time become a primarily female place, a "gendered counterpublic", a space that allows these survivors to cope with the continuing confrontation of loss and trauma in their daily lives through gendered devotional practices, upholding memory and healing.

Italian scholar Barbara Bertoloni focuses on gendered practices within Italian gurdwaras through the Sikh lens of "*seva*", or service. To contextualize the issues discussed, she gives an overview of Sikhs in Italy, the largest Sikh community in Europe outside of UK numbers. Highlighting "official" and "unofficial" gendered roles and practices in gurdwaras, Bertoloni examines notions such as "*izzat*" or honor, as well as the rigid divisions of labour within Sikh families that reproduce degrees of power between genders.

Sandra Santos-Fraile's anthropological and ethnographic exploration of Sikh communities in Barcelona concentrates on the gendered dynamics, negotiation and adaptation that are part of the experiences of Sikh migrants in Spain. Santos-Fraile especially attends to novel forms of agency among young Sikh women in Barcelona in terms of Sikh identity construction, kinship/marriage patterns, body/corporeal (re)presentations and self-reflexivity vis-à-vis the process of cultural socialization in Spain.

2. Deconstructing Sikh Masculinities

In his ethnographic study of Italian Sikh communities, Nachatter Singh Garha emphasizes how Sikh masculinities are constructed through notions of what constitutes Sikh masculinity transferred from the homeland, as well as those subsequently developed within the Italian context. According to Singh, gender construction for Sikh males is directly influenced by their perceptions of control or lack thereof over their wives. Women who have higher education are less willing to give up their own rights in the interests of their husbands. This has led to new challenges for Sikh males, many of whom are struggling to construct viable versions of masculinity in a new social context.

Christine Moliner's work brings a layered ethnographic approach to the discussion of gender construction, in particular the negotiation of Sikh masculinity in France. The majority of Sikhs in France have stemmed from rural backgrounds and most arrived through widespread transnational connections. Moliner's primary focus, however, is instead on the impact of immigration policies on young undocumented Sikh migrants arriving in Paris through illegal means, including immigration smugglers' contacts. This shift in connections has greatly impinged these new migrants' social and economic incorporation processes in Paris. The notion of *izzat*/pride figures significantly in their struggles against their subordinate status. Migrants' constraints and challenges stem from biases and prejudices that they experience from the wider French community, but also the negative attitudes afforded them from their fellow French Sikhs, especially regarding economic advancement. Gurdwara politics, relationships and practices, both inclusionary and exclusionary, are also examined from the perspective of these undocumented migrants.

In his article on the notorious late Punjabi Sikh gangster, Bindy Johal, Manjit Pabla adds an important gendered complexity to this volume in examining competing dimensions of masculine gender construction. Johal's legacy is both filtrated with heroism but also insidious characterizations—Johal as folk devil. Narratives surrounding Bindy Johal

have contributed to continuing gang violence stemming from the Greater Vancouver Sikh community. Pabla traces these conflicting narratives within the context of a ‘contemporary moral panic’ over hyper-masculinity, gang involvement and the prevailing challenges faced by racialized, working-class boys and men.

3. History, Text, Theory

It is in the disciplines of history, textual studies (including scripture) and theology that scholarship within Sikh Studies has generally been most easily situated. It is in these arenas that most scholarly works on Sikh traditions have developed and thrived. The wide-ranging chapters on offer here attest to this richness. Robin Rinehart’s work is an exegetical and historical exploration of the gender and the *Dasam Granth*, a scriptural text second only to the *Adi Granth/Guru Granth Sahib* in its importance. As Rinehart notes, the *Dasam Granth* has long been embroiled in controversy in terms of its authorship and the inclusion of narratives steeped in Hindu mythology. She examines the figure of the Devi or Durga, interpreted by Sikhs instead as “sword” instead of goddess. As a result, Rinehart maintains that Sikhs have thus lost their direct association with the feminine divine. She also examines one of Granth’s central narratives, ‘the nature of women’ or ‘the wiles of women’. Regarding the well-known (and generally negative) tropes of women’s nature, Rinehart observes that there is no generic and comparable ‘male nature’ that comes to the fore through these narratives. In terms of developing approaches to the *Dasam Granth*, women’s voices are increasingly complementing—and at times challenging—male interpretations that have largely prevailed, whether within scholarly or popular realms.

Satwinder Kaur Bains interrogates gender difference and Sikh feminisms through Sikh theological perspectives, scripture references and prescriptive texts. Bains examines how Sikh feminist approaches deconstruct politics of power and create interpretive spaces within which to question both misrepresented and misinterpreted texts. She focuses extensively on uncovering gender differences in practice and ideology vis-à-vis the five Ks, external markers and outward representations of Sikh identity.

Eleanor Nesbitt offers a novel study of gender construction and representation of Sikh women through the colonial “gaze”, particularly through an uncovering and analysis of the writings of western women travelers, army wives, missionaries, artists among others in the nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries. Not surprisingly, these colonial accounts were heavily weighted in favour of “race” (white women of the ruling class) over that of gender commonality with Sikh women. Moreover, notions of Sikh women’s identity are noted as problematic by Nesbitt, given that they were identified as Sikh vis-à-vis their relations to Sikh menfolk. These accounts included a “spectrum of gazes”, both approving and disapproving of Sikh women’s realities.

Nicola Mooney utilizes a gendered lens to examine the gaps between deeply held and celebrated Sikh notions of egalitarianism and the lived experiences of Sikhs, especially vis-à-vis Anshu Malhotra’s notion of the “shameful continuities” (Malhotra 2010) of gender and caste-based hierarchies in contemporary Sikh attitudes and practices. She delineates the space between “the ideal and the real” as “third spaces” that are particularly instructive for both analysis and critique in attempting to understand contemporary Sikh subject formation. While highlighting the promise (and paradox) of Sikh egalitarianism scripturally and theologically, Mooney focuses most specifically on Sikh practices of householding as primary intersections of caste and gender, those “prosaic—and deeply unequal” as sites of kinship. Gurdwara reform, according to Mooney, regarding gender and caste-based inequities may be inadequate unless the unequal and ongoing domestic kinship practices are addressed.

Jaspal Kaur Singh’s article examines female construction within various contemporary Sikh diasporas through an analysis of a selection of creative and non-fiction writings and testimonial life writings. Singh analyzes central Sikh tenets and religious practices, some deeply personal, and many steeped in patriarchal traditions, examining how they are

resisted, reinterpreted and reconstructed through these varied writings as expressions of agency, gender negotiation and practices within Sikh diasporic spaces.

4. Gendered Performance, Aesthetics and Economics

Anjali Gera Roy's work focuses on the gendered nature of Punjabi dance, most particularly the traditional male genre known as bhangra, and examines its unmistakably masculine, warrior and peasant-inspired movements, alongside what Roy delineates as its accompanying "lyrical machismo". She also locates the connection between bhangra and Sikhs, through the dance form's agrarian origins and traditional Jat Sikh symbolic association with the "land", notions of hypermasculinity and Sikh male devotional bodily signifiers, particularly the turban. Roy examines the incursion of a small number of female musicians who have been able to "make a dent in the male bhangra monopoly", with a particular focus on female rapper Hard Kaur, who deconstructs the segregated male bhangra space, then blends elements of traditional masculine and feminine tropes through co-option and challenge to Punjabi/Jat/Sikh patriarchies.

Zabeen Khamisa closes this Special Issue by adding an important dimension to Sikh gender production through her examination of Millennial Fashion Enterprises in Canada, identified as "Sikh chic". She delineates these enterprises as values-based in terms of self-determined representation, ethical purchasing, and gender equitable, all the while steeped in the free-market economy and the digital marketplace. While the normative Khalsa Sikh male aesthetic has long been steeped in tradition, young Sikh women are moving to the frontlines in challenging mainstream representations of Sikh masculine identities, but also in creating new aesthetic and fashion platforms that reflect the lived experiences of women or "Kaurhood".

As will be shown throughout this issue, with the expansion of the boundaries defining "what is religion" and "what counts" as important aspects of rich Sikh traditions, alongside diverse approaches to constructions of gender, this Special Issue is a significant, perhaps even groundbreaking contribution to Sikh Studies.

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Article

“I Get Peace:” Gender and Religious Life in a Delhi Gurdwara

Kamal Arora

Department of Social, Cultural and Media Studies, University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, BC V2S 7M8, Canada; kamal.arora@ufv.ca

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Abstract: In October and November of 1984, after the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards, approximately 3500 Sikh men were killed in Delhi, India. Many of the survivors—Sikh widows and their kin—were relocated thereafter to the “Widow Colony”, also known as Tilak Vihar, within the boundary of Tilak Nagar in West Delhi, as a means of rehabilitation and compensation. Within this colony lies the Shaheedganj Gurdwara, frequented by widows and their families. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, I explore the intersections between violence, widowhood, and gendered religious practice in this place of worship. Memories of violence and experiences of widowhood inform and intersect with embodied religious practices in this place. I argue that the gurdwara is primarily a female place; although male-administered, it is a place that, through women’s practices, becomes a gendered counterpublic, allowing women a place to socialize and heal in an area where there is little public space for women to gather. The gurdwara has been re-appropriated away from formal religious practice by these widows, functioning as a place that enables the subversive exchange of local knowledges and viewpoints and a repository of shared experiences that reifies and reclaims gendered loss.

Keywords: counterpublic; embodiment; ethnography; gender; prayer; Sikhism; violence; widowhood

1. A Day in the Life of the Shaheedganj Gurdwara

The Shaheedganj Gurdwara lies just off the main road of Tilak Vihar, the neighbourhood in Delhi also known as the “Widow Colony”. From 2012 to 2014, I lived in Delhi to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in this colony—a designated slum area in Tilak Vihar, Tilak Nagar, which was used to relocate many Sikh widows and their families after the 1984 anti-Sikh massacre.¹ No one I spoke to in this neighbourhood could remember the exact date the gurdwara was built, although most say that it was erected in the early to mid-1990s to serve the colony and thus was named “Shaheedganj” (translation: home of the martyrs) in memory of those who were killed during the 1984 violence. The gurdwara is run by a committee of Labana² Sikhs, although the congregation, which is roughly 80% widows, daughters, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren of the colony, is comprised of a mix of Labana and Punjabi Sikhs.³

¹ This paper arises out of PhD fieldwork conducted from 2012 to 2014 that focused on past experiences and current legacies of violence, gender, memory, space, affect, and religious practice among Sikh widows in this colony.

² Labana Sikhs in this community are lower-caste Sikhs from various parts of Rajasthan, whereas Punjabi Sikhs in the colony have family roots in the state of Punjab and come from several different castes. Many Punjabi Sikhs in the colony differentiate themselves from Labana Sikhs, as the latter are traditionally involved in labour-heavy professions. Language also differentiates the groups; most Labana women converse among themselves in various Rajasthani languages and dialects, whereas Punjabi Sikhs will converse mainly in Punjabi and Hindi. Both groups of women will use Hindi when conversing with one another. The male administrators of the Shaheedganj Gurdwara conduct services in Punjabi.

³ Punjabi and Rajasthani Labana Sikh women have formed casual friendships crossing these barriers, yet they have remarked that each group is happy sticking to its own. Although beyond the scope of this paper, caste differences in the colony are

The gurdwara shares its right wall with a large NGO along the main street of the colony. It is a concrete and brick structure, with the left wall of the gurdwara slightly crumbling and facing a small empty lot that is overrun with weeds, garbage, and mud. Directly across from the gurdwara are some flats and a small convenience store (a single, street-facing counter) run by an elderly woman selling sundries. Further down the road, lies another neighbourhood block where mostly Dalit families live. Indoors there are a number of blue signs advertising messages related to the gurdwara. Similar to most other gurdwaras, one must cover one's head and take off one's shoes and wash both hands and feet, although the small pool of water reserved for dipping one's feet is generally dry here.

It is in this gurdwara that many of the Sikh families in the Widow Colony congregate. On any given day, the congregation is comprised of roughly 80% women and 20% men. As I will discuss, the importance of the gurdwara to the Sikh tradition and community-building cannot be overstated. This is especially true for women in the colony. The gurdwara functions not only as a physical place for prayer but also a gathering space and, as I will argue, a gendered counterpublic. Its very presence exists as a memorial to the 1984 violence, yet it also holds memory palaces within it—a room filled with photographs and another room with a lamp lit around the clock. Women who attend and perform prayers in the gurdwara obtain peace from doing so, and, as such, the gurdwara provides a place of healing through social forms of religious practice that other private areas (flats) and public areas in the colony do not. Thus, there is a tension between the gurdwara as a healing place and the colony as a place that engenders continual forms of structural violence, and these places are constituted by this tension. Forms of memory tethered to particular spaces are constitutive of experiences of locality, connecting places where memory is produced with past and contemporary landscapes (cf. Gordillo 2004). The material forms of remembrance in the gurdwara and the embodied remembering that takes place there in this way connects the violence of the past with the contemporary landscape of the colony.

The word gurdwara literally means “door to the guru” in Punjabi. The distinguishing feature of a gurdwara is the presence of the holy text of the Sikhs, the Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS); in this way, a room inside one's home, or a temporary space for an event such as a wedding, can be viewed as a gurdwara (Cole 2004). In contemporary usage, it is used to denote a space wherever the SGGS is placed as well as where Sikhs gather to worship and discuss community happenings and world events. The establishment of gurdwaras also aids in commemorating the historical landscape of Sikh communities, including important objects and historical sites related to the Gurus (Murphy 2012, p. 189). Gurdwaras are “every sense community centres as much as they are places of worship” (Mandair 2013, p. 117). The importance of pairing the spiritual and temporal realms of life within a gurdwara is underscored by the emphasis Sikhism puts on both *miri* and *piri*, or the temporal and spiritual components of Sikh life.⁴

In theory, if not completely in practice,⁵ all are welcome in a gurdwara regardless of religious denomination or affiliation if they cover their heads, are not under the influence of alcohol or narcotics, take off their shoes, and wash their hands. Visitors to the gurdwara are encouraged to have *langar*, or a communal meal, operated by the congregation's donations, charity, and *seva*, or acts of service (Lee and Nadeau 2011). Gurdwaras often run under management committees, who oversee the daily program; special events, *langar*; upkeep of the building; appoint *raagis* (those who musically perform scripture from the SGGS), and perform other administrative tasks. Although, in theory, women can

apparent. Interactions between the Sikh (both Labana and Punjabi) families and Dalit families past the colony are limited and, at times, are fraught with tension.

⁴ Gurdwaras have also been used as centres of resistance and social justice. For example, in 20th-century North America, some gurdwaras on the West coast were used by an anticolonial movement known as the Ghadar Party (Sohi 2014). Within diasporic communities, centres of worship for immigrants can provide valuable spaces for the assertion and preservation of identity (Hirvi 2010; Gallo 2012).

⁵ In recent years, some caretakers of a gurdwara in the UK have not allowed the elderly or disabled to sit with the main congregation (Daily News and Analysis 2015; Express and Star 2015).

take on roles of *granthi*,⁶ this is rare in practice. Sikh women, for example, are currently prohibited from performing scripture or *granthi* duties at Harimandir Sahib, the seat of spiritual and temporal authority located in Amritsar, Punjab. Aside from volunteer service, the management of gurdwaras and services performed are mostly administered by men.⁷ In Tilak Vihar, the management committee and the caretakers of this gurdwara are all male.

During fieldwork, I had been attending prayer at the gurdwara, particularly the morning program which starts at around six o'clock in the morning and ends at around half past eight.⁸ Anywhere between twenty and forty members of the community are present during the reciting of the morning prayers,⁹ with a larger presence on the weekends.

When the women in the colony pass through the metal gates of the gurdwara, painted a creamy yellow, and ascend the white and grey marble steps, slightly yellowed by time and covered by green matting, they arrive at a landing. Immediately towards the right of the landing is a small room, roughly ten feet by fifteen feet, housing photographs of men who were killed during the 1984 violence in Delhi. The rows of portraits, in the form of headshots, are individually framed and spaced so that the edges are touching. Directly in front of the stairs lies the main hall, housing the SGGS. Like all gurdwaras, activity is centred around the holy text, placed gently in the centre of the room in the early mornings, usually by the *granthi* Bhai Chetan Singh^{*10}—in a ceremony known as *prakash karna*. The SGGS is generally laid out on cloth on a small raised platform under a canopy. The canopy and cloth surrounding the scriptures are often made of colourful silk with embroidered gold thread. The area is often decorated with steel *kirpans*¹¹ and *khandas*^{12,13} and festooned with vases of colourful artificial flowers. Women in the colony sit on the right-hand side and men to the left, which I found slightly unusual, as women generally sit on the left-hand side (away from the *raagis*) in the gurdwaras to which I am accustomed in North America. A passageway in the middle is left open for worshippers to walk up to the SGGS. A small room at the back of the main hall houses an oil lamp, lit around the clock, memorializing the victims who were killed in 1984. Beside this room is another small room with another copy of the SGGS, and the farthest chamber to the right is the Guru's resting place, which contains a canopied bed where the main copy of the SGGS is laid to rest every evening after evening prayers, in a ceremony known as *sukhasan*. A small kitchen lies to the right of the central hall for making *parshaad*, a semolina halva made of wheat, flour, butter, and sugar, and there are a few rooms beyond it that the volunteers, or *sevadars*, use. A cavernous hall in the basement serves *langar* and meals during special events and also serves as a practice room for children learning Sikh hymns some evenings.

Prayers in the gurdwara begin in the morning by the male caretakers and Bhai Chetan Singh. Women comprise the majority of the congregation at any given time, and there is a marked difference in the way the women navigate the space in the gurdwara from the men. Women, for example, stop to

⁶ Although *granthis* are often translated to “priest” in English, the Catholic concept of priesthood does not apply here. *Granthis* are often married, have families and children, and often live close by to the gurdwara they serve. Thinking of *granthis* more as “leaders”, “religious specialists”, or “textual specialists” would be more a more accurate description of their role.

⁷ This has been contested in recent years. Women have made a concerted effort to challenge the unwritten ban on women in Harimandir Sahib (Nibber 2011).

⁸ It was difficult for me to attend the evening program throughout the year due to safety concerns.

⁹ These are the *Japji Sahib*, *kirtan*, *ardas*, and a *hukam*.

¹⁰ In the interests of anonymity all names in this paper are pseudonyms, which are denoted by an asterisk (*) the first time the name is mentioned, unless otherwise indicated. I have also used the Sikh names Kaur and Singh throughout for interlocutors older than I out of respect.

¹¹ A *kirpan* is a small dagger or sword worn by initiated Sikhs, which carries both defensive and symbolic functions.

¹² The *khandas* is comprised of a central circle (one interpretation sees the circle as symbolizing unity and the oneness of the Divine) surrounded by two swords (symbolizing spiritual and temporal authority).

¹³ Both the *kirpan* and *khandas* are insignias of the Khalsa, or the collective body of Sikhs, particularly initiated Sikhs.

matha thek,¹⁴ or bow and touch their foreheads to the ground as a sign of reverence for the scripture, in more spots in the gurdwara than men do, while men are much more likely to do *chaur seva*.¹⁵

The women begin filtering into the gurdwara in the early morning for morning prayer. During the winter, they are wrapped in heavy shawls and wear toe socks with their rubber sandals. Like in other gurdwaras, the women sit cross-legged on the floor, with some elderly women who have mobility and joint problems sitting on a bench in the back. One elderly woman I had mentally dubbed “Cane Aunty” given the three-tipped cane she waved around with great gusto, preferred to sit along the side of the centre of the room and watch worshippers come and go. Bhai Chetan Singh recites the morning prayer (*Jajji Sahib*) followed by *ardas*, a standardized form of prayer or petition to God. After the *ardas*, which takes place while standing, the women sit down, and a *hukam*, a reading from the scripture meant to guide the congregation and chosen at random, is read for the day. One of the younger caretakers hands out the blessed offering of *parshaad*, which is a welcome treat especially on a cold day. In warmer weather, wool, or heavier cotton Punjabi suits are replaced with breezy muslin or cotton. From about March onwards, the ceiling fans overhead are turned on, and the side doors are flung open to keep the room as cool as possible. Although there are coolers, they are not used regularly. A few of the women wear white, or lighter colours, keeping in line with their widow status and colours generally worn by older women in Punjab, although most do not. They take off their sandals at the entrance (there is no designated shoe area here, though they are common at many other gurdwaras) and wash their hands at the porcelain sink to the right.

After ascending the marble steps, the women come inside to *matha thek* by getting on their hands and knees and swiftly bowing their heads until they touch the floor in front of the scripture. After rising, the women circumambulate from the left, going clockwise. Many stop, standing, with hands folded, to bow their heads briefly at the *chaur* and then again behind the SGGS, at the *granthi*'s back, who is reading the holy text. Then, the women generally walk to the back of the room and bow to the cabins housing an oil lamp and the room where the SGGS is kept in repose at night. They turn back to the front of the room, stopping at the large, lightbox-type photograph of the Harimandir Sahib. Many touch this image and then touch their eyes, back and forth in rapid succession, as if receiving a blessing from it, before finally wiping their face with their hands. They then move to sit down, greeting women with “*Sat Sri Akal*”, a common Sikh greeting, on their way to sit.¹⁶ I have noticed that usually the congregation leaves a half-circle of space from the SGGS in order to keep somewhat of a reverent distance. While most of the women sit in the middle, some of the more elderly women sit at the back bench or near the sides to rest their backs and legs. It is usually younger children who sit closer to the front, while any toddlers accompanying their mothers or grandmothers usually run around the room, repeatedly shushed by whoever has accompanied them. Many children and youth drop by the gurdwara on the way to school or college, their heavy backpacks shifting as they *matha thek*. During the program, women are more likely to greet each other, sigh, and utter words during prayer, such as “*Waheguru!*”¹⁷ or “*Waheguru, the True King, have mercy on us!*” their voices rippling one after another. After evening prayer, the scripture is ceremonially moved into its chamber for the night.

After the morning prayer and conversations, some of the women step into the memorial room on their way out, stopping to touch the photographs of their loved ones they have lost. The women leave the gurdwara; some go off to work and others back home to do their domestic work. Afternoons in the gurdwara are usually quiet. There is little foot traffic other than the late risers who did not make the morning prayers. The scripture is covered with a sheet, and the fans are turned off, except for perhaps one circling overhead, as one of the caretakers rests or sleeps below it, supine and somewhat oblivious

¹⁴ To *matha thek* is to also acknowledge the wisdom of the SGGS (Lee and Nadeau 2011).

¹⁵ *Chaur seva* is a form of *seva* in which one waves a fly whisk made out of yak hair (a *chaur*) over the scripture, as a sign of dedication and respect.

¹⁶ The greeting roughly translates to the following: “Eternal is the timeless Lord”.

¹⁷ *Waheguru* means “God is great” and is also used as a term for God.

to any visitors. Traffic begins to increase again in the early evening, when the congregation flows in for evening prayers. Some of the women come to both morning and evening prayers; others come only in the morning or only in the evening. It seems that there are more children and younger women (daughters and daughters-in-law of the widows) in the evening. Communal meals are usually only reserved for special events and functions, such as the *akhand paath*¹⁸, held in commemoration of 1984. After the closing of prayer, the women again linger to converse before heading home—shorter this time, as it is getting late and gets dark early in the winters.

2. Gurdwara as Gendered Counterpublic

In the particular spatiotemporal juncture of contemporary Tilak Vihar, the Shaheedganj Gurdwara is much more than a religious or congregational centre. In the way that gurdwaras have functioned, in some ways, as memorial sites in Sikh tradition (cf. Murphy 2012), so too does Shaheedganj Gurdwara. It was built to serve the widows of the massacre and their families and continues to commemorate the violence through its very existence and the forms of commemorative practice and prayer that take place within it. It is a place of worship and a community centre, but it is also, in whole and in parts, a memorial in a wide variety of ways.¹⁹ In addition, the gurdwara provides a space for women to socialize with one another.

The Shaheedganj Gurdwaras remains a place administered and intensely patrolled by men. Not only are all of the caretakers men, but the hymn-singers are too, other than the youth *kirtan* group, which performs during special events. Men conduct all the daily prayers and the *parkash* and *sukhasan* ceremonies, open and close the front gates and the gates to the memorial room, make the *parshaad*, and handle the donations. The elderly volunteer caretaker²⁰ particularly polices the space, telling women where to sit, shooing people over, and disciplining unruly children. Yet, the congregation at any given time is mostly women; in fact, women often enter the men's side, due to their numbers, with a few men scattered against the far side, near the wall, on any given day. After the morning prayer is over, the women often linger behind, gossiping about the neighbourhood goings-on, at the back and sides of the main hall.

Structural relations of gender and power are both preserved and destabilized in part through interactions in social situations. If we understand everyday linguistic interactions as forms of resistance, we hear practices that are more contradictory, ambiguous, and diverse, ranging from subversion to outright rejection to acceptance and reconstruction of prevailing cultural definitions of gender (Gal 1991, p. 178). We see this in the social interactions between women in the colony. They speak of events in the community: of marriages, of illness, of death. One morning, for example, I observed two women speaking in their Rajasthani dialect about a death that had occurred in the neighbourhood. From what I could understand, it seemed that a man had come down with a severe viral illness—either dengue or typhoid—and after five days of medicine, his “veins exploded”, and he had to have surgery. Upon getting up from this conversation, one of the women uttered in Punjabi, in long, emphatic syllables, “Waheguru, the True King, have mercy on us” and the other woman heaved a heavy sigh in agreement. These conversations often last more than half an hour, to the annoyance of the all-male gurdwara establishment, and the women are often admonished strongly by the elderly caretaker, who would say things like, “Have you come here to pray or gossip! You should take God's name!”

These structural relations of power between the male caretakers and the widows often resulted in tense interactions. One particular instance of this took place one winter morning in December 2013. I had arrived at the gurdwara from a family friend's home at which I stayed from time to time which was close-by. It was bone-chillingly cold that day, and fog rolled heavily across the early morning

¹⁸ A three-day prayer service in which the SGGS is read in its entirety.

¹⁹ In my PhD dissertation, I devote one chapter to forms of memorialization among the Sikh diaspora and how the Widow Colony, its inhabitants and the gurdwara intersect with these forms.

²⁰ Known as the *sevadadar*.

streets. *Parshaad* was handed out as usual after the close of prayer, and the women huddled into themselves, in their sweaters and shawls, shivering and grateful for the warm blessing. The women sat in silence eating their *parshaad*, basking in satisfaction after the morning prayer, evident in their happy faces and the quiet in the air. Suddenly a voice rang out in the corner in Punjabi: “THERE ARE MOUSE DROPPINGS IN THIS PARSHAAD!” One of the women in the congregation had discovered mouse excrement in the holy offering. I blanched. I had already eaten the offering. What followed was a rising tide of emotion, anger, and shouting. All of the women began to chime in and berate the male caretakers for the lack of sanitation.

From my observations of how women’s bodies mimic and respond to one another in the gurdwara, it seems that they exist in an emotive relationship to each another, on which I will further elaborate below. The gurdwara allows them a physical, communal space—so severely lacking in this colony—to share their life histories, social events, emotions, joy, and pain—their *dukh-sukh*, as the saying in Punjabi goes. If we follow Fraser’s critique of the public sphere (Fraser 1990), the permeable space of the gurdwara can, in a way, be seen as a subaltern (and, in this case, highly gendered) counterpublic, working as a feminist critique to Habermas’s notion of the public sphere as an inclusive space that preserves social interaction and disregards status (Habermas 1989) and how this sphere organizes discourse. Fraser describes these “subaltern counterpublics” as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 1990, p. 23). The public sphere is in fact comprised of a number of significant exclusions, which has historically discriminated against women and lower castes and classes, holding hegemonic and patriarchal tendencies. The women of Tilak Vihar have little access to this public sphere, having little public recourse to address their grievances surrounding the violence of the event and the everyday structural violence of poverty.

The gendered counterpublic of the gurdwara also provides a space that is somewhat (though by no means completely) removed from the stigmas and restrictions placed upon Sikh widows. These include a loss of social status, expectations of limited mobility and visibility in public, structural poverty, ostracization, and expectations of celibacy and life-long mourning. Many of the oppressions widows in North India face are also common for Sikh widows. Widowhood in North India has been described as “social death”, arising from a widow’s lowered status following the loss of her husband, and exclusion as a functional member of the family unit (Chakravarti 1995). Prescriptive Brahmanical texts generally outline two models of widowhood: the widow-turned-ascetic who remains celibate and in the home or one who commits *sati*, or widow immolation, in devotion to her husband, thereby avoiding widowhood altogether.²¹ The gurdwara then, although policed by men who position women as widows and mourners, provides an alternative public or a counterpublic formed in part by women as a public space to discuss pertinent issues in their lives.

3. Harnoor Kaur*

The lived experiences and religious practices of Harnoor Kaur, whose husband was killed in 1984 and who lives on her own in the colony, illuminate the importance of the gurdwara in the daily lives of the widows in the neighbourhood. The gurdwara provides for Harnoor Kaur a legitimate public space. I first met Harnoor Kaur on a Sunday afternoon. It was the last day of the 1984 memorial *akhand paath* being held at the Shaheedganj Gurdwara in Tilak Vihar. Harnoor Kaur, whose family hails from Amritsar and Rawalpindi, was eighteen when she was married, and she moved to Delhi in 1973. Her husband worked as a machine manager for the printing division of a national Indian newspaper and ran a part-time cycle spare parts shop at home. They had four children—two daughters and two sons.

²¹ Given the paucity of data specific to Sikh women and Sikh widowhood in particular, we have to extrapolate from the larger cultural milieu in which most Sikhs in India live. Malhotra has pointed out the difficulties of “culling out a Sikh identity as separate and distinct from a Hindu identity” in early 20th-century Punjab (Malhotra 2012, p. 169).

I first interviewed Harnoor Kaur, who was fifty-six at the time of our interviews, in the autumn of 2013. It had taken me some time to introduce myself to women in the colony and create a sense of rapport, yet even after being in the field for almost a year at that point, I was anxious about interviewing her. My nervousness rose the higher I climbed the narrow, steep steps to get to her flat. She greeted me warmly. We sat in her small front room. Harnoor Kaur discussed with me the details of her experiences during the 1984 massacre, including the killing of her husband.²² In a low voice, she described how she and others in her neighbourhood were called out of their homes by the military and taken to relief camps. “I didn’t even have a scarf on my head, no slippers on my feet”, Harnoor Kaur said, pointing out that she was not in a respectable physical state to be out of the home as a woman. The stigma attached to widowhood led Harnoor Kaur’s family to disown her.²³ Eventually, Harnoor Kaur was rehabilitated into the Widow Colony.

Patterns of structural violence have continued throughout Harnoor Kaur’s life. One of her daughters died from an unspecified illness at the age of two while being raised in her maternal home.²⁴ Her oldest son, Jaspreet*, about thirty-eight at the time of our interviews, lives in the UK and is married with one daughter. Her daughter, Amrita*, was born in 1978, is married, and lives in Delhi. The death of her youngest son Balbir*, in April of 2010 in Shadarpur village, Rajpur, was a focus of our conversations. Balbir had suffered from addiction and substance use throughout his life. He married a Sikh woman, Jinder*, and had two daughters. Balbir’s relationship with his wife and her family were characterized by violence. Balbir went missing in 2010 and his corpse was eventually found in a river a couple of weeks later. Harnoor Kaur outlined that his death was caused by her daughter-in-law Jinder’s family.

Harnoor Kaur’s telling of her son’s death is rife with gendered statements about her daughter-in-law that are exemplary of the gendered restrictions placed on women, especially widows, by society at large, by women, and by widows themselves. Throughout our conversations, in keeping with the undeniable importance given to sons in Punjabi culture, she continued to put her son Balbir up on a pedestal—painting him in a positive light and downplaying the negative effects of his drug use. For her, Balbir was still an outstanding son because he was a religious man and had often gone to Hemkunt Sahib, a popular historical pilgrimage site. Although it did not seem that there had been a criminal court case regarding his death, she blamed her daughter-in-law’s family intensely for it. Throughout our conversations, her discussions of her daughter-in-law at times followed the pattern Das has argued about mother and daughter-in-law relationships: a subtle hostility (Das 1976). At other times it was more overtly hostile. For example, Jinder’s demands for material goods and other services from her mother-in-law (“I want to get my eyebrows done, I want sandals”)—seemed more grievous to Harnoor Kaur than Balbir asking for money to support his drug habit. “Now tell me—what does she need all that for? She didn’t care that he did drugs”, she said. “There was something fishy there. I think ... Whenever there’s a newlywed couple there’s going to be arguments, you have to endure it as a wife.” Harnoor Kaur clearly believed that Jinder had failed as a dutiful daughter-in-law, as she was not able to tolerate her husband’s substance abuse, nor their fighting. Of Balbir’s death, she said that Jinder “didn’t even come and touch the flowers. She didn’t come to the last rites either, she didn’t *matha thek*, she didn’t ask for forgiveness.” Jinder had failed in her ultimate final duty as a widow: to ensure that funeral rites were paid proper attention to help ferry Balbir’s soul to the afterlife. Perhaps Harnoor Kaur was particularly bitter about this point, as she did not have the opportunity to do the same with her husband after the 1984 massacre. Jinder neither came close to Balbir’s corpse nor attended the cremation. Harnoor Kaur felt that her daughter-in-law had transgressed her role within

²² These details are violent and traumatic. In order to do justice to Harnoor Kaur’s experiences I have not included these details here due to the constrictions of word limits.

²³ Harnoor Kaur mentioned this disowning with a shrug, saying “Who would keep you?”

²⁴ In India, “other mothering”, or the practice of women rearing children not biologically related to them, is common, especially in situations where the biological parents are unable to care for the child financially (cf. O’Reilly 2010).

the family power dynamics (“She used to rule like a queen here”) and that she continued to be too brash and mobile: “She still hasn’t learned. Whenever she wants, she puts on her sandals and heads out to the bazaar, her relatives, wherever.” These restrictions surrounding the mobility of women were all too common and underscored the importance of the gurdwara. Such conversations allowed me to understand, in a more nuanced manner, how gendered kinship structures interact with particular forms of ongoing violence and how the gurdwara can provide a legitimate space for widowed bodies.

Harnoor Kaur and Religious Practice

Every morning, Harnoor Kaur would wake up around four or five o’clock in the morning and begin her day with *naam-simran*, or the continuous, meditative recitation of God’s name, before taking a bath. She told me that she went to the gurdwara twice a day, for morning (six o’clock) and evening (seven o’clock) prayers, because, in her words “What am I going to do sitting at home?” This statement is particularly important, as Harnoor Kaur frames the activity as being the sole alternative to staying at home in the evenings. After returning from work in the evening, she would make a vegetable dish and then would make two *rotis* (unleavened bread) when she came back after evening prayer, which she attended for about an hour. “After 8:00 [PM], I lock my door and don’t let anyone come in”, she says. “No sister or brother, no relative. I have stopped everyone.” Harnoor Kaur would then eat dinner and watch one and a half to two hours of television before going to bed. When I asked her how she feels and what she gains from going to the gurdwara, she replied:

My heart ... I get peace ... like when I do *simran*²⁵ in the morning for an hour or the five prayers.²⁶ And it takes me one hour. And I sit, I don’t have any interruptions, just God ... It becomes a habit. When someone stops me in the street, I say I have to go back [home]. Nor do I go to any friend’s house. I don’t go to anyone’s house.

KA: Here, you don’t have any friends?

HK: No, I don’t like going to anyone’s house.

KA: Your own house is fine.

Harnoor Kaur nodded in agreement. She told me how her sister in Chandigarh would call her and urge her to attend the religious ceremonies they would hold, offering to buy her travel fare as well. Harnoor Kaur would tell her, “My heart doesn’t feel like it.”

Throughout our conversations, it was evident that Harnoor Kaur did not think it was appropriate for women to be out socializing frequently (as described above, she would often complain to me that her daughter-in-law, Jinder, who herself was a widow, would often dress up and go out). The gurdwara, as a legitimate space for socializing then, serves as a homing point in the complex interplay of the places in Harnoor Kaur’s life. She walks to the gurdwara from her flat twice a day, for the morning and evening programmes. In the evenings, she walks home after prayers are finished. The spatial configurations in the colony and the social restrictions on widowhood work against women in that there are few places for women to socialize other than the cramped, narrow, open-air hallways of the colony flats, and to be outside on one’s own seemed inappropriate to her. Whereas the space of the colony and Delhi at large pose restrictions on the bodies of all women, the gurdwara provides a legitimate space for her gendered, widowed body to be, a body that, given the stigmas and restrictions associated with widowhood, has no business being out and about the city. She seemed embarrassed to tell me that she enjoyed going to the gurdwara to participate in religious activity and socialize. Her question, “[Otherwise] what am I going to do sitting at home now?” implied that it was an action

²⁵ A short-form of *naam-simran*, discussed in the previous paragraph.

²⁶ The five prayers include the following: *Japji Sahib*, *Jaap Sahib*, *Shabad Hazarey*, *Rehras Sahib*, and *Anand Sahib*.

she was resigned to do, rather than an active choice. She also did not think it appropriate to visit her sisters-in-law, as her parents are deceased, and thus, she had no business being there. She stressed that, even when stopped by an acquaintance on the street, she refused to visit anyone and preferred to isolate herself in her own home other than her two daily visits to the gurdwara or going to work as a lab assistant at a school.

“If someone invites me ten times, I’ll go once. Some people, just immediately—get ready and go (*tyaar hokey chaliyaan jandiyaan*), not me.” Harnoor Kaur here is emphasizing what it means to be a “good” widow in Delhi, to be a woman who is widowed by tragedy. This is a woman who leaves the house out of necessity (prayer and work) but rarely ventures out into social spaces—and even then, only after great insistence by her friends or family. *Tyaar hokey*, or having gotten ready, implies not only getting dressed, but also the specific way in which a woman might get dressed, by putting on nice clothes, jewellery, and perhaps makeup, which are generally the purview of young women of marriageable age and married women, not widows. In her view, Harnoor Kaur, is not like these women—she knows what society expects of her as a widow and strives to prove that she meets, and perhaps even exceeds, these guidelines. The gurdwara then, functions as a legitimate outlet for her physical presence as a widow and her socializing—indeed, it was in the gurdwara where I first met Harnoor Kaur.

One day, Harnoor Kaur and I were discussing how she began to attend the gurdwara regularly. She told me that, after 1984, she stopped going to pray although she was staying at a refugee camp within a gurdwara. She again stopped going to the gurdwara in the colony after one of her adult sons died and only began visiting again when women in the neighbourhood came to her:

KA: So, there were some ladies in this area who didn’t do prayers, because they were very angry at what happened to them.

HK: Yes, yes, that is what I told you, no?

KA: Yes.

HK: I never used to do it. I never went to the gurdwara or did anything [after 1984], then God brought me a little closer to him. I came here [to Tilak Vihar] then started going. Then, after [my son’s] death occurred, I didn’t go to the temple for six months.

KA: So, you had the same feeling?

HK: Yes.

KA: Like, “Why is this happening?”

HK: Two or three ladies from the gurdwara came and visited me and said, “You should come. Why don’t you come to the gurdwara?” Women who knew me. It had been a while. Surjit’s*²⁷ mother also said, “You should go to the gurdwara” Then, I started going. I never sit at the front in the gurdwara.

Harnoor Kaur discussed that she likes to sit at the back because she thinks that it is a humble action to sit far away from the SGGS. She also enjoys the vantage point it provides her in terms of people-watching and socializing.

HK: [I can see] those who come and go, they care a lot; they give a lot of respect to me; everyone knows me. You say hello to them. Then, it makes you feel good, that we are sitting in God’s home. We only go to beg from God, to beg. What else do we go for?

²⁷ Surjit is the pseudonym of the young woman in the neighbourhood who I hired as a research assistant.

KA: So, you sit at the back, meaning everyone meets you.

HK: Yes, those who have been separated [from their loved ones], you see them all.

We can see from Harnoor Kaur's discussion how the gurdwara acts as a gendered counterpublic in that it provides a space for widows to socialize; it is also a healing place where she "feels good" and peaceful. Indeed, throughout our conversations, Harnoor Kaur stressed that she did not feel comfortable making friends with anyone unless she was in the gurdwara. Although administered by men, it is mostly populated by women and their prayers, discussions, and connections with one another and, therefore, remains a women's space. Issues that normally disproportionately affect women in patriarchal societal structures, such as nurturing and caring for the young, the elderly, and the ill, are not often included in the public sphere. Yet, the gurdwara space provides a backdrop to bring private issues into the public sphere.

4. Gender and Religious Practice

The examination of Sikh women's religious practices and their embodiment of mourning can contribute to the discourse of gendered embodiment in manifold ways. First, it reemphasizes the idea that gender is performative (Butler 1990) and embodied, and that gendered performativities in the global South may be vastly different from Western, liberal, secular notions of embodiment (Mahmood 2005; Ong 1988). In the context of the colony, Sikh widows' affective and embodied behaviours are deeply tied to their statuses and experiences as widows and their religiosity. Sikh women's emotional and outwardly expressive performances of mourning and grief during funeral rites and after a death illustrate this point, as does the very prohibition of such bodily practices by the current Sikh *Rehat Maryada*, or Code of Conduct, which instructs mourners to "not grieve or raise a hue and cry or indulge in breast-beating" (Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee n.d.).

While much of the work on gender and Sikhism by feminist scholars has focused on scriptural analysis via exegetical methodologies or development-based discussions of Sikh women's health and well-being in Punjab, I am interested here in researching the intersections between embodied experiences of affective, performative religious practice, belief, and gendered space-making in order to interrogate binary notions of freedom and agency (i.e., free or unfree, agentive or passive subjects) pertaining to religious women in India. Popular representations and performances of Sikh identity tend to be strongly masculinized, with little, or cursory, treatment of women's experiences. In scholarly literature, however, some attention has been paid to Sikh women's (Bhachu 1991; Jakobsh 2003; Mahmood 2000; Singh 2000) and men's (Axel 2001; Gell 1996; Mandair 2005) gendered Sikh bodies and selves.

Popular explanations and discursive constructions of women's places and roles within Sikhism are overwhelmingly absorbed in a discourse that posits gender differences based on biological sex and reproduction and argues that women are closer to nature than men or that women are endowed with feminine characteristics while men are not (a perspective that has been criticized by authors like Jakobsh (2003) and Ortner (1972)).²⁸ For example, many online articles²⁹ discussing the egalitarian position of women in Sikhism quote the following line by Guru Nanak in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib:

From woman, man is born; within woman, man is conceived; to woman he is engaged and married. Woman becomes his friend; through woman, the future generations come. When his woman dies, he seeks another woman; to woman he is bound. So why call her bad? From her, kings are born. From woman, woman is born; without woman, there would be no one at

²⁸ Ortner's concern here is to show why "woman might tend to be assumed, over and over, in the most diverse sorts of world-views, and in cultures of every degree of complexity, to be closer to nature than men" (Ortner 1972, p. 24).

²⁹ See, for example, http://www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Equality_of_women (accessed on 1 October 2016).

all. O Nanak, only the True Lord is without a woman (Guru Nanak, Raag Aasaa Mehal 1, p. 473, in [Khalsa 2000](#)).

The above issues arose during a conversation with Harnek Singh* (a board member from the local NGO Nishkam serving the Widow Colony) as well when discussing women's positions within Sikhism.

HS: [Speaking in Punjabi] Women have gotten more than equality. The traditions of this place [are too restrictive]; for example, someone's pregnant and she shouldn't do this or that to avoid miscarriage. God would say, what are you talking about? God said, kings, saints, everyone, it was women that gave birth to them, right? How can you disrespect them? Look—at the time [of the Gurus], it was in fashion for women to have to prove their innocence by going into the fire [*sati*]. And then it was en vogue for women to cover their foreheads in the presence of men. But [Sri Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru] forbade it. When the Khalsa was initiated, he did something really wonderful. He asked *Maa-ji* [Mata Gujri Kaur, his wife], how will you contribute to this? She said, my service is this [makes circling motion with arm, as in mixing water]. She put *pathaasas* [a hardened mixture of sugar] in the water. Sweetness. Everywhere.³⁰ Then, they [women] fought in wars. It's in Sikh history. So, the character of the woman in Sikh religion is always [high] ... And I think, if this is in books, it should be in practice also.

Harnek Singh also refers to this line in Gurbani of women as those who birth kings, using it to support gender equality for Sikh women. There has been little critique of the discursive underpinnings of this line in popular discourse—which, in part, ascribes a woman's power and worth based on her ostensibly natural reproductive capacity and relationships to men (see [Jakobsh 2003](#), pp. 24–25).³¹ In Harnek Singh's view, however, this assertion was powerful given the prevailing practices of *sati* (widow immolation) and *pardah*³² (gender segregation) at the time. Within Sikh studies, many feminist scholars have debated Sikh scripture, including its exegesis, imagery, content, and emancipatory potential.³³

Debates on feminist interpretations within Sikh scripture notwithstanding, the patriarchy of Sikhism has tangible effects on women's autonomy and gender relations in both private and public domains. Negative qualities and *maya*, or the illusory nature of the universe, are associated with women, and the lineage of the Gurus was composed of males of high-caste Khatri status. In the Sikh perception of marital relations and motherhood, traditional feminine qualities are valorised; women are still positioned as invisible in the labour force and have little say in the number and spacing of children, and the skewed sex ratio in Punjab is well known ([Mohan 2006](#)). Sikhism's misogynistic tendencies (rather than its emancipatory potential) have influenced male perceptions and images of women and attitudes towards sex, gender, and codes of conduct in domestic and public spaces ([Mand 2005](#)).³⁴ However, Singh finds feminist potential in historical Sikh practice: women were no longer segregated; did not observe *pardah*, could participate in the affairs of their religious community;

³⁰ Harnek Singh is referring to the Sikh baptism ceremony, known as *amrit*.

³¹ In a conversation with a relative, who is a leader in the Vancouver Sikh youth community, he remarked that he believed this line was powerful and ground-breaking in the historical context from which it arose, given the historical status of women in India. Like Harnek Singh, he too discussed the problem of *sati* at the time of the Gurus. In feminist Sikh circles, I have encountered much resistance when questioning the suppositions underpinning this line of text.

³² *Purdah* is a system concealing women from men, which can include gender-segregated spaces or the covering of women's bodies.

³³ Singh posits that the Gurus strategically adopted a female voice and bridal imagery to express love for the divine, and thus, scripture prizes a woman's bodily activities and longing ([Singh 2000, 2005](#)). Yet, perhaps such usage reifies the definition of "feminine" and "masculine", essentializing these ostensibly innate characteristics of gender. [Jakobsh \(2003\)](#) argues that to move from a grammatically feminine form of speech (such as the bridal symbol) to a theological argument intent on discovering the intention of the scripture as Singh does is more of an interpretation of scripture rather than a reflection of the actual content of the scripture as written by the Gurus.

³⁴ The Sikh Code of Conduct for Funeral Ceremonies, for example, includes gendered language.

served, ate, and cooked with men in communal meals; and were celebrated as important partners in spiritual growth (Singh 2000). Yet, although “herstory” and the historical inclusion of women are fundamental to addressing inadequacies of historical knowledge, they do not always confront the historical articulation of gendered hierarchies. As such, Sikh feminisms can fail to provide a full account of the workings of gender in Sikh everyday practice (Jakobsh 2003; Murphy 2009). It is also critical to note that debates about scripture and scripture itself can be far-removed from the lives of Sikh widows in the colony, such as women who cannot read nor write, which I will discuss below. First, however, I turn my attention to Sikh women’s religiosity as performed in prayer.

Healing through Performing Prayer

One understanding of prayer is that it is a spiritual conversation with a higher power and a movement towards divinity (Tiele 2016). As a central phenomenon of religious life, it serves diverse functions. Prayer is multidimensional: it is textual, it is oral, it is an embodied act yet transcends the body, it is repetitive and ritualistic, and it is social in that it is never free from social influence, even when performed individually.³⁵

The social aspect of prayer is exemplified in the *ardas*. The *ardas*, arising from the Persian word *arazdashat* (Cole 2004), is a common petitionary prayer of remembrance that is recited at the end of prayer programs in gurdwaras and Sikh homes transnationally, before or after undertaking tasks that are deemed significant, and at the end of a prayer service. The act of *ardas* works against the idea of prayer as solely an oral action, as it involves movements of the body. *Ardas* is an oral prayer, in that it involves ritual locutions spoken aloud, yet it is also embodied, as it takes certain postures (bowing and touching the ground with one’s forehead in front of the SGGS before rising to stand and recite the prayer with hands folded and then moving again to *matha thek*, before sitting down once it is over). During the *ardas*, one stands, hands folded at the chest or in front of the solar plexus; perhaps one closes their eyes and slightly rocks back and forth. *Ardas*, which is recited morning and evening in the Shaheedganj Gurdwara and at special events is one form of remembrance that takes on a particular double meaning in the colony. The *ardas* is a prayer that emphasizes sacrifice and martyrdom, which makes it even more pertinent in the colony, where such discourses often circulate. As a recitative form of prayer, it enables healing and forms of memory-making to occur for women, while involving the body.

Discussions of prayer-as-text are critical to understanding forms of Sikh prayer, yet these debates are far removed from some women, particularly Labana women who do not speak Punjabi fluently or read scripture. In such cases, it is the space of the gurdwara and the emotive experience of it that provide benefit. Jhansi Kaur*, for example, told me that she does not know how to read scripture, but she goes to the gurdwara because she likes to see other women there and she gets “peace by going”. She then said, “God gives peace through gurdwaras. Like, when someone dies, we pray, and we get such peace in that; we get peace by listening in the gurdwara.” Amar Kaur*, as well, said the following:

The ladies are uneducated, they don’t do prayers, like me; I am uneducated. Maybe if you’re an educated lady. . . like my daughter-in-law is one, she goes there and does prayers with the prayer book and takes it to the gurdwara and reads. And like my grandson, he takes the prayer book and reads there. Those who are educated will sit, read; the prayer books are

³⁵ Prayers can include forms such as food offerings (Banerji 2006), dances and sacrifices (Scott 1994), and bodily actions (Henkel 2005). Prayer can incorporate “certain body postures and orientations, ritual actions and objects, designated architectural structures or physical environments, particular times of the day or calendar dates, specified moods, attitudes, or intentions” (Gill 2005, p. 7369). A number of authors have analyzed how forms of prayer can enable healing (Csordas 2002; Luhrmann 2013; Tomlinson 2004; Zhang 2016) and help women cope with grief and trauma. Religious healing, as an “elaborate and persuasive cultural performance” (Csordas 2002, p. 2) can bring about a change in the phenomenological conditions under which one experiences suffering and hardship. In order for healing to take place, however, a subject must be predisposed towards it and believe that the healing is working (Csordas 2002).

lying there to use. Some do read, but someone like me will pay her respects and sit and just listen and wait for the [end] and then leave.

KA: So, maybe some ladies, have they memorized it, like *Japji Sahib*?

AK: Yes, yes, some do some don't. Those who listen daily, they may have memorized [it], those who don't know how to read any prayers and who go daily may memorize them.

In such instances, it is the gurdwara as a counterpublic and the emotions and relationships within that bring about positive effects for the worshipper. Jhansi Kaur finds going to the gurdwara to be a helpful experience, even though she cannot recite prayers, because she finds it a positive social space to be in, and the affective power of listening to other women's prayers brings her inner peace. Amar Kaur also enjoys sitting and listening to the prayer while still others will participate in yet another embodied form of prayer, recitation by memory. Harnoor Kaur mentioned to me that she has memorized various prayers but that reading prayers from a book was a different experience. She said that praying was not difficult because it had "become a habit". However, for some elderly women with mobility issues, such as Kirat Kaur*, going to the gurdwara is a difficult task. Instead of visiting Shaheedganj, which was a twice-daily activity for her for many years, she now listens to prayers via the live television feeds from Bangla Sahib Gurdwara in Delhi and Harimandir Sahib in Amritsar, Punjab.

In the colony, women tend to sit in the same spots when visiting the gurdwara and perform repetitive movements, as discussed earlier—bowing, circumambulating, or touching the photograph of the Harimandir Sahib. Repetitive too are their performances of rituals, whether reciting certain prayers, singing along to devotional music, or rocking slightly while listening to others in the congregation pray. The religious practices of women as habitus (cf. Bourdieu 1977) become habitual and repetitive through ritual and prayer.³⁶ Bodily actions and habits, especially within the domain of religious practice, are not anchored in a specific body. Rather, these elements of the body are in affective relationships with other bodies (cf. Ahmed 2004; Das 2007), as we see in the Shaheedganj Gurdwara. This understanding complicates the view of the body as a "bounded system" (cf. Douglas 2002).

Sikh women's mourning and religious practices in the Shaheedganj Gurdwara allow us a richer understanding and complication of ritual as cultural elaborations of codes consisting of distancing one from spontaneous expressions of emotion (cf. Tambiah 1979). Although the prayers have a repetitive quality, they do not fall along these lines of elaboration, and there is room for exhibiting intentional rather than conventional behaviour. While ritual can help validate Sikh women's common behaviour during times of grief (for example, wailing, beating of the chest, loud crying, and getting "out of control" during funerals (Das 1996)), these behaviours complicate the Durkheimian (cf. Durkheim 1915) notion that ritual can help control experience. Thus, I would like to suggest that prayer in this context does not control traumatic experiences of the past; rather, the practices offer room for exploring grief in an embodied manner. In the days after the massacre, many women were numbed and silent due to shock and perhaps being denied an opportunity to mourn, as the bodies of the dead were missing, and they could not perform last rites. Perhaps it is this denied opportunity that has lent itself to how grief has become embodied in everyday life and prayer. Sikh women's experiences with prayer rituals also unsettle the notion that ritual can simply provide a tool for understanding the world (cf. Douglas 2002); indeed, their experiences show that rituals can provide a place where loss and grief perhaps cannot be made sense of but are only enacted through raw bodily affects. At times, I would see this unfold in front of me, when women rocked back and forth with intensity during prayer, uttered words to God under their breath, or, during our interviews, began to cry, their voices quivering and varying in intensity.

³⁶ Habitus is a set of practices that point towards how we habituate ourselves to ways of being; it is our bodily socialization and deeply orientating bodily actions, a learned process of our physical being (cf. Bourdieu 1977).

Returning to the *ardas*, then, we can view the prayer as a social ritual that aids women in remembering their loss and healing from their trauma, one where women participate wholeheartedly. Given the centrality of the *ardas* in Sikh prayer, many of the women have memorized it, and so, those women who would normally only listen to other parts of prayers will loudly chant along with the *ardas*. It allows a performative, ritual social space for a communal utterance of memory, healing, and the reinforcement of historical narratives of violence. In addition to the *ardas*, the act of continuously reciting the name of the Guru, or *naam simran*, brings about a certain inner peace for some women in the colony, alleviating, at least temporarily, the pain associated with loss.

Forms of healing through prayer take place in the gendered counterpublic of the gurdwara. It is the gurdwara that provides a space for healing, where women's bodies are linked to one another. This relationship between women and the gurdwara underscores the importance of this place as one that engenders healing. For instance, when interviewing Amar Kaur, she discussed how she stopped going to the gurdwara for a while when faced with the death of a loved one and several other hardships. She stated that, after her son broke his leg, she herself sustained injuries, and her daughter-in-law broke her foot, she became superstitious about these negative events and began to attend prayers again. Growing up in a village, she found it easier to attend the Shaheedganj Gurdwara in the evenings because it was not possible to travel at night in her home village due to safety reasons. I asked her what she received internally by going to the gurdwara. She replied, "I feel like my heart receives peace. If I don't go then I feel like I have lost something, I don't feel right. When I go to the gurdwara, I feel at peace."

Harnoor Kaur too, echoed the positive benefits that praying in the gurdwara bring for her. During one interview, while her two granddaughters played around us, Harnoor Kaur outlined her complicated relationship with God and prayer. When I asked her how often she thinks about God, she replied:

HK: I remember God daily. I stay with God twenty-four hours a day, I keep God with me, because you know God right? God is with us in the times of pain and happiness. God is truly a part of us at all times. This is why, if we let God lead us, then God will keep us on the right path, keep us from bad people, bad talk, and eliminate enemies.

Harnoor Kaur further emphasized that God punishes everyone—those who commit crimes and those who do not—and gives pain so that we remember God more. She stated that punishments were also given out once one died ("We will get it in the next life"). Harnoor Kaur's emphasis on having to "endure" and "pay the repercussions" reflects her belief in karma.³⁷ When I asked Harnoor Kaur what she received from doing prayers, she replied, "*sukh shanti*" (a happy peace). I continued this line of questioning, asking her what kind of peace. She replied, "I remember 100 things from home. I remember the past, I remember what I have endured, by doing prayers."

HK: Like, if I said to you today I am not going to the Gurdwara, then that entire day will go badly.

KA: You, what do they say . . . You get a blessing.

HK: Yes, I get *shakti* [power, strength, or energy].³⁸

KA: When you pay your respects [at the gurdwara]?

HK: Actually, I have kept [prayer books] at home too, so when my heart feels like it, I start doing prayers [at home].

³⁷ When I asked her what she thought about souls, she said, "You don't have a soul, it leaves your body in minutes, it's just us who don't know where it flies away and where it doesn't. Our body stays here. No one looks ahead or back."

³⁸ It is interesting to note that *shakti* has feminine connotations. In Hinduism, *shakti* denotes divine feminine power.

5. Conclusions

We can see how, through the social space of the gurdwara and the forms of prayer within it, women cope with the continuing confrontation of loss and trauma in their everyday lives. We see too how women have utilized the male-ruled space of the Shaheedganj Gurdwara for their own purposes and turned it into a sort of gendered counterpublic. These employments of place, prayer, ritual, and forms of embodiment have allowed collective forms of memory-making that enable women to remember the past in ways facilitating healing. The Shaheedganj Gurdwara, then, helps women heal from their grieving as it provides a social space for affective prayer—prayer that is performed and shared with other women who have gone through similar hardships and traumas. The relationship between prayer as a performative social ritual, belief, and trauma allows us to better understand how women in Tilak Vihar continue to cope with long-term grief. While women's belief in God provides an explanatory ground for the happenings in their lives and allows them to situate their life experiences and loss as karma, the gurdwara operates as a space for women. Performative prayers, in the form of ritual, form as a bridge between place and belief. Based on my conversations with women and observations of their practice in the gurdwara, we see how religious places such as Shaheedganj Gurdwara bring women together, how belief allows women to feel closer to God, and how social, religious rituals bridge places and belief. These intersections between gender and religious practice are further enmeshed with the lived experiences of Sikh widowhood.

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Article

Women and Sikhism in Theory and Practice: Normative Discourses, *Seva* Performances, and Agency in the Case Study of Some Young Sikh Women in Northern Italy

Barbara Bertolani

Department of Sociology, University of Trento, 38122 Trento, Italy; bertolani.barbara@gmail.com

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Abstract: The paper reflects on the role of women in Sikhism in theory and social practice, starting from a case study in northern Italy. Although the normative discourse widely shared in mainstream Sikhism affirms the equality between man and woman and the same possibility to manifest devotion through every kind of *seva* (social service within gurdwaras), empirical observation in some Italian gurdwaras has shown a different picture, as there is a clear division of tasks that implicitly subtends a gender-based hierarchy. This relational structure is challenged by intergenerational tensions, especially by young women born or raised in Italy, who may want to develop a different Sikh identity, considered compatible also with the Italian social and cultural context. In this initial process of collective identity definition and of agency, the female participation in the religious *seva* within gurdwaras is identified as the tool for change of power relations that cross genders and generations.

Keywords: women and Sikhism; Sikh women in Italy; *seva* performances; Sikh youth; Sikhs in Italy; gurdwaras in Italy

1. Introduction

It is Saturday night. In a gurdwara (Sikh house of worship, or, “house of the guru”) on the outskirts of Bergamo in northern Italy and housed in a small shed in a primarily artisanal area, a celebration is taking place for guru Nanak’s *gurpurb* in which women are performing “*Guru seva*”; that is, women are carrying out all the rituals of the evening religious liturgy.¹ It is these young women—joined by others from various Italian provinces and regions—who perform *Kirtan*, read *Path* and the *Hukamnama*, recite *Ardas*, wave the *chaur*, distribute *prashad* and who, performing *Sukh Asan*, accompany the Guru Granth Sahib to the *Sach Khand* for its night rest.² In a room adjacent to the *darbar*, the *granthi* is carrying out the *Akhand Path*,³ while these young women lead the communal worship

¹ “*Guru seva*” is the religious service performed by recitation of the Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred text of Sikhs, the Guru Granth considered by Sikhs to be their living master. In general, the term *seva* is understood as selfless service that takes place within as well as beyond the gurdwara.

² These activities are part of the liturgical process: *Kirtan* is the singing of hymns taken from the Guru Granth Sahib accompanied by live music; *Path* is the recitation of prayers (*Gurbani*) from the Guru Granth Sahib and other texts ascribed to guru Gobind Singh; *Hukamnama* refers to a hymn selected from the Guru Granth Sahib at random, which is then understood as an order or guidance for Sikhs (historically, it was also a decree given by one of the Sikh gurus. Indeed, the terms *Hukamnama* is a compound of two words: *Hukam*, meaning command or order, and *namah*, meaning statement). *Chaur* is the ritual waving of the whisk over the Guru Granth Sahib; *Ardas* is the prayer that frames all forms of worship and also signifies the end of the liturgical process; *Kirtan Sohila* is the night prayer; *prashad* is a sacramental food made of ghee (clarified butter), flour and sugar; *Sukh Asan* is the nightly ritual performance in which the Guru Granth Sahib is wrapped in cloth and *Kirtan Sohila* is recited during a ritual procession that accompanies the Guru Granth Sahib to the *Sach Khand*, the room dedicated to housing “the guru” for the night.

³ The *darbar* is the room of the gurdwara in which the Sikh community (*sangat*) meets for religious celebrations. It is distinct from the *langar* hall, which is where food is distributed. The *granthi* is the caretaker of the Guru Granth Sahib who is

for forty men and women. They are discreetly joined by another member of the community, who occasionally intervenes with a few gestures, or a suggestion of a few words during their recitation. This event is taking place for the first time. It is the result of numerous trials and is organized by a group of Punjabi Sikh *amritdhari*⁴ girls who were born or raised in Italy. One of these young women explains:

The idea came from us girls ... for some time we wanted to do something like this ... During a [summer Sikh] camp [we girls proposed] ... the idea but [so far] ... we were never able to achieve it ... I was about to graduate ... and I wanted to do something different, unique ... I know my friends have a party, [they give] "confetti" [sugared almonds] ... [I thought] of doing something original that could bring all the girls together ... [I wanted to] do ... something all-female, to be able to put us in the practice of [Guru] *seva* too and to integrate and show that we girls are there, to show it not only to ourselves but also to the *sangat*, that has the habit of seeing only male *sevadars* [volunteers].

(H. K., 23 year-old *amritdhari* woman, interview)

This paper reflects on the role of women in Sikhism in theory and social practice, starting from a case study. The normative discourse widely shared in Sikhism affirms the equality between man and woman before God, the equal possibility of liberation, the opportunity to perform the same roles and functions in religious practice and, for both genders, to manifest their devotion to the guru through the performance of every kind of *seva*.⁵ However, observations of other Italian gurdwaras present a very different reality: Men and women hold distinct roles and there is a clear division of tasks that implicitly promotes a gender-based hierarchy. Nevertheless, this relational structure is increasingly being challenged, particularly by young women born or raised in Italy, that is resulting in intergenerational tensions. Compared to their mothers, these young women want to develop a different Sikh identity, one which is considered acceptable and compatible with the Italian social and cultural context. Some of the women I met understood female participation in all types of religious *seva* as an attempt to overcome gender inequalities.

In the next section, I will try to contextualize these developments within the context of the prevailing characteristics of Indians and Sikhs in Italy and, above all, in Emilia-Romagna and Lombardy, the two regions in which I carried out my study. I will later refer to some contributions in the literature on women in Sikhism to clarify my initial hypotheses and the questions upon which I concentrated my empirical observations. In the fourth section I outline the methodological choices adopted during this empirical research. I will then present the results of my study and, in the conclusions, offer some final considerations.

2. Prevailing Characteristics of Indians and Sikhs in Italy

The Sikhs in Italy have become the second-largest community in terms of their numbers in Europe after Great Britain, according to recent research, and; therefore, the largest Sikh community in continental Europe (Denti et al. 2005). However, numbers differ considerably, ranging from 25,000 to 100,000 devotees, due to the absence of an official census and to the different criteria used to estimate

responsible for the performance of a series of daily rituals, while *Akhand Path* is the continuous reading of the Guru Granth Sahib which is recited over a span of 48 h. *Akhand Path* usually begins at 10:00 a.m. on a Friday and ends on Sunday at 10:00 a.m., during which the worshippers alternate with the *granthi* for the recitation of scripture every few hours.

⁴ *Amritdhari* Sikhs are those who have been initiated to the *Khalsa* brotherhood and that follow a precise code of conduct (*Rehat Maryada*).

⁵ The role of *panj piare* is a disputed issue within mainstream Sikhism. According to tradition, guru Gobind Singh, during the Vaisakhi festival in 1699, presented himself to the crowd of devotees with a drawn sword, asking who, among his followers, would sacrifice himself for their guru (McLeod 1996). Only five men came forward (known as the *panj piare*) and this is at the origin of the exclusion of women from this role. According to Jakobsh (2014, 2017), this has prohibited women from contributing to Sikh ritual life in significant ways, as *panj piare* must be present in all central rites and ceremonies. Exceptions to the exclusion of women as *panj piare* can be found within groups outside of the Sikh mainstream such as 3HO Sikhs, also known as Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere and others.

them (Thandi 2012; Introvigne and Zoccatelli 2006; Gallo 2012; Bertolani 2013). Moreover, Sikhism has become part of the Italian religious landscape because most Indian immigrants in Italy come from Punjab, a region where, according to the 2011 Indian census, the Sikhs are the largest religious community, amounting to 57.69%.⁶

Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna, Veneto (in northern Italy) and Lazio (in central Italy) are the four regions where the historical settlement of the Indians (Table 1) and, consequently, of the Sikhs, has taken place.

Table 1. Indian residents in the various Italian regions and percentage distribution at 31 December 2017.⁷

Italian Regions	Indian Residents	%
Valle d’Aosta	75	0.1
Trentino Alto Adige	2157	1.4
Friuli Venezia Giulia	2260	1.5
Lombardy	46,274	30.5
Veneto	14,693	9.7
Piedmont	4863	3.1
Emilia-Romagna	16,790	11.1
Tuscany	6476	4.3
Liguria	1911	1.3
Marche	4025	2.7
Umbria	1569	1
Abruzzo	910	0.6
Lazio	29,162	19.2
Molise	575	0.4
Campania	7992	5.3
Puglia	3842	2.5
Basilicata	998	0.7
Calabria	4579	3
Sicily	2046	1.3
Sardinia	594	0.4
TOTAL	151,791	100

The opening of the first gurdwara dates back to the early nineties in the province of Reggio Emilia in Emilia-Romagna (Bertolani 2004).⁸ This has given impetus to dynamics of religious rooting which have extended—in different ways and times—to other Italian regions, fostering a progressive manifestation of Sikhism in public space (Gallo and Sai 2013). In the last twenty years, a process of gradual institutionalization of the Sikh religious community in Italy has occurred, with the opening of various gurdwaras (today about forty) in addition to the inauguration of two national associations,⁹ directly tied to Sikh claims for recognition from the Italian State, a request that has not been successful thus far (Bertolani and Singh 2012).¹⁰

⁶ Official data are accessible from the site: http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/Religion_PCA.html (last access: 20 January 2020). In Italy, it is estimated that the Italians who converted to Sikhism are minimal, about one hundred, mostly living in the urban areas of Rome and Bologna and generally linked to the “3HO” (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization) or Sikh Dharma movement, which was officially founded in the USA by Yogi Bhajan (1929–2004) and subsequently spread throughout the United States and Europe through the practice of meditation and kundalini yoga (CESNUR 2014).

⁷ Elaboration conducted on ISTAT data, accessible from the site: <http://demo.istat.it/> (last access: 23 June 2019). The data are based on citizenship. They do not include the Indians who have accepted Italian citizenship.

⁸ A gurdwara is per definition a place in which the Guru Granth Sahib is installed and can be temporary or permanent.

⁹ The “Associazione Sikhismo Religione Italia”, based in Castelgomberto (province of Vicenza), and the “Italy Sikh Council”, established in 2007 and based in Cortenuova (province of Bergamo).

¹⁰ The reasons for the non-recognition are mainly due to the *kirpan* (a curved and small sword), one of the five religious symbols worn by the *amritdhari* Sikhs, since it is considered a weapon by Italian legislation. However, other motivations are

Table 2 shows an estimate of the number of gurdwaras in the various Italian regions.¹¹ As is the case with the actual numbers of Sikhs in Italy, it is difficult to account for all the places of Sikh worship because there is no official mapping and, above all, because there are regions in which the presence of gurdwaras is precarious and characterized by frequent openings, closures, and displacements, reflecting a characteristic of local Sikh settlements. Furthermore, the number of gurdwaras varies according to the criteria of their definition which may lead to the inclusion or exclusion of certain minorities or movements inscribable in the tradition, but distinct from Sikh orthodoxy, such as the Ravidassi, the Namdhari, the Nanaksar, etc. (Bertolani 2013, 2019; Kaur Takhar 2011; Nesbitt 2011).

Table 2. Estimate of the number of gurdwaras in the various Italian regions.

Italian Regions	N. of Gurdwaras
Valle d'Aosta	-
Trentino Alto Adige	1
Friuli Venezia Giulia	1
Lombardy	7
Veneto	3
Piedmont	4
Emilia-Romagna	7
Tuscany	1
Liguria	-
Marche	1
Umbria	1
Abruzzo	-
Lazio	6
Molise	-
Campania	-
Puglia	2
Basilicata	-
Calabria	2
Sicily	-
Sardinia	-
TOTAL	36

According to Ferraris and Sai (2013), in some localities, particularly in northern Italy, Sikhism and the consequent opening of gurdwaras are a resource that has led to increased stabilization and economic and social integration of the Indian minority. This is the direct result of Sikhs being able to elaborate and share two prevailing and coherent narratives of their religious identity with the local communities. On the one hand, Sikhism, as it has been presented to Italians, is a universal religion, respectful of other religions, and is based on the idea of the equality of all men and women before God. The Sikhs present themselves as saint soldiers, ready to fight against injustice and for freedom, democracy and the common good. They refer to their history to support this narrative of their values and their identity, recalling their participation and their sacrifice as soldiers in the British army during the first and second world wars to free the local populations from the oppressors and sustain the birth of the Italian democratic state, similar to local partisans who fought against fascism. On the other hand, Sikhism is presented as a non-threatening religion through a process of ethnicization and reduction to the folklore of practices and objects linked to the *Khalsa* tradition. Daggers and swords, present in religious processions (*Nagar Kirtan*), on the occasion of the religious festival of *Vaisakhi* held every spring, are explained to the Italians as martial symbols and as harmless ritual objects that belong to a

also linked to the deep divisions that Italian Sikhs are experiencing and that have so far prevented the creation of a unitary leadership capable of confronting Italian institutions.

¹¹ The table is based on first-hand information and from the web sites https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sikhismo_in_Italia, (last access: 26 June 2019) and <http://www.sikhisewasociety.org/templi-sikh-in-italia.html> (last access: 20 January 2020).

religious tradition along with colorful clothes, turbans, uncut hair and beards, spicy food and Punjabi music (Bertolani 2015; Gallo and Sai 2013; Sai 2009).

These positive self-narratives have been used by Italian Sikhs to differentiate themselves from other religious minorities of immigrant origin. As Jakobsh (2015) states, the definition of one's identity is a process which is carried out through the comparison not only with the majority group but also with other minorities in a given territory. The Italian mass media often stereotype Muslims "bad migrants", bearers of cultural and religious traditions that are antagonistic to Christian identity and oppressive towards women (Frisina 2013). In an equally simplistic interpretation, the Sikhs tend to present themselves as the "good migrants" that work hard, pray, fight for justice altruistically and respect women. These representations have proved effective as in newspapers they are often described as a cohesive community of harmless farmers, steeped in a religious dimension of life (Bertolani et al. 2011). Actually, social reality is much more complex. The Punjabi Sikh community in Italy is characterized by profound and multiple internal differentiations that are linked to the rural or urban contexts in their country of origin, caste, social class, migratory seniority, age, and gender, as well as to the resources and socio-economic opportunities present in the various Italian territories of settlement.¹²

In Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna, regions in which I carried out my research, the Sikhs are well integrated socio-economically, especially in the agricultural sector. Moreover, they are well organized from a religious point of view, given the presence of numerous gurdwaras in the region that provide religious, cultural, social, and historical continuity. Like Indian Sikhs in other European countries (Myrvold 2011; Jacobsen 2011), there is a strong tendency among the first generation of Sikhs in Italy to combine religious and ethnic elements when organizing functions in gurdwaras, and, to perform services to the Guru Granth Sahib according to ritual patterns that are followed in India. Similarly, Sikhs have maintained the distribution of Punjabi food in the communal kitchen (*langar*) and the practice of voluntary service (*sewa*). The organization of these social and religious activities tends to enact traditional power relations between genders that originate from Punjabi and Indian traditions. These last stem from patriarchal social structures that seem to have little to do with the original message of Sikh sacred scripture.

3. Women in Sikhism in Theory and in Practice

Within the Guru Granth Sahib, both male and female images and metaphors for "Akal Purakh", the divine, are used by Sikh gurus (Jakobsh 2014, 2017). The divine is understood as transcending every binary and category, moving beyond an exclusively masculine-gendered image of a monotheistic, patriarchal God. Sexism and taboos against women, female pollution, menstruation, and sexuality are rejected and the female body is celebrated in its creative power. Apart from these gendered understandings from the Guru Granth Sahib, during the late nineteenth century a process of female identity construction by the Singh Sabha reform movement took place. Trying to distinguish Sikh

¹² To highlight some socio-demographic characteristics of Sikhs in Italy, I will refer to the population of Indian residents, the only one with official data available. The first settlements of Indians in Italy date back to the end of the 1970s. Indian immigration is; therefore, a recent phenomenon and is still unbalanced due to the greater presence of men (about 60%) compared to women. If we consider the employment status of the Indians as a whole in 2016, 52.7% of them between 15 and 64 years is regularly occupied. The main sectors of economic activity for them in 2016 are industry (34%) and agriculture (30%), as for example vegetable growing in Lazio, Puglia, Calabria, and Campania, and bovine breeding and dairy activities in Emilia-Romagna and Lombardy. According to official data (MLPS, Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2017), this last rate is particularly high if compared to other non-EU workers (reaching 5%). Nevertheless, Indian employment status is lower if compared to the average of non-EU citizens and this is explained considering the difference between the male (76.2%) and female (18.1%) employment rate. Indian women are, in fact, much less prevalent in the labor market, even when compared to women of other non-EU communities. The low incidence of employed Indian women brings about that the inactivity rate stands at 39.8%, a value that is higher than other control groups. Moreover, 9.9% of Indians in Italy are in the category of the so-called NEET, which includes boys and girls between 15 and 29 years old that are "Not in employment, Education and Training" (MLPS, Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2016). The young Indian women represent 63.4% of the category (while on the total of non-EU NEET, women are 46%); this may be an indication of particularly difficult social integration processes for girls, or of a lack of family investment in favor of secondary and professional training courses that would encourage girls' economic autonomy.

women from Hindus and Muslims, this reformist effort redefined and re-imagined the role, status, and history of women in Sikhism and provided a narrative of gender equality that seems to have little historical foundation, but which has been widely diffused in the Sikh imaginary, becoming part of an identity representation within the current normative discourse on Sikhism. More recently, the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* (the ethical code which was published in 1950 by the SGPC)¹³ contains a series of provisions aimed at combating forms of female oppression which can be traced back to the Indian tradition: it bans dowries, prohibits infanticide (especially of females), and allows the remarriage of widows.¹⁴ This code of conduct—by defining Sikh religious identity, correct behavior, proper ways of conducting birth, marriage, and death rituals—also enshrines non-gendered practices and leadership roles. Indeed, women are allowed to serve as *ragis* (musicians) and *granthis* (the readers and custodians of the Guru Granth Sahib) and; therefore, to take on leadership roles within gurdwaras (Jakobsh 2006, 2014). Though their heads must be covered, they can read the Guru Granth Sahib in public, receive initiation into the *Khalsa* through a ritual process that is identical to males, and can also be part of the *panj piare* who administer it (McLeod 1997).

The Guru Granth Sahib, Singh Sabha reformist attempts, as well as the *Sikh Rehat Maryada* are; therefore, radically innovative with regard to the relations between genders. However, they are lodged within a patriarchal social structure, with the consequence that much of their revolutionary reach has been set aside in everyday interpretations and social practices over time (Kaur Singh 2014; Jakobsh 2017; McLeod 1997). This includes the very identity of the divine, conceived initially as without substance or gender and as entirely transcendent, but to which gender identity has been attributed through social practice. Indeed, according to Jakobsh (2014) the use of the term “Sahib” for the Guru Granth denotes a male perspective, as it is an honorary title reserved for men. Furthermore, the Sikh gurus themselves often referred to the divine as “Master” or “Lord”, that is, with masculine epithets. All the gurus were males; although they have clearly refused to divine status, yet due to the authority of their religious message they have often been identified as God’s representatives (Jakobsh 2017). During colonialism, some scholarship maintains that the British produced a hypermasculine male identity by emphasizing the “martial” character of the Sikhs and massively recruiting them in their army (Kaur Singh 2014). This identity was attributed to the *Khalsa* brotherhood, thereby reinforcing the patriarchal social structure and paternalistic attitudes toward women who were considered instead to be repositories of family prestige and honor, and; therefore, as objects of control, particularly women’s bodies and conduct, by male family members. In other words, a masculine identity founded on bravery and prowess in battle and on physical strength was consolidated, while the feminine instead came to be defined by virtues such as modesty and submission, respect, and preservation of male authority. As a consequence, even today, the public and the privileged traditional role of men translates into social superiority, “with the result that male domination is reproduced in the family, home, and Sikh society at large” (Kaur Singh 2014, p. 620). As regards religious practices, and although there is no official priesthood in Sikhism, in India as in Sikh diasporas, women are tacitly discouraged from conducting public ceremonies (Jakobsh 2006, 2017; Singh 2006). They may perform an active role in devotional practices at their homes, or, in all-women gatherings, while men usually lead the main worship services in gurdwaras.

In recent years, religious studies have engaged with discussions on the existing gap between normative ideals and praxis, referred to as a “lived religion” approach (Nyhagen 2017). Instead of concentrating predominantly on the study of religious institutions and organizations, this approach considers the experience of religious persons in everyday life (Orsi 2003), assuming that people have an active and reflexive role in changing and negotiating their spiritual practices and beliefs, as well as

¹³ Kashmir Singh’s essay (Singh 2014) explains the role and origins of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), while Fenech (2014) provides a historical perspective on the *Sikh Rahit Maryada*.

¹⁴ According to Jakobsh (2014), this ethical code is much more far-reaching than other early prescriptive texts, that focused for the most part on male identity and ritual life and were contradictory or silent about women’s inclusion into the *Khalsa*. The *Sikh Rehat Maryada* is available also in English at: <http://www.gurunakdarbar.net/sikhrehatmaryada.pdf>.

engaging with institutional forms of religion. It also assumes that religion is not merely a private or individual phenomenon. On the contrary, religion is always linked to the social and relational contexts in which individuals live and act, giving its adherents a sense of belonging. This approach allows the study of “what people *do*” with respect to religion (Ganzevoort and Roeland 2014, p. 94) and to consider people’s agency and reinterpretation, concentrating on praxis as a patterned configuration of action, experience, and meaning.

Starting from these assumptions, I analyzed religious and mundane practices in a number of Italian gurdwaras. In particular, I studied the distribution of *seva* tasks and official roles, both religious and secular, between men and women in gurdwaras (for example the responsibility of *granthis* or presidents and members of the leading committees) and, finally, women’s forms of agency to introduce changes in those social and religious activities. My attention was mainly focused on the processes of collective re-signification of some spiritual practices and of female engagement in them, in overcoming the potential distance between religious norms and their concrete application in the social contexts studied.

I decided to focus my analysis on *seva* in gurdwaras as a central aspect of Sikhism and as a set of activities considered very important by all my female interlocutors. The concept of *seva* can be translated as “selfless service”, which is performed individually or collectively not only in the gurdwara, but also beyond, as means to realizing and manifesting the gurus’ teaching in the social world. *Seva* is also understood as acts of worship as well as a complete surrender to the guru and God (Myrvold 2008; Murphy 2004). Some forms of *seva* fulfill the role of maintaining, managing, and general material functioning of the gurdwara, including offering of service to the community (such as liturgical, the distribution of food in the *langar*, the transmission of Sikh history and Punjabi language and culture), and the overall care of the Guru Granth Sahib, considered a living guru by Sikhs. In the more established Italian gurdwaras, some of these activities are carried out by paid staff (for example the *granthi* who takes care of the Guru Granth Sahib, the cook who guarantees the constant functioning of the kitchen, etc.), while in the smaller ones it is the *sangat* that carries out all the necessary functions. In all gurdwaras; however, devotees are encouraged to participate in religious life through *seva*, according to their capabilities. Therefore, the gurdwara “is entwined with the principle of *seva*” and “the meaning of a gurdwara . . . is in the words of the Guru Granth Sahib, and the practices of the people who put their perception of those words into action” (Canning 2017, p. 69).

4. Data Sources and Methodology

I conducted qualitative analysis from May to November 2019 in five gurdwaras in Emilia-Romagna and Lombardy, precisely in one of the two gurdwaras of Parma, and in those of Novellara and Correggio (province of Reggio Emilia), of Casalecchio di Reno (province of Bologna) and of Covo (province of Bergamo). Thirteen women, including nine *amritdharis*, were involved through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Eight of them were between the ages of 18 and 25 who were part of the so-called 1.5 generation: They were all born in India, emigrated as children, and attended school in Italy. Five of my interviewees were first generation migrants and were around the age of 40. All of them came from villages or rural areas in Punjab. When I met my female interlocutors, seven of them were gainfully employed, four were students, while two women were housewives.

In particular, I conducted the first focus group in the gurdwara of Parma with four young women: They were all between 20 and 25 years old, and three of them were *amritdhari*. The second focus group was conducted at the home of one of my interlocutors in Casalecchio di Reno and involved four women in their forties, two of whom were *amritdhari*. Both focus groups were engaged through a series of open queries and other in-depth questions, aimed at stimulating a discussion on the role of women in Sikhism, on the importance of *seva* in *gurdawaras*, and on the actual involvement of women in *seva*, starting from the experience of my interlocutors. I also conducted five semi-structured interviews at different times with the president of the gurdwara of Correggio (an *amritdhari* woman in her forties) and four additional young women. Two of them were part of the group that had organized the celebration for the Nanak’s *gurburb* in Covo, while the others attended the gurdwaras of Novellara and Parma.

I selected my interviewees through the snowball sampling technique (Samoggia 1989; Ferruzza 1988). In this case, snowball sampling consists of identifying respondents who are then used to refer researchers on to other potential respondents (Cipolla 1991). This type of sample is particularly useful in the case of research conducted on specific populations which are difficult to reach through other sampling techniques, or may be vulnerable or part of an impenetrable or isolated social grouping. It offers the advantage of facilitated initial contact between the researcher and members of the sample and is based on the assumption that the individuals belonging to the group know each other (Atkinson and Flint 2001). In my case, this sampling technique seemed to be particularly suitable, as I wanted to conduct explorative research on a specific group (*amritdhari* and *non-amritdhari* women attending gurdwaras) within a religious and ethnic minority (the Sikhs) in northern Italy. Nevertheless, the nature of similarity within social networks may mean that people who are isolated or have different characteristics are not included in the sample. To avoid this outcome, at the beginning of the construction of the sample, I identified women who were *amritdhari* and *non-amritdhari* of different ages and with different migration backgrounds, asking them to refer their friends, acquaintances, or relatives who wanted to participate in the research. I identified my contacts by going to the gurdwaras. Only in one case, I was introduced to an interviewee by an Italian friend. Data collection was also carried out through participant observation and numerous informal interviews with women as well as men. The interviews and focus groups were transcribed and integrated with a series of field notes that I wrote during the whole research period. I conducted a qualitative analysis of the collected material, isolating the recurring themes, the answers to the most important questions, and the exchanges of opinions, even divergent, during the focus groups. Through the qualitative content analysis, I identified two main themes: The participation of women in various forms of *seva* and the varied importance attributed to this participation by women of different ages and backgrounds (first and 1.5 generation Sikh women).

This is an exploratory paper. As such, it does not claim to be representative of the whole reality of Sikhs or Sikh women in Italy, but rather it will present some hypotheses that require further investigation.

5. Sikh Women in Italy: Some Considerations Starting from a Case Study

All my female interlocutors described the gurdwara in numerous and positive ways: It is “an important place”, “like a home”, “a meeting and a reference point for the community” where “one feels welcomed”, and part of a wider community. However, they also expressed criticisms concerning the ways that activities were organized, which they perceived as reproducing power relations between men and women and between the “old” and “new” generations of Punjabi Sikhs (Myrvold 2011).

The main area of controversy concerns *seva*. In speaking about the distribution of these tasks between men and women, my informants distinguished *Guru seva* from other types such as *langar seva* and gurdwara management. The first involves a physical closeness and concrete and emotional relationship with the Guru Granth Sahib by the worshipper who is performing *seva* in the *sangat*. *Guru seva* implies a public performativity and, consequently, a community role and a certain degree of symbolic power, religious authority, and personal prestige. To perform this type of *seva* it is necessary to acquire a series of skills, and to know the prayers and all the rituals surrounding the care of the Guru Granth Sahib. Given that in the diaspora there is no official training on these issues, usually the *granthis*—who are in charge of looking after the Guru Granth Sahib—come from India. The members of the *sangat* who wish to perform *Guru seva* must; therefore, learn through practice, supporting the *granthis* during daily rituals. Other types of *seva*—such as cooking, cleaning, serving in the *langar* hall, teaching the Punjabi language or *gatka* to children—are distinguished by different degrees of public performance. Consequently, although in the official and normative discourse all forms of *seva* are considered to be equally important, in reality they do not seem to imply the same degree of respect. Finally, the management of the gurdwara is another type of *seva* that involves organizational skills and involves significant administrative acumen. The gurdwaras in Italy are generally the headquarters

of registered cultural or religious associations which provide for management bodies and formal assignments. The *sangat* periodically elects people who carry out these tasks.

5.1. The Participation of Women in the “Guru seva”: Reasons, Interpretations, and Practices

With few exceptions, in the gurdwaras where I conducted my study, I noticed a clear separation of roles between men and women, which also corresponds to a certain separation of space. Men are almost always engaged in the *Guru seva*, alongside the *granthi*, while women are more often occupied in educational roles (for example, they teach children Punjabi) or they are busy inside the kitchen preparing *roti*. Therefore, men are typically engaged in tasks which are in “front” of the *sangat*, while women occupy hidden spaces. Even in the *langar seva*, it is the men who usually serve the food in the *langar* hall, clean it, and remove the dishes, while women generally stay in the background. In other words, within the gurdwaras, numerous physical and symbolic thresholds exist that regulate access to space according to gender. This differentiated access to these spaces reproduces the traditional spatial organization still widespread in Sikh families in Italy, which corresponds to a division of tasks between the sexes: The unpaid work of family education, care, and reproduction in the domestic space is delegated to women, while men perform more public tasks that mirror paid work outside the home. In the gurdwara, this involves the customary separation of genders, starting with the *darbar* and the *langar*, where men and women sit together but are separated by carpets that act as thresholds and delimit space, and where only men may invade the feminine spaces for the distribution of *prashad* or food. This separation is carried out and is even enforced by mothers who are in charge of transmitting norms and values related to Punjabi culture to their daughters. The daughters; however, struggle to understand their meaning, as the social, scholastic, working context, and daily life in general in Italy does not reflect this separation of genders, as one of my young interlocutors testified:

[Sitting separately in the *darbar* is a habit]. It happened to me that once . . . I sat on the side of the boys and my mother told me “But go on the other side!” And I said “Why do I have to go to the other side? I sit here!” And she said “No, here the males have to sit, go to the other side!” I had to move, but I didn’t understand why.

(J. K., 22 year-old *amritdhari* woman, focus group)

In the performance of *seva*, the separation between men and women usually determines an absence of mixed groups of *sevadars* and the exclusion of women from certain types of *seva* in the *darbar* and the *langar hall*. This organization seems to reflect the need to protect the respectability of women, traditionally considered to be the custodians of male and family honor (Jakobsh 2015; Mooney 2006). During my research, the issue of the protection of women outside of the physical and metaphorical space that they traditionally occupy to carry out tasks of *seva* is an aspect that was also identified by men:

Usually, [men] make up stories not to let [women] perform [“Guru seva”]. They say] “No, she’s a woman . . . she cannot pray, she cannot be *granthi* . . . ” It’s always a question of respect also towards the woman . . . to leave her alone to practice [this kind of *seva*] when men come and go . . . in the sense that you must also be a little careful from this point of view . . .

(V. S., 20 year-old *amritdhari* man, informal conversation)

According to some of my young interviewees, the control of space and certain types of *seva* in gurdwara reflects a hierarchy of roles and reproduces different degrees of power between genders. Consequently, the gender-based monopoly of specific tasks appears strategic. In some of the gurdwaras, women are encouraged “in words” to engage in the *Guru seva*. In practice; however, it is challenging for them to take part in its performance. On the one hand, there is a lack of availability of men to teach women prayers and religious rituals; on the other hand, the preservation of personal reputation forces women to interact with other men only in larger groups. In this regard, a young *non-amritdhari* woman noted:

[With a friend of mine] I discussed the role of women within the gurdwara and Sikhism ... [for example, regarding] *seva*. [We were considering the fact that slowly] the girls are becoming a little more integrated, they are giving themselves a boost to be able to do even ... “men’s stuff” ... In my opinion in the *langar* it is much easier to do this, but if you go “up” [upstairs, in the *darbar*, near the] holy book, it’s almost impossible ... They would almost never allow it ... those who are the “*baba ji*”, that is [those who are] around the sacred book, who take turns and everything ... [and who are] however supported by the men who attend the temple ... Because [otherwise] I think that ... patriarchal society would collapse! In the sense that, within each Indian family [as well as in the gurdwaras], the one who commands ... is the man, the father of the family.

(K. K., 23 year-old woman, interview)

Appealing to the sacred texts and the normative discourse that affirms the absolute equality between men and women in Sikhism, some young women I interviewed manifested their agency and tried to regain possession of spaces and roles from which they have been traditionally excluded, distinguishing between religious (indisputable) and cultural (transformable) practices. The desire to perform *seva* in the gurdwara is interpreted and publicly motivated as the religious duty in obeying the words of the Sikh gurus and as an effort that women must make to overcome their own inner resistance and insecurities. While explaining her participation in the public event which took place in the gurdwara of Covo, a young woman says:

The primary motivation [in wanting to do *Guru seva*] is Guru Mahraj ... what he is telling us and teaching us through everyday prayers, with the *Nitnem* and with all the teachings he gave us? The teaching is: women and men are on the same level ... I wonder: am I really? Do I really feel [like men]? And to answer this, I got involved to demonstrate to myself and to respect the order of Guru Sahib ... Because [he] said that we are at par and therefore why not do it? Why not get in it? Why not show the other women, the other girls, that “you too can do it”? ... In practice ... so many girls are afraid [of doing *Guru seva*] ... you must first of all have the desire to do it within yourself, and you must have a path that allows you to practice and perform it during a particular event [in gurdwara] ... I want [this desire] to be born even in the hearts of other girls, [I want] that they don’t feel inferior and that they are involved ... to show that we [women] can also do all these things.

(H. K., 23 year-old *amritdhari* woman, interview)

Thus, in the opinion of some of my young interviewees the feminine commitment to *Guru seva* becomes a quasi-political sphere, an initial activity within the religious community, and a tool through which to promote a new role, a different collective female identity and relations between the sexes based on real equality, not only in the gurdwara but also in the family and society in general.

I hope that women will succeed ... [to integrate] more and more, not only in the part of the *langar seva* but also [in the *Guru seva*] ... because this would go hand in hand ... with the cultural aspect because in Indian families women do not have this power and authority. If they acquired it within religion, perhaps even the family model would change slowly ... The cultural and religious aspects are connected, closely connected, and one depends on the other.

(K. K., 23 year-old woman, interview)

In the aspirations of the young women I met, this goal of equality also means achieving the objectives of a rotation of *seva* tasks between men and women, a sharing of skills in mixed groups of *sevadars* and common access to all spaces in the gurdwara. In other words, it is precisely in overcoming the physical and the symbolic thresholds in the occupation of all spaces and in the execution of all tasks by women and men that gender disparities can be changed. A young woman explains:

For me this thing . . . that the kitchen is run only by women, I don't really like it. I want there to be men . . . [I wish] that women who are in the kitchen can come in and do "*Maharaj seva*"¹⁵ and [men] . . . who are inside can do *seva* in the kitchen because . . . my wish is to be able to see us women that we can do all the roles, as well as the men because equality means just that.

(H. K., 23 year-old *amritdhari* woman, interview)

According to some of my interviewees, it is the woman who must first authorize herself to perform the "*Guru seva*" in the gurdwara, regardless of what other people may say. Some women who wish to participate in this activity wish to be trained but dare not ask for guidance from those (males) who hold this knowledge. Therefore, they initially may join a group to be able to learn in the company of women, with the hope of then practicing in mixed groups. However, this desire may be still absent among many first generation migrant women who prefer not to raise controversial questions and among young women, who may not wish to be in conflict with their parents. Indeed, when young women insist on playing a more active role in the gurdwara, the differences in views and expectations between mothers and daughters regarding women's appropriate behavior and roles are likely to emerge. One of my young *non amritdhari* interviewees reports:

I asked my mother: Why here in this gurdwara no woman does *Sukh Asan*? And she answers "Of course women can do it, there is no difference!" so why does no woman do it? And she replies: "there are men, [they already do it]!" That's it! . . . It is just a habit, isn't it? [It is like saying]: "They are doing it, that's fine, why do we have to question? . . . Why do we have to tire ourselves?" But I wonder: if both can really do it, why [even women] don't? It's the mentality, isn't it? We are used to it, let's continue like this! . . . [We must] break . . . these constraints . . . Let's say we're equal, but . . . until [we don't do the same things], we don't show that we're [really] equal . . . When there is a change in Sikhism, this is not a change of the system, it is a change in oneself and in saying "Okay, I don't have to think about what other people think . . . it's something I can do, I just do it! . . ." But in my opinion [for me and my sisters-in-law] . . . it will be different in five or ten years: maybe today we wonder: [what will others think of me?] . . . maybe when you are 30 or 35, you don't think anymore about what other people may think . . .

(M. K., 25 year-old woman, focus group)

It would appear that when there is a desire for change regarding *seva* practices, intergenerational conflicts between women may transpire. According to anecdotes from my interviewees, they were "sent to the kitchen with the other girls" by their mothers or aunts when they want to do *Guru seva*, often with the justification of "not being pure enough" during the menstrual period. A young *amritdhari* woman reports:

[This belief blocks women a lot], but I don't think there should be . . . because they put it in our heads that . . . "No, if you are like that you should not [touch the Guru Granth Sahib] . . ." and then one thinks "No, maybe I do a sin, maybe if I do it, maybe this and that happens . . ." Honestly . . . [I hope] that the woman joins the man in all the roles . . . until we let ourselves be heard, nobody tells us "Come on, I'll give you everything ready!" right? [I hope] that one day we will all be able to understand the importance of this thing and we will be able to go on . . . It is true, it is difficult to convince the generations of our parents and wait for the men of this generation to give us everything, but I think it will be much easier [for future generations] . . .

¹⁵ The term "*Maharaj seva*" was used by one of the girls that I interviewed to refer to *Guru seva* or the religious service close to the Guru Granth Sahib. Since "*Maharaj*" means "king" or "ruler" and is a political epithet, while *guru* is a spiritual one, I chose to use the expression *Guru seva* throughout the text.

(A. K., 29 year-old *amritdhari* woman, focus group)

However, these statements should not suggest that only young women want to engage in the *Guru seva*. As I noted earlier, I attended a service at a gurdwara led by women. It took place in the gurdwara in Covo during the celebrations of Nanak's *gurpurb* and was organized by a group of girls who, for months, trained together and prepared themselves to conduct prayer and to perform rituals in front of the *sangat*. According to some of these girls, it would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of a group of first-generation Sikh migrant women, who gathered weekly in the local gurdwara to pray and perform *Guru seva*:

They gave us a lot of support, [and urged us to go on] ... we [young women] are still a little inexperienced, they gave us experience because every Wednesday [in Covo] ... all these ladies gather to do *Path*, the *Sukhmani Sahib Path* ... They are five or six [women] ... and they do everything: *Ardas*, *Hukamnama* ... and this is something that has been going on for two or three years ... Not many people come because it is on Wednesday afternoon ... [due to work commitments, most of the *sangat*] cannot come ... Every evening there is a family who brings food for the [*granthi*] who lives [in the gurdwara] ... On Wednesday it's the turn of one of these ladies. With this excuse, they say: "while we are here, we do *Path*" ... that's why ladies who live in the surroundings come.

(H. K., 23 year-old *amritdhari* woman, interview)

These words testify to the fact that some Sikh women of different ages are trying to build up their spaces in the gurdwaras through their lived religious practices, in search of compromises amid the normative discourse, traditional customs and their desire for change. The main difference between the first migrant women and the young devotees I interviewed seems to be, above all, in the willingness of the latter to engage in the *Guru seva* not just as an intimate or restricted religious practice for a small group of women, but rather as a collective event to be performed in front of the whole *sangat*, together with the male *sevadars*. In this respect, the *Guru seva* becomes for them a practice of equality between the sexes with a religious as well political import.

In addition to the event in Covo, I also witnessed the participation of women of all ages in the recitation of the Guru Granth Sahib during the *Akhand Path*, *Sukhmani Sahib* and even, though rarely, in the recitation of *Ardas*. In general, according to my observations, female involvement in the performance of the *Guru seva* has always been minimal and has only occurred in the smaller gurdwaras (like that of Covo, Parma and Casalecchio di Reno) that do not have a full-time *granthi* and where there is a lack of organization with regard to gurdwara activities. In all these cases; therefore, female participation is indispensable for the performance of normal liturgical functions and *amritdhari* women are generally involved if no men are available.

Female participation in *Guru seva* also depends on whether women were *amritdhari* or not. A tacit and implicit hierarchy seems to exist in that only *amritdhari* devotees are permitted to do *Guru seva* in front of the *sangat*. This criterion is the same for women and men and was vigorously defended by some young women, though much less often by first-generation Sikh women. It was justified by the belief that being *amritdhari* offers certain guarantees of higher "purity" due to a precise conduct of life. In this regard, a young woman explained:

Guru seva ... [like performing] *Sukh Asan* or reading *Gurbani* in *sangat*: these [things] can only be done by an *amritdhari* [person], simply because an *amritdhari* has a daily routine and conduct that can allow him [or her] to go there. Let's say [that this] gives a sort of guarantee that it is not a person who smokes ... who does not go to steal ... if you are *non-amritdhari* it may be that you eat meat or other things that do not allow you to go to the *sangat* and to do this *seva* ... In the gurdwara, where it is also about giving an example to the children ... [If you are not an *amritdhari*, the fact of doing *Guru* *seva* in front of the *sangat* takes away the value of the *amritdhari* person, so it absolutely must not happen.

(H. K., 23 year-old *amritdhari* woman, interview)

This distinction was not questioned by the *non-amritdhari* women themselves, even by those who reserve an important place in their lives for religion:

She [indicating her *amritdhari* friend] can read [the Guru Granth in the gurdwara], I cannot ... because I'm not *amritdhari* yet ... [I don't feel like doing it]. At home, I read the *Path ... Japji Sahib, Sukhmani Sahib ...* but there [in the gurdwara] ... I feel that it is a place only for *amritdhari* [people]

(D. K., 38 year-old woman, focus group)

In fact, the distinction between *amritdhari* and *non-amritdhari* seems to resume the exclusion thresholds claimed by some men towards women, according to which—to perform the *Guru seva* in the gurdwara—the devotees must know how to read the Guru Granth Sahib and know specific rituals, a skill-set which is more common among *amritdhari* Sikhs. At the same time, this distinction adds to the differences between genders and generations, increasing the degree of complexity within the Sikh community.

5.2. Women's Participation in Official Roles in Gurdwara: Obstacles in the Relationship between Genders and Generations

In addition to *Guru seva* and *langar seva*, I also observed another type of service, particularly with regard to the management of gurdwaras and the distribution of official roles between men and women. This includes, for example, taking on responsibilities as *granthis* or as presidents and leading members of committees. Women were not in charge of these official assignments in most of the gurdwaras I encountered, except for the Sikh temple of Correggio, whose president is a woman. This is perhaps the only example in all of Italy because women are unlikely to get involved in this type of task. According to the narratives I gathered, the reasons are many. On the one hand, in speaking of first-generation migrant women, they prefer not to come forward in gurdwaras as they know they will encounter some ostracism by the *sangat*, mainly by older men imbued with a traditional mentality. As a first-generation *amritdhari* woman explains, highlighting the commonly divergent views between Sikh women of different generations on the issue of power relationships:

Our guru has given more importance to women, but [some] men think that man is more important ... [During meetings in gurdwara] even if men talk, I intervene to say my opinion, I don't care! ... What is right, I say it directly, even if they think badly of me ... because I want to tell the truth ... Then, some say "But no, you're a woman, let men talk!" What does it matter if I'm a woman? It does not matter! What I see well, I say it well ... At home ... I am the same as my husband, and I am not "woman" ... [I am] like him because I work, I have a scooter and I go where I want ... Now the new generation ... does not behave like the first generation that thinks men are superior and women ... should be "submissive" ... [Young women] say ... "If women can go to work outside the home, why can't they do the same things men do?"

(S. K., 40 year-old *amritdhari* woman, focus group)

On the other hand, those who take on formal roles often encounter opposition from their own families, which are anxious to preserve the honor of the family as well as the integrity and respectability of the woman who finds herself acting in predominantly male contexts. A first-generation *amritdhari* woman who is the president of the gurdwara of Correggio explains:

When I was [elected] president [of this gurdwara], my family was very angry with me, yes! "Why are you doing it? Now you go among men! Then you will have lots of things to do! Many bad words will come out ... " But the members [of this committee] respect me a lot,

this didn't turn out to be a problem ... My family [was worried], but I wasn't. I go when I want, and that's it!

(S. K., 38 year-old *amritdhari* woman, interview)

However, the main obstacle in taking on formal responsibilities in gurdwaras seems to be linked to the rigid division of labor within the family. Domestic chores and the raising of children are almost entirely the responsibility of women, even when they are working outside the home. They consequently complain of not having enough time or of not being able to afford absences from home:

Many times they told me that "Look, we will put you in the gurdwara committee ... " I say no, I don't have time because I have to think about the needs of the family, the children, the work ... if I had free time maybe I would do it ... A man does not have to do housework, he does not look after his children ... [who does it?] It is the woman, isn't it? Then [men] have more time

(S. K., 40 year-old *amritdhari* woman, focus group)

For the same reasons, it seems virtually impossible for women to become *granthis*, as noted by a 23 year-old *amritdhari* woman:

"The woman has never managed to free herself from all these ... [family duties] [it is easier for a man] because this means just living in gurdwara *sahib* and always being close to [Guru Granth Sahib] to do *seva* ... ".

(H. K., 23 year-old *amritdhari* woman, interview)

Many first-migrant Sikh women experience a drastic reduction in their autonomy once they are reunited with their husbands in Italy, compared to the relatively autonomous conditions in which they found themselves in their country of origin. These women play an important role in the migratory project of the first Sikh migrants in Italy: Through their care and educational work they support family reproduction and their (unpaid and hidden) work allows for male economic success outside of the family. Most of the first migrant women I met have rural origins in India. In Italy, they settle in the countryside since their husbands are engaged in agriculture, particularly in breeding and cow milking, activities that are related to the production of Parmigiano Reggiano or Grana Padano (two products of Italian gastronomy). Migration and isolation in Italian rural areas favor a loss of autonomy for these women; the absence or scarcity of public transport services and the difficulty in reaching and attending Italian language courses are factors that further limit their chances of movement, self-determination, and acquisition of skills useful in the migration context, increasing their dependence on their husbands. For many first-generation migrant women, the prevailing social environment becomes the gurdwara; in many cases, they do not speak Italian correctly even after many years of residence (Bertolani 2011; Provincia di Cremona 2000). Therefore, for some of them, their arrival in Italy has led to a reduction of personal independence and the strengthening of the division of roles in the family. Some young women I interviewed describe their mothers as much more autonomous in India, where they moved about freely and interacted with the outside world on their own, even if their primary role was that of a housewife. From the perspective of these young women, the difficulties that their mothers are experiencing in Italy are one of the causes that prevent first-generation migrant women from engaging in the formal management of the gurdwaras.

To be president [of a gurdwara] you must be able to go to the bank, be able to go to the accountant ... all these things, which are things that so far our women [did not manage to learn because having to take care of the family] ... they couldn't get out [of the house] ... But this doesn't mean that in the future a girl ... cannot become president, on the contrary! ... I think that in India women are more autonomous because ... for tasks like bringing the child to school, talking to the teacher, going to the bank, going to the post office, to the market, to the supermarket: in India women have no language problem

(H. K., 23 year-old *amritdhari* woman, interview)

As far as second-generation women are concerned, many of them would have the necessary skills to perform roles in committees, yet they still do not feel authoritative enough to be able to confront their male elders. For some of my young interviewees, the comparison between their behaviors and those of Italian women in similar situations leads to criticism of their female identity. In their opinion, unlike many Italian women, they still do not view themselves as behaving equally to men, even if they are living in a social and cultural context which is different from that of the country of origin.

If I went [to committee meetings], nobody would stop me, but it would be difficult to take the floor between them because maybe they are already discussing things they know better than me . . . If I think of Italian [women] in a meeting, they say what they think, maybe we [Punjabi] women sometimes don't speak out what we feel because we say "Oh well, what [old men] say is right" . . . this is not something related to Sikhism, it is just a . . . mentality typical of the Punjabi culture . . . today for a woman it is difficult to express one's point of view in a committee . . . and then again here in Italy it is different, if we think in India . . . this thing simply does not exist, that a woman goes to a meeting!

(M. K., 25 year-old woman, focus group)

Although there are many differences within the Punjabi Sikh community, there seems to be a double cleavage that concerns, on the one hand, the hierarchical relationship between the genders and on the other, between generations. In the second case, sometimes it is the mothers themselves who—for fear of the community's judgment on their maternal role and their daughters' respectability—may adopt traditional models of evaluation and behavior, reproducing a patriarchal order.¹⁶ This can generate conflict with regard to the role of women in the gurdwara as well.

I'd be curious to know the answer to a question like "Why can't a woman be a *granthi*?" Because . . . I would like my father to change some things, because maybe sometimes . . . he says "No, other people don't do this!" It's not right that if others don't do, he must necessarily imitate them, right? . . . Things will change a lot from our generation onwards . . . because we . . . also want to contribute . . . The desire for change [in us] must be so much to overcome these little things . . . We are already a different generation [from that of our mothers]. Our mothers . . . their answers are very different [from ours], because in any case they lived both in India and here, and therefore there is a difference . . .

(M. K., 25 year-old woman, focus group)

Some young women experience a generational gap; unlike their mothers, they have studied in Italy, know the Italian language, work, drive cars, and aspire to non-traditional roles in the family and the gurdwara. At times they feel that they are not living up to the expectations of their parents and relatives, as they continue to develop a female identity that challenges the "Punjabi mentality". These expectations may take on the appearance of implicit forms of coercion, which are difficult to detect and define. While trying to elaborate original kinds of agency and change, these young women are also concerned about not losing their place in the family and the Punjabi Sikh community at large (Thapan 2015).

¹⁶ It should be remembered that the *granthis* that serve in the Italian gurdwaras have normally been trained in India in the educational Sikh institutes that are almost exclusively designed for men. On the issue of the training of *granthis* and "Sikh preachers" in diaspora see (Myrvold 2012). The questions of separation of the sexes, of the inopportunities for a woman to live alone in a building like the gurdwara to perform the functions of *granthi* and of the need for men to protect the female reputation and honor are only hinted at here and they deserve a separate study. For an overview of these issues, see (McLeod 1997).

5.3. Women's Agency

Evans (2013) and Wilson (2013) argue that the concept of "agency" is strongly imbued with liberal assumptions related to western culture and male gender ideals. There are in fact preconditions of individualism, self-sufficiency, voluntarism, and free action underlying the idea of agency or autonomy. These assumptions run the risk of devaluing the initiative of women living in oppressive social contexts and judging them incapable of owning their own agency. According to Madhok (2007, 2013), this idea of autonomy and agency suffers from an "action bias" since it focuses solely on the action preferred by the individual, in isolation from the context in which it should be enacted. It also emphasises individual sovereignty and emotional separateness, ignoring other value codes which allow and even favour interdependence and relationality. The sociality of persons in their real-life context is therefore disregarded. Madhok (2007, p. 344) suggests that "persons do not always act in accordance with their preferred desires or preferences" and, considering the process of action, we have to "shift our focus from the act itself to the reasons behind the actions". This shift enables a redefinition of concepts of agency and autonomy in relational terms, starting from the idea that people's identities are made up of several contextual factors. This conceptual shift allows for the recognition of implicit forms of coercion. It is these implicit forms, according to Evans (2013), that affect women at a time when, for example, the pursuit of their personal aspiration might mean abandoning those relational bonds or cultural practices that make up an individual's sense of identity. In the stories of the young women I interviewed, the wish for equality between women and men goes hand in hand with the need to continue being part of meaningful relationships. The actions taken to pursue one's desire are; therefore, always subject to compromises and incremental objectives. This includes concerns regarding the role of women in the gurdwara, but also outside of it. A young woman noted:

In our house [in the rural village where I come from] ... my grandfather still commands ... So ... [this summer when I returned to India and] I told my grandfather that I didn't want a dowry ... because [usually] the girls get the dowry and the males a piece of land and I asked for a piece of land ... He was a bit shocked! ... because I told him that "I will never marry, so I want a piece of land." This discussion became a problem in the family! Everyone started telling me ... my uncles, my aunts ... that this is not beautiful, that this is not according to our culture and tradition, etc. I had no support from anyone ... It's like this in a family ... Women continue to practice the same rules ... they cannot get out of this circle ... In India it's impossible ... there in the village, I too had to do what they said ... For my safety and my well-being, I had to do as men said, which was not good for me ... [for] the Western part in me.
(K. K., 23 year-old woman, interview)

Some young women I interviewed took the opportunity afforded by this research to manifest their agency. Those who were involved in the focus group at the gurdwara of Parma transformed their participation into an occasion to continue discussions among themselves. The external gaze of the researcher allowed them to relativize consolidated and taken for granted practices. They raised difficult questions regarding the discrepancies between theoretical statements and social practices of Sikh women to trigger collective dynamics of awareness-raising, self-criticism, elaboration, and cultural change. They used research participation as an opportunity to make some claims within their community and to challenge the religious practices established in the gurdwara regarding *sewa*, trying at the same time not to generate a lacerating and destructive conflict with their families. All this resulted in an unexpected quest.¹⁷ I wrote in my field notes:

¹⁷ My position as a woman researcher, white, Italian, older than the young women I interacted with, who involved them in a research on the role of women in Sikhism in Italy, where the language of communication was Italian, are all conditions that initially defined a power relationship with my interlocutors. The focus groups and; therefore, the interaction in group; however, allowed these women to advance their own agency, asking me to organize a subsequent meeting extended to

At the end of the focus group in the gurdwara of Parma one of the participants told me to leave her the sheet with the questions I asked them, as she wanted to ask them to her father. Moreover, some of the participants proposed that I organize another meeting that could be extended to the rest of the *sangat*, to talk about the same issues with older women (especially with their mothers) and with men who should be “more experienced” from a religious point of view. My impression is that the discussion in the group has brought out a desire for change that has been mutually legitimized in this small group, but which now needs a broader authorization, between genders and generations. My position as a researcher has generated a need for clarification on some issues, indeed one young woman said that “sometimes . . . it is an external person who points it out [things we had not thought about]”. Shortly after, in the corner of the *langar*, I found one of the participants talking animatedly with her father. The urgency of the confrontation highlighted the need to find answers and to ascertain that she had not been deceived by her parents as regards the issue of equality between men and women in Sikhism. There was a need to look for a plausible explanation for the discrepancy that exists between the theory and the order of things.

In the following weeks, a meeting took place with the rest of the *sangat*. In my field notes I wrote:

I am struck by the spatial arrangement in the room: One of the girls who participated in the focus group and I are asked to be seated in front of a row of adult *amritdhari* men. I feel her tension, while she translates for me from Italian to Punjabi. The other women, children, and young people sit in a group on my left and listen in silence. I feel as though I am in front of an examination board. I introduce myself and ask my questions: Can women be *granthi* in Sikhism? Can they do the *Guru seva*? Are there women in this gurdwara who do it? I am assured that women in Sikhism are equal to men, and it is; therefore, possible for them to do all the functions, except for being *Panj Pyare*. The reason lies in the fact that “no woman stood up when guru Gobind Singh asked for the five heads at the time of the founding of the *Khalsa*.” A man who normally helps the *granthi* in his duties; however, objects that to perform the *Guru seva* one must know how to read the Guru Granth Sahib, be *amritdhari*, and must have studied and possess specific skills. I ask if the women who already participate in reading shifts during the *Akhand Path* in the gurdwara meet these requirements. At this point, the men begin to discuss among themselves in Punjabi. Then, I am told that it is not necessary to have “attended a school” and that, if women so wish, someone can teach them how to do *Guru seva*. Five *amritdhari* women timidly raise their hands. They say that they would like to “do everything”: The rituals of the *Sukh Asan* and the *Prakash*, the recitation of the *Path*, the *Ardas*, the *Sukhmani Sahib* and the *Hukumnama*, as well as the managing of the *rumallas* (clothes) that cover the Guru Granth Sahib. The meeting ends. Later, in the *langar*, one of the women tells me that she is very satisfied and surprised, because she did not think that “men were so open-minded.” A few days after this meeting, one of the young girls tells me that the *granthi* has gone. I still wonder if my questions and the answers that have emerged in the *sangat* have contributed to his leaving the gurdwara.

6. Conclusions

According to the women I interviewed, each type of *seva* has the same value and importance from a religious point of view. However, in social practice, the *Guru seva* becomes a device of maintenance and affirmation, within the Sikh community in northern Italy, of a power based on gender, and is generally controlled by first-generation migrant *amritdhari* men. This control by male *sevadars* is based

other members of the *sangat*, in some way reversing the power dynamics which are inherent in the research process. On the subject of reflexivity, see also (Singh Brar 2015).

on two implicit and tacitly accepted rules, which define symbolic thresholds of inclusion/exclusion: Being *amritdhari* and being able to deal with the Guru Granth Sahib, with little concrete possibility on the part of the women, even if *amritdhari*, to be able to learn the rituals in their gestural and material aspects, precisely because they are scarcely involved in their direct practice. In fact, some women already perform these same religious rituals at home because they have created a domestic gurdwara where they take care of the Guru Granth Sahib or the “Pothis Saroop”¹⁸ every day, performing *Prakash* and *Sukh Asan*, and reciting *Ardas* and all other prayers. Therefore, in practice, these *amritdhari* women may perform *Guru seva* within the family and in the privacy of their home, but rarely in the gurdwara. If this does take place, it is usually between women and not in mixed groups. As noted earlier, women are also more involved in this type of *seva* in small gurdwaras, recently opened and still relatively unstructured, because in this context, their participation is essential for the performance of religious functions. There is instead an almost total absence of women in covering more institutional management roles. In no gurdwara I visited in Italy so far have I ever met a woman who served as *granthi*.

As in other contexts of the Sikh diaspora (Myrvold 2011; Jacobsen, 2011; Qureshi 2013), in Italy questions highlighting inconsistencies between Sikh ideals and Sikh practices concerning the status of women appear to be of significant concern, especially among young women. In this paper, I have described some outcomes that emerged during my exploratory research. They raise numerous other questions which deserve further analysis. For example, all the Sikh women who contributed to the study showed some interest in women’s engagement in religious practices. Therefore, I have not dealt directly with those who have no interest in participating in religious activities because they wish to avoid the conflict that would then arise through questioning some social and religious customs. My sample did not include those women who think that Sikhism is a marginal aspect of their identity, or who believe that to integrate fully into the host society they must adopt a secular behavior, one that might be considered more compatible with the general Italian lifestyle. However, as far as I could see, the local social environment was an essential factor in defining women’s religious engagement. For example, speaking about the importance of getting involved in *Guru seva* by women, one of my female interlocutors said:

The teaching [of our gurus] is: “women and men [are] equal. We now come here to a society where we are asked for this, whether in your [Indian] society this happens or not . . . ”.

(H. K., 23 year-old *amritdhari* woman, interview)

In this case, the perception of the Sikhs by Italian society is evoked instrumentally to carry forward the desire for a change. According to the interpretation of this young woman, it is not so much the abandonment of religious identity but rather its fulfilment (for example, being able to put religious dictates into practice by overcoming cultural boundaries) that would allow Sikh women to be in tune with “Italian culture”, considered fairer in the male/female relationship than the Punjabi one. This result would also confirm the prevailing narrative on Sikhism which was mentioned at the beginning of this essay and that is normally promoted in Italian public discourse by Sikhs, according to which Sikhism is respectful of both men and women, and, considered equal by God.

¹⁸ The “Pothis Saroop” is the Guru Granth Sahib published in two volumes.

Another question that deserves further research is whether the *amritdhari* identity may promote a stronger feminist consciousness among Sikh women. The fact that among my female participants there is a greater number of *amritdhari* women might suggest that this is the case. However, as I noted earlier, many differences also emerged within this group regarding the desire to actively engage in *Guru seva* and the meaning that was attributed to this devotional act. On the other hand, at least three of the non-*amritdhari* women who joined in the research expressed a strong feminist awareness and a critical attitude concerning the role of women in Sikhism. However, it can also be safely said that when young *amritdhari* women did manage to participate in *Guru seva*, the support (and authorization) of the first-generation migrant *amritdhari* women was a decisive factor.

A few weeks after the end of my fieldwork in some of the gurdwaras that I visited, the involvement of women in the act of *Guru seva* seems to remain on an occasional basis. In one of them, the *granthi* has changed. The new *granthi* appears to be open to women's religious training, though this training has not yet begun. According to one 18 year-old *amritdhari* girl, "the *granthi* is very good and he is also kind, but among women none has the courage to start new things." Yet, another young *amritdhari* woman attending the gurdwara of Covo asserts that "the [*Guru seva*] ... continues very well ... slowly we girls ... are routinely trying to do as much *seva* as possible, so as to learn more and more, therefore [on Sunday we are practicing in] mixed groups. Then it always depends ... on when we are [in gurdwara] or not."

If only concrete results were looked at, it would seem that little has changed, or that each gurdwara is acting on its own terms. Thus, according to each specific context, women's desires to be involved in the *Guru seva* find different degrees of realization. However, from the perspective of lived religion and women's agency, it is clear that these forms of agency are not intended as rebellion or action in the strictest sense, regardless of the relational and identity repercussions on the people involved, but instead as varied positions and negotiations that come to the fore through religious practices. These are slow changes that are only gradually accepted and implemented. They derive from a female awareness that is contextual, progressive, and subject to continual reinterpretations.

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Article

The Sikh Gender Construction and Use of Agency in Spain: Negotiations and Identity (Re)Constructions in the Diaspora

Sandra Santos-Fraile

Department of Social Anthropology and Social Psychology, Complutense University of Madrid, Pozuelo del Alarcón, 28223 Madrid, Spain; sandrasf@ucm.es

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Abstract: For decades, Sikhs have made the choice to migrate to the United Kingdom (UK), the United States of America (USA), or Canada, as these countries are held in high esteem by Sikh communities and appear to afford prestige in socio-cultural terms to those who settle in them. However, changes in border policies (among other considerations such as the greater difficulty of establishing themselves in other countries, the opening of borders by regularization processes in Spain, commercial business purposes, or political reasons) have compelled Sikh migrants to diversify their destinations, which now include many European countries, Spain among them. The first generation of Sikhs arrived in Spain as part of this search for new migratory routes, and there are now sizable Sikh communities settled in different parts of this country. All migrants need to follow a process of adaptation to their new living environment. Moreover, a novel living context may offer new possibilities for migrants to (re)negotiate old identities and create new ones, both at individual and collective levels. This article will explore a case study of a Sikh community in Barcelona to reflect on the forms in which Sikh men and women perceive, question, and manage their identity and their lives in this new migratory context in Spain. The present paper argues that adaptation to the new place implies identity negotiations that include the redefinition of gender roles, changes in the management of body and appearance, and, most particularly, the emergence of new forms of agency among young Sikh women. In addition, we argue that new forms of female agency are made possible not only by the opportunities offered by the new context, but also emerge as a reaction against the many pressures experienced by the young women and exerted by their male counterparts in Sikh communities, as the latter push against the loss of traditional values.

Keywords: Sikhs in Barcelona; identity (re)construction; gender relations; agency

1. Introduction

This article explores the diverse dynamics and negotiations carried out within the Sikh community in Barcelona as part of migrants' processes of integration to their new context. The Sikh communities which have settled in diverse European countries face a variety of separate challenges, as their relationship to the host society and the conditions for their integration are quite dissimilar, depending not only on national regulations but also on political, economic, social and cultural environments. Moreover, national contexts intersect and combine with transnational dimensions, especially in the case of the European Union, thus generating a complex range of possibilities that make it impossible to generalize about the practices and forms of integration of different Sikh communities around Europe¹.

¹ Jacobsen and Myrvold (2011, 2012).

In order to provide some context for the particular case study examined in this article, it is an important point out that Sikhs have only recently started migrating to Spain. Changes in border policies, the greater difficulty of establishing themselves in other countries, the opening of borders by regularization processes in Spain, commercial business purposes, or political reasons among other considerations have compelled Sikh to come to Spain². According to my informants in Barcelona, the first Sikhs arrived in this city in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The current size of the Sikh community in Barcelona is difficult to ascertain as Spanish Government census data does not establish categorical differences between people in terms of their religion. However, in 2007, the Sikh Council of Catalonia and other institutions made an estimate of the number of Sikhs settled in Spain, taking into account both legal (“regular”) and illegal (“irregular” or “without papers”) migrants, and came to the conclusion that, at that time, there were around 5000 Sikhs living in Catalonia and around 10,000 in all of Spain. In addition, the number of *gurdwaras* (Sikh places of worship and assembly) has increased significantly in recent years. The fieldwork carried out for this research reveals that there are currently at least 22 *gurdwaras* spread throughout Spanish territory, most of them in Catalonia; there are 6 *gurdwaras* in and around Barcelona.

As can be observed in the case of Barcelona, the dynamics of integration of Sikhs to their new situation and to a new geographic, political, social, and cultural environment vary according to gender and age. This has led to tensions among community members. However, they have also promoted the emergence of new forms of agency, particularly among young Sikh women. The aim of this work is to reflect on the processes of gender construction and reconstruction among Sikhs in a new migratory context. This paper unveils the tensions and responses which result from the pressures exerted by a strong patriarchal system on a new generation of Sikh women in Spain, who, in turn, use their newly (re)created agency as a response to these pressures and as an exit strategy from them. In addition, we also show the ways in which Sikh men negotiate their own integration through their bodies, in order to navigate their migratory project in a successful manner. We describe and analyze the gender (re)configurations that occur in the process of migratory adaptation, as well as the motivations and consequences that accompany such gender negotiations, as well as the transformations and uses of new forms of agency. In fact, the changes that take place within the dynamics of migratory adaptation and integration are closely linked to, or at least can be analyzed from, the perspective of body management and appearance, which represents a significant part of Sikh identity. We also reflect on those situations where the negotiation of corporeal (re)presentations through individual agency subverts the constraints imposed on culturally mediated bodies. We place some emphasis on negotiations and changes, but we also find continuities in processes that link individuals to their places of origin.

In this article, we explore the concepts of body and corporeal management and appearance and the debates that surround them, as well as their relationship with processes of identity construction³, given that identity can be conceptualized as fluid⁴ and thus is always under (re)construction. Bodies and corporeal (re)presentations are influenced and constrained by culture. However, at the same time, bodies and forms of corporality make culture. Both concepts offer useful prisms through which a society can be analyzed and understood. We also include notions and considerations around the migratory and

² According to my informants. Spain is not usually the first choice of destination for Sikhs who ended up migrating to this country. They came here mostly due to barriers they encountered when trying to move first to their preferred destinations (USA, UK and Canada) and then to more popular western European countries. As it is common in processes of chain migration, a small number of Sikhs arrived in Spain as tourists, secured themselves in terms of jobs and accommodation, and then called upon relatives and other co-nationals to join them, thus becoming a pull factor for other members of their community in India. In general, Sikhs migrate due to work and other economic reasons, although they might also move in search of the prestige afforded by countries of the Global North, or to escape political or religious intolerance in their country of origin. For literature on border policies and migratory movements in Spain see, for instance, [Alonso et al. \(2015\)](#) or [Recaño and Domingo \(2005\)](#).

³ [Barth \(1976\)](#); [Baumann \(2001, \[1996\] 2003\)](#); [Gupta and Ferguson \(1992\)](#).

⁴ [Bauman \(1999\)](#).

diaspora phenomena⁵, which represent fundamental milestones and experiences in the lives of those included in the case study. Gender, defined as a social construction that establishes the roles of men and women in any given society, is also a vertebral concept in this work. A gendered perspective⁶ is essential since gender structures the relationships—as well as the processes of identification, difference, and power relations—between men and women within and outside the community of study. Finally we must consider agency⁷—the capacity of individuals to subvert the limitations or constrictions imposed by culture and religion; the notion of agency enables us to discuss how individuals actively take sides (or not) when confronted with the conditions, limitations or potentialities that surround their lives at social, political, economic, and religious levels.

As analyses of the body and sexuality from a gender perspective have shown, ideological representations shape and condition human bodies in a very significant way⁸. In this sense, it could be said that religion is the ideal ideological arena from which prescriptions and models regarding proper, acceptable bodies are issued; such prescriptions also have a bearing on the individuals who possess the malleable⁹ bodies. Our point of departure is twofold: on the one hand, bodies are political since forms of control over individuals within groups or religious communities are established through their bodies¹⁰; on the other hand, individual bodies are the sites through which individuals, as agents, manage (through their corporeal expressions and representations) to develop themselves in tune with the context and achieve their goals or desires. The main aim of this text is to explore and analyze the changes that take place among individuals and the questions that assail them as a result of their efforts to adapt to and integrate into a new society. We argue that body management and (re)presentation, and especially the changes related to both of them, are unavoidable elements for the analysis of general social transformations. Our perspective involves using body and corporeal management (as a result of embodiment) as key concepts in the analysis of changes that occur at the level of the body but affect wider areas of people's lives, such as economic, political, or social realities. We are particularly interested in those changes that individuals assume to be not only necessary for their integration into the host society but also advantageous as strategies for adaptation, which are enacted through their own sense of agency. These changes could also entail the rethinking of conceptualizations of gender in relation to the culture of origin, and such rethinking and reconceptualizing might become embodied in turn. In this sense, we contend that the analysis of women's experiences can be particularly productive in order to ascertain whether the new situations they face bring about a process of self-reflexivity, both as members of society and in terms of the gender roles they play.

Finally, we describe and explain the processes of cultural socialization and the modes of embodiment through which they occur, considering political, economic, or work spheres as gender substructures which become incorporated by individuals in their process of adaptation to their host society, mainly to be accepted within it. We examine and delineate the emergence of new values and bodily practices, which are different from those held and enacted at the place of origin (the Punjab) but which become performed at the place of arrival (Barcelona). Taking into account this premise, the concept of *emergence*, as described by Raymond Williams¹¹, is fundamental. We utilize Williams' notion of emergence since this concept encompasses both new meanings and values, new ethics, new relationships, and types of relationships that are created continuously, as well as those that are alternative or oppositional¹².

⁵ Brown (2006); Gavron (2005); Sayad (2006); Vertovec (2009).

⁶ Butler ([1993] 2002, [1990] 2007); Mathieu (1991, 2002); Stolcke (1996, 2003).

⁷ Esteban (2004); Erickson and Murphy (2008); Lyon and Barbalet (1994); Salzman (2001).

⁸ (Martínez Guirao and Infantes 2010, p. 10).

⁹ Bodies are malleable since they are adaptable, they can be changed or modified depending on the circumstances and decisions of their owners.

¹⁰ Foucault (1976, [1976] 2006).

¹¹ (Williams 1997, p. 145).

¹² In del Valle (2002, p. 31).

In the first part of this article, we discuss how gender construction works and how gendered practices are carried out in the constitution of Sikh subjects in Barcelona. Later on, we deal with the forms in which the negotiation of male bodies is produced in order to adapt to the new migratory context and how this negotiation varies depending on the processes of integration and the precise socio-historical context when these processes occur. Finally, we explore the use of agency among young Sikh women migrants, an agency that is enabled by the opportunity to become relatively invisible in the new context and is also related to the possibilities afforded by the use of new technologies.

Since Sikhs in Spain are a relatively new ethnic and religious migrant group, they are not identified by the local population as a distinct community and they tend to be confused with other Asian groups such as Pakistanis or generalized simply as “Indians”. Being a recently arrived migrant group, they are still shaping their identity as a community in this new geopolitical and cultural setting and are still working on how they want to present themselves to the host society. This process of (re)construction as a community interpellates and questions issues of gender and identity as well.

2. A Brief Methodological Note

This article is based on data gathered through ethnographic fieldwork and subsequently analyzed to form the basis of my doctoral thesis. I used multi-sited ethnography (the practice of pursuing ethnographic fieldwork in more than one geographical location) as research methodology, and carried out in depth, continuous fieldwork for 18 months¹³ in diverse and distant locations: Barcelona, London, Delhi, and Punjab.

The present work relies fundamentally on qualitative techniques for data gathering, whilst quantitative data has been used to obtain only a certain kind of information, such as Sikh migrants’ places of origin and settlement. As has been mentioned before, Spanish census data does not contain information on the religious affiliation of people, so it does not offer sufficient information to differentiate Sikh migrant groups from other groups from the same geographical region. Additional bibliographic and archival research was carried out in London and Delhi.

As I alternated between field locations, living side by side with Sikh communities in Barcelona and accompanying individuals and groups in their sojourns to India, I developed deep links and widened my contacts with people within this transnational community, which was crucial for the purpose of comparing practices and values in the different locations. This is why a multi-sited ethnography, as defined by Marcus¹⁴ (“follow the people”, “follow the thing”) became paramount from the beginning of my research and gave shape to my methodological design. This type of ethnographic investigation allowed me to gain a profound knowledge of Sikh communities and of Sikhism, and to compare and contrast their ways of life in the different geographical settings.

I have used a variety of qualitative and mixed-methods techniques for this research, which include direct and participant observation, semi-structured and open interviews, and video recordings. Although formal interviews felt quite threatening to informants, informal conversations facilitated a better understanding of their statements, perceptions, and reflexions about their own practices. I have also conducted internet searches to obtain information from news outlets, individual and community webpages, and social networks, although those materials have been differentiated from proper academic sources for analytical purposes.

3. The Construction of Gender

Socially and culturally constructed meanings based on sexual differences are created and re-created within the arena of gender relations. It is thus necessary to first explore the social places and spaces

¹³ The main research took place between 2006 and 2010. After the main body of fieldwork was completed, I kept in touch with informants and carried out additional research activities up until 2017.

¹⁴ Marcus (1998).

that men and women occupy in Sikh society, as well as their gendered roles and hierarchies. As Punjabi society is a traditional and highly patriarchal society¹⁵, it is generally accepted that men have preferential access to the majority of the social, cultural, political, and economic assets and resources, as well as making most relevant decisions in domestic and public settings. Men also hold the bulk of the property and inheritance rights, while women remain in a position of subalternity. Furthermore, in addition to the ideology that helps to build gender relations in Sikh society, we must take into account social and cultural discourses in relation to gender. Despite the impression of the existence of a strong gender ideology within the Sikh community, Nikki-Guninder Kaur Singh argues, in her book entitled *The feminine principle in the Sikh vision of the transcendent* that Sikh gender construction processes and practices are full of contradictions. Speaking of Sikh women, this author states that “the characterization of girls and women in my society was a source of constant ambivalence”¹⁶. Kaur Singh portrays an extremely patriarchal society in which, on the one hand, a woman can become Prime Minister, while, on the other hand, many other women are killed with full impunity due to dowry issues¹⁷ or are mistreated and rejected because their perceived inability to produce offspring¹⁸. Thus the constitution of the female gender intersects with cultural notions of class, sexuality, and reproductive capacities, and accordingly, there exist different kinds of womanhood, which are attributed different values.

It is said that Sikh ideology considers that women occupy a prominent place in Sikh society, as they are invested with positive values and are also deemed fundamental for the creation of the world and persons. Most literature focusing on Sikhs¹⁹ maintains that men and women are equally positioned to attain progress in spiritual practice and emancipation²⁰. In fact, it is believed that the female dimension is essential to interconnect all human beings, undoing social, creed, racial, or gender hierarchies²¹. Kaur Singh goes as far as to say that the literature of Sikhism is in harmony with western feminists’ voices since there is a centrality of female symbols and imagery in Sikh literature, both sacred and secular. As the author states, female models are presented frequently either in prose or in verse, portraying the physical and mental strength of women, their spiritual awakening, their existential Angst [sic], ethical values, and mystical union, thus providing a picture of a multivalent and complex feminine imagery²². Finally, the author states that “feminine phenomena, feminine tone, feminine terminology, feminine imagery, and feminine consciousness form the heart and muscle of it. (. . .) She is the subject”²³. On a more concrete level, this vindication of the feminine and of the substantial role that women play is also highlighted in sacred texts where Sikh gurus vehemently criticize practices and customs of their time that were degrading towards women, such as wife purchasing, dowries²⁴, seclusion, the veil, the custom of *suttee* (or self-immolation of the widows on the funeral pyre of the husband), or feminine infanticide. Some of these practices are still being carried out today²⁵.

At the present time, this idealization of women and of the feminine, which in many cases is maintained in dominant narratives is far from the social reality among Sikh men and women. A strong form of patriarchy dominates institutions²⁶, access to resources, and the relationship between men and

¹⁵ Jakobsh (2006, 2014, 2017).

¹⁶ (Kaur Singh 1993, p. 1).

¹⁷ Op. cit. See also Kumar and Tripathi (2004).

¹⁸ Syamala (2012); Stellar et al. (2016).

¹⁹ Kaur Singh (1993); Pániker (2007); Matringe (2008).

²⁰ (Pániker 2007, p. 300).

²¹ (Kaur Singh 1993, p. 244).

²² Op. cit., p. 3.

²³ Ibid., p. 251.

²⁴ Dowry, which is necessary to marry a daughter or sister, together with hypergamy as a marital ideal for women, constitute barriers to female emancipation because they relate directly to a form of prestige hinged upon family honour where men are the guarantors. Garha (2020) notes that changes in dowry patterns are taking place in this regard.

²⁵ (Pániker 2007, p. 300).

²⁶ To know how this system of patriarchal values was established and consolidated through time and historical processes, see the conscientious and interesting work of Jakobsh (2003).

women. It is characterized by a clear inequality and where men, de facto, dominate²⁷. Despite the traditional narrative of gender egalitarianism that is understood to be inherent within Sikh sacred texts, Sikh history is largely told from the perspective of men. All the gurus were male, Sikh institutions are completely dominated by men, and rituals such as the initiation to the *khālsā* were exclusively designated for male candidates until a few decades ago²⁸. At present, there is a significant inequality in power relations, which means that women find it difficult to access different areas of power or find significant barriers to develop their agency. The reality reveals a substantial inequality between genders and severe difficulties for women to achieve different degrees of empowerment, in a social world full of obstacles for women, the first of which is the deliberate management and limitation of the number of female individuals born into the community²⁹.

In everyday life, the position of women is clearly defined, first and foremost through their main role as mothers of and carers for sons and daughters, confined to the domestic sphere. Their social condition as private domain caregivers is reinforced, on the one hand, by a de facto rejection of divorce and the absence of property rights ascribed to women, and, on the other hand, by the crucial concept of honor, *izzat*, which translates into a rigid notion of chastity linked to modesty and decorum in conduct and appearance, as well as a rigorous taboo placed on adultery³⁰.

4. Gendered Practices in the Construction of Sikh Subjects in Barcelona

In the construction of new Sikh subjects in Barcelona, many traditional practices are maintained, if not enhanced, in order to avoid the introduction of “novel” or “extraneous” western practices, which are considered detrimental to Sikh identity. Men, particularly firstborns, continue to play a fundamental role within the family structure. Similar to the rest of Indian society³¹ and even though new legislation allocates daughters equal coparcenary birthrights in joint family property, substantial gender bias persists. As Navtej Purewal—following Delphy³²—notes in her work “Sex-selective abortion, neoliberal patriarchy and structural violence in India”,

Within the symbolic realm of economic entitlements and norms of transmission of capital through inheritance, sons receive land and/or property within norms of inheritance, while daughters are given gifts or dowries that require them to marry and exist non-autonomously,

²⁷ (Matringe 2008, p. 261).

²⁸ While Pāniker (2007, p. 301) may have made this point, it was first made by Jakobsh (2003).

²⁹ According to Punjab government data from the 2011 census, there is a ratio of 893 women per 1000 men. It is interesting to consider the sexual ratio here given the structural deficit of women in India in general and especially in Punjab. This can be related to an entrenched patriarchal structure and a negative perception of the intrinsic and societal value of women, which might have been at the origin of practices such as infanticide and female feticide, widely silenced but traditionally accepted. The existence of these practices and their consequences have concerned successive Indian governments and have resulted in official publications such as the Handbook on Pre-Conception & Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act, 1994 and Rules with Amendments (Ministry of Health and Social Welfare of India 2006). Their persistence and significance also become evident in the works of renowned author Sen (1990) or in a paper presented at the *Population Association of America Meeting* in 2009, where the various authors (Pande et al. 2009) discuss the numbers of women that have “disappeared” due to the socio-cultural preference of men over women in countries such as India or China. In the article on infanticide and female feticide, Campos Mansilla (2010) points out how these practices are causing a deficit of around 48 million women in India, although this deficit is not so high in urban areas, especially among the middle classes and families where women have higher education. Both Sen and Campos Mantilla refer to an area known in India as “the feticide belt”, across the states of Haryana and the Punjab, where the greatest imbalances between men and women are being registered. As Punjab is a relatively prosperous agricultural zone, female feticide and infanticide practices cannot be attributed directly to poverty in but may be better explained in terms of the preference for sons in families with landholdings due to strict inheritance customs. In fact, the work of Purewal (2018) stresses that sex selective abortion across the whole of India is structurally produced and has to be understood as an outcome of broader systemic economic, political and social processes. Regarding the specific case of the Punjab, Kaur Singh states that “female fetuses are being aborted to preserve the legacy, business, property, and status of fathers and their sons” (Kaur Singh 2008, p. 123).

³⁰ (Singh and Tatla 2006, p. 30).

³¹ See Deininger et al. (2013).

³² Delphy (1988).

thus entrenching them within the patriarchal structures of not only their natal family but also their marital family³³.

While men inherit a large part of the family's possessions equally among them, ensuring continuity of the lineage, only those daughters who, despite their legal entitlement, make no demands on parents for their part of the inheritance are considered "good daughters". These women, daughters and sisters, understand very clearly the threat of being stigmatized as "selfish" or of being ostracised by their families³⁴ and they continue to renounce their inheritance rights even when they have already been living in Barcelona, the new migratory context.

Likewise, men enjoy greater freedoms than their sisters in Barcelona from a very young age, and their acts and opinions are given much more respect. They are allowed to arrive home late, to go out on weekends and enjoy certain freedoms unthinkable for women, such as going to the cinema with a group of friends or, for instance, giving private Hindi or Punjabi lessons to people of the opposite sex. However, the relationship and contact of young men with the local population is also tightly controlled, since western influence is considered to exert a negative influence on them, particularly around those activities which involve interactions between young men and women.

Regarding marriage, young men are inclined to select Sikh brides from India, unlike their female counterparts, who prefer to marry Sikh men already living in Spain. For the men, marriage with a woman of Indian origin who has already settled in Spain would be a much cheaper affair, yet they prefer to bring a bride from their country of origin, one who has not migrated, as they assume that she will fulfill her role of wife, housewife, and family caretaker better. Conversely, young Sikh women in Barcelona prefer to marry an Indian counterpart already settled in Spain or in other European countries as they assume that Indian men who have grown up in Europe will be more inclined to support a spouse working outside of the home while having a family and yet leading a life independently from extended family. In any case, and as it is the case in continental India, the prestige of both families involved in a marriage, the husband's and the bride's, rest upon the shoulders of the bride alone, and thus the woman's attitudes and actions are constrained and controlled by both families and by the community at large. To a large extent, the value of a man hinges upon his wife. How she behaves, dresses, and attends to guests, has a bearing on his honourability. Daughters learn in their birth families which qualities are considered worthy of a good woman, a good wife, and a good daughter-in-law. As a male informant (a husband and a father) once told me,

A woman must be attentive to everything her husband requires, to prepare special food for him if he requires it, be attentive to his clothes, his shoes, in short, to everything that he needs. If the husband says something to her, that's fine; But if he says no, it's no. And there's not much more to say about this. (Field notes, Barcelona, 28 August 2007)

In short, the ideal woman has to devote herself completely to her husband and attend to all his needs; she must obey him without questioning and she must live primarily for him and his family. This includes taking care of his parents too. Sometimes, the conditions in which women do so might be considered as servitude. However, women also enjoy their spaces and moments of meeting and relaxation with female neighbors and friends. In these contexts, they rest, relax, chat and share concerns, confidences, gossip, and fun. The minute there are guests in the home, women retreat into a decorous and solicitous position, attending to the husband and the guests, never sitting down to eat with them, bringing food and drink, and cleaning up after them. Men may or may not eat with the guests, but they do sit down to chat with them in a relaxed way. Men never collaborate in the preparation and serving of the food and drink: their role is exclusively that of hosts.

³³ (Purewal 2018, p. 26).

³⁴ Purewal, *ibid.*, p. 29.

In the development of women as social beings, there is also a turning point that occurs in adolescence, which becomes visible at that time when young women are required to wear the *shalwar kameez* to the exclusion of other types of garments. This happens regularly in rural Punjab, but we can also observe similar cases in Barcelona. As Senah³⁵, a young unmarried woman in her early twenties, explained to me:

I like to wear jeans and T-shirts, but at the age of 15, my father told me and my sisters that we had to wear only suits (*shalwar kameez*), because of the men. (Informal interview, Punjab, 9 September 2007)

In Barcelona, Neja, a 22-year-old woman, reflected in conversation about the restrictions imposed on women's dressing styles. As I wrote in my field diary:

Neja speaks of the clothes here and the freedom here as "modern". She makes constant reference to this idea, establishing a link between what is from here and "the modern", saying that Indians should be "more modern". (Fieldnotes, Barcelona, 4 June 2008)

The use of certain clothes has different meanings depending on the context and is related to the construction of both individual and group identity. Particular clothes can be utilized to conceal the shape of those parts of the body, both feminine and masculine, which serve to differentiate males and females and are also used as symbols for the construction of social sex³⁶ and gender relations³⁷. In this way, the *shalwar kameez* for women and the *kurta pyjama* for men avoid the perception of bodily shapes, which are considered "dangerous" because of their erotic or sexual content. The *suit* or *shalwar-kameez* consists of long pants and a wide, baggy camisole that reaches almost to the knees. It is complemented by the *chunni* or *dupata*, a scarf that is placed on the chest, preventing the observation or insinuation of the female shape. Moreover, the *chunni* or *dupata*, in addition to concealing the area of the female chest, serves to cover the head in the temples and other spaces that become sacred by the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib. It also signals the status of married women, who must place it over their heads in public spaces or moments to mark their marital condition. Regarding the *kurta pyjama*³⁸, it is so wide in the upper part of the pants that it prevents any insinuation of male sexual organs.

In Barcelona, the *shalwar kameez* is generally used as an everyday garment by adult women who come from India, while their daughters prefer the daily use of "western" clothes. When in Barcelona, the women who were largely socialized in Punjab, particularly in rural areas, use the *shalwar kameez* as a daily garment. Teenagers and young adult women, or those who spend a great deal of their time outside the private space because of public-facing work, or who attend secondary schools or higher education, generally wear "western" clothing. There are, however, some garments that are strictly prohibited at all times: miniskirts, skirts, or pants that expose the legs, shirts, and dresses with a low neckline and straps, or clothing that is sleeveless. In the case of dresses, if they are not low cut, they can be worn with long pants.

On Sundays, the day of attendance at the *gurdwara* and other community celebrations, women are required to wear the *shalwar kameez*, as it is considered indispensable for such events. In addition, the use of *shalwar kameez* implies belonging to a generational group—that of adult women—which has certain implications with respect to the social role played within the group. Thus, girls are exempted from the compulsory use of the *shalwar kameez* at the temple until they reach adolescence. Until that time, they can still choose to alternate the traditional garments with "western" clothes. However, after they have become adolescents, the *shalwar kameez* becomes compulsory for young women in sacred

³⁵ Pseudonyms are used throughout the article to favor the anonymity of informants.

³⁶ "Social sex" refers here to the cultural classification of biological sexual traits and their subsequent categorisation into masculine and feminine. "Gender" refers here to the social and cultural construction of sexual identity. See Mathieu (1991, 2002).

³⁷ Butler ([1993] 2002, [1990] 2007); Stolcke (1996, 2003).

³⁸ It is the traditional clothing for men in Punjab and it too consists of a long camisole and wide pants.

places in Barcelona. In rural Punjab, the *shalwar kameez* is obligatory on a daily basis since women of that age are already considered full social subjects within the group and are deemed to play a crucial role, as bearers of the family honor and as future links with other families within the community. At this stage, there are certain norms and duties with which these young women as gendered social beings must necessarily comply, namely, those duties and responsibilities attributed to them as sexualized subjects, and as the recipients of social impositions and cultural norms.

In this way, we argue that bodily appearance, as well as clothes, are crucial to the practices and management of the Sikh body and its corporality, and also to the construction of the physical identity and presentation of the Sikhs. These issues can be tied directly to the restraint of individuals through the control of their bodies. Similar to the prohibition for males to cut their hair (essential for *amritdharis* in order to become ideal Sikhs), clothes contribute to identity construction as well as the identification of individuals in the community. They can also point to a differentiation from the *other*. In the case of women, a feminine appearance through the use of certain clothes also serves to establish distinctions between generations, which are fundamental for the construction of identity either at an individual or collective level.

Norbert Elias, in his book *The civilizing process (El proceso de la civilización* in the Spanish translation used here)³⁹, discusses parents' preoccupations with their children's role in preserving the family's prestige. The author shows how parents are permanently concerned about the ways in which their sons and daughters will succeed (or not) in assimilating the behavioral patterns of their own class (or of a superior class) and worry about whether their children will be able to maintain or even increase the family's prestige. This includes parents' concern whether they will be able to protect their children from any exclusion from their own social group. These types of parental fears are crucial in the structuring and enactment of controls and impositions that families impose on individuals from a very early age⁴⁰. Although Elias' theories emanate from his investigation of class in western societies, his conclusions are useful in illuminating the case of parental fears and expectations and social limitations and constraints imposed on Sikh youth as they grow up to become full members of their group. In the case of Sikhs, strict regulations and control are applied to the ways in which people, and particularly women, dress, thus exerting direct control over their bodies, a control that is in turn closely related to the management of the family's prestige and honor and, by extension, to the honor of the community.

Despite a long history of migration among Punjabis, the context of diaspora has brought about a permanent sense of threat and a fear of loss of community and its values. It is because of this sense of threat and fear of loss that families, and, more generally, the men in the community, try to exert pressure on young women to wear the *shalwar kameez* as a daily dress, arguing that this is necessary for the preservation of values and traditions⁴¹. This was brought to the fore in a conversation with Neja:

Neja has also pointed out how her father does not insist too much on what she can or cannot wear, but Mandar (her little brother) reminds Neja that she is Indian (sic) and should not forget this. And that she should dress more with Indian clothes. Neja also says that they have a male cousin in Lanzarote [a Spanish island] who tells her and Mandar that Neja should wear Indian clothes. But Neja says not to pay much attention to her cousin, since he is neither her father, nor her brother. (Fieldnotes, Barcelona, 4 June 2008)

³⁹ (Elias [1977] 1993).

⁴⁰ Op. Cit., p. 529.

⁴¹ Traditionally, Sikh women, as has been the case with other Indian women, have played the role of preservers and transmitters of cultural traditions, and they have done so in part through the use of traditional clothing. As Tarlo (1996, pp. 320–22) points out, in India, in different times and contexts, women have been persuaded and encouraged to use local forms of clothing, and have even been praised for their loyalty to traditional attire and for being the guardians of local dressing traditions in the face of the push from western fashion. In the mid-twentieth century, for example, many Indian men switched to western-style clothes, while women kept their traditional dresses for two main reasons: first, out of convictions regarding feminine modesty, and second, because Indian men endeavoured to “protect” their women from the pollutant influence of the West (quotes are mine).

Thus, from an emic point of view, the feminine appearance is key for the upkeep, preservation, and representation of Sikh traditions and culture, and such maintenance and representation is done through women's bodies to a large extent. Nevertheless, it is necessary to explain that in different areas of India, the *shalwar kameez* involves various uses and connotations depending on the geographical and local context. For instance, young women in Delhi use *saris*, *kurtas* with jeans, or "western" clothes more often, whilst in rural Punjab, the use of *shalwar kameez* is dominant.

There are places where the *shalwar kameez* is worn only by Muslim women, or where it is used as a school uniform, or that young Indian women may also use it as an expression of emancipation and a progressive attitude. Moreover, in its current status as a fashionable form of dress⁴², we can consider the *shalwar kameez* as a polysemantic garment, which holds changing meanings depending on the context. It is, in this sense, very suggestive that Sikhs in Barcelona, both men and women, consider that the use of their traditional clothes and their traditional Sikh appearance constitutes a barrier for finding employment. Sikhs have to manage and negotiate their traditional appearance in different ways and depending on the stage of their process of integration. At first, when they arrive Spain, Sikhs, particularly the men, will avoid being seen as different. Yet after some time in the new country, and when they find themselves more or less established, they return to their traditional garments and bodily appearance. Regardless of the changes and movements which are permitted with regard to male attire, Sikh men generally insist that their women wear traditional garments and clothes.

The construction of a Punjabi adult woman as a Sikh subject implies, therefore, a series of guidelines to be followed that are prompted by community members, and especially by men, which is not surprising in a strongly patriarchal community. However, and in tune with the findings of Arthur Wesley Helweg in *Sikhs in England*⁴³, we find many cases in which it is the adult women themselves who put more pressure on their daughters and the rest of the family in order to avoid any kind of "deviant" behavior. According to Helweg,

The émigré wife was most affected if *izzat* was diminished. If she did not prove to be an upright wife and mother, improving the position of her husband's family, then shame would be brought on her, her parents, and kin group, as well as on her husband's family. Since women had this dual responsibility, it was they who reinstated social control. They exerted pressure in two ways: they influenced the behaviour of their family in England, and they reinstated a full network communication with Jandiali. (...) The women in Gravesend pressured their husbands against dealing with men who manifested deviant behavior⁴⁴.

Our research would suggest that in those cases when a family drastically rejects a young woman's relationship with a man of a higher caste, it tends to be the mother who most firmly rejects this situation, and who exerts most pressure on her daughter to terminate her love relationship. The young woman's mother's family in Punjab is also often strongly opposed to this kind of relationship, as it will be trying to preserve the honor of the young woman's mother and that of their granddaughter and niece, and by extension, of the entire family. It is not surprising that in a strongly patriarchal society, the men try to exercise control over the women. It is also not surprising that women incorporate and embody these guidelines, which they in turn pass to a younger generation of daughters, nieces, and granddaughters. This is especially salient in the new migratory context where, as mentioned above, there is a perceived threat to the loss of group identity. In Elias' terms, females are a "permanent concern"⁴⁵, and both men, in their roles as paternal authorities, and adult women reproduce these internalized and embodied social patterns.

⁴² See Tarlo (1996).

⁴³ Helweg (1986).

⁴⁴ Op. Cit., p. 59.

⁴⁵ Op. Cit.

However, men and women are constructed differently as Sikh subjects. Although there are common practices regarding the two genders, the motivations that generate these practices are substantially different. We find a clear example of this in the case of higher education. Both in Barcelona and in Punjab, men who have the capacity and opportunity are trained, obtain higher education qualifications and degrees, and will try to practice their profession in the future. Yet in the case of women, there seems to be a pattern whereby they are also trained and acquire qualifications and a profession, but they will cease their professional activity when they get married. One of the reasons why women are given access to educational and professional training is because this represents an investment in *social capital*⁴⁶. In other words, education and qualifications allow women to have access to better marriage prospects and, by marrying well, they generate greater prestige and strategic alliances for their families. This became evident in the case of Surdin, an adult male informant, who was looking for a husband for a young woman and he rejected a prospective partner due to his inferior level of qualification. Surdin argued that the woman was more educated than this prospective groom and he was therefore not “appropriate”, nor did his family have good status as a result⁴⁷.

The construction of the difference between men and women becomes particularly evident in sacred spaces, which also serve to reify and justify this differentiation. In the *gurdwaras* I visited in Delhi and the Punjab, Sikhs go to the temple with their families and as they sit together, it is possible to observe the differentiation in the practice of *seva*. In Southall, London, in the Sri Guru Singh Sabha Gurdwara, where there is a large Sikh community that was established a long time ago, we find a strict gendered distinction of places for men and women: there are separate bathrooms and areas to leave outerwear and shoes. There are also different worship spaces for men and women as well as different stairs to ascend separately, according to their gender. However, in the *gurdwaras* of Barcelona, all spaces are shared by men and women with the exception of the places reserved for standing and sitting in the temple. Men will sit on the left and women on the right (or vice versa). In the *gurdwaras* I visited in Punjab and Delhi, groups and families who go together to the temple sit together. Furthermore, in the Sikh temples in Barcelona, women cannot do *seva*, whereas they are allowed to do so in *gurdwaras* in Punjab and Delhi. However, the distribution of work will still be done according to gender: men cook and clean, and women are in charge of the preparation of the *chapati*.

In the same way, the entrances to *gurdwaras* are replete with symbolic connotations that highlight the differences between men and women. In Barcelona, for instance, the gates to the *gurdwaras*, especially on days when there is a religious service, are occupied by large numbers of men who gather there to chat, wait, or observe others. Women are hardly ever seen there. This differentiation of roles and use of space can also be observed when the streets are turned into temporary *gurdwaras* during festivals or processions. In the Nagar Kirtan in Barcelona, which took place on 4 November 2006, men were in charge of distributing the food, drink, as well as throwing rose petals and purifying the space with water. Women, however, did not perform this form of *seva*. In addition, men and women walked separately and physical distance was upheld through the use of a long stick that was held by two men on opposite ends. Women walked together behind this barrier, while men walked at the front of the procession. Only those men who were videotaping or taking photographs were permitted to cross the barrier temporarily.

Through processions of this kind, the street becomes a sacred space from the moment the Guru Granth Sahib (the most important religious scripture in Sikhism) is paraded through the street. In order for the secular, public space to be transformed into sacred space, it is necessary to purify it first through the appropriate rituals. Only then can the sacred scripture of the Sikhs be displayed. The street is ritually cleansed with water, the assistants walk barefoot and with their heads covered, and

⁴⁶ (Bourdieu [1979] 2000).

⁴⁷ Since Spanish census data does not classify people in terms of religion, it is not possible to know how many Sikh men and women attend secondary school or university, but during my fieldwork, most of the young women with whom I worked were students or combined work and study, whereas the young men were less engaged in educational trajectories.

the *Panj Pyare* (beloved five) lead the procession. Once again, the places and roles of different gender categories are in clearly evident. Men and women walk in strict separation. The active, interactionary role with the sacred is essentially masculine, and it is men who stage the warrior characteristics of the community by a display of *gatka*, an Indian martial art associated with Sikhs. Only children, before they have reached puberty, enjoy unencumbered freedom of movement. Much of what takes place at this outdoor ceremonial procession mirrors what takes place inside Sikh *gurdwaras*.

The apparent distinctions in Sikh gender relations also become clear within the migratory process, as Sikh men are allowed to marry western women, but it is unthinkable that a Sikh woman, even if she already lives in Barcelona, would be permitted to marry a western man. During my fieldwork in Barcelona, I met only three families that included a Punjabi Sikh husband and a wife of Spanish origin. Furthermore, one of these families was polygamous, which is legally punishable in Spain:

Sunil is married to two women. With the first wife—of Spanish origin—he has two daughters. With the second wife, who comes from India, he has an 11-month-old baby. They all live together in the same house. (Fieldnotes, Barcelona, 22 October 2006)

It is very common among Sikh men to first marry a Spanish woman and, after a while and once they have regularized their personal situation, to divorce the Spanish wife and to remarry, choosing a bride who is brought directly from India for this purpose⁴⁸. In the following example, I write about a Sikh man who married an Indian woman following the death of his Spanish spouse; this vignette can serve to expose some of the most entrenched gender beliefs and prejudices that exist among Sikh men:

I was chatting with Naya (a young woman of who is in her early twenties) and her father at the family restaurant. Naya's father was born in Delhi and her mother was born in Punjab. During our conversation, they discussed the case of Sikh men who have married women from Spanish origin. Naya's father pointed out, as he displayed a big smile, that they do it for "the papers"⁴⁹. He talked about his brother, who had married a woman in Barcelona (she was from Cadiz, another Spanish province) and they had two daughters. The wife had died about thirteen years earlier, and he subsequently went to India to find another woman to marry. Now they all live together (the father, his new wife and their offspring and the daughters of his first marriage). According to Naya's father, his brother's daughters have too much freedom; he said he doesn't agree with the amount of freedom that is given to young girls, as it does not reflect well on them or the family. Naya replied that she was of the opposite opinion, and told her father that if he does not like how things are done in Spain, he should have stayed in India. (Fieldnotes, Barcelona, 4 June 2008)

On a separate occasion, an older woman from India suggested to me that mixed marriages are fine, but that since western men do not make good husbands, it is justifiable that Sikh women prefer not to marry European men:

I asked [the elderly Sikh woman] what she thought about Sikh marriages with people from Spain and she replied that she felt they were fine, both in cases of a Spanish bride and a Sikh groom, or vice versa. She then added that Spanish women make good wives, but that

⁴⁸ It is also very common for Sikh men to marry Portuguese women in exchange for money, in order to legalize their personal situation in the EU. According to my informants, the woman who agrees to this kind of marriage receives between 6000 and 9000 euros. My informants told me that couples usually go to Norway to formalize their marriage because the procedures can be resolved in just a few days. Once married, the couple never meets again. In addition, in an unpublished paper entitled "Sikh Migration to Poland and other East European Countries" (presented by Zbigniew Igielski at the "Sikhs in Europe" Conference organized in Sweden in 2010), the author explained that there are many Polish women who migrate to Spain and, once in this country, and upon meeting a Sikh man they wish to marry, they travel back to Poland for the marriage ceremony, since the procedure is more complicated in Spain.

⁴⁹ In Spanish "*los papeles*". *Tener los papeles* (to have papers) or *conseguir los papeles* (to obtain papers) are the colloquial expressions referring to the necessary documentation to become a legal migrant in this country.

Spanish men are not such good husbands: “there are a lot of bad men here”. She also told me that she knew a man from India who had married an older Spanish woman ten years earlier. At the time of the wedding, he was 22 and she was 40. The Spanish woman told my informant that she was happy to marry him and let him go once he had obtained “the papers”. However, the Sikh groom insisted that he loved her and wanted to continue being married to her. (Fieldnotes, Barcelona, 10 December 2006)

The tacit prohibition of marriage between a Sikh woman and a western man is associated with Sikh understandings of filiation. According to Sikh Punjabi customs, the children of any marriage belong to the father’s family; thus, a marriage between a Sikh woman and an outsider could imply that their offspring may be excluded from the kinship group and the Sikh community. This highlights the importance of exerting control over women’s bodies, sexuality, and reproduction, as Foucault⁵⁰ has pointed out. According to Foucault, the regulation of bodies, sexualities, and alliances within communities is oriented towards the maintenance of the social body, something that is achieved by controlling reproduction through marriage and kinship systems. These in turn connect people and regulate the economy through the transfer of assets and family names⁵¹. This is what Foucault described as the control of the population through bio-power techniques, which are capable of “obtaining the subjection of bodies and population control”⁵². It is through the control over women’s bodies and the surveillance of their sexuality that the claim to the offspring is secured and that community’s boundaries maintained.

Power relations and the differential value given to individuals depending on their biological sex also become evident in the uptake and acceptance of certain practices, such as female feticide. Although this is an issue that most Sikhs explicitly avoid in conversation, I was able to communicate with an informant who was particularly sensitive towards this matter and who worked in a health center in Barcelona. As she explained, selective abortions are also practiced in Spain:

Today I was eating with Sitara, before she went to work. As we talked, several interesting topics came to the fore; perhaps the most striking centred on female infanticide. She explained to me that here in Barcelona, just as in India, women in the community practice female feticide, and that they are protected by the legal guarantees afforded by Spanish abortion laws. She told me that she knew of some cases, and since prenatal ultrasounds are very common in this country, it is very easy for the prospective parents to know the sex of the baby. Thus, many Sikh women proceed to have an abortion if they learn they are expecting a girl. (Fieldnotes, 17 December 2007)

If being a woman implies fulfilling certain expectations within the family and the community, being a man also means undertaking specific roles and obligations. The most valued qualities in a man are the ability and the skills to play the role assigned by the family and by society, such as assuming the obligations of being the firstborn male, or to be hard-working. Hard work and doing a good job are highly valued traits within the community. Being a good worker and achieving success and prosperity through work are particularly valued within the community and offer a gateway to recognition and prestige. Having a virile aspect (which usually translates into very straight and upright body posture) and a good bearing and appearance are also socially valued, as they relate to the ideal of the Sikh soldier in the imaginary collective⁵³. In the same way, as stated by Gill for Britain⁵⁴, when analyzed through the lens of masculinity, the *pagh* (turban) is a specific symbol of male honor and a symbol of

⁵⁰ Foucault ([1976] 2006).

⁵¹ Op. Cit., pp. 111–13.

⁵² Ibid., p. 148.

⁵³ This ideal has its maximum expression in the amritdharis or representatives of the khālsā.

⁵⁴ Gill (2014), following Kalra (2005).

pride and manhood particularly for upper-caste Sikh men⁵⁵. Thus the maximum representatives of an honorable masculinity socio-historically constructed⁵⁶ are the *kesdhharis* and especially the *anritdharis*. In addition, the community expects both of them to act with honesty and integrity.

5. The Negotiation of Bodily (Re)Presentation and Agency

The manner in which Sikhs have settled in Barcelona has many analogies with the way in which Sikhs and other religious communities stemming from Asia have settled in places such as the USA, UK or Canada, and we can follow these analogies in the works of Judith Brown, Ballard and Ballard, and Gerd Baumann⁵⁷. However, there are also notable differences between the Sikhs in Spain and the Sikh communities in other parts of the world⁵⁸. Therefore, and exercising some caution, we can hypothesize that there may be particular characteristics that are unique to the Sikh community of Barcelona⁵⁹. In this regard, it is important to mention the relevant role played by the creation of *gurdwaras* and also the different forms of negotiations that the Sikhs carry out as individuals but also as a community. As part of these negotiations, we find strategic relationships with members of the local population through the enactment of a sort of “westernized Sikhism”, mediated and made possible by the practice of Kundalini yoga⁶⁰. It can be argued that such practices or processes are examples of hybridization as described by García Canclini⁶¹, or of meeting points or interstices, following Núria Benach⁶². We also find negotiations in the use of specific forms of Sikh clothing and outfits that acquire particular significance in some contexts. In Spain, the Sikhs manage to use their attire in different but pragmatic ways: to settle successfully at the place of arrival, to generate forms of identity, differentiation or identification with other groups, to gain agency, or with the intention of maintaining the values and traditions of their place of origin, as well as the power relations that exist there.

In Barcelona, most Sikhs feel that their corporeal appearance, attire, or traditional bodily practices make their full insertion in Spanish society or their chances to settle successfully, especially in terms of jobs and economics in general, quite difficult. Not only do they perceive that their clothes and outfits may complicate their integration, but these complications also extend to bodily practices, such as the use of henna. In India, henna is used as an element of purification, as well as in ceremonial rituals such as weddings and other celebrations and festivities. In Barcelona, its use is restricted to a minimum and limited to very specific moments (such as weddings), in order to avoid excessive attention from others in their host country, as one young informant explained to me:

And apart from this ... , it is very visible ... , for example, look, henna, I always wear a little, I always wear a little. Because sometimes I put more but ... it attracts a lot of attention and depending on the place it is not accepted very well. People look at you like, ‘hey!, what is this?’... you know? Well, now henna is beginning to get better known, for instance, in the temporary tattoos that people acquire in the summer. But of course, you could feel intimidated. [When asked if henna is only aesthetic or if it has any other meaning, she answered:] It is very traditional, very traditional, and very purifying, henna is applied to the body at every festival in India, at weddings, at Indian Christmas, well, at every major holiday there is henna ... Here we put it on ourselves, but in India there are dedicated professionals. (Interview with Anju, a Sikh woman in her early twenties, Barcelona, 12 October 2006)

⁵⁵ Garha (2020).

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Brown (2006); Ballard and Ballard (1979); and Baumann ([1996] 2003).

⁵⁸ Due to space limitation, we will limit ourselves to minimal observations. See Santos-Fraile (2016).

⁵⁹ See Santos-Fraile (2007, 2013, 2016, 2017).

⁶⁰ These western people belong to the 3HO movement or the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere. For more information about these groups, see Jakobsh (2008).

⁶¹ García Canclini (2005).

⁶² Benach (2005).

As we can see, the perceived difficulties in social integration implies that Sikhs implement changes in their lives, such as excluding certain attire or practices which they consider traditional, or including alien habits or practices, which may cause some degree of discomfort among the more orthodox Sikhs. Some of these alien, uncomfortable practices include the consumption of alcohol at social events, which is typical of Spanish culture. Or the incorporation of celebrations that mix their culture of origin with local traditions, such as Christmas or New Year's Eve, and which again might involve alcoholic drinks. Changes in dietary patterns are also significant as new foods and ways of cooking are introduced, although often they do not transgress Sikh orthodoxy, particularly, vegetarianism⁶³.

5.1. The Negotiation of Male Bodily Appearance and (Re)Presentation

Since a virile and martial appearance is part of the construction of Sikh masculinity⁶⁴, it is interesting to consider that this construction takes place, on the one hand, both at the individual level and as a member of a collective, and on the other hand, in terms of self-presentation within the community but also vis-à-vis external others. Thus Sikhs display an appearance of body, department, and attire that, in Shilling's terms⁶⁵, must represent the very embodiment of power:

(...) Berger's argument (1972) that a man's presence (be it fabricated or real) is dependent on the promise of power he embodies ... If a man's physicality is unable to convey an image of power, he is found to have little presence precisely because the social definition of men as holders of power is not reflected in his embodiment.

It is important to note that the embodiment of power does not always have to occur purely through the development of a powerful body ... It has other variants which incorporate such elements as posture, height, weight, walk, dress, etc.⁶⁶.

In principle, wearing a turban and keeping a well-groomed beard presents a strong masculine image, as does walking with a straight carriage. However, we find that in Barcelona, wearing the turban and not cutting one's hair or beard is a matter for negotiation within the community and also in the context of the host society. After their arrival in Barcelona, many Sikhs who wear beards and turbans decide to get rid of them or at least modify them⁶⁷, as they consider that this physical appearance prevents them from accessing opportunities in the job market. In some cases, changes such as the giving up of the beard and the turban are also accompanied by changes in other bodily practices such as the ingestion of meat and alcohol, which are taboo among orthodox Sikhs. Many Sikh men feel that changes in their appearance and comportment are not voluntary but forced by circumstances, as it was explained to me by a male informant in his early forties who was quite orthodox in his beliefs and practices:

Surjeet has told me that when he arrived in Barcelona, he spent six years eating meat and drinking alcohol, although he kept his beard trimmed and wore a turban⁶⁸. According to him, he was forced to act in this way by circumstances, since he lived with a family who ate meat and drank alcohol, and he could neither refuse food nor demand that they prepare something special for him. According to him, he only had one glass of whiskey at a time,

⁶³ Often there is some form of relaxation in the beliefs and practices of younger Sikh generations who are born and bred in Spain. This becomes evident in the acquisition of new culinary tastes among them: for instance, they might be more likely to eat meat than their Indian-born counterparts, and they might express a clear preference for local foods, as is the case of "*pollo al ast*", a typical Catalan roast chicken, eggs with chips, and even fast food served at places like McDonalds which often include meat (although in India, many fast food places like McDonalds have adapted their wares to include vegetarian food).

⁶⁴ Garha (2020).

⁶⁵ Shilling ([1993] 2005).

⁶⁶ (Shilling [1993] 2005, pp. 99–100).

⁶⁷ For instance, keeping the turban and a short beard.

⁶⁸ Some friends of Surjeet confirmed to me that he had cut his beard and also removed his turban, somewhat contradicting his own explanations.

since a second glass always made him sick. He also explained that drinking alcohol makes you ignore other things and that now that he no longer drinks, he can do other things, like sitting with his daughter at night eating sunflower seeds. When he drank whisky, he said, he would concentrate solely on his drink and would be unable to share significant moments with others. He also says that when his daughter was a baby, he bathed her every night and massaged her legs so that she slept well, and that if he had been drinking at that time, he could not have done this. He tells me that at one point he realized that something was not going well with him, and he thought that it was time to stop. He thought things were going wrong for specific reasons such as eating meat, drinking alcohol, etc. (Fieldnotes, Barcelona, 31 August 2007)

Sikhs are very clear about the importance of dressing well to ensure their success in the process of adaptation to the arrival context⁶⁹. As was the case with Surjeet, men tend to revert to a more orthodox type of dress when the need abates: for instance, when they achieve some economic independence (such as owning their business) and a modicum of home stability after family reunification. Likewise, we can observe that as the community grows and becomes more stable in geographical and demographic terms, many of those who had once renounced orthodox bodily practices return to them. Moreover, orthodox beliefs and practices are, at times, incorporated by community members who had never followed them before. In recent times, when the number of Sikhs has grown substantially and their communities in Barcelona and surrounding areas have been established for a considerable amount of time, it is easy to find Sikhs who had never before worn turbans or beards but now choose to display them in order to better integrate and position themselves favorably within the Sikh community. In other diaspora locations, such as the UK, a stronger commitment to a traditional Sikh appearance grew following the events that took place in India in 1984⁷⁰ and also as more Sikhs took part in youth camps or Sikh university associations⁷¹. However, in the Spanish context, the Sikh community has only recently arrived, and they are still in the process of working out how they want to present themselves to the others. These circumstances condition the decision-making processes in terms of committing to, or avoiding, traditional Sikh appearance. The same considerations apply to the wearing of turbans among women. While Sikh women from the Indian diaspora may be donning the turban, in part as a result of the influence of Sikh websites (as argued by Jakobsh⁷²) in Spain it is unusual to see a Sikh woman wearing a turban, except in cases of Gora Sikhs, that is, western women who converted to Sikhism. In fact, since the beginning of my research, I have never heard of or seen any Sikh women of Indian origin who wore a turban in Spain.

The geographic and demographic expansion of the Sikh community in Spain and the increase in the number of Sikhs who wear beards and turbans puts them in a better position to manage and negotiate beard and turban use in the context of the wider society. If early on the *kesdharis* chose to eliminate beards and turbans, today, the consolidation of Sikhs in the new context allows them to defend their right to be recognized as a distinct group and to wear attire which signifies their ethnic-religious identity. Many Sikh men have complained about discriminatory treatment at some Spanish airports when they have been forced to remove their turban due to national security measures. An analogous situation regarding the negotiation of Sikh bodily attires happens when Sikhs appeal to representatives of the local administration, in order to ask them for special dispensations. For instance, a technician in migration policies from the General Directorate of Religious Affairs at the Generalitat of Catalunya (the autonomous Catalanian government) told me that Sikh representatives went to him

⁶⁹ As an example of this flexibility of attire depending on the context, the same informants who would always dress in a suit (or pants and shirt) in Barcelona would wear *kurta pyjamas* on a regular basis in the Punjab.

⁷⁰ Jakobsh (2008).

⁷¹ Singh (2011).

⁷² *Ibid.*

to discuss the possibility of Sikhs wearing their turbans for the official photograph required for the National Identity Card⁷³.

On other occasions, it is the Sikhs themselves who introduce changes in the shapes or sizes of items considered essential for their attire, taking into account the legislation of the country of arrival. This is the case of the *kirpan* (traditional Sikh sword or dagger). For instance, some *amritdharis* have replaced their traditional *kirpan* with small neck pendants. Similarly, leaving the *kirpan* in the custody of security guards at public buildings does not seem to be a major inconvenience for *amritdharis*, yet they make prior arrangements with the administration whenever possible in order to avoid having to take them off.

Apart from these modifications or negotiations regarding religious attire or items with which some Sikh men identify, we also find changes in the use of clothes and style of dressing. Some Sikh men vary their appearance depending on the context in which they find themselves. In Barcelona, they wear “western”⁷⁴ clothes daily; however, when they are in the private sphere of their homes, and when they attend the temple on Sundays, Sikh men wear *kurta pyjamas*, especially if they are participating in the religious liturgy.

5.2. The Use of Agency among Young Sikh Women

I argued earlier that the separation of spaces according to gender seems to gain importance in the diaspora, and it seems to be related to the size of Sikh communities and to the length of time that the community has been settled in the new migratory context. In addition, women seem to have a less active or agentive role in the practice of *seva* in places where Sikh communities have only recently arrived, while permission to participate increases in places where the Sikh have been settled for a longer time. This situation may seem paradoxical, and yet it brings us back to the concept of *emergence* as proposed by Williams⁷⁵, as we can interpret these differences in terms of the negotiations that take place at different times in diverse migratory contexts.

On the one hand, early negotiations within recently established Sikh communities enforce limits and create structural habits through the delimitation of spaces and restrictions in their use according to gender; yet on the other hand, long term negotiations must necessarily allow for certain flexibility, as is the case in the practice of *seva* by Sikh women in London. However, women are always expected to respect the limitations in space and in the activities allowed them, which are defined by ritual ideology and practice. Women’s negotiations in being allowed more significant and visible roles in Sikh ritual and representation happens in the context of a social and cultural tension where women’s agency and demands are supported by the political and social situation that surrounds them. This can be seen in the case of the UK, where several generations of Sikhs have been socialized in the country of arrival, and Sikh women find alternative strategies and more transcultural tools with which to negotiate their situation and their roles within the community. This increased capacity for negotiation has been facilitated by a greater female presence in the public sphere, as a result of the progressive incorporation of women in the labor market. As Judith Brown⁷⁶ explains, the role that Sikh women have played in the family economy (as in the case of Southeast Asian women in general) has been transformed as part of the diasporic process:

Women in South Asia had always contributed fundamentally to the family economy in many ways but paid work outside the home or the family farm was less usual and often felt as

⁷³ It should be noted that these claims regarding the use of the turban in Spain are still at an early stage when compared to claims that have been made for decades in the UK; see Beetham (1970).

⁷⁴ However, as Emma Tarlo explains, western clothes have long been introduced to male Indian wardrobes, and they are often considered part of contemporary Indian fashion (1996, p. 331).

⁷⁵ Williams (1997).

⁷⁶ Brown (2006).

demeaning to family honor. Increasingly in the new situation abroad, women also became involved in paid work of various kinds⁷⁷.

In this same work, Brown points out that paid female work outside the family context has resulted not only in an increase in the socio-purchasing power of families but also in the empowerment of women⁷⁸. However, this empowerment, as Brown⁷⁹ notes, continues to be significantly limited when we consider them within the framework of gender relations. However, this does not prevent women from using their agency in varying circumstances.

My work in Spain shows (and this is similar to what Meenakshi Thapan explains in the context of Northern Italy⁸⁰) that young Sikh women that grew up in this new migratory context question the roles that men and women play more often and in a more vigorous manner. Young women particularly recognize the importance of their economic and personal independence. The generalized belief among newly migrated Sikh families that women's education is valuable gives young women a new position from which to develop their agency, as they strategically extend their studies, obtain the best possible qualifications, and argue for the need to continue with their training. Through this extension of their education, they crucially get to postpone the time of marriage, despite assuming that marriage will inevitably be arranged and that they will accept their parents' wishes. Even when they are of marrying age (that is, between 18 and 23 years old), young Sikh women are deliberately deferring their nuptials by stretching the time they spend in education⁸¹ while simultaneously holding jobs related to their acquired professions. This strategy allows them to postpone this event that they know will be key and critical in their lives. Young Sikh women are aware that their perception of relationships is substantially different from that of their parents; in addition, they explicitly assume that there will be conflicts if and when they marry a Sikh man from India, as the young women already know that there will be a significant cultural distance between them. The fact that young Sikh women are purposefully delaying their marriages does not mean that they are not able to maintain secret but stable relationships with men of their choice, both in Barcelona and in India, before an actual marriage takes place. In some cases, unauthorized couples go as far as getting engaged and performing some commitment rituals in order to signal their allegiance to themselves. In many cases, when the family uncovers these secret relationships, usually through another member of the Sikh community, the rebellious young women are severely punished, even though physical violence, and may be forced into an early marriage to avoid further "deviations".

Meanwhile, significant supervision and control are exercised over daughters. This control does not decrease with their coming of age, but rather increases as they approach the age of marriage, in keeping with the status and the roles assigned to young marriageable women in India. Sikh girls and young women can not go out alone or during the night, and their friendships or any other type of relationship are surveilled and vetted; this applies even to working relationships. If a young woman dares to contravene the norms, control, and sanction mechanisms are activated to resolve the situation and to punish the unruly young woman, who is normally sent to India, where it is assumed that she will incorporate the values and attitudes expected of her. Likewise, an early marriage, it is hoped, will be arranged to distance her from other possible violations of the customary regulations. This was the case of Naya, who was taken to India after meeting with a man for an evening outing. It was the man's friends who betrayed her to her family, and Naya had to stay in India for three years, during which time her family arranged a marriage for her.

⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 61.

⁷⁸ Ibid. pp. 70–71.

⁷⁹ Op. Cit.

⁸⁰ Thapan (2015).

⁸¹ The fact that they strive to be good students becomes a strong argument for the family to allow the extension of their studies, understanding that this will represent a significant increase in symbolic capital, which in turn will have a positive impact on the family.

However, young Sikh women in Barcelona find spaces or strategies to avoid the restrictions imposed and managed by men and adult women in their community, controls that are, in many cases, exercised through their bodies and bodily appearance. For example, when young Sikh women are away from the direct influence and control of other members of their community, they take the opportunity to modify their clothing by removing the pants that they wear under dresses, or openly displaying garments with plunging necklines or shoulder straps. In addition, social networks like Facebook or Orkut are places where they present themselves in the ways in which they want to be seen, skipping the strict rules applied to their comportment. Through these social networks, they upload photographs of themselves in miniskirts, bikinis, or other garments that are strictly forbidden to them.

Other strategies serve to carry out activities that are similarly censured, such as going out at night. As my informants explained to me, young Sikh women resort to methods that I have not been able to corroborate, such as drugging their parents with sleeping pills or escaping through windows. They also phone their boyfriends or lovers and meet up with them secretly, as I have witnessed. The strategies that these women carry out to be able to find these spaces for freedom can become truly complex and risky. This was the case of an informant who went on vacation to an island with friends. She told her parents that she was participating in a mandatory training course related to her profession and that it was organized by a Spanish university. She had to falsify several documents of invitation, accommodation, and accreditation to justify her attendance. The risk that some of these women are willing to take is not a trivial matter, given the probable consequences and punishments they face if found out, such as physical aggression, or forced and immediate marriage to avoid shame and loss of honor for the young woman and her family. When my informant came back from her secret, unauthorized holiday, she explained to me that for the first time in her life, she had experienced a feeling of freedom. She also told me that, from then, her perception of the world and of her own life, as well as of the city in which she lives (Barcelona), had changed. As I wrote in my fieldnotes, *“she told me that neither now nor ever would she and the world be the same”*.

6. Conclusions

Throughout this article, I have reflected on specific issues regarding the way in which the Sikh community in Barcelona and its individual members perceive, question, and manage their identity in a new migratory context. The notion of the body and the descriptions of changes and negotiations in bodily appearance have allowed us to view and understand how they manage their process of settlement in the new context, as well as their relationships within the community and their connections with others outside it and with the wider society. Through the management of their bodies and appearances, newly arrived Sikh men and women situate themselves within and outside of their community, as they strategically manage their lives to unfold in the new context. I have used the notions of bodily control and physical management to analyze aspects of the social and cultural realities in which individuals find themselves in migratory contexts and to describe some of the constraints and opportunities that are afforded to them in the new situations. My arguments contribute to the understanding of the diverse processes that are involved in the constitution of individual and group identities in transnational mobility contexts. I have also presented the notion of agency in order to assess the capacity for initiative and for cultural transformation of gendered individuals in migratory contexts. For this, gender relations have been taken into account as a basic framework.

I have described how the roles of men and women among some Sikhs in Barcelona are perfectly differentiated and articulated and have attempted to explain how the constitution and management of gendered bodies reinforce these roles that are both culturally established and socially controlled. Thus, in the context of migration of Sikhs to Spain, hierarchies, subordination, and forms of control over women are reinforced, and the power exerted by men over women becomes even more entrenched; power is also further exercised by those maintaining orthodox identities (and, therefore, considered purer) over those who move away from it.

In short, I have found that gendered bodies are imbued with power relations, and that choice and changes in corporeal expression and (re)presentation must be linked to an intentionality within the framework of power relations. Furthermore, I have shown that among Sikhs in Spain, there is a persistence of norms regarding gender roles within families, but that young Sikh women express and display a significantly lower acceptance of the implicit ideals and rules, as illustrated throughout this article. Finally, I argue that the space of immigration to Spain is a context that affords a multiplicity of interstices that permit and encourage the use of new forms of agency among young Sikh women who come to live there.

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Article

Masculinity in the Sikh Community in Italy and Spain: Expectations and Challenges

Nachatter Singh Garha

Center for Demographic Studies, Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB), 08193 Barcelona, Spain; nsingh@ced.uab.es

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Abstract: Since the 1990s, the Sikh community in India has entered a phase of considerable socioeconomic and demographic transformation that is caused by the large-scale practice of female feticide, the spread of higher education among women, and the mass emigration of unskilled men to the Western countries. These changes have a great impact on the traditional configuration of gender roles and disrupt the construction of masculinity in the Sikh community in India and in the diaspora. Based on ethnographic observations and 64 in-depth interviews with Sikh immigrants in Spain (26) and Italy (22) and their relatives in India (16), this paper first explores the expectations of masculinity in the Sikh community in Italy and Spain; and second, analyses the challenges that are imposed by the socioeconomic and demographic transformation in the Indian Sikh community and the social environment in the host countries on the construction of masculinity in the Sikh community in both countries.

Keywords: Sikh religion; masculinity; gender roles; women's education; diaspora

1. Introduction

While explaining the concept of 'doing gender', [West and Zimmerman \(1987, p. 127\)](#) postulate that "gender . . . is the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category". Therefore, for men and women, their gender identity is based on their performance of masculinity and femininity, respectively. Gender is not a biological trait, being fixed and stable, but it can change over time and individually ([Diamond and Butterworth 2008](#)). It is learned through careful observations and imitations of social norms and practices, which are expected from men and women in different social contexts. In several ethno-religious groups, gender has a huge impact on access to opportunities, freedoms, powers, and resources that one can have in a society. Moreover, it affects all important decisions in the life of an individual, especially those that are related to education, job, marriage, and migration. In many traditional societies, migration is highly gender sensitive, since who, how, when, why, and where will migrate, primarily depends on gender identity. Migration creates new challenges and opportunities for migrant men and women by placing them into a new socioeconomic context that often has different gender roles and expectations. The construction of gender identity in a group of immigrants, which has notable cultural differences from the host society and a short time of residence, is influenced by socioeconomic, demographic, cultural, and political changes in their country of origin ([Broughton 2008](#)). The 'Sikh community' is one of the immigrant groups in Italy and Spain, which is trying to construct their gender identity in the midst of socioeconomic and demographic transformation in their homeland.

Sikhism was founded by guru Nanak, the first Sikh guru, at the end of the 15th century and spread by his nine successors. After the death of the tenth guru, Gobind Singh, in 1708, the religious scripture '*Adi Granth*' was venerated as an eternal guru. Currently, the Sikh community is the fourth largest religious group in India after the Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. According to the 2011 Indian

census, Sikhism has 20.8 million followers in India, which represents 1.72% of its total population (i.e., 1210 million). In addition, over two million Sikhs live abroad in more than 50 countries around the world, which makes the global Sikh diaspora (Garha and Domingo 2017). Italy and Spain are recent additions to the countries of the Sikh diaspora, where large-scale migration started in the new millennium. Sikh gurus and saints were strong believers of gender equality (Kaur 2010). In principle, it is the only religion in India that allows women to wear turban (which is a symbol of masculinity for upper caste men in Hindu society), carry weapons with them, lead a congregation, and participate in all religious and social activities at any time of their life (Kaur Singh 2005a; Jakobsh 2014). However, despite the efforts made by the Sikh gurus and saints, the Sikh community remained patriarchal, where men had exclusive control over all religious, socioeconomic, and political activities, and women were limited to domestic chores (Kaur Singh 2000; Mahmood and Brady 2000; Jakobsh 2006, 2017). Consequently, even today, it is very difficult to find women in the position of *Granthi* (caretaker of religious scripture) or *Pardhaan* (head of gurudwara (Sikh temples) management committees) in India and in the Sikh diaspora. In many gurudwaras, they are not allowed to perform ministerial duties and enter *Sachkhand* (rest room for religious scripture) (Jakobsh and Walton-Roberts 2016). They are not permitted to perform rites of birth, initiation, marriage, and death. In many Sikh families, being mainly due to the practice of dowry, they are still considered to be a burden on family wealth. Currently, more and more parents have begun to invest in the education of daughters, but they still rarely receive a portion of their ancestral property, although inheritance laws entitle daughters to their fair share of property, due to the small size of Sikh families (two children). Their participation in the labour market, politics, and social life is very limited, which shows that 'the radically uplifting female concepts, symbols, and images permeating the *Guru Granth Sahib* are simply neglected [and] the fundamentally patriarchal culture of the Punjab has continued to reproduce male stream misogynistic interpretations [of the religious scriptures] (Kaur Singh 2005a). These misinterpretations of religious scriptures, given by male priests, resulted in greater control over women in Sikh families and their exclusion from the public sphere. It worked as a very efficient tool for establishing the hegemony of men in Sikh households and society at large during the last three centuries.

Over the past three decades, the Sikh community in India has witnessed three major changes in its socioeconomic and demographic configuration: first, large-scale emigration of poorly educated and unskilled Sikh men from rural areas of Punjab to the South European countries caused by the failure of agriculture and a drastic reduction in the recruitment of Sikh men in the Indian armed services (Khalidi 2001), which were their traditional occupations; second, the shortage of women in the Sikh marriage market due to selective abortions of female fetuses that were facilitated by the inappropriate use of ultrasound technologies in India (Kaur Singh 2008); and finally, the dissemination of women's higher education and their insertion in the labour market.¹ These changes, on the one hand, have left Sikh men without their traditional jobs and, on the other hand, have equipped Sikh women with higher education, which disrupts the power balance between both genders. These unemployed Sikh men, fearing the loss of their status as the breadwinners in the family, began to emigrate to the South European countries (such as Italy and Spain) in search of jobs. However, their poor education and lower skills have created new challenges in their new places of residence. In addition to their weak position in the labour market of the host countries, they are also challenged by more educated Sikh women in their homes, who in the past could not emigrate alone. However, after the completion of their studies, these women are looking for work or higher education in India or abroad. Unlike their mothers or grandmothers, they are neither limited to domestic work, nor completely submissive to male family members. They want to participate in the decision-making process regarding their own lives and other family and social matters. All of these changes have posed new challenges for Sikh

¹ According to 2011 census data, in the age group of 7 to 35 years, the number of women with university education is higher than men (97 thousand more women than men).

men to maintain their authority in their families and society at large and redefine their masculinity in a new socioeconomic and demographic context.

In previous research, the construction of masculinity in the Sikh community has not received significant attention from social scientists. Existing studies have focused on the role of military recruitment (Kohli 2016), land ownership and property (Chopra 2004), caste issues and presence in social media (Gill 2012), and the symbols of Sikh masculinity, such as the turban (Mandair 2005; Kalra 2005; Gill 2014; Chanda and Ford 2010). However, studies on the challenges facing Sikh men in constructing their gender identity in the new countries of the Sikh diaspora, such as Italy and Spain, are scarce (Lum 2016). The main objectives of this paper are: first, to explore the expectations of masculinity in the Sikh community in Italy and Spain, which provides standards for young men to construct their gender identity; second, to analyse the challenges that are posed by socioeconomic and demographic changes in the Sikh community in India for the construction of masculinity in both countries.

The main reasons behind the selection of Italy and Spain as areas of study are: first, these countries are a recent addition to the Sikh diaspora and they have received large-scale immigration of Sikh men since 1990 (Garha and Domingo 2017). These men are going through a period of socioeconomic and demographic transition of the Sikh community in India that is having a significant impact on their construction of masculinity. Secondly, the majority of Sikh immigrants in both countries belong to the first or one and a half generation (Garha and Paparusso 2018), who have less economic and social capital, which, in turn, makes them more vulnerable to changes in their country of origin when compared to Sikh men in other major destinations of the Sikh diaspora, such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and the US. Finally, due to their short stay in host countries, they present researchers with an excellent opportunity to study how Sikh men adapt or resist to their new context where gender equality is an important concern in all spheres of life.

2. Masculinity as a Social Construct

In previous studies, masculinity is widely described as socially and historically constructed phenomenon, rather than a result of genetic or biological differences between men and women (Clatterbaugh 1990; MacInnes 1998; Whitehead and Barrett 2001; Hibbins and Pease 2009; Jackson and Scott 2010). In other words, it is better understood what men do or are supposed to do, and then what they are (Kimmel 1994). According to Connell (2005a), masculinity only exists in contrast to femininity, so it does not exist in a culture that lacks a prescribed set of roles for men and women. It “consists of those behaviours languages and practices existing in specific cultural and organizational locations that are commonly associated with males and, thus, culturally defined as not feminine” (Itulua-Abumere 2013, p. 42). Men and women are constantly pressured to act according to the role prescribed to them because gender roles are predefined by society. Therefore, for men denying all other behaviours and practices that are considered as effeminate becomes an essential part of their gender construction. The level of masculinity depends on upbringing, family background, schools, the labour market, socioeconomic status, and culture, in which boys learn the male role through observation and feedback and become men (Edley and Wetherell 1995).

In American society ‘marketplace masculinity’, which is based on the ability of men to buy tangible goods, is used as a standard definition of manhood against which other forms are measured (Kimmel 1994, p. 124). It leaves many other groups with limited purchasing power, such as poor men, blacks, and women, in a subordinate position. Recently, the concept of neoliberal masculinity (Cornwall et al. 2016) highlights the constant struggle of men to accumulate and maintain their market value through self-exploitation. In relation to the Sikh community, Connell’s theoretical framework (Connell 1987, 2005a) on gender is very important, since it integrates the concepts of ‘patriarchy’ and ‘masculinity’ into the theory of gender relations, which are the most important characteristics of the Sikh community. Her concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’, which relies on Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, asserts that hegemonic masculinity is “constructed in relation to several subordinate masculinities, as well as in relation to women” (Connell 1987, p. 183). It is the most socially sanctioned

form of masculinity that subordinates other types, and it functions as the standard of masculinity that men follow and identify with psychologically (Ibid.). In this theory, the most important aspect is the hierarchal nature of masculinities that reinforces domination both within and between genders. Different historical periods had a certain type of hierarchical set up of masculinities in all human societies, according to [Connell \(2005b\)](#). In the colonial period, the imperial powers had created a masculinity scale to classify their subject groups into masculine 'martial races', such as the Sikhs, Rajputs, and Gorkhas, and effeminate groups, such as Bengalis ([Sinha 1995](#)).

Some scholars have criticised the dualism of hegemonic/subordinate masculinities to explain the complexity of gender power relations. In his article, [Demetriou \(2001\)](#) introduced the notion of "hegemonic masculine bloc" to eliminate this dualism. He suggests that a form of masculinity that is capable of reproducing patriarchy is in a constant process of negotiation, translation, hybridization, and reconfiguration. It implies that hegemonic masculinity is capable of transforming to adapt to the specificities of new historical conjunctures. He stresses that "the hegemonic bloc changes in a very deceptive and unrecognizable way through the negotiation, appropriation, translation, and transformation of what appears counter-hegemonic and progressive into an instrument of backwardness and patriarchal reproduction" ([Demetriou 2001](#), p. 355). Later, [Connell and Messerschmidt \(2005\)](#) reformulated the concept of hegemonic masculinity by "incorporating a more holistic grasp of gender hierarchy that recognizes the agency of subordinated groups as much as the power of hegemonic groups and that appreciates the mutual conditioning (intersectionality) of gender with such other social dynamics as class, race, age, sexuality, and nation" (as cited in [Messerschmidt 2012](#), p. 59). In recent research, some authors described hegemonic masculinity as "a set of values established by men in power that functions to include and exclude and to organize society in gender unequal ways, which combines several features: a hierarchy of masculinities differential access among men to power (over women and other men) and the interplay between men's identity, men's ideals, interactions power and patriarchy" ([Jewkes et al. 2015](#), p. 113). Although hegemonic masculinity is the most idealized and desired type of masculinity, it is not available to all men ([Connell and Messerschmidt 2005](#)). Men who enjoy hegemonic masculinity are also more prone to the crisis of masculinity with the loss of the breadwinner's role and their status in the family ([Coward 1999](#)). In this sense, [Connell \(2005a\)](#), p. 54 states "masculinity becomes vulnerable when for whatever reason gender performance breaks down". This breakdown of gender roles often results in the emergence to toxic masculinities ([Sculos 2017](#)) that use aggression, dominance, and violence as tools to maintain hegemony of men in the family and society. Despite its criticism, the reformulated concept of hegemonic masculinity ([Connell and Messerschmidt 2005](#)) offers a solid theoretical framework for understanding the nature, form, and dynamics of male power in the Sikh community, which is affected by caste and class differences.

Migration, as a global process, affects the construction of gender identities by changing the socioeconomic environment of the people involved ([Hugo 2000](#); [Parreñas 2005](#); [Ye 2014](#)). In their study of Kerala men, [Filipo Osella](#) and [Caroline Osella](#) illustrate how migration and the failure of migrant men to meet dominant social expectations impact their gender identity ([Osella and Osella 2000](#)). Similarly, [Gardner \(1995\)](#) highlights how the wealth earned and remitted by migrant men from Bangladesh contributes to the construction of their identity as 'men'. In general, migrants try to make a balance between the gender orders of their homeland and that of the host countries. They negotiate their gender identity according to their social context, which makes them susceptible to socioeconomic and demographic changes at both ends of their migration process (see [Broughton 2008](#) for Mexican migrants). Therefore, it is imperative to take into account changes in countries of origin and destination to study the ways in which gender identities are redefined in the new countries of residence ([Gutmann 2003](#)). In some recent studies, scholars have discovered that how the entrance of migrant women in the labour market and their assumption of the role of the main breadwinners of their families, disarticulate the ways in which men used to construct their masculine identity in the past ([Parreñas 2001](#); [Gamburd 2002](#)).

In the Sikh community, masculinity also known as *mardangi* in Hindi/Punjabi, is directly related to men's ability to meet their household needs, and have control over women. As [Connell \(2005b\)](#) claims that each historical period and society have a certain hierarchical configuration of masculinities, the upper-caste *Jatt* Sikh men, who still own a large part of the land and property in Punjab, represent the standard hegemonic masculinity in the Sikh community. The manhood of a *Jatt* man in Punjab is measured through his ability to plough the land and his influence in the social and political spheres ([Chopra 2004](#)). The turban, which is an important symbol of religious and cultural identity of Sikhs ([Chanda and Ford 2010](#)), is also a symbol of pride and manhood for the upper-caste Sikh men. In this paper, I will focus on how Sikh men construct their gender identity in Italy and Spain, where they immigrated in search of livelihoods and to make a space for them as men.

3. Data Source and Methodology

Fieldwork for this paper was carried out over a period of three years (2015–2018). The ethnographic research method, where the researchers observe and interact with the participants of a study in their real-life environment, was applied to gather information on the expectations of masculinity and the challenges facing Sikh men in the construction of their gender identity in Italy and Spain. In addition, 64 in-depth interviews were conducted with Sikh immigrants in Spain (26 interviews in January to September 2016) and Italy (22 interviews in January to April 2017) and some of their relatives (parents, spouses, or children) in the Indian Punjab (16 interviews in December 2017 to January 2018). The interviews were conducted in seven cities in Italy (Brescia, Rome, and Latina) and Spain (Barcelona, Girona, Valencia, and Murcia), which has a considerable number of Sikh immigrants. In India, interviews were conducted in Kapurthala, Jalandhar, and Hoshiarpur districts in the Doaba region of Punjab, which is the homeland of most Sikhs living in Italy and Spain.

Respondents in Italy and Spain were selected while using the snowball sampling technique and matched-sampling method was used to select respondents in India. For those interviewed in Italy and Spain, the eligibility criterion was that a person must be a Sikh, over 16 years of age and live permanently in either of these two countries. In India, the respondents were close relatives of the immigrants in Spain or Italy. In the total respondents, 42 were men and 22 women, which corresponds to the sex ratio of the Sikh community in both countries. The interviews were conducted with a semi-structured open-ended questionnaire. The immigrant respondents were asked to express themselves on the following topics: family history, migration process, main causes of migration, life in the country of destination, attitude towards gender roles, current socioeconomic condition, and future perspectives. The relatives of immigrants interviewed in India were asked to explain their role in the migration process and the consequences of immigration on their lives. The interviews were conducted at the respondent's place of residence in one of the following languages: Punjabi or English, thus making the interview as convenient as possible for the respondents. For a thematic analysis ([Boyatzis 1998](#)), all of the interviews were coded in the Atlas.ti computer programme. After transcribing the interviews, following the steps mentioned by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#) for the thematic analysis, the topics that were highlighted by the respondents were searched and coded with some initial codes. Subsequently, the families of the initial codes were formed to classify information related to a topic in one place of all interviews. This prepared the primary data for analysis. Subsequently, patterns and themes related to the construction of gender identity were sought in all interviews. Several quotations were selected to present different views on the construction of masculinity in the Sikh community in Italy and Spain.

4. Sikh Masculinity in Italy and Spain

The pioneer Sikhs entered Italy during World War II as the British Imperial army ([Bedi 2011](#)), but their large-scale immigration began in the 1990s ([Garha and Domingo 2019](#)). In this influx, a large number of young men with little education and skills entered Italy in search of manual jobs, regularisation, and opportunities for permanent settlement. It established Italy as an important destination in the Sikh diaspora. In 2018, after the United Kingdom, Italy had the highest number of Sikhs in Europe. The sex-ratio (males per female) of the Sikh population has always been in favour of

men due to the predominance of men in the total influx. Most Sikh women entered Italy with family visas, as wives or daughters of the immigrants. The Sikhs are mainly concentrated in Lombardy and Lazio regions of Italy. In Lombardy, the province of Brescia, Bergamo, and Mantua are their main destinations, while, in the Lazio region, they are concentrated in the provinces of Rome and Latina (Garha 2019). Their main occupations are dairy farming, agriculture, and manual labour in small-scale food processing, leather, and metal industry (Sahai and Lum 2013).

In Spain, the first Sikhs entered in the late 1970s (Santos-Fraile 2013), but their numbers were relatively small and concentrated in the La Rioja region of Spain (López-Sala 2013). A large-scale influx of young unskilled and poorly educated Sikh men to Spain began in the late 1990s. According to the National Statistical Institute (INE), in 2018, the size of the Sikh population in Spain was 26,200, of which two-thirds were men of working age. They settled along with the Mediterranean coast of Spain. Currently, the autonomous community of Catalonia has half of the total Sikh population in Spain. It also has 10 of the total 21 gurudwaras (Sikh temples) in Spain (Garha and Domingo 2017). After Catalonia, the autonomous communities of Valencia, Murcia, and the Balearic Islands have a considerable number of Sikhs. They are mainly engaged in the catering, agriculture, and construction sectors and they have a very low socioeconomic profile (Garha and Domingo 2019).

When compared to other destinations in the Sikh diaspora (such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States) that attract high skilled workers or students, Italy and Spain are new destination countries for low skilled Sikh emigrants from middle-class farmer families, who can pay money for irregular entries through tourist visas. In both countries, the Sikh community is highly masculinized and they have a very low level of integration into the host societies due to the remarkable cultural differences (language, religion and education) with the host population and lower education (Garha and Paparusso 2018).

Expectations of Masculinity in the Sikh Community in Italy and Spain

As each society has its unique set of gender roles and expectations from different gender identities, before studying the challenges for the construction of masculinity, it is imperative to explore what it means 'to be a man' or 'expectations of masculinity' in the Sikh community in Italy and Spain. Currently, most Sikh men in both countries were born and raised in India. Their early life in the rural areas of Punjab, where the social structure is highly patriarchal, has a very strong impact on their ideas regarding gender roles, and the position of men and women in society. During my regular visits to Sikh temples and the time I spent with Sikh families in Italy and Spain, I gathered opinions of Sikh men of different age groups (from 20 to 60 years) regarding their perception of a "real man". With a detailed analysis of interviews and field notes, I discovered that Sikh men in both countries construct and measure their masculinity on the bases of four factors: physical and psychological strength, moral character, economic and political power, and the degree of control over women. First, masculinity is seen as being directly related to the physical strength of men. Tall and muscular men are considered to be more masculine when compared to others (short, fat, slim, or disabled men). These others are always mocked because of their physical appearance, and struggle to construct their masculinity. In this sense, Harman, 24, a student in Brescia, says that "strong, muscular and tall men always gain more respect compared to slim, short and fat men, who are often bullied by others". In addition, physical appearance is considered a very important aspect of normative Sikh identity due to the dominance of the Khalsa tradition. The long beard, moustaches, and turban are considered to be essential masculine traits for all Sikh men. The clean shaved men are often categorised as effeminate or less masculine. As Gurnaam, 56, a member of gurudwara committee in Barcelona, says that "men with turban and beard are complete men. All others [clean shaved men] are like sheep and goats, they should not be called as men". The demonstration of physical strength through participation in combat sports, such as wrestling and Kabaddi, and some risky behaviours, such as getting into bodily fights with other men, driving fast, and overworking, are also considered to be manly attributes. The growing interest among young Sikh men in Italy and Spain to participate in annual Kabaddi tournaments and spend time bodybuilding are clear examples of their awareness of their physical appearance, which is

an important element of their masculinity. In addition to physical strength, Sikh men are also expected to be psychologically stable and less expressive. While describing the characteristics of an ideal man, Major, 34, a restaurant worker in Barcelona, says that “real men do not cry for small things and accept life’s challenges with a smile. They keep their promises and do not hesitate to die for their honour”. Showing weak emotions in public is forbidden for Sikh men, as it can jeopardize their status as ‘strong men’ in the family and society.

Second, in the Sikh community, high moral character is considered to be an essential masculine characteristic. Sikh men are expected to have qualities, such as truthfulness, honesty, kindness, fidelity, faithfulness to their religion, and respect for others. Sikh history and folk music glorify the warriors and saints, who had demonstrated high levels of morality. In his interview, Harnam, 35, an agriculture worker in Murcia, Spain, explains that “real men have faith in god and do not cheat anyone. They are kind and helpful to others”. Sikh religion strictly prohibits men from having intimate relationships before marriage. Instead, all men are encouraged to marry Sikh women of adequate age and remain faithful to her throughout their lives. In this regard, Jeet, 32, a factory worker in Rome, states that “real men always remain faithful to their partner. They treat all other women as mothers, sisters, or daughters. Throughout our history, Sikh warriors have sacrificed their own lives while saving the lives and honour of women from other communities”. The high moral standards of Sikh masculinity, on the one hand, do not allow promiscuous behaviour in the community and, on the other hand, promotes endogamy as an essential characteristic of real men. It is one of the main reasons behind the dependence of Sikh men on their homeland marriage market for their marriages and the low number of mixed marriages in the Sikh community in both countries.

Third, as in the Sikh community, all men are expected to assume the role of breadwinner, being active in the labour market is an important feature of masculinity (see marketplace masculinity by [Kimmel 1994](#)). Most Sikh men emigrate to assume the role of provider for their families due to the lack of opportunities in India. In fact, for them, ‘emigration’ is a way to demonstrate their manliness. An easy adaptability in harsh working conditions and a willingness to perform all of the tasks entrusted by employers are highly valued masculine traits in the Sikh community in Italy and Spain. Malkit, 36, an agriculture worker in Latina, states that “real men do all jobs offered to them. They do not cry doing hard-work”. Some Sikh men believe that ‘money’ is a very important factor in earning respect in society. For them, their main duty is to earn money with a respectful work, which helps them to prove their worth in the family and society. Gurjit, 32, a construction worker in Barcelona, affirms that “If you do not have money, big house and luxury cars, nobody respects you in the society. A man is valued by what he owns”. Others believe that for a man to spend money on friends or doing charity for social or religious causes is as important as taking care of his own family. Sikh men are expected to be generous with others, regardless of their religion, caste, and colour. Self-centred men are always classified as less manly than others. Kamal, 33, a truck-driver in Madrid, says that “money is not something important for real men. It comes and goes, but real men do not lose their character in difficult situations”. The ability to have a large social circle is also considered to be a manly trait. An active social life and participation in community affairs stand out as essential characteristics of Sikh men. Therefore, they invest a lot of time and resources in expanding their social networks. In Italy and Spain, the wide social network not only translates into high social status, but also provides support in search for employment and accommodation and facilitates the process of regularisation in host countries. Kuldeep, 28, a shop worker in Valencia, affirms that “the power of a man can only be measured through his social circle. Real men like to have a large social circle that supports them to gain power in society and politics”.

The fourth important factor in measuring the level of masculinity is the degree of control over women. In general, Sikh men are expected to have some control over women (wife, sisters, and daughters) in the family and society. In almost all Sikh families, men assume the role of the head of family, due to the strong patriarchal structure of the Sikh community and the early migration of men in Italy and Spain. They feel that this is their legitimate right and that women must respect their decisions

5. Major Challenges Facing Sikh Men in Italy and Spain

In the Sikh community, all men are expected to remain active in the labour market and provide resources for their families due to the prevalence of the male-breadwinner model. For centuries, agriculture has been the main occupation for Sikh men in India. Traditionally, Sikh men have used their abilities to plough the land and produce food in large quantities to demonstrate their manliness in society. In the 1960s, the government of India began a pilot project called 'Green Revolution' in Punjab. Agricultural production increased remarkably and Punjab became the bread-basket of India due to the mechanization of agriculture and the use of new high-yielding varieties of seeds and chemical fertilizers (Dutta 2012). The rampant commercialization of agriculture and exclusive land-ownership rights accumulated economic powers in the hands of men and strengthened the patriarchal structure of Sikh society. However, at the same time, the mechanization of agriculture reduced its dependence on muscle power, which left large numbers of unemployed youth.

After agriculture, the second main occupation of Sikh men in Punjab was to serve in the armed forces. With the creation of the Khalsa in 1699, the glorification of men as brave soldiers promoted a hyper-masculine culture in Punjab (Kaur Singh 2005). Later, under colonial rule, the categorisation of the Sikhs as a "martial race" and their recruitment into the British imperial army in a disproportionately large numbers strengthened patriarchy in the Sikh society (Kaur Singh 2005a). The pride that was associated with the position of a soldier and the good income received in the form of land or cash provided the basic ingredients for the construction of traditional Sikh masculinity for many generations of Sikh men. The dominance of Sikh men in the Indian armed forces remained until the 1980s, but, after the battle of succession in Punjab, the recruitment of Sikh men in the armed forces was drastically reduced. It left a large number of Sikh men without their traditional jobs. In addition, the political crisis exacerbated economic conditions in Punjab and no investments were made to create employment opportunities in the state (Ghuman 2012). At the same time, the neoliberal shift in Indian economic policies in the 1990s destroyed the public education system and vocational training centres in Punjab (Kumar 2008, 2016), which deprived the youth of higher education and good health services.

The failure of agriculture, the lower recruitment in the armed forces, and the lack of infrastructure (education and vocational training facilities) led to the creation of a pool of unskilled and poorly educated young men who were not eligible for the government jobs in India or professional jobs abroad. Therefore, most of these unskilled men began to emigrate to the Western countries to assume the role of bread-winner expected from them. Ranjit, 38, a restaurant worker in Barcelona, explains:

"I was born in a Sikh family. My grandfather was a farmer in a small village on the banks of the Beas river in the Kapurthala district of Indian Punjab. He had the largest share of land in the village. He was very proud of his ability to plough the land and feed the family of 16 members, including his own 9 children. He was the supreme authority in the family and due to his strong personality, intelligence, hardworking and generous nature, he had earned a lot of respect (*Izzat*) in society. People used to call him *Sardar Ji* and for many he was a perfect model of 'what a man ought to be'. My grandmother was a housewife. She was fully dedicated to the service of her husband and the care of children ... My father, at the age of 20, was recruited in the Indian army to serve the nation in the 1971 battle with Pakistan. With his strong physique, good command over military weapons and acts of bravery in war, he earned respect as a brave soldier in the army and in society at large. In addition, with the salary received as a government employee, he managed to assume the role of breadwinner of the family. My mother is a housewife. She spent her entire life serving her husband, in-laws family and then taking care of her 4 children ... I, as the first grandson of a proud farmer and the eldest son of a brave soldier, grew up in the shadow of two very dominant men, who were very proud of their achievements in life. In my early childhood, I was taught to be bold, courageous, protective and provider. When I turned 20, the mechanization of agriculture had reduced employment opportunities in the village, and due to the *Khalistani* movement in

Punjab in 1984, the recruitment of Sikhs into the Indian army was at its lowest level. I had few opportunities to prove my worth in the family, therefore, in 2004, I emigrated to Spain to earn a living and a space in society as a ‘man’”.

This is not a rare case, rather it is a repeated story in many interviews and speaks of the challenges facing Sikh men in India to construct their masculinity. They are desperate to emigrate from Punjab, as they understand this to be an opportunity to prove their worth to their families and to establish themselves as providers. Even in the South European countries, they are denied legal access and work permits due to less demand for unskilled labour. Therefore, most of them emigrate illegally, paying huge sums of money to human traffickers and enter countries where the process of regularisation is relatively easier, such as Spain and Italy as compared to other European countries (Garha and Domingo 2017). The dangers that are involved in illegal migration are also seen as opportunities for young Sikh men to show their courage. Balkar, 47, father of an irregular immigrant, states that “when irregular immigrants return to India after regularising their legal status, they tell their stories of illegal emigration with great pride to show their courage and manliness, and to earn respect of their parents, younger siblings, and friends”. This has promoted a new form of neoliberal masculinity in the Sikh community that encourages young men to risk their lives and properties to satisfy the requirement of being active in the labour market.

In Italy and Spain, the life of irregular immigrants is full of hardships, where irregular immigrants cannot work in the formal labour market and have no social protection at the time of unemployment or illness. The difficult journeys undertaken by Sikh men to enter Europe do not help them improve their market value and demonstrate their worth in the family through remittances. This adds to their previous difficulties and generates a huge psychological stress regarding the construction of their gender identity. As Tarlok, 29, an irregular immigrant in Latina, says “I do not have papers and work. I cannot remit money to my family. I feel very depressed because my wife has to work in India to feed our son. I am not fulfilling my duty as head of the family”. Due to the restrictions in the labour market, most irregular Sikh men have no other choice than to work in the shadow economy for their survival. The lack of labour contracts, which safeguard the rights of workers in European countries, make them vulnerable to exploitation by their employers who pay them low wages and treat them as slaves. Young Sikh men that are trapped in these working conditions lose their self-esteem and sometimes end up feeling helpless and depressed. Manreet, 29, a farm worker in Brescia, explains: “We have no money or respect in the host society. Employers here treat us like slaves because they know we do not have papers [legal work and residence permit]. It gives us a sense of impotency”. This sense of helplessness often results in drug/alcohol abuse, which further produces elements of toxic masculinity in the Sikh community. Even after the regularisation of their legal status, they remain occupationally segregated in some poorly paid jobs in the agriculture and service sectors due to their limited skills and knowledge of the host languages (Italian or Spanish) and segmented nature of host labour markets. This affects their financial stability and upward social mobility, considered to be essential elements for the construction of Sikh masculinity.

The factors that are central to the construction of traditional Sikh masculinity in India (i.e., land ownership, luxurious homes, upper caste, and job in the armed services), lose their importance in Italy and Spain. Especially, the upper caste Jatt Sikh men who have enjoyed a high social status and represent the hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) in the Indian Sikh community, feel the burden of proving themselves in this new context, where they lack their social and economic capital. As Jagjit, 27, a farm worker in Latina, explained that: “In Punjab, we were landowners. The workers from Bihar and UP used to work on our fields. We had respect in the society. Here we work under ill-mannered managers, who treat us like slaves. It damages our self-esteem”. The turban and long beard, which are the important symbols of masculinity in India, have also lost their importance in Italy and Spain. Here, young Sikh men hesitate to wear a turban as they believe that it will reduce their chances of getting jobs in restaurants and sales sectors, which are their main occupations in the host countries. Manpreet, 24, a restaurant worker in Valencia, affirms that “In Spain, it is very difficult

for a Sikh man with a turban and beard to get a job in the service sector. Restaurant employers do not hire people with long hairs or beard”.

In summary, the irregular legal status, the low level of education and skills, the lack of social and economic capital, the poor working conditions in the host labour markets, and the restrictions on the symbols of Sikh masculinity are negatively affecting young Sikh men, who are constructing their gender identity in Italy and Spain. They live in the nostalgic memories of their past life in the rural areas of Punjab, where they were landowners and had high socioeconomic status in society.

5.1. Losing Control over Women

Over the past three decades, the shortage of women in the reproductive age groups and the spread of higher education among women has begun to change the position and aspiration of Sikh women in India and abroad. The Sikh community has begun to witness a shortage of women in the marital and reproductive age groups due to the preference of the male child and the widespread practice of selective abortion of female fetuses (Purewal 2010). According to the 2011 India census, the sex-ratio of the Sikh population was 110.7 men per 100 women. Men outnumbered women in all age groups and the greatest difference was in the age group of 0 to 6 years, i.e., 121 boys for 100 girls. It was far from the overall sex-ratio (around 105 boys for 100 girls) within other religious communities in India. The second major social change in the Sikh community is the growing number of women with higher education. In traditional Sikh society, girls were not allowed to have higher education and they were encouraged to learn domestic work. Therefore, it was easy for men to control their lives and impose their decisions on them. However, with the expansion of higher education among women and their insertion in the labour market, women within traditional Sikh society are insisting on their right to choose their own futures. This desire to become independent sometimes clashes with the interests of men (husband, father, or brothers) in the family, who in the name of family honour expect the total submission of women (wife, daughter, or sister) to their authority. This empowerment of women has posed new challenges for Sikh men (husbands, fathers, or brothers), who do not want to give up their privileges and struggle to construct their masculinity in a new social context where gender equality is protected by the law and highly valued in all spheres of life.

5.1.1. Challenges for Partners

In the new destinations of the Sikh diaspora, such as Italy and Spain, where the influx of migrants is mainly made up of single men, most of them depend on the marriage market in Punjab to search for their partner. The number of mixed-marriages is very small due to their low socioeconomic status in the host countries, expected endogamy, and the restrictions imposed by religion (the Sikh code of conduct prohibits marriages with non-Sikhs). The shortage of women in marital and reproductive age groups and the growing interest of women in marrying men settled in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom have exacerbated the situation for Sikh men in Italy and Spain². As Gurpal, 27, a farm worker in Latina, Italy, explained “In Punjab, most women want to marry men who are settled in Canada, the United Kingdom, or the United States of America. Sikh men in Italy, Spain, Portugal, or Greece have no value in Sikh marriage market”. For Sikh men, who have undertaken dangerous journeys to enter Europe and worked hard to establish themselves in Europe, rejection in the marriage market of their community is a matter of shame. They are afraid of being left behind, which affects their self-esteem. Jeevan, 29, a factory worker in Rome, explains “For the past three years, my family could not find a suitable bride for me. When they tell girl’s parent that I live in Italy, they refuse. I am afraid I will die ‘Shada’ [a derogatory term for a single man]”.

² In addition to the better economic condition and the English language, this interest is also driven by the fact that it creates the possibilities of migration of other family members, such as siblings and spouse’s parents (see Mooney 2006).

Even when they manage to marry a girl in Punjab, they struggle, as they face the reality of more educated and non-submissive partner. The education gap with their wives makes them insecure about their position as head of household, which they perceive as an attack on their masculinity. In this sense, Gagandeep, 34, a farm worker in Latina, says that “now in Punjab girls are very demanding. They do not listen to their in-laws and if the husband says something, they threaten him with divorce. The day is not far when men have to follow the orders of their wives, as they do in Europe or Americas”. The more educated wives do not hesitate to remind them about their low education and demand participation in all family decisions. Most of the men married to more educated women advise others to avoid marrying a more educated woman than themselves. Harjinder, 31, a restaurant worker in Barcelona, says that “I advise all single men not to marry a ‘Master’ girl [with a Master’s degree]. It is better to remain single than to marry them. They treat their husbands like crap and make them feel inferior throughout their lives”.

Similarly, the entry of women into the labour market has also changed the balance of power between men and women in Sikh households in Italy and Spain. Working women have begun to demand their rights to leisure and the participation of men in domestic and reproductive work, which often creates domestic conflicts. Most Sikh men find it embarrassing to do housework when their wives work outside. They take it as a direct attack on their masculinity. Even when some of them do take part in domestic work, they are afraid of being labelled as less manly by their friends and family. Kulbir, 38, a salesman in Rome, explains that “my wife works in a gift shop. I do all the domestic work when she is away. But in our community, if you do domestic work people make fun of you. So I don’t tell anyone about this, not even to my parents because they have a very traditional thinking”.

In the Sikh community, men usually migrate first and then bring their wives, but, in some cases, girls who have emigrated with their parents also reunite with their husbands from India. The Sikh men who emigrate after marrying a Sikh woman in Italy or Spain feel enormous stress to prove their manliness. Traditionally, it is considered to be shameful for a man to live in his spouse’s house. Therefore, after arriving Italy or Spain, getting a permanent job and renting an apartment become the main tasks for sponsored husbands. Newly arrived Sikh men find it difficult to find good jobs and rent apartments in the host countries due to cultural and language differences. Additionally, if the wife is working outside of the home, these men are expected to do domestic work, which hurts their manhood. Tarinder, 29, a restaurant worker in Barcelona, explains that “I immigrated with a family visa to join my wife in Spain. Initially, it was very difficult to adapt to this new situation . . . I used to avoid Sikh people because they often see me with disrespect . . . Now I have a decent job and a beautiful apartment. Now I feel comfortable with my male ego”.

5.1.2. Challenges for Parents

In the Sikh community, the honour of the family is the most important thing and the responsibility for keeping it high rests with the women (Viridi 2012). They are often considered to be the jewels of the ‘turban’ of their father and brothers, the turban being a symbol of masculinity in Indian society. During the last decade, the attitude of Sikh parents in India and abroad has changed with respect to the education of their daughters and their access to the labour market. Currently, most of them are proud to send their daughters to universities and professional colleges for higher education and vocational training, instead of saving money to pay the dowry at the time of their wedding. For fathers, the respect earned in society by giving a huge amount of dowry in the past has been replaced by the pride earned in the form of daughters who managed to obtain a university degree or a position in the labour market. Kirpal, 48, a shop owner in Madrid, says that “My daughter has completed a nursing course. Now she can have a permanent job at a local hospital. I am very proud of her. As a father, I have done my duty”. The dissemination of higher education has changed the opinion of young women regarding the gender roles that are expected from them. They have begun to demand their rights and participation in decisions that are related to their lives. In this situation, the same fathers who have

spent resources to educate their daughters and make them independent feel deceived by their desire to take control of their lives. Mukhtiar, 47, a construction worker in Barcelona, expressed concerns as “I sent my daughters for higher education. As a father I have done my job. But now it’s up to them to maintain my respect in society. If they do not follow my decisions now, then it will be a punishment for a father who supported his daughters”. It is common to find fathers who struggle to cope with these issues and, in turn, blame modernization or social-media for spoiling their daughters.

The growing educational gap between Sikh men and women in India has posed a new challenge of having equally educated matches in the community. As the number of highly educated women is growing faster than men, it has become very difficult for their parents to find suitable spouses for them within the community. In his interview, Gurmukh, 49, a construction worker in Barcelona, explained “I have two daughters with university degrees. Both are in the age of marriage. I am looking for good matches in our community, but it is very difficult to find well-educated men in the Sikh community. I am worried about their future”. Parents often feel compelled to marry their daughters to less educated men, which sometimes create generational and class conflicts. The daughters who resist parent’s decisions regarding their marriage often receive severe punishments. In extreme cases, it also results in forced marriages or honour killings, which are registered in India and other countries of the Sikh diaspora (Deol 2014). No such cases have yet been registered in Italy and Spain.

Cohabitation is not allowed in the Sikh community for both sexes, but the rules are much more rigid for women than for men. Therefore, one can find Sikh men who live with European or Latin American women, but it is very difficult to find Sikh women who live in cohabitation relationships. For Sikh fathers, it is a disgrace if their daughters leave home to live with someone outside of marriage, even if he is a Sikh. Gurlal, 54, a businessman in Barcelona, expressed his opinion about living together as “If a girl leaves her family to enter into a living together relationship, it is a shame for the whole family. No Sikh father will allow this to happen”. In Spain and Italy, the institution of marriage is losing its importance and the number of cohabitating couples is growing rapidly. Young Sikh girls who are in schools and universities, witness this transformation in the host society. At times, they long for the same freedoms that are entirely unacceptable to their fathers (and families in general). This, in turn, might lead to generational conflicts and even domestic violence.

Control over women also includes control over sisters by elder or younger brothers. For Sikh men, any disrespect toward their sisters is a direct attack on their masculinity. They do everything possible to ensure the safety and well-being of their sisters, which at times translates into excessive control over their freedom to eat or drink whatever they want, dress as they want, and be in the company of a person they like. This excessive control often creates frictions between brothers and sisters regarding their freedoms to live their lives as they wish. Many brothers in Italy and Spain claim that any act of their sisters, which is considered to be inappropriate for a girl in the Sikh community, will profoundly damage their respect and position as men in society. Simran, 28, a restaurant worker in Barcelona, says that “If your sister does inappropriate things, such as drinking alcohol, wearing short cloths, or spend time with guys at night parties, you have all rights to punish her, even if she is elder than you. As a man, it’s your responsibility to have control”.

In Italy and Spain, challenged by their wives, daughters, or sisters, who have their own wishes and plans about their lives, and the protection granted by the laws of the host countries against any kind of aggression, these husbands, fathers, and brothers struggle to live with their new realities that clash with their ideas about their own gender identity and the desired hegemonic masculinity.

6. Conclusions

Gender has always been a very complex issue in the Sikh community. For the past three centuries, contrary to the teachings of the Sikh religion, the Sikh society remained patriarchal, where men had full control over social, economic, and political affairs and women were limited to domestic chores. The traditional occupations of Sikh men in agriculture and armed services and misogynistic social norms and practices prevalent in the broader Indian society, facilitated the reproduction and strengthening of

the patriarchal structure of Sikh society. It helped Sikh men to construct their masculinity as protectors and providers for their families. The centrality of upper caste men in the public sphere, their exclusive control over resources, and control over women become essential ingredients for the construction of hegemonic Sikh masculinity.

In the last two decades, the loss of traditional occupations and the fear of losing the breadwinner's role have expelled Sikh men from rural India to South European countries, such as Italy and Spain. In addition to the labour force, they have also brought their ideas about gender roles and the expected form of traditional Sikh masculinity to their new destinations. They have very high expectations of masculinity, which stem from the folkloric history of the Sikhs and they represent an idealised form of real man in the Indian context, one who is physically and psychologically strong, economically well-off, dominant, highly moral, and heterosexual. Sikh men in Italy and Spain aspire to have all these traits, but, due to their low skills, irregular status, and lack of social and economic capital, struggle to construct their desired form of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Rather, the self-exploitation of Sikh men to earn money working in harsh conditions bring on elements of neoliberal masculinity (Cornwall et al. 2016) in the Sikh community, which encourages young Sikh men to risk their lives on dangerous journeys to irregularly enter Europe.

In addition to the challenges in the economic sphere, the traditional configuration of gender roles has been challenged due to the shortage of women in marital and reproductive age groups and the dissemination of higher education for women in the Sikh community in India. Men have started losing control over women. More educated Sikh women do not want to marry less educated men in Italy and Spain, which leaves a large number of Sikh men with no chance of getting a bride in the Sikh community. This rejection in the marriage market harms their self-respect. They feel uncomfortable with their more educated wives, even if they manage to marry a girl with higher level of education than their own. These wives do not hesitate to contradict them when it comes to their rights and freedoms. The fear of being rejected in the marriage market and marrying a woman with more education generates anxiety among Sikh men regarding their position in the family and construction of their desired form masculinity. As parents, Sikh men have begun to support their daughters to get higher education, but they still struggle to give them total freedom to choose their partners and lifestyles of their own choice. This fear and insecurity at times manifests itself in the form of excessive control, aggression, and domestic violence, which creates the elements of toxic masculinity (Sculos 2017) in the Sikh community in both countries.

The Sikh community has been in Italy and Spain for a relatively short time span. Most Sikh men belong to the first generation and their ideas about gender roles are more influenced by their home society, which is highly patriarchal. Their attempts to maintain total authority in the family often leads to domestic violence and generational conflicts, which is not a healthy sign for any human society. Now the time has come when Sikh men in Italy and Spain have to rethink their perception of masculinity, shedding the toxic elements, including aggression, dominance, and control, and renouncing their full authority in their family and social spaces. In their new socioeconomic context, they have to negotiate their position in their families and in society on more equal terms (as suggested by Demetriou 2001). In this regard, Sikh men that are born and educated in Italy and Spain, who are more exposed to the host society (in which gender equality is fully respected), can play an important role in creating an egalitarian Sikh society, dreamed of and preached about by all Sikh gurus centuries ago.

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Article

Vulnerable Masculinities? Gender Identity Construction among Young Undocumented Sikh Migrants in Paris

Christine Moliner

Jindal School of International Affairs, O.P. Jindal Global University, Haryana 131001, India; christinemoliner@gmail.com

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Abstract: This paper discusses the impact of immigration policies on the ways young undocumented Sikh migrants in Paris negotiate their masculinity. The current criminalization of labor migration from the global South in Europe is disrupting long established patterns of upward mobility through international migration, that entailed remitting money home, getting married and reuniting with one's family in the host country and moving up the socio-professional ladder from low-paid jobs to self employment. Instead, the life of an increasing number of Sikh migrants in France and elsewhere is marked by irregular status and socio-economic vulnerability. In this context, undocumented Sikh migrants try to assert their gender identity in multiple ways, characterized by homosociality, the importance of manual labor, specific forms of male sociability marked by the cultivation of their body, while remaining firmly grounded in a Sikh/Panjabi religious universe through *sewa* (voluntary service) and gurdwara attendance.

Keywords: Sikhs in France; undocumented migration; masculinity; construction sector; fitness; philanthropy

1. Introduction

This article seeks to address some gaps in Panjabi/Sikh Diaspora studies, namely the lack of engagement with undocumented migration, all the more surprising that the latter has become a prevalent pattern in current migration flows from Indian Panjab to Europe. The specific experience of Panjabi *kabooter* (pigeons, irregular migrants) has started to be addressed in Panjabi popular culture, in numerous films and songs, but remains silenced in academic literature. One reason pertains to the theoretical framework that has become dominant in migration studies, and more specifically in studies of the Sikh diaspora: transnationalism. It accounts for the intense and multiple ties and connections sustained by migrants across borders, and allowed by technologies of travel and communication. Some major contributions to the field have hence explored a wide range of transnational practices and highlighted issues of institutionalization, socio-economic incorporation, identity politics and religious and cultural transmission. But none of this addresses the specific experience of irregular migrants, nor the material conditions of migration. Another reason might be that this category of migrants represents the hidden face of the enterprising, law-abiding, gurdwara-focused Sikh diaspora and an embarrassing reality for their well-settled and documented counterparts, that perceive themselves as a model minority, as well as for the Indian State and its diplomatic representatives abroad.

I will here explore how their irregular status shapes Panjabi men's experience of migration in France, and more particularly how they negotiate their masculinity in the face of an unprecedented set of socio-economic and legal constraints, which confine them to low-paid, exhausting jobs, a position of inferiority and subordination vis-à-vis well settled migrants and social invisibility and marginalization within their community and the wider society. After discussing the contribution of masculinity

studies to my research topic, I will investigate the social world of manual labor that plays a major role in the making of working-class immigrant manhood. The construction sector where most of them are employed operates as a highly gendered and ethnically segmented social space, where as undocumented newcomers, they occupy a subordinated position. The various practices of cultivation of their body (fitness and bodybuilding, hair styling and dyeing, tattooing). can be analyzed as a response to situations of alienation and domination, while also pertaining to a new globalized male aesthetic glorifying the muscular, bearded and hypermasculine body. Lastly, we will explore how ethics and religious beliefs and practices contribute to shaping spaces of self-respect, collective belonging as well as resilience and resistance to their vulnerability.

2. Methodology

The empirical data used in this research has been collected over several years during informal interviews with about twenty undocumented Panjabi/Sikh migrants in different settings: a day care center for homeless people with an addictive condition;¹ the Singh Sabha gurdwara, the main gurdwara located in the Northeastern suburbs of Paris; a small Panjabi restaurant whose owner belongs to the gurdwara management committee; private homes and public parks. It has also involved a great deal of long-term participant observation in those social spaces. My interviewees were men aged between their early twenties and late forties, with the vast majority of them being in their twenties. Most were single, except for the eldest among them who had got married in India before migrating. The medium used to communicate was predominantly Panjabi, with a mixture of French and English words (or more precisely, their frequently distorted pronunciation of the French terminology borrowed from the building sector, as quoted below). Working among undocumented male migrants involves a set of challenges, the main one being the social asymmetries and underlying power relations between a white middle-aged French woman and young irregular migrants. All of them were approached either through common acquaintances, amongst well-settled families or individuals that I had met at the gurdwara or in the day care center where I worked for a while. The most important factors that helped to bridge the gap between us were the use of their mother tongue and my fieldwork experience and knowledge of their place of origin, the Panjab, particularly of a cluster of villages in Doaba, where most of them originate from. Interestingly, the very fact that their knowledge both of the language and of the land was far more intimate and experiential than mine somehow contributed to rebalance our asymmetrical relations and created forms of commonality and familiarity. My status as a researcher was difficult to ascertain: in the day care center, migrants originally mistook me for a social worker, and despite my recurrent clarifications, I was regularly asked to translate administrative documents and mediate between users and the staff. It was easier to explain my work to my interviewees met outside of that institutional setting, and most of the time they seemed truly interested in sharing their plight with an empathic listener.

Panjabi and Sikh as categories are used in this paper in an almost interchangeable manner, along with the term Indian and this requires some clarification. Panjabi refers to a regional identity based on a common language, the cultural heritage, social practices, values and norms shared by Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus alike and infused with a marked nostalgia for pre-partition undivided Panjab, idealized as a unique space of communal harmony. In a migration context though, it tends to be equated with Sikhs only, while Panjabi Muslims primarily identify themselves as Pakistanis (Panjabi Hindus are numerically insignificant in France). The usefulness of those categories obviously varies, depending on the context. The migrants interviewed self-identify mostly as Panjabis, when they are in a community

¹ From 2009 to 2014, I conducted a research at the Beaufort Centre, a day care center located in an ethnically diverse neighborhood of Paris, where I worked as a consultant anthropologist on a specific health project aimed at Panjabi undocumented migrants, most of whom demonstrated severe forms of alcoholism (for a more detailed presentation of the project, see Kirpalani et al. 2015). I have chosen not to address the issue of addiction, as this has been the focus of previous publications (ibid.)

environment and as Indians in their interactions with outsiders. The religious category as Sikh tends to be restricted to the institutional setting of the gurdwara. This is not to signify that religion is a negligible factor, but it is mediated by a wide range of additional identifications and social relations.

Finally, the conspicuous absence of caste has to be accounted for. Caste plays a major role in the migration process, in the way migrants, including undocumented ones, have better access to resources and networks depending on their caste affiliation. However, it is my contention that in the French context, residence status constitutes the decisive factor accounting for internal stratification and hierarchy as well as discrimination and exploitation, much more than caste.

3. Sikhs in France: The Community's Profile

Because ethnic and religious data cannot legally be collected in France, except for research purposes, ethnic and religious groups are statistically invisible. Sikhs who have retained their Indian citizenship are subsumed under the Indian national category, and those who have acquired French nationality are categorized as French (Moliner 2016). For that reason, one has to rely on estimates provided by the local authorities, putting their numbers at 25,000. Sikh migration to France and continental Europe is a recent phenomenon, starting in the late 1970s and 1980s when the United Kingdom, the preferred European destination for migrants from South Asia, closed its doors to further labor migration from Commonwealth countries. Interestingly, it occurred after the French government had officially put an end to labor migration in 1974, so that most first-generation Sikh (and South Asian) migrants have experienced some form or another of irregular administrative status, with respect to their journey, entry, and work or residence status.

Sikh migration history to France can be divided into four major stages (Moliner 2016). The pioneer phase saw a handful of Sikhs arrive in the late 1970s and early 1980s as undocumented immigrants in Belgium or Germany first, from whence they moved on to France. They lived in extremely precarious conditions, without permanent housing or job, unable to speak a word of French. Most of the pioneers benefited from a massive regularization campaign launched in 1981–1982, which allowed them to settle down and set up the first community institutions and networks—in particular the first *gurdwara* created in 1986—and initiate a process of chain migration. They were followed after 1984 by a second wave of migrants, linked to the political situation in their homeland, namely fifteen years of Khalistan insurgency and State repression, which propelled thousands of young Sikh men to apply for political asylum in Western countries, at a time when European immigration policies were becoming stricter, particularly for asylum seekers. A third stage comprised the wives and children of the pioneers who migrated under the family reunification provisions, with a second generation of French Sikhs emerging in the early 1990s. In the same period, single men joined members of their *biradari* (clan) already settled in France, relying on them for access to employment, housing, and dealings with French bureaucracy; this wave took advantage of another regularization operation in 1997–1998.

A fourth stage started in the early 2000s with the boom of irregular migration from South Asia, particularly from Panjab (both Indian and Pakistani) as well as Bangladesh to France. The progressive erosion of border controls between EU members states enabled migrants to move between France and neighboring countries, in search of documents; these multiple cross-border movements were also related to the segmentation of labor markets and to differing immigration regimes within the EU. As discussed by Ahmad (2011), France and Germany in the 1980s and 1990s constituted the core of a hierarchically organized Panjabi migratory space in continental Europe. Both countries offered well paid full-time jobs, but little to none opportunity to regularize one's residence status, because of increasingly tough immigration and asylum policies. Southern Europe presented a contrasting picture: low skilled, underpaid jobs, particularly in the agricultural sector, but easier access to regular status—albeit a long and costly process (Moliner 2018). Therefore, a pattern of commuting emerged whereby South Asian irregular migrants applied for documents in Italy, Spain, Portugal or Greece while living and working in France. But since the mid-2000s, most of these paths to regularization are more or less closed—at least to migrants without strong connections and family or community backup—and

labor migrants who have arrived in France since then are trapped into long term clandestineness and a state of “ontological insecurity”, to borrow Ahmad’s apt formulation, with little to no hope of regularization and an endless quest of residency status (Ahmad 2011). These issues will be addressed later in this article

As for their socio-demographic characteristics and spatial distribution, the vast majority of Sikhs in France belong to a rural background, usually to families with a prior migration history and widespread transnational connections. However, several of the most recent migrants arrived in France solely on the basis of their smugglers’ contacts along the migration route, while their own lack of prior kinship or village ties in France has greatly impinged on their socio-economic incorporation process (Moliner 2016). Until recently, Sikh migrants typically originated almost exclusively from Doaba, the central region of Panjab and a traditional emigration reservoir since the 19th century, but now an increasing number comes from Majha (mostly from Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts) and even Panjabi speaking areas of Haryana (Ambala) and Rajasthan.

As far as caste composition is concerned, the French Sikh population comprises three main caste groups: Jats, Ravidasias, and Labanas. Whereas the numerical preponderance of Jats and the significant number of Ravidasias come as no surprise, as these two castes are conspicuous in many diasporic settlements, the presence of a large number of Labanas is rather unusual (Moliner 2016); in Panjab, they form a small caste group, not known for its propensity to migrate abroad. But in the past ten years, Labanas have engaged in transnational mobility, migrating mostly to relatively cheaper and less popular destinations (as compared to more coveted ones such as Canada and Australia), including France, Italy, and Spain, slowly building their own transnational caste and kinship networks.

As for their geographical distribution, Sikhs share most patterns with other South Asian migrants: a territorial clustering in the French capital and its eastern and northern suburbs, particularly the departments of Seine-Saint-Denis, where the six gurdwaras are located, and Val-d’Oise. Their occupational profile is characterized by a strong concentration in three ethnic niches, construction work, clothing and catering—this will be discussed further below.

4. Masculinity and Irregular Migration

Several authors have highlighted the absence of men in the gender turn taken in migration and mobility studies and the resulting sole focus on female migrants. In a very comprehensive introduction to a special issue on the topic, aptly entitled “The invisible (migrant) man”, Charsley and Wray (2015) discuss how the gendered experiences of male migrants have been largely neglected, and their emotional lives, motivations and subjectivity dismissed. All too often, male migrants are either portrayed in a negative light (as oppressors of women) or reduced to working bodies.

The field of masculinity studies has explored how masculinities are hierarchically ordered and are culturally specific social constructs, configured not only by the relations between men and women but also by intra-male relationships and individual negotiations of idealized forms of masculinity. In that respect, the very influential notion of hegemonic masculinity was originally defined by Connell as the configuration of gender practices based on the dominant position of men and the subordination of both women and alternative masculinities, including the stigmatization of homosexuals (Connell 1995). Recognizing the diversity and fluidity in masculinities, Connell stresses that hegemonic masculinity draws its power from idealized forms of masculinity that individual men identify with, perceive as a norm or contest. He insists this is not how men behave but it represents a framework of reference creating a scale of masculinities, against which they judge their own and that of others.

Migration introduces an unprecedented diversity and fluidity in those gender constructions and contestations because of the multiplicity of signifiers and performances of masculinity encountered by migrants. Intersection of gender with residence status, class, ethnicity and employment situation is particularly relevant in exploring migrant men gender identity construction, and more specifically that of irregular migrants (Charsley and Wray 2015). Their administrative vulnerability makes them prey to severe forms of stigma and exploitation both from within their own community and from

the dominant society, to the point that they find it increasingly difficult to fulfill the role of provider, considered as a key component of labor migrants' manhood ideal.

Building on those findings, a small body of research has emerged focusing on the interrelations between South Asian masculinities, sexuality and international mobility (Chopra et al. 2004; Charsley 2005; Gallo 2006; Ahmad 2011), with some publications more specifically focusing on Panjabi/Sikh masculinities (S. S. Gill 2005, 2014; H. Gill 2012; Lum 2016).

The concept of "culture of migration" proposed in the context of Mexican migration to the US refers to a situation where communities characterized by a long-standing tradition and high rates of international migration place a high value on emigration and the attitudes, values and lifestyles associated with it (Kandel and Massey 2012). As a strategy of upward social mobility, international migration extends throughout the community to become the norm, particularly for young men for whom it amounts to a rite of passage (on migration as a rite of passage for young men, see Monsutti (2007) on Afghanistan and Osella and Osella (2000) on Kerala).

Panjab has developed such a culture of migration, idealizing international mobility perceived as the hallmark of the Panjabi male. In Panjabi popular culture, migration and masculinity have come to be defined in relation to one another. In films, as Gill argues, the performance of masculinity is exemplified by the ability of the male heroes to move effortlessly between rural, urban and transnational spaces (H. Gill 2012). International mobility serves as a rite of passage for young men, that necessarily brings wealth, prestige and status to their kinship group and expands their range of marriage opportunities, while immobility amounts to failure, lack of courage, enterprising spirit or manliness. Whereas mobility defines masculinity, immobility is a traditionally understood attribute of women.

This considerable social pressure exerted on young Panjabi men to migrate in order to prove their manhood, leads them to take major risks in the current legal and political context in destination countries that places unprecedented limitations to the labor mobility of men from the Global South. Ahmad has eloquently captured the tragic paradox of current (im)mobility patterns from South Asia to Europe: migrants travel thousands of miles across continents and complex migratory systems, which involves paying a large amount of money to smugglers (currently 12,000 euros for a Schengen visa), longer routes, including dangerous border-crossings, only to be stuck upon arrival in Europe, because of their irregular status, with their spatial movement becoming very restricted and no hope of upward social mobility (Ahmad 2011).

Recent research in migration studies has precisely documented how labor migrants' experience has decisively shifted from mobility to forced immobility (Carling 2002). Subordinated during their travel and at destination to an unprecedented edifice of state surveillance, border policing and repression, irregular migrants are confined to what Ahmad calls a state of "ontological insecurity", characterized by indefinite waiting, marginality and "stuckedness" (Ahmad 2011). This set of constraints exerts a heavy toll on their wellbeing, as well as on their mental and physical health and can be experienced as a form of emasculation, all the more so that undocumented migrants may find no socially acceptable way to express their powerlessness and sense of frustration. As discussed elsewhere, current migration policies that criminalize labor migration have disrupted long established patterns of upward mobility through international migration (Moliner 2018). For Panjabi migrants, it traditionally entailed regularly remitting money to their families, building a house in the ancestral village, getting married and reuniting with one's family in the host country as well moving up the socio-professional ladder from low-paid jobs to self-employment and social respectability. This trajectory toward family fulfillment and economic success followed by earlier waves of Panjabi migrants has now closed for most newcomers who find it increasingly difficult to fulfill the role of provider, so central in the definition of Panjabi hegemonic masculinity. As noted by Ahmad in the case of Pakistani Panjabis (Ahmad 2011), instead of being a financial asset and a source of prestige for their family in Panjab, these men can become a liability, when for instance they fail to remit money regularly because most of their earnings are invested in the quest for regularization. In some cases, they have to borrow money from home for that same purpose.

5. Undocumented Work: Between Exploitation and Self-Respect

Masculinity is often narrated, shaped and performed in relation to work. In the case of labor migrants, particularly undocumented ones, it provides the only legitimate reason for their otherwise unwanted presence in Europe. Because they are without the proper documentation allowing them to reside and work legally in France, newcomers are incorporated in a very disadvantaged position in pre-existing Panjabi (Indian and Pakistani) employment networks, structuring the ethnic enclaves located in Paris and its region. These enclaves were set up from the 1980s onwards by early migrants who specialized in ethnic niches, such as small-scale retailing, catering and most predominantly construction work. Among the new migrants, those who lack family or caste connections within this closed labor circuit cannot access those jobs considered as relatively well paid, hence they are confined to petty jobs at the very bottom of the occupational ladder: they load and unload trucks for Chinese textile wholesalers, work as helpers on market stalls for documented Panjabi or North African migrants, sell flowers at night in restaurants, distribute flyers in letter boxes, or have small street stalls selling toys, belts or hot chestnuts.

We will focus particularly on the construction sector that employs almost all of my interviewees, a sector that according to Waldinger represents “the quintessential ethnic niche,” that has played a major role in the initial insertion in the labor market of several waves of immigrants in the USA as well as Europe, offering job opportunities to low skilled newcomers (Waldinger 1995). In the Parisian economy, construction work is highly segmented along ethnic and racial lines, with Indian and Pakistani Panjabis now being well established as subcontractors in painting, electric work, flocking and plumbing.

Kinship and community networks are crucial in procuring a job, the initial training, raising capital to establish one’s own business, recruiting employees and finding new clients. The sociology of social networks and social capital has so far emphasized the supportive role of immigrant networks, reducing the costs and risks of migration. But as highlighted by Ahmad, these networks are also fashioned by larger forces, such as restrictive immigration policies, criminalization of labor migration and a neo-liberal flexible economy and they create dynamics of exploitation, exclusion and class formation (Ahmad 2011). Far from being egalitarian and protective for their most vulnerable members, Panjabi ethnic networks in Paris are characterized by power asymmetries, an intricate web of moral obligations and reciprocation, and the domination of newcomers by well-established migrants, disguised as mutual help and solidarity.

The labor regime prevalent in Panjabi ethnic enclaves is characterized by informality and paternalistic relations, that leave employees at the mercy of their employer and prevent collective demands from emerging. Panjabi migrants are notably absent from the undocumented workers mobilization involving mostly North African, West African and Chinese immigrants who take to the streets and regularly go on strike, demanding their regularization.

Panjabi construction workers are employed by Indian and Pakistani Panjabi *malik* (employers)², and are submitted to very poor working conditions, with major health and security issues resulting in accidents and injuries. They work without contract, without paid holiday, sick leave nor unemployment compensation and for a salary much lower than that of documented workers. Although construction work is supposed to be more regulated than catering or retail, with fixed working hours five days a week, in effect, employers find ways to circumvent official regulation. Arguing that themselves are paid late by their client, Panjabi subcontractors always delay paying their own employees by several weeks, which results in them being perpetually short of money, despite being employed full time.

As noted by Ahmad (2011), the labor regime in the Panjabi ethnic enclave is characterized by a blurring of the separation between working and non-working hours, with no real respite in terms of

² Pakistanis make up a more numerous and a relatively older and better established group in France. In the construction sector, the employment networks of the two groups largely overlap.

holidays or weekends. Workers only get time off in between two *chantiers* (construction sites) or when the *matériel* (construction equipment) is finished—but they pay a high price for it, since contrary to regular workers, they don't get unemployment benefits during this work-free period.

Sandeep³, a thirty-one year-old man with Italian residency documents, delivers big cable equipment to several Panjabi *mali* on construction sites. He expresses a lot of resentment with respect to his professional life:

I don't like this job, I see no sense in this . . . We are paid very little and always with several months delay . . . Here in France, Panjabi *malik* are the worst. Mine was supposed to pay me for the past 3 months, but he postpones every week, finding all kinds of excuses . . . At least, when I was working in a factory in Italy, I got my wages each month and there was some respect. Here I feel powerless . . .

Most of the young workers interviewed expressed a mixture of envy and strong resentment vis-à-vis their Panjabi *malik*, whose economic and professional success largely depends on the exploitation of vulnerable undocumented employees. However, they don't question the structural patterns of these exploitative relations and only wait for their own residency documents to follow in the first generation's footsteps.

Work is also a source of pride, of *izzat*, and is a prime site for the enactment of manhood where men encounter very diverse models and practices of masculinity. A hierarchical ordering of professions ranks electricians and plumbers at the top, and specialists of flocking at the bottom, the former because they are considered as skilled, better paid and hence respectable (*izzatdaar*) professions. The latter are regarded as *ganda kam* (dirty work), since it involves the use of fiberglass, a material hazardous for health, as most undocumented migrant workers are not provided with the required protective equipment. Interestingly, flocking was one of the first occupations through which Indian Panjabis entered the construction sector; since then they have tended to move out and up.

Sukhdev, a twenty-three year-old electrician who migrated to France four years ago, states:

I love electrical work, it is a job where there is *izzat* (prestige), not like these odd jobs selling flowers or helping in *marché* (market stalls). On a construction site, when the work starts in the morning, everybody is asking: where is the electrician? When is he coming?

Similarly, Parminder, a twenty-nine year-old undocumented Panjabi worker, with seven years of experience in the electricity trade, takes pride in his job, despite the constraints discussed above:

I knew nothing of electric work, the only job I knew was truck driving, which I did for two years in Dubai. I learnt everything from my second *malik* here in Paris. He trained me first to install a socket and a power switch, then the next step is electric wiring in the kitchen and last is the electrical board. It took me two years to learn all the tricks, and now the only thing I need is a residency card to set up my own business.

What I like the most in this job is the status it gives us. We have skills and expertise and therefore we have power over people: whether people have access to internet or their TV channels depends on us. Even French people treat us very nicely to get work done faster or to have an extra socket installed.

Jasmeet, a painter in his early twenties, insists on what he considers as a Panjabi work ethos and on the bodily capital he possesses:

³ All the names used here are pseudonyms.

When I was in India, basically I was doing nothing, after high school. My parents were getting desperate, I was not interested in farm work; this is not proper work . . . Here I have learnt the hard way what is the meaning of hard work, getting up everyday at 5.30, travelling on the train 3 hours daily to the *chantier*. We Panjabis, we work really hard, without counting our time, and I think French people respect us for that. Myself, I have never missed a day at work, even if I am sick, or exhausted, I still go.

Work and earning a living is the only reason why I am here in France . . . You must know that *bani* in our Guru Granth Sahib that says that we should earn our living by honest means, share with others and remember God.⁴ Even in our desperate situation, we should strive to do that.

In response to their marginalized position in the labor regime of the ethnic enclaves and to the exploitative relations with their co-ethnic employers, Panjabi undocumented workers strive to construct an ideal of working-class manliness and self-respect through hard work and skill acquisition. This ideal borrows most of its values from the locally dominant version of Panjabi manhood, embodied by the documented and economically successful immigrants, with whom very complex relations, based on exploitation, mutual dependence, solidarity and emulation, are fashioned under an increasingly constraining administrative regime that criminalizes new labor migrants.

6. Cultivation of the Body

Facebook and other social media constitute prime arenas where forms of hypermasculinity are performed and reaffirmed. Undocumented Panjabi youth in Paris, despite or because of their marginalized and vulnerable status, partake of a global consumer culture, nurturing fantasies about international migration and life in the West among their peers back home. Their Facebook posts feature, for instance, prominent symbols of material success such as luxury cars (which they don't own, since they don't have a driving license), branded watches and designer clothes.

Many of them also display online their bodily transformation and their almost daily workout routine in suburban fitness centers. This section will explore the cultivation of their bodies through practices such as fitness and bodybuilding, hairstyling and hair dying, piercing and tattooing. We will discuss how these practices can be understood as a way to promote self-worth, autonomy and reappropriation of one's body in a social context characterized by severe constraints, already explored above.

Bodybuilding and fitness have become extremely popular physical practices both in France and in India. Rural as well as urban Panjab has in the past decade witnessed a craze for bodybuilding and fitness with innumerable gym clubs dotting its landscape; fit, muscular and athletic male bodies prominently displayed in the public space, on billboards and in popular media—particularly in Bollywood and Panjabi films as well as bhangra videos (a popular dance and music genre of Panjab). This pervasive gym culture can be destructive, with several newspaper articles reporting an increased use of anabolic steroids by Panjabi youth, causing severe addictions and even leading to death (Kumar 2019). In some cases, bodybuilding is seen as a way for the unemployed youth to procure a job under the sports quota in the Panjab police, the railways and other government services (Dogra 2003).

Bollywood films have played a major role in the spectacular growth of fitness among the Indian urban middle-class, albeit a rather recent phenomenon, that Baas dates back to the blockbuster film *Om Shanti Om* (2007), where Sharukh Khan displayed his six-pack abs and a muscular body that has become a standard for male actors to emulate (Baas 2017). Since then, several films have narrated the bodily transformation of their lead actors (such as *Ghajini* or *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*, and several

⁴ Jasmeet refers here to the following teaching of Guru Nanak, the first Sikh Guru: *Kirat karo, naam japo, vand chakko* to be found in the *Adi Granth*, the Sikh sacred scripture.

subsequent sports films, such as *Dangal*), pushing young Indian males to attend fitness clubs in the hope of acquiring the ideal muscular bodies glorified in popular cinema. According to Baas, this new ideal male body is increasingly equated with professional success, a cosmopolitan lifestyle & upper middle class belonging.

Borrowing from Panjabi sport culture and the recent craze for fitness & bodybuilding in India, Panjabi migrants in France are also influenced by the prevalent sport culture of the immigrant working class neighborhoods where they live. Oualhaci has highlighted the extent to which sports related socialization contributes to the shaping of working-class masculinities (Oualhaci 2016). Self-transformation through sport amounts to a strategy of resistance and empowerment of subaltern groups, seeking to distance themselves from a “deviant” street culture and gain some local respectability (Oualhaci 2016). Self-esteem and reappropriation of one’s body, space and time are also among the stated motivations of the young Panjabi migrants practicing fitness, that I interviewed, such as twenty-five year-old Manpreet, a painter by profession:

I come from a family of *kabaddi*⁵ players. But I was too frail for *kabaddi*, so I used to play cricket in my school days. When I grew older, most of my college mates had joined a gym in Jalandhar, there were over sixty of them back then. So, they quickly started looking much more muscular and manly than me. I couldn’t join because I had already the plan to go to Europe and my parents had started saving some money to send me there, so they would have refused to pay for the gym fees.

When I arrived in France, it took me three months to get my first wages, and that same week I enrolled at a local gym. Now almost every day I go there, I take this time for me to work on my body, to stay fit and look good. There, I don’t wear my painting outfit, I am not a *nauker* (employee), waking up at five am every morning, there I don’t fear the police, it is just me, my abs and my muscles, and the machines. When I feel depressed by my situation, the gym helps me a lot.

Sukha, a twenty-two year-old electrician, who belongs to a close-knit group of youngsters from the Labana caste, expounds on his own motivations:

All my friends have joined the local gym here. A man has to be strong, fit and muscular to make himself respected. We Indians have a reputation at work of being docile, we don’t speak up because we are not conversant in French and we don’t get much respect because of that, workers on the *chantier* often crack jokes on us. But when you display muscles, they behave differently. Also, where I live, we Indians are much less numerous than Arabs or Blacks, so when we get in a fight, we are always outnumbered. So, this is also to protect ourselves.

In the two highly gendered and racialized spaces that Sukha refers to, the building site and the street, in the *quartier* (neighborhood) they inhabit, young Panjabi migrants hold a subservient position, because of their smaller number vis-à-vis other immigrant groups, their irregular status and their lack of proficiency in French. The ideal hypermasculine body that Sukha and other Panjabi youth are sculpting in their local gym is therefore layered with multiple meanings pertaining to individual subjectivity, restoration of self-esteem and collective identification.

Much has been said about the role played by the turban as the prime embodiment of Sikh masculinity as well as Sikh ethno-religious identity. Panjabi/Sikh visual culture is indeed saturated with representations of the turbaned *Kesdhari* (donning *kes*, unshorn hair and beard) male body, ranging from Sikh religious art depicting the ten Gurus and other Sikh heroic figures to Khalistani imagery portraying the martyred turbaned body of militants tortured and killed by the police (Axel 2001).

⁵ A traditional team sport, very popular in Panjab and among the Diaspora.

The physical appearance of the young undocumented migrants under study presents a sharp contrast and a radical shift from Khalsa orthopraxy, and they are in direct contradiction with some of its mandates, since they shave and dye their hair, trim their beards, pierce their ears, get tattooed, and smoke. Their acute aesthetic concern for hair styling and dyeing as well as beard trimming reflects the importance these bodily markers occupy in current Panjabi popular culture, particularly in films and Bhangra videos, that are major trendsetters among the Panjabi youth worldwide. It also partakes in a globalized male aesthetics, where facial hair enjoys a new popularity, since the hipster bearded look has gone mainstream. These bodily practices and aesthetic concerns produce specific forms of male sociability enacted in the several hair dresser shops located in Paris and its eastern suburbs, specifically catering to a South Asian male clientele.

Popularized by Panjabi models, actors and singers (a *bhangra* song titled *Tattoo* praises the waist tattoo of the female protagonist of the singer), tattooing has also become quite common among some sections of the Panjabi youth in India and abroad, particularly in Paris, where a couple of tattooing and piercing salons are owned by Panjabis. The designs range from religious themes (*Ek-Onkar* and the *khandā*⁶ being amongst the most popular ones) to secular ones (the lion as a symbol of Panjabi masculinity and Sikh male identity) and may also include the expression of romantic or filial love (“luv u mum”). This practice of indelibly inking the body has a very long history. In the West, before becoming mainstream, it was a social marker for marginalized or deviant groups, such as convicts, sailors, soldiers and the working classes, while in India it is still widely used among tribal populations.

These practices of cultivation and transformation of one’s body by young undocumented migrants from Panjab need further investigation: at this stage of my research, they seem to indicate personal aesthetic choices as well as generational ones; they take part both in an emerging immigrant sub-culture and a sense of belonging to a more dominant version of male aesthetics and manhood.

The reappraisal of the concept of hegemonic masculinity by Connell and his co-author Messerschmidt can be useful to make sense of these multiple and dynamic cultures of manhood fashioned by young Panjabi migrants in Parisian suburbs (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The authors advocate for an ethnographic multi-scalar (at the local, regional/national and global levels) and comparatist analysis of hegemonic masculinities. Of particular relevance to this case-study is their discussion of the localized dimension of gender hierarchies and cultures of masculinity. My ethnographic data suggest that within the global Sikh/Panjabi diaspora, very different and localized versions of the Sikh male coexist and interact with one another. According to academic research among British Sikhs, who form a predominant section of the Sikh Diaspora, a collective understanding exists of what an authentic British Sikh masculine identity should consist of (see in particular S. S. Gill 2014). This localized form of hegemonic masculinity is heavily influenced by notions of Khalsa identity and its visible symbols (particularly the turban and the beard). With the creation of the Khalsa in 1699, a hyper-masculine and martial ethos became central to Sikh doctrine and identity and found a counterpart in the nineteenth century in the imperial culture of masculinity fostered by the British, casting some Indian groups as martial races and others as effeminate and weak (Dirks 2001; Jakobsh 2003). The Sikhs, categorized as a martial race, were lauded as closely matching British representations of themselves, and hence benefited from preferential recruitment in the colonial army. This construct was further promoted in post-colonial Britain, by public policies and by Sikh immigrants themselves mobilizing for the right to wear the turban (S. S. Gill 2014). In an article pertinently entitled ‘So people know I’m a Sikh’, S.S. Gill discusses young British Sikh men’s narratives and praxis concerning the turban, the turban having become such a potent symbol of collective belonging and the prime marker of British Sikh separate ethno-religious identity (S. S. Gill 2014).

⁶ The Sikh emblem *Ek-Onkar* is the combination of the figure “one” and of the letter “o” and forms the opening words of the *Adi Granth*. It symbolizes the unity of God. The *khandā*, the modern insignia of the Khalsa, comprises a vertical double-edged sword over a quoit with two swords on each side, representing both spiritual and temporal authority.

In the very different local configuration of France, Khalsa identity is far from being hegemonic, at least for the undocumented Sikhs I have interviewed. If they don't wear the turban, it is precisely because it makes them visible and hence more vulnerable to identity checks by the police, risks of deportation and job discriminations. But besides this practical reason, my contention is that the Khalsa ideal seems much less relevant in local configurations of hegemonic masculinity, as embodied by the first generation of well-settled, documented migrants. There, hard work, material wealth and success (no matter at what moral costs it is achieved, including the brutal exploitation of undocumented migrants) and its display both in France and in Panjab, such as starting one's own business and building one's network of co-ethnics. The respectability and notability thus derived are no small achievements and are the true measure of a man, a *markandeya*. In that sense the external symbols have become irrelevant; what truly matters is residency status.

7. Ethics, Moral Values and the Practice of *seva*

This final section will discuss the ethical, moral and socio-religious universe to which Panjabi undocumented migrants belong, a universe deeply influenced by the Sikh religious tradition. It will do so within the institutional setting of the gurdwara, where these undocumented migrants occupy a subordinated position, as well as at its margins. The doctrine and practice of *seva* (voluntary service) will be focused upon.

As already highlighted in the case of Italy (Gallo 2012) and France (Moliner 2016), the gurdwara plays a crucial role in the recent Sikh settlements of continental Europe. Gallo argues that the gurdwara is "ascribed shifting meanings according to the biographical time of migrant experiences" (Gallo 2012). The evolution of the community from very precarious conditions to institutionalization and increased visibility within the host society impacts on the way different groups among Sikhs relate to the gurdwara. For the pioneers in the 1980s and for the successive waves of undocumented migrants, it has continuously operated as a service hub, where survival strategies pertaining to work and housing were dealt with. But with the emergence of a second generation, it has significantly become a space of cultural and religious transmission and of increased interactions with the local authorities, while remaining a space of male hierarchical sociability—the main one in the Parisian context, other than the construction sites, as discussed earlier. Competing dynamics are at play regarding the meanings ascribed to the gurdwara: while undocumented migrants strive for social invisibility vis-à-vis the host society and its institutions (for obvious reasons pertaining to their irregular status and fear of deportation), the leadership and the French Sikh youth seek legitimacy and recognition from mainstream society and local authorities.

As undocumented migrants, youth and *Mone* (clean shaven), they occupy a marginalized position in the gurdwara, which functions as a deeply hierarchical space, despite the egalitarian rhetoric at the core of the Sikh doctrine. First generation *Keshdhari* men occupy all the leadership positions and embody the visible and respectable face of the community in its dealings with French authorities, despite the fact that, as discussed earlier, all the pioneers experienced irregular status themselves when they arrived in Europe, an embarrassing reality over which they conveniently prefer to draw a veil in their quest for respectability.

Seva is usually translated as selfless service and as a theological concept and a social practice, it takes various forms, both material and immaterial, within the gurdwara and outside of it. Myrvold argues that, in its institutionalized forms, *seva* exemplifies "the various ways in which doctrines of egalitarianism and philanthropy (. . .) are embodied in social institutions and practical work" (Myrvold 2007). Through the practice of *seva*, the *sevadar* (one who performs *seva*) is able to cultivate inner qualities such as humility, compassion, peace of mind, and remembrance of God, among others.

Purewal in the British context (Purewal 2009) and Bertolani in the Italian one (Bertolani 2020) have highlighted the highly gendered dimension of *seva*, with men involved in the more publicly visible and prestigious forms of *seva* and women confined to the more hidden and unrewarding types. Interestingly, a similar analysis can be applied to undocumented migrants who engage in *seva*

on a regularly basis in the Singh Sabha gurdwara. The *langar* (community kitchen) heavily relies on them both to cook the daily vegetarian meals and to serve the *sangat* (congregation). Actually, undocumented young migrants are much more numerous there than regularized Sikhs, who mostly attend the gurdwara on Sunday, and are less involved in this particular form of material *seva*.

Surjit, a young man in his mid-twenties, is one of the most regular *sevadars* at the Singh Sabha gurdwara:

I have practiced *seva* since childhood. I come from a small village near Sultanpur Lodi, my house is next door to the village gurdwara, so I grew up listening to the prayers from early morning till evening. I used to do *seva* on a regular basis in my local gurdwara. And for the *gurpurab* (anniversary celebrations of the Gurus), I would also go to Sultanpur Lodi with my friends and do all day or all night *seva* in the *langar*, because there was such a rush then . . .

So when I arrived in France, the first thing I did was to locate the gurdwara, and I come almost every day. I am working in a nearby Indian restaurant, so I can come during my mid-day break.

Here, I am myself, I am the one I used to be in Panjab. I don't earn much but I contribute to the gurdwara, I am a part of the *sangat*. I also come for the peace of mind, it helps me to put away all my problems and gives me a lot of strength.

As an embodied socio-religious practice, *seva* plays an important role in the sense of selfhood of Surjit; it helps him maintain some continuity with a past rural life that was immersed in the religious and cultural universe of the gurdwara. It also gives him a sense of belonging to a community and a sense of self-worth.

Besides the gurdwara, internet and social networks are alternative spaces to investigate less institutionalized forms of *seva*. Several of my interviewees belong to village based WhatsApp groups, allowing them to remain in contact and nurture strong ties with their village and class mates in Panjab and abroad. Sukhpreet, a twenty-nine year-old man originating from a village near Phagwara, belongs to one such group, that includes migrants (mostly undocumented) in their late twenties settled in California, Australia, Dubai, Italy, Germany, Portugal and France. All regularly remit small amounts of money to finance village projects. So far, besides remittances sent to their family, they have funded four scholarships for impoverished local girls wishing to study in college. They have also contributed a lump sum to the renovation and enlargement of the village gurdwara and to the improvement of the village water pipes network.

Two Facebook groups have been created by Panjabi migrants in Paris, Shahid Bhagat Singh Paris Group and Help group Eiffel Tower—both comprised mostly of Labanas, and the latter, as its name indicates, of migrants working at the major tourist hotspot of the French capital, selling wine and beer to visitors. Group members regularly meet in different locations in the city to shoot short videos, where about twenty of them appeal for financial help to support causes in Panjab, usually poor villagers with a medical condition, needing urgent medical care and hospital treatment.

Sukha, the twenty-two year-old electrician and bodybuilder quoted earlier, is a member of the Shahid Bhagat Singh Paris Facebook Group:

We all donate money to the *golak* (donation box) in the gurdwara, but we don't trust the management committee members . . . And we know so many needy people in Panjab, so we decided to create this group.

In my village, a lot of money is sent from abroad for the collectivity. So, despite our problems with papers, despite our limitations, we want to contribute. We are not as successful as the older migrants, but we are as good human beings and we care for *Sarbat da Bhalla* (welfare of all).

8. Conclusions

The coming of age of the Panjabi undocumented migrants that occupy the center stage of this paper and the subsequent construction of their gender identity are deeply shaped by their irregular status and the resulting administrative and socio-economic precariousness. Their life experience in France is tragically remote from the fantasies about migration to Europe that Panjabi popular culture nurtures. Their subordinate position within the labor regime of the host society as well within their own community makes it very difficult for them to uphold values and aspirations on a daily basis, that are regarded as essential components of Panjabi masculinity—autonomy, self-reliance, *izzat*, power, and providing for one's family. Nonetheless, with a great deal of creativity and resilience, they strive to circumvent the unprecedented set of constraints they face and to recoup some form of respectable manhood: this includes specific forms of all-male sociability, the value placed on manual labor and work ethics, the cultivation of their bodies and the solace they seek in an ethical and religious horizon grounded in Sikh teachings and religious institutions.

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Article

The Legacies of Bindy Johal: The Contemporary Folk Devil or Sympathetic Hero

Manjit Pabla

Sociology and Legal Studies, The University of Waterloo, Waterloo, ON N2L 3G1, Canada;
m49singh@uwaterloo.ca

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Abstract: A folk devil has the ability to elicit a community's fear over crime. Notorious late gangster, Bindy Johal, occupies this position as his legacy stirs the social anxieties over gang violence by some in the Punjabi-Sikh community in Western Canada. A competing narrative of Johal's legacy has emerged, which frames him in a more sympathetic light, and as an individual who overcame systemic racial barriers that subordinated the masculinity of South Asian men in British Columbia. Based on interviews with 34 authorities in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, and drawing attention to his status as both a folk devil and hero, the discussion reveals two dueling narratives framing his legacy. The overall effect of these contradictory narratives is the overshadowing of racism, class oppression and a regional history within Sikh extremist movements that illustrate why gang involvement may appeal to some disenfranchised boys and men in the Indo-Canadian community.

Keywords: masculinities; gangs; British Columbia; moral panics; Sikhs; Punjabis; Khalistanis

1. Introduction

"Every grade 8 kid is talking about [Bindy] as he is some hero who defied the police and got killed and his interviews are online and people are looking it up, and these grade 6,7 kids are always searching them up and bringing him up. So, one thing I decided is never, ever use his name or react to his name" —(Simran (secondary school teacher), interview, 1 December 2016)

"When we sit down and think about race relations in this country and our community, shit we look at people like fucking Bindy and say: "hey. Did he do something for our community?" Did he? Like moralism aside, put the ethical, moral shit [aside], let's just deal with power relations. And so, when you look at South Asian young men today, this guy becomes fucking icon. He becomes a fucking God in the imagination of the emasculated South Asian male. All of a sudden, they're like "oh right. We can fucking do this"" —(Diljit (former gang member), interview, 15 August 2016)

In the Lower Mainland of British Columbia (BC) the name of late gangster "Bindy Johal" polarizes a community dealing with a perceived problem of gang involvement of Punjabi youth. On the one hand, Johal occupies the position of a 'folk devil', the classical criminological construct that has the ability to stir a community's social anxiety and fuel a moral panic on gangs in the region. Specifically, Johal is posthumously blamed for recruiting a large number of Sikh-Punjabi youth to gangs, as claimed by authorities. Yet Diljit, a former gang member, frames the legend of Johal as a folk hero of sorts, or at the very least a sympathetic figure who has been romanticized or idolized by a generation of disenfranchised youngsters. Under this conception of his legend, Johal is believed to have broken through a pervasive system that has subordinated the masculinity of South Asian males. The dominance of Sikhs in the region at the time through the Khalistani movement coincides with

Johal's own rise to power as a gang leader, as well as the involvement of other Sikh-Punjabi youth in gangs. These individuals transformed to modern-day soldiers and followed in the footsteps of their Sikh forefathers to battle perceived injustices perpetrated against them.

Drawing on the literature on moral panics and folk devils, as well as the theorizing on hegemonic masculinities and crime, this analysis provides some preliminary insights on how Johal's legacy has been constructed. Through the narratives of 34 interview subjects who are 'authority' figures in the governance of gangs, this paper explores what these dueling legacies are, and their broader significance and relationships. Indeed, this paper asks the question: how has Bindy Johal as a social figure been imagined by authorities? I argue that Bindy Johal has been imagined as both a contemporary folk devil, corrupting a generation of vulnerable boys to join gangs, as well as a heroic figure who successfully achieved a form of manhood typically blocked to Punjabi young boys and men. Nevertheless, the overall effect of these contradictory narratives is the overshadowing of racism, class oppression, and the broader social context, and the region's history of religious extremist movements that might be the product of a local geographic condition that is unique to that area of Canada.

The Story of Bindy Johal

Understanding these competing narratives on Johal's legacy requires a brief biography on the man often characterized as a "mythic figure". Born on 14 January 1971, Bhupinder "Bindy" Singh Johal, Johal immigrated to Canada as a young boy from Punjab, India, although the exact city Johal was born is hard to locate. Raised by a single-working class mother, Johal was viewed as a problem child and performed poorly in school, as indicated by numerous behavioral and learning challenges he experienced in adolescence. Bindy was first introduced to gangs during a stint in prison for assaulting his high school vice principal. Upon his release, Johal would go on to work for the notorious Dosanjh brothers, predominate South Asian gangsters in the late 80s and early 90s. During this time, Johal became a major player in Metro Vancouver's gang scene, developing a muscular physique, a particular style of dress and clothing, and numerous sexual exploits with countless women, as close associate Diljit describes.

After a falling out, a bloody turf war emerged that resulted in the deaths of the Dosanjh brothers, of which Johal and several of his associates were criminally charged. Nevertheless, Johal and his co-defendants were acquitted of the murders in 1995. The case took a shocking turn, however, when a juror, Gillian Guest, was subsequently charged and convicted of obstruction of justice stemming from a sexual relationship she had with one of Johal's co-accused, Peter Gill, which likely resulted in the acquittals. Guest was given an 18-month prison sentence, but only served 12 weeks, garnering much media attention. The end of the trial nevertheless cemented Johal's reputation as untouchable, and the face of the "Punjabi gang problem". At its peak, Johal's criminal enterprise earned CAD 4 million annually from an assortment of illicit activities, including drug distribution, auto thefts, and even extortion and a murder for hire operation known as the Elite (Pearce 2009).

Johal's fortunes changed on 20th December 1998, when he was shot and killed while on the dance floor of a busy Vancouver nightclub. With many suspects who had a vendetta against Johal, it was one of his closest associates, Bal Buttar, who confessed to the killing years later. The salacious story of Bindy Johal captivated a generation of disenfranchised young Punjabi boys nearly two decades since his death, becoming a part of British Columbia's local cultural zeitgeist, and influencing how his legend has been shaped, however polarizing that legacy has become.

2. Materials and Methods

The arguments made in this analysis are derived from in-depth, in-person, and over-the-telephone interviews conducted with 34 individuals from August 2016 to January 2017, with some professional expertise on the phenomenon of Punjabi gang involvement across several municipalities in Lower Mainland British Columbia, including Vancouver, Surrey, Delta, Richmond, and Abbotsford. These individuals include representatives from community agencies who do some type of gang advocacy

or support work. The category of work includes frontline workers, counsellors, activists, and even a number of former gang members who are involved in anti-gang programming. Additionally, police officers, both involved in gang enforcement and those who may volunteer their off-duty time to work with at-risk youth, are also included as viable research participants. Finally, the inclusion of school officials, such as principals, vice-principals, counsellors, teachers, and district level-employees, is also deemed necessary, as they interact directly with youth in high-risk communities, and often refer vulnerable youth to gang programming.

Purposive and snowballing sampling schemes were used to gain access to suitable research participants. This combination of sampling techniques is deemed necessary, given the ontological nature of this study, and allows for the selection of suitable research participants, based on their ability to provide valuable insights on Punjabi gang offending. With permission, interviews were tape-recorded and meticulously transcribed. The analytical technical of open-coding was utilized so that key concepts, categories, and properties could be derived from the data, a technique outlined by [Glaser and Strauss \(1967\)](#). Given the qualitative nature of this inquiry, a process of member-checking was used when deemed necessary. This involves a researcher seeking clarification on their interpretations and conclusions by research participants ([Creswell and Miller 2000](#)). This step ensures the researcher accurately captures the narratives of research participants, which can be challenging in ethnographic research. Finally, this study received ethical clearance from the University of Waterloo's Office of Research Ethics. To ensure the anonymity of interview subjects, culturally appropriate pseudonyms are used to conceal their identity.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Contemporary Moral Panics and the Construction of a Folk Devil or Hero

Stanley Cohen laid the foundation for much of the theorizing on moral panics and folk devils, defining these concepts as occurring when "a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests" ([Cohen 2011](#), p. 1). [Goode and Ben-Yehuda \(1994\)](#) expand on Cohen's analysis of moral panics by articulating a set of criteria of which they are measured, including: concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality, and volatility. When certain moral panics arise, like the fallout from a high-profile crime or series of crimes, folk devils attached to them are viewed as an existential threat to societal morality, and subject to strict social control ([Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994](#)). Thus, folk devils represent evil personified, induce anxiety among law-abiding citizens, and often are the target of some negative reaction, as they provide a face to the moral panic that is currently in fashion. Gang members, gang leaders, and gangs in general have also undergone extensive analysis by moral panic scholars ([Zatz 1987](#); [St. Cyr 2003](#); [McCorkle and Miethe 1998](#)) as they embody key elements of the folk devil.

Examining the underlying motivation behind moral panics, [Hall et al. \(1978\)](#) look at muggings in 1960s and 1970s Britain, suggesting that moral entrepreneurs, such as the police and political figures, likely manufactured or exaggerated the dangers associated with this crime. This panic was initiated to divert the public's attention away from the economic anxiety people were experiencing as the result of the recession, and direct it towards British Black youth, who were identified as the folk devils associated with muggings ([Hall et al. 1978](#)). Therefore, moral panics may often work to conceal a far greater crisis that is much harder for policy makers, law enforcement, and other authority figures to address. This line of reasoning is similar to Rene Girard's theory of mimetic rivalry and scapegoating, which assumes people subconsciously imitate others both out of admiration, as well as a primitive urge to compete against those very same people they mimic. This leads to rivalry and potential conflict, with those on the outside looking for a scapegoat to blame, punish, and cast out of a community ([Girard 1996](#)).

Given the changing nature of society, moral panic analysis has undergone several significant modifications in order to update it for modern times. For instance, some challenge [Cohen \(2011\)](#)

original assertion as to the existence of universally agreed upon moral boundaries, which he suggests are often threatened and give rise to moral panics in the first place. Particularly, [Hier \(2008\)](#) argues that contemporary moral panics are far from universal, with [Garland \(2008\)](#) highlighting counter-reactions that develop to challenge the validity of claims made by alarmists. In an update to his text, [Cohen \(2011\)](#) responds to such criticisms by introducing the concept of a “generalized moral stance” to highlight a moral panic that is more predictable and born from a seamless web of social anxieties that exists in society. In this sense, through the generalized moral stance, the theorizing on moral panics aligns with the literature on governance and the risk society. Specifically, such panics develop from general anxieties individuals have become hypersensitive to by living in a perceived hazardous society, one where gangs and violent crime are viewed as common features ([Ungar 2001](#)).

While theorizing on the folk devil is plentiful, the concept of the ‘folk hero’ has not received as much attention among moral panic scholars. [Flinders and Wood \(2015\)](#) try to remedy this deficiency by understanding the reaction people have to heroic figures, and the euphoria and ‘crowd joy’ they can produce, which stands in stark contrast to the anxiety and indignation folk devils generate. However, under contemporary moral panics, where counter-claim makers sympathetic to folk devils emerge, theoretical analysis should be cognizant of the morally ambiguous gray area that exists, producing a condition where one person’s folk devil may be another’s hero, something not captured in [Flinders and Wood \(2015\)](#) analysis. Related to the aims of this paper in particular, the elevation of certain criminals from villains to heroes is important. [Kooistra \(1989\)](#) examines such a transition, such as the admiration some have towards certain criminals like killers or thieves when their acts are perceived as a response to some symbolic resistance to a wrong that has occurred. This archetypal “Robin Hood” figure is affixed cultural group values, like loyalty or courage, and who’s criminal behavior is attributed to a social injustice that has precipitated and motivated their crimes ([Duncan 1991](#)).

3.2. Masculinities and Crime: Racialized Men and Offending

“Manliness” is a socially desirable trait that some individuals might look for in a hero. Indeed, the theorizing on masculinities and crime sheds light on how a gangster may be viewed as a hero for some. [Connell \(2005\)](#) concept of “hegemonic masculinity” has been particularly useful in understanding men’s monopoly over physical violence, which is not only directed against women but other men as well. Masculinity falls under a spectrum where at one end is the ‘hegemonic ideal’, a dominating, oppressive representation of manhood that ensures the institutional supremacy of men who meet this standard ([Connell 2005](#)). Violence then is a tool used by some men to preserve their hegemonic status and superiority, as a counter-measure when they feel wronged, or to reclaim a sense of justice owed ([Chodorow 2002](#)).

Men who do not meet this standard fall at the other end of the spectrum and possess a subordinate masculinity, yet, despite their station, all men are required to position themselves in relation to the hegemonic masculine ideal ([Connell and Messerschmidt 2005](#)). As [Morrell \(1998\)](#) explains: “the concept of hegemonic masculinity (which) provides a way of explaining that though a number of masculinities coexist, a particular version of masculinity holds sway, bestowing power and privilege on men who espouse it and claim it as their own” (p. 608).

Certain racialized and disenfranchised men are considered to have subordinate masculinities, including working-class males, on account of failing to reach socially desirable economic goals based on their lived realities ([Hooks 1995](#)). Additionally, under the stress of structural powerlessness, some men resort to gangs as an alternative way of performing masculinity, making hyper-masculinity through violence an antidote to poor self-esteem ([Messerschmidt 1997](#)). Thus, [Vigil \(2007\)](#) suggests that gangs are an expression of marginalized masculinity. Adding to this, [Rios \(2011\)](#) examines the gang behavior of urban racialized men, suggesting that gang symbols, dress, and language, as well as hypermasculine behavior, are ways to reclaim lost status and stake a claim on the masculine hierarchy. Similarly, [Gutmann \(1996\)](#) looks at cultural machismo among Latino gang members as a form of reworking masculinity for marginalized men, themes this study examines through Johal.

Punjabi men have not received as much attention among the masculinity and crime literature. More broadly, South Asian masculinity is regulated under subordinate status, as it falls short of meeting the hegemonic standard (Finch-Boyer 2014). However, the performance of masculinity for some South Asian men requires the endorsement of machismo or traditionally masculine beliefs in order to protect family, and preserve the honor and purity of women or caste identity (Gilmore 1990; Malhotra 2002; Dube 2001; Yim and Mahalingam 2006). Frost (2010) provides one of the few analyses on South Asian gang involvement in British Columbia, linking it a group of males classified as “Surrey Jacks”. A Surrey Jack is a subculture of Punjabi boys with a set of expectations on the performance of masculinity, which ultimately resembles a counter-protest to the dominant hegemonic standard (Frost 2010). According to Frost (2010), the Surrey Jack stands in contrast to the “Brown boy”, a category of South Asian males who more closely align their masculinity with the standards established by their white peers. Surrey Jacks, on the other hand, are more willing to use violence and aggression at slight provocation, and are blamed for the perceived gang problem. Frost (2010) defines “the Brown boy” in relation to the “Surrey Jack”:

“These boys’ conceptions of their ethno-racial identities are bound up with their understandings of masculinity, how brown has evolved as an alternative way of “doing male” which not only contests a white hegemonic masculinity but confronts versions of Punjabi masculinity embodied by their fathers as well as the media’s representation of the typical Indo-Canadian man or “Surrey Jack” which has emerged in Surrey as a form of subordinate protest masculinity”. (p. 213)

A figure like Bindy Johal may be celebrated by “Surrey Jacks”, as well as other young Punjabi boys who have had to navigate and perform a protestive form of masculinity.

Punjabi-Jat ethical codes centered on male Izzat (honor), a cultural moral principle that is associated with a man’s reputation, and the respect and dignity he is able to convey (Das 1976). A man’s izzat also dictates the level of power, influence, and authority he commands (Das 1976). Nicola Mooney (2013) suggests that hypermasculinity is a reactionary response to the construction of South Asian men as feminine by the British. An alternative means to obtain izzat for young Punjabi boys then, is the hypermasculine performance of masculinity in order to achieve power, respect, and reputation. Izzat is also relational. For the Sikh-Punjabi male, the women in his life (i.e., daughters, sisters, wives) are associated with his izzat, which is strengthened in his ability to protect and guard them (Mooney 2010). Female relatives must also uphold a man’s izzat, by regulating their behavior and not bringing sharam (shame) to the family.

4. Results

4.1. “Never Use His Name”—The Construction of the Folk Devil

Pseudonyms for interview sources are used in the following sections to reveal the stories being told of Bindy Johal. Most dominant among the narratives is that Bindy Johal represents something insidious to the Greater Vancouver Area, someone who the community can collectively blame for the continuing gang violence. Not only has Johal given birth to the modern-day Punjabi gangster, but he personifies all the negative attributes attached to the risky Punjabi male. Retired gang enforcement officer John explains the significance of early Punjabi gangsters, like Johal, in transforming the gang climate in BC:

In the day [gangs] were very organized and there was a sense of, they kind of all got along, it was good for business not to fight and war and they were making lots of money. But when you get people like Bindy Johal and Raj Cheema and some of these guys come into the game, they’re just complete killers. There was no honor among thieves as there was. It just turned into murder and mayhem. (John, interview, 27 September 2016)

Officers like John stood on the frontlines of early gang warfare between Indo-Canadian young men, witnessing the rise of gang members that he believed were far less honorable and more sinister than the gangs that preceded them. The honor system this new breed of gangsters observed contrasted with the hegemonic honor code of white men, their forefathers, or their peers—the Brown Boys. This more nefarious breed of gangster, of which Johal takes center stage, becomes the focus of a moral crusade launched by moral entrepreneurs like Officer John. Officer John believes Johal still has the ability to seduce young Punjabi males to gangs to this date. The framing of a threat as “new” or different, and hence more dangerous by agents of social control is a defining feature of moral panics on crime, especially when they are transmitted by law enforcement.

Johal’s folk devil status is further cemented through the apprehension some have in even saying his name, as naming the devil may legitimize his appeal among Punjabi youth. High school teacher Simran makes a conscious effort to not say Johal’s name in front of her students:

I also think that a lot of gang activity is glamorized online. Like I know our kids, like we’re trying not to use the name Bindy Johal in our area. Every grade 8 kid is talking about him as he is some hero who defied the police and got killed and his interviews are online and people are looking it up and these grade 6, 7 kids are always searching them up and bringing him up. So, one thing I decided is never ever to use his name or react to his name. (Simran, interview, 1 December 2016)

For Simran, the media has glamorized Johal as a hero providing the foundation for his admiration by youth. Simran’s reluctance to say his name or react to it if mentioned is indicative of the anxiety a folk devil can produce, since much of the gang violence associated to Punjabi boys is problematized as the outcome of youth emulating Johal, and their keen interest in his life. Yet, not all display the level of apprehension in naming Johal as Simran does, particularly community activist Harjit:

Bindy Johal, his name keeps coming up, and rightfully so, because a lot of youth that contact me are still aware of him. Like, I’ll go to high schools, twenty years after the fucking guy has been dead, and they’re like: Hey, Bindy Johal, he’s the man. He’s the man. He put us on the map. Bro, he didn’t put you on the map, he put you on the pavement. You’re going to live a lifestyle that’s going to get you shot or killed. (Harjit, interview, 29 August 2016)

Harjit believes that identifying the “devil” is a necessary step in order to delegitimize his legacy, and to weaken the appeal he has to his admirers. The notion that Johal’s lifestyle ultimately results in an untimely death is stressed by others in the community like Officer Ranjit who works to deconstruct his legacy and accentuate the ultimate cost of his villainy:

We went through that initial iteration of these groups going back to the Dhosanj’s and Bindy’s and they became like cult like figures to these people. Like a lot of these kids want to emulate them and think that: “Oh yeah it’s the girls. It’s the power, it’s the money.” And then we’re always hammering the other aspect: “Where are they? They’re all dead before they’re 25. So, if that’s the lifestyle you choose, you know, it’s great for a little bit to think your king, but where are you going to end up long term?” (Harjit, interview, 3 October 2016)

Ranjit appeals to the rationality of young Punjabi boys by highlighting that drive to make money, and to gain power, respect and women, ultimately comes at a fatal cost. As the reaction to a folk devil is of utmost importance to moral panic analyses, Johal’s violent murder is often used to steer youth away from gangs. Specifically, the Truth About Gangs initiative has been used in local schools as a gang prevention technique, which involves police presenting pictures of a dead Johal lying on a morgue table with bullet wounds and tubes connected to his body to school-aged children (Bailey 2008). Despite the harsh reactions by teachers, these pictures of Johal are meant to shock and scare young Punjabi boys away from gangs by illuminating the consequences of gang involvement, and are a counter-measure to dismantle his glamorized appeal on youth.

In addition, Johal becomes a more fearful figure when his deviance is amplified, inflaming an already heightened moral panic. Deviance amplification by respondents occurs in two ways: (I) by connecting Johal's influence to specific family members who could have fallen prey to his influence; and (II) by associating him with some of the other 'evils' in the community, namely, the extremist Sikh Khalistani movement. The separatist movement, which resulted in the several acts of violence across the world, gained increase popularity in British Columbia, coinciding with the rise of Punjabi gangsterism. First, some respondents point to the degree of influence Johal exerts by drawing attention to how certain family members escaped his grasp. Teacher Simran discusses her husband's prior history with Johal:

Bindy Johal went to the same high school my husband graduated from. He tried to recruit my husband in grade 12 and that's a story he has shared with me . . . back in the 80s and my husband went to the same school and he invited him, my husband, a lot of times to come to his house and [say]: "I'm going to introduce to these people and you can make money." And my husband didn't make those choices. He didn't really go. (Simran, interview, 1 December 2016)

For Simran, her husband was able to reject Johal's dangerous proposition and make the "right" choices. Had he followed in Johal's footsteps however, Simran believes that her husband's life, and by extension hers, likely could have unfolded quite differently. Simran frames the struggle young Punjabi men in that region faced at the time, which is their ability to withstand Johal's influence. Anita, who operates a community safety program, similarly personalizes the danger Johal posed to a family member:

It's really interesting from what I've seen. My husband's family, three boys grew up. They're all professionals . . . yeah, a South Asian family. Three boys grew up. They're all professionals. They all went to University and my husband played football with Bindy Johal. Bindy's one of the most notorious South Asian gangsters and my husband was on the force and arrested Bindy and the Dhosanj brothers. Was on the Swat team for [name of police service omitted]. Was involved heavily with the gangs and it was really interesting when Bindy Johal was taken out, these police officers were relieved because he was killing a lot of people. (Anita, interview, 17 August 2016)

Anita frames her husband as a heroic figure, the model to which Punjabi boys should aspire, a position that is diametrically opposed to Johal's gangsterism. Heroes like her officer-husband played an important part in vanquishing the devil, and even felt some level of comfort with Johal's murder, because it brought an end to the horror and violence he inflicted on the community. Both Simran and Anita use personal examples to illustrate the scope of Johal's power, as they have first-hand knowledge of the threat Johal posed through the lived experiences of loved ones and the proximity they had to the notorious gangster.

Finally, Johal's deviance is amplified by being connected to some of society's other social ills. Activist Harjit draws on Johal's connection to the Sikh extremist movement:

You might not know this but a lot of the original gangsters, like Bindy Johal and these guys, their fathers were involved at a certain level, or supporters of things like Babar Khalsa, the Khalistani movement . . . They were all for the 1984 retaliation attacks and stuff like that. We're talking about a lot of the original gangsters, the Dhosanj brothers were part of the United Sikh Federation or sorry the Sikh Youth Federation. So, these guys have backgrounds in separatist kind of mentalities, or their families at least did, or they're involved at a cultural or even a religious level. (Harjit, interview, 3 October 2016)

Johal is a figure that is more frightening and dangerous when his deviance is broadened in such a manner. The Khalistani movement has a long history in Canada, particularly Western Canada,

developing a moral panic over religious extremism, which intensified following the bombing of Air India Flight 182. This terrorist attack was alleged to have been planned and carried out in the Vancouver area by those associated with the Khalistani movement. By connecting Johal's father (among other gangsters) to the Sikh separatist movement, Johal becomes not only responsible for the gang violence plaguing the community, but is now somehow indirectly responsible for the community's panic on dangerous religious and political ideology. In other words, there is no better way of solidifying Johal's status as a folk devil than by connecting him to another source of a community's anxiety: Sikh extremist movements.

However, not much is known about Johal's father and whether he was indeed involved in the Khalistani movement. During the 1980s, the Babbar Khalsa drew much fundraising support in the Vancouver area from the local Sikh community (Purewal 2012). Considering Johal's formative years coincide with rise of the Khalistani movement, and that the Vancouver was the political and social epicenter of the cause, Johal's father may have had these connections to the Babbar Khalsa and other fundamentalist groups. However, the lack of publicly available information about his father has left room for Johal's legacy to grow. In this sense, the elder Johal's alleged activities have been absorbed into his son's legacy, cementing Bindy Johal's status as a mythic figure. Whether Johal's father was actually involved in the Khalistani movement is less important, but rather, the belief that he was a part of the Sikh separatist movement is an integral part of the myth building process as it works to further demonize the Johal name. This provides a connection to the rise of the Khalistani movement with that of gangsterism in the region.

These narratives paint a legacy of Bindy Johal that is steeped in gang violence, one that has been glamorized in the media and admired and emulated by a generation of Punjabi boys. Yet, this take on the Johal legacy is not the only one that exists; a counter-narrative exists that views Johal in a more sympathetic, and perhaps even heroic light.

4.2. "A Fucking Legend"—The Construction of a Local Hero

Johal's status as a folk devil overshadows a different legacy that has emerged in the region, one that views him as a hero. As mentioned above, a source of fear among some in the community is that youth admire Johal, which some have referred to as the "Bindy Johal effect". Former gang unit officer John describes the effect Johal has on young boys:

I was a police officer in South East Vancouver, which is the South Slope, it's predominately a South East Asian community down there. So, for five years in uniform I worked in that area. I got to know a lot of the young kids I met as teenagers, evolved into unfortunately, that lifestyle. They kind of followed in the footsteps of Bindy. Bindy was actually famous, somewhat of a role model for a lot of the young South Asian kids unfortunately. They didn't go after positive role models. They saw him in the news every night and they saw him as some type of cult superstar or something, I don't know. (John, interview, 27 September 2016)

Officer John draws on Johal's celebrity status, and like their favorite athletes, movie, or pop stars, his ability to have youth emulate him. However, as indicated at the end of his comments, Officer John does not know the source of Johal's superstar status, or why youth aspire to follow in his footsteps. Fellow police officer, Scott, provides a few more insights as to why Johal's entry into the gang scene in the early 1990s is significant, and why young Punjabi men were keen to imitate him:

We see this almost mythical evil figure in Bindy Johal. And Bindy Johal is engaged in the drug trafficking field and he's up against the Dhosanj brothers and there's this video clip that I have of Bindy challenging the Dhosanj brothers on the six o'clock news and the Dhosanj brothers getting back at him and then there's violence. So, what happens within the Indo-Canadian community, and this is still to the day to a certain extent, that Johal's got this sort of mythical following among young people, because he's this guy who basically he's not

playing the typical if you will, traditional quiet, studious, law abiding Indo-Canadian young guy. He's breaking the mold and he's going to be the bad ass gangster. And so, kids really look at that and the glamorization and he got away. (Scott, interview, 29 September 2016)

Officer Scott makes an important point around Punjabi masculinity and how Johal's cult status was developed. As a local cultural icon, Johal stood against the typical masculine expectation of the South Asian man as framed by dominant White Anglo-Saxon standards. In the performance of masculinity, South Asian men are expected to be quiet and studious, an image that ultimately serves to subordinate their masculinity, and a baseline for which Punjabi men are evaluated and compared. Johal shattered this stereotypical expectation of the submissive Indian man by adopting a hyper-masculine personality through the gangster life. Consequently, Punjabi men were now constituted as "risky" or "dangerous", a narrative that some may have embraced as a badge of honor as it is more reaffirming of their masculinity. Status-decline might be a common experience for many Punjabi-Jat males, particularly young boys dealing with racism and emasculation in Canada. Further, traditional means to preserve *izzat*, like land ownership, are not readily available in host countries. As Mooney (2013) notes, hypermasculinity may be one form of achieving *izzat*, making gang involvement for some Punjabi males an alternative method to gain power, status, and an influence for boys who cannot achieve it the way their forefathers were able to.

Having shared the same experiences as Johal, former gang leader and Johal associate Diljit understands the motivations of young Punjabi men adopting gangsterism:

"So Bindy comes along and he's fucking ripped with fucking muscles. He's got 40 fucking pounds of gold around his fucking neck. He's just shot three fucking people and he's laughing about it on fucking TV ... It's an emasculated male driving around in a Corvette ... Forty chicks lining up at a bar to suck his [redacted]. "Hey take a number. Take a number, girls". Guy turns into a fucking legend. In terms of race, it's really interesting in terms of race relations how these things ... how does this work? And it fucking made a difference. Fucking white folks stopped fucking around with fucking East Indians after that. They we're like "okay maybe I'll just keep my mouth shut next time I'm thinking of calling you a Hindoo". When we sit down and think about race relations in this country and our community, shit we look at people like fucking Bindy and say "hey. Did he do something for our community?" Did he? Like moralism aside, put the ethical, moral shit, let's just deal with power relations. And so, when you look at South Asian young men today, this guy becomes fucking icon. He becomes a fucking god in the imagination of the emasculated South Asian male. All of a sudden, they're like "oh right. We can fucking do this."" (Diljit, interview, 15 August 2016)

While likely exaggerating certain aspects of Johal's life to get his point across, Diljit highlights two salient issues that need to be unpacked. First, a significant problem associated with the masculinity of racialized men, particularly South Asian and Asian men, is the perception that they are less masculine than White men, who hold the hegemonic standard (Shek 2007). Therefore, a consequence of a being hobbled with a subordinate masculinity is that South Asian men may be considered less sexually desirable (Balaji 2012). Diljit suggests Johal was able to overcome this subordinate status and stake a claim on the hegemonic masculine standard through a hyper-masculine personality, and as a consequence, engaging in hyper-sexual activity. While crude in his assessment, Diljit points to a transformation of both body and attitude that made Johal more sexually appealing as evident by the number of sexual partners he was able to attract. As folk devils are tied to a particular dress and style, Johal's muscular physique, gold jewelry, and overt sexuality became symbols to generations of young Punjabi boys as to how masculinity should be performed.

Diljit makes another important statement related to the experiences of racism young working-class Punjabi males were subjected to. According to Diljit, being called a "Hindoo", a regional derogatory term, along with bullying and physical violence was not uncommon for boys like him and Johal

growing up in predominately White, working-class neighborhoods. Indeed, the term Hindoo has a long history in North America, and was used to emasculate mostly Sikh and Pakistani migrants in the 19th and 20th centuries (Thangaraj 2012). As Thangaraj (2012) notes, discriminatory laws forced South Asian men to form bachelor communities, as “Hindoos” were viewed as perverse and subjects unsuited for full citizenship in their host countries. At its core, the slur “Hindoo” continued the tradition of demasculinizing South Asian men like Johal or Diljit, requiring them to respond through violence and gangs. Thus, similar to Frost (2010) analysis, for Bindy and young Punjabi males who followed, masculinity became a form of counter-protest to the dominant hegemonic standard that they could not meet due to their working-class, minority backgrounds, and the domineering racism of the time.

Feelings of social exclusion are often associated with racism. Anju, who works with several community groups and projects on gang violence, makes an important argument that ties some of Diljit’s arguments together:

So, I think there’s a big history of that and Bindy Johal, you know, was often excluded in clubs, while White people were allowed in. And so, he felt he needed, or others also of his caliber needed the bling, bling to gain more recognition. So, there is the racism that is manifested through bullying. There is the lack of recognition because of race, the exclusion and then the need to have this bling, bling compensates for that inferiority that’s socially constructed around South Asian. (Anju, interview, 29 September 2016)

According to Anju, the gold and jewelry, which became symbols for Johal and his gangster lifestyle, were the result of this performance of a counter-protest masculinity. In order to overcome feelings of inferiority that were brought on by racism and social rejection and achieve some form of recognition, Johal and his followers adopted a distinct new subculture for the disenfranchised Punjabi man that provided them entry to spaces, such as nightclubs, that they were typically excluded from.

It is clear that the source of Johal’s admiration lies in his ability to shatter stereotypes of the Punjabi male and achieve some level of masculinity along the hegemonic standard that typically eludes South Asian men. In other words, Johal is perceived to have fought a system that is unjust and unfair to brown boys like him. High school teacher Lena discusses the appeal Johal has with her students today:

They want to be known as somebody. They want to be seen as someone that is important right? ... So that sense of racism, they want to escape that and just be known, and wow Bindy Johal is important. And I bring out the name Bindy Johal is one of these lions, right? Legends in the 80s that kids know. They all know that person and they might not like what he did but they point to the fact that everybody knows his name. That he’s still considered, right? He put the South Asian population on the map in a different way and I think some of the things Bindy Johal said was about racism, it was about this idea of taking back the power. I completely disagree. I usually tear apart that argument in class but it’s interesting to note that that does matter to some of our students. That they do want to be known as something other than just what the larger society sees them as.

From Lena’s account, Johal’s heroic status among Punjabi youth parallels the lived experiences of African Americans and expressed through gangster rap where “taking back the power” by standing up to racially unjust institutions like the police were common cultural messages transmitted by disenfranchised youth (Lusane 1993). Consequently, in a separate point, Lena mentions the negative perception the city of Surrey typically evokes and how her Punjabi students express being discriminated against as a consequence of the community they call home. While his criminality is not lost on these youth, Johal is a central figure in the local cultural zeitgeist, and glamorized in the media, according to the stakeholder narratives captured in this study for similarly taking back the power against a system that has left Punjabi boys feel powerless, isolation, and discriminated against in their own communities.

5. Discussion

5.1. *Overlooking a Far Greater Crisis: Johal Represents the Problems of South Asian Masculinity*

Johal's legacy is hard to situate within a singular narrative, because it does not clearly fall under the hero or villain category. On the one hand, Johal is perceived as some contemporary folk devil, and his legacy remains harmful for its ability to seduce a new generation of Punjabi boys into gangs. This narrative stands in stark contrast to a more sympathetic view of Johal by highlighting the racial barriers he was able to overcome. Through an exaggerated performance of masculinity, one characterized by displays of aggression and hypersexuality, Johal became an icon for the newly emancipated South Asian male, free them from their subordinated position on the hegemonic masculine hierarchy.

The ambiguous gray area that the legend of Bindy Johal appears to fall under is easier to understand within the context of deviance admiration and the idolization of criminals. For instance, Johal's cult hero status stems from his symbolic resistance to the perceived racial injustices that have plagued Punjabi young men in that region. [Duncan \(1991\)](#) suggests that criminals become admired when their criminal acts are seen as a response to a prior injustice or wrong that has befallen them, which, in Johal's case, would be his many gang-related activities that are attributed to bullying and racism. This is a point Anju makes:

Well it starts off with the bullying. Many of the South Asians gangs started because of racism. That they were beaten up, young Sikh boys that had their patkas [Sikh turban for young males] ripped off, a 13-year-old would be kicked by a 17-year-old. Total humiliation and so Sikhs wanted to, or South Asians primarily Sikhs, wanted to actually defend themselves and they got together. Initially they were gangs to protect themselves and then you get into illegal drugs. So, I think there's a big history of that and Bindy Johal.

Racism and bullying against South Asians is clearly framed as the injustice and necessary precursor to gang involvement, which were initially formed out of a need for protection and a line of defense against physical violence. Drug offenses and other material benefits for gang involvement are deemed as secondary motivations for gang-involvement, and came after as an added bonus, according to Anju. Anju's account illustrates how some may admire Johal when his actions are born out of an injustice, making it easier to romanticize him and rationalize his actions for the "greater good" of a racialized community. Yet, most are not willing to reconcile the impartible harm he has caused and the violence he has inflicted and continues to inflict after his death. For them, Johal remains a folk devil to pin gang violence on, which appears to be the more dominant of the narratives coming from that region, as it is the most supported by official agents of social control.

This provokes a fundamental question: what is the overall consequence of these competing narratives on his legacy? While both images of Johal's legacy appear contradictory, they do share an important relationship, a connection that is best understood within the context of how crises are policed. In the seminal work by [Hall et al. \(1978\)](#), a moral panic over muggings in 1960s and 1970s Britain was manufactured by official agents, like the police, to divert the attention of the public from the poor economic conditions brought on by the recession. As a consequence, young Black youths were framed as a threat, and the folk devils associated with the "wave of muggings", overshadowing the more pervasive and significant economic crisis of the time.

Under a more nuanced interpretation of [Hall et al. \(1978\)](#), it is apparent that Bindy Johal has also been similarly imagined as a threat to the moral functioning of the community and the source of the community's gang problem. Yet, those who frame Johal as a folk devil might be doing so less purposefully, as [Hall et al. \(1978\)](#) suggest happens when crises develop. In other words, the moral panic over Johal's influence over young Punjabi men might not be a manufactured crisis, but one that has organically developed but still produces the same effect. Specifically, this crisis misplaces blame for gang involvement on an individual who is easy to blame, rather than addressing a far greater crisis surrounding Punjabi masculinity. Thus, in this case, a crisis over Punjabi masculinity for working-class

boys serves as the overarching problem that goes unnoticed by central figures in the discourses on gang violence that have emerged in that region. Introspection as to why Johal may have turned to gangs is largely overshadowed by the perceived harm he is believed to have caused and continues to inflict in British Columbia.

Girard's framework on mimetic rivalry and scapegoating can also be used to understand the demonization of Johal in the region. The intra-racial violence among Punjabi young men is indicative of the mimetic rivalry Girard articulates. Essentially, competing conceptions of izzat (honor) and masculinity breeds the violence being witnessed in Western Canada, which at its core is centered on the belief that young men are imitating Binda Johal. This makes him an easy scapegoat to posthumously blame gang violence on, while downplaying or ignoring how as a social figure, Johal animates notions of masculinity, class, and izzat among disenfranchised Punjabi boys in the region.

5.2. Sikh Warriors: From Terrorism to Gangsterism and Its Long History of British Columbia

No analysis on Johal would be complete without understanding the local history of the region, and the development of panics that have impacted the sizable Sikh community in British Columbia. A significant number of Sikhs have settled in British Columbia, where they have continued to follow and practice their religion. Indeed, the free practice of one's religion is a fundamental belief of Sikhism, of which Sikhs are willing to protect if threatened. Indeed, Sikhism was founded in the 16th century Northern India as a distinct religion from majority Hindu and Muslim population. While living relatively peacefully, Sikh warriors emerged in the 17th century to fight against the reigning Mughal Empire and their often-violent campaigns of forced conversions to Islam. This signified the transformation of Sikhs from a passive and relatively peaceful religion to that of the, the religious warrior or soldier (Razavy 2006). The image of the warrior Sikh became an important symbol, and has been appropriated by some when perceived cultural and religious threats arise. In fact, the Lower Mainland of British Columbia is unique, in that the very image of the warrior Sikh has become a part of that region's history and the source of two moral panics, one over terrorism and the other over gangs.

The fear of religious extremism centres on the Khalistani movement, a collective of individuals advocating for a separate Sikh state in Northern Punjab, India. The separatist movement caused significant political violence and turmoil in India including three important watershed moments: (1) the storming of the Harmandir Sahib, the Golden Temple and the Sikh's holiest site, by the Indian army; (2) the revenge assassination of India's Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, in 1984 by her Sikh bodyguard; and (3) the retaliatory violence against Sikhs by Hindu nationalists upset over Gandhi's killing. Noteworthy is that British Columbia has the largest Sikh population outside of India, where they tend to form dense ethnic enclaves in cities like Surrey, Richmond, Delta, and Abbotsford (Todd 2012).

While drawing on support across the globe, including in Ontario, the UK and the United States, British Columbia appears to have been the epicenter of the West's engagement with the pro-separatist Khalistani movement, becoming a part of the local culture and Sikh diaspora. With political violence in India against their people, coupled with a profound sense of isolation and a feeling of not belonging to Canada, the movement may have offered disenfranchised Khalistanis, who are generally more traditionally dressed turbaned-Sikhs, a sense of community and purpose (Chakraborty 2015).

Activist Harjit notes the region's connection to the Khalistani movement:

The Khalistani movement is still very prevalent in the mentality around here. In a lot of the Gurdwaras around here, they worship guys like Bhindranwale. That whole Khalistani movement is big here, where they want a separatist mentality from India. They want their own Sikh Khalistan right. (Harjit, interview, 29 August 2016)

As a result, the Khalistani movement flourished in British Columbia and local figures emerged to contribute to the fight for an independent Sikh state in India. Consequently, Gurdwaras (Sikh temples) in Vancouver, Surrey, West Minister and Abbotsford were taken over by pro-separatist groups as sources of fundraising (Razavy 2006). This culminated in the bombing of Air India Flight 182 in 1985,

killing all 329 passengers, the majority of which were Indo-Canadians. This attack was believed to be planned and carried out by members of the Babbar Khalsa, a leading Khalistani group in British Columbia as a message to India's government (Singh and Singh 2008). Acts of violence in the name of a free-Khalistan are often celebrated, admired, or respected as warriors by supporters sympathetic to the cause (Dorn and Gucciardi 2017). Thus, those who carry out political violence are likely perceived as more modern-day soldiers fighting against threats to Sikh sovereignty akin to the religion's early leaders who fought against Islamic rule.

Although Sikhism encourages carrying on the warrior tradition, typically as soldiers, it does not support criminal gang membership (Dorn and Gucciardi 2017). Interestingly, despite this, the Sikh warrior or soldier label has been appropriated by gangsters or those sympathetic to figures like Bindy Johal to frame their criminality. First, as Anju notes above, Punjabi youth initially joined gangs because of bullying, particularly turbaned Sikh boys who had their "patkas ripped off". Thus, in the face of threats to their religion by racist bullies, gangs were formed by people like Johal from a sense of solidarity, protection, and fighting against racial and religious bigotry. Former gangster Diljit explains the connection between gangs and the image of the Sikh warrior: "I think even for a lot of your young people, we're looking for something to fight. And you know, Sikhism, it's got a brave warrior tradition." (Diljit, interview, 15 August 2016) For Diljit, the warrior mentality that gang members like him developed stems from religious notions of the brave warrior fending off threats to individual liberty and cultural identity.

Officer Scott makes a related statement: "I think Sikhism talks about the Sikh as the warrior, right? And I think that many of the youth are misinterpreting the teachings of the temple, right? They're not hearing the full message of the guru, right?" (Scott, interview, 29 September 2016). Officer Scott attributes the gang involvement of young Punjabi men to a misguided interpretation of Sikh scripture and the purpose of warriorhood. Harjit expands a bit on Scott's statement:

I think the whole Khalistani, we're warriors, we come from a Sikh background. When words don't work, pick up swords, that kind of Guru Gobind Singh mentality. They carry that around. That might come from a religious standpoint or just their cultural upbringing, but I don't think it's a huge factor. (Harjit, interview, 29 August 2016)

For Harjit, the warrior mentality plays some role in the gang involvement of Punjabi boys in the region, albeit acknowledging that it may not be as influential as other factors. Nevertheless, these narratives suggest that Sikh tradition and the image of the warrior/soldier/sant has been especially potent in British Columbia and connected to the moral panics around gangs and terrorism. Johal, the warrior, was a symbolic figure who stood up to racial bullying Sikh's experienced, while those involved in the Khalistani movement are similarly admired by some for their fight against perceived injustices related to a lack of true homeland. A main issue of the Sikh diaspora is local integration and the loss of the Sikh identity and living on the outside of the homeland (Kalra et al. 2005). Considering the challenges posed by integration and identity loss, with the added experience of bullying and racism, disenfranchised Punjabi-Sikhs in Canada may attach themselves to figures that fight perceived injustices, whether that be a lack of true homeland or threats to their masculinity.

This produces a local cultural phenomenon where the image of the warrior is appropriated mostly by disenfranchised Sikh men, and they engage in behavior that is otherwise deemed deviant and criminal by society at large. In some ways, the principle of "fighting for the homeland" is adopted by the Punjabi gangster, who imagines the home/nation quite differently than the Separatist. For some second-generation youth born and raised in British Columbia, there may be a lack of connection to Punjab and Khalistan as the true Sikh homeland. Further, on account of racial discrimination and feelings of social exclusion from Western society, Canada may not truly feel like home either for those young men. This creates an interesting tension where competing conceptions of masculinity, honor, and finding a "home" play out in the form of gang violence and offending in British Columbia.

6. Conclusions

Bindy Johal's life is a remarkable story with plot twists and salacious details more fitting of a Hollywood movie than real life. Johal reached a level of regional notoriety and fame that typically eludes working-class Punjabi boys, and is likely why his legacy resonates with some to this date. As a polarizing figure, Johal is viewed by some as a clear villain and corrupting force, while others may be more empathetic towards him and recognize why he may be a source of admiration among youth. On the surface, Bindy Johal acutely fulfills the 'folk devil' role, and can be easily blamed for the community's gang problem. Yet, any analysis must be cognizant on how such moral panics manifest themselves today, especially since there is no clear consensus on social problems. On one hand, alarmists believe Punjabi youth are being led down the same gang-ridden lifestyle as Johal, while others make counter-claims recognizing his appeal among boys who relate to his struggles. Additionally, as a contemporary moral panic, the fear over Johal's influence on youth is not generated by erratic and volatile bursts of panic that would require immediate action, but instead is a fear that remains a part of the community's conscious and general anxiety over gangs for a more sustained and prolonged period of time.

This analysis reveals several important details of the Bindy Johal story. On the one hand, Johal is deemed a corrupting force, influencing young Punjabi men to join gangs. This includes reluctance to name the devil, share stories of loved ones who may have fallen under his grasp, and amplify his deviance by connecting him to the Khalistani movement, despite a lack of evidence. Nevertheless, a counter-narrative has emerged that is more sympathetic to Johal, and understands his appeal. This outlook on Johal's legacy salvages some of "the good" he may have done for the Punjabi community. Specifically, Johal was able to break Western stereotypes and prevailing challenges faced by racialized, working-class boys and young men. This was achieved through hyper-masculinity and gang involvement.

These narratives point to a distinct regional story that has emerged in British Columbia, and is a part of the Sikh diaspora. Mainly, a fear centered on a particular warrior-type mentality young, Punjabi Sikh men are adopting, which fuels the community's anxieties over terrorism and gangs. Future research would benefit from a richer analysis of the Khalistani movement, and how it might connect to the issue of gangs. This would require broadening the scope of the study to include a more general look at moral panics involving the Sikh community in British Columbia.

Finally, as Hier (2008) suggests, a more substantive moral panic analysis must examine the responses or reactions elicited when such folk devils arise. During the course of this study, it has become apparent that counter-programming exists that aims to delegitimize Johal's appeal to youth. A Punjabi languages course and mentorship program operating in one BC school district, which serves to provide youth with positive Sikh role-models and mentor figures that stand in contrast to what Johal has to offer. These figures include current and historical Sikh-Canadians in the areas of the military, politics, sports, journalism, and the media. Future research may want to examine how the reaction to Johal has influenced the governing of others, particularly youth who are perceived to be susceptible to gangs, through an analysis of such programming.

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Article

Presence and Absence: Constructions of Gender in Dasam Granth Exegesis

Robin Rinehart

Department of Religious Studies, Lafayette College, Easton, PA 18042, USA; rineharr@lafayette.edu

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Abstract: Controversy has swirled round the writings attributed to Guru Gobind Singh in the Dasam Granth, for not all Sikhs agree that he composed the entire text. Disputes about the Dasam Granth and its status have addressed the fact that many of the text's compositions are concerned with gender with respect to the nature of both divinity and humans, thus playing a key role in the ongoing construction of notions of gender in Sikhism. Female voices, however, have been largely absent from this discourse despite the presence of two key gender-related themes—the figure of the goddess/sword [*bhagautī*], a topic throughout the text, and the nature of women [*triyā caritra*], the subject of the longest composition in the Dasam Granth. Through analysis of the intersection of the presence of goddesses and women but the relative absence of female voices in Dasam Granth exegesis, this paper demonstrates that the ongoing reception of the Dasam Granth has been a site for both proclaiming idealized constructions of gender equality, but also instantiating constructions of femininity that run counter to this ideal.

Keywords: Sikhism; gender; gender construction; Dasam Granth

1. Introduction

“The wiles of women are so unfathomable that not even the Creator can figure them out.”¹

Caritropākhiān 332:26 [CP], Dasam Granth

The proclamation that Sikhism supports gender equality is often made in contemporary discourse, as for example, in this statement from the website sikhwomen.com: “Sikhism is unique in recognizing unequivocal equality for all human beings and specifically for both men and women.”² Such statements are often made, as here, with an implicit or explicit comparison to other religious traditions that have not always championed gender equality, whether in their early history or in current practice. The ideal of gender equality, however, can at times seem challenging to reconcile with particular aspects of Sikh history, as the quote about the “wiles of women” above suggests. An analysis of portions of the Sikh text known as the Dasam Granth, along with the exegetical discourse surrounding the text and its reception, illustrates the complexity of realizing the gender equality ideal while at the same time

¹ Translation by the author.

² Sikhism at times is contrasted with Hinduism, e.g., “The concept of equality of woman with man not only gave woman an identity of her own but tended to free her from all kinds of fetters to which she was bound in the Hindu society” (Kaur n.d.). For another example, see the article “Guru Granth Sahib Ji—Torchbearer Of Gender Equality” at <https://www.sikhphilosophy.net/threads/guru-granth-sahib-ji-torchbearer-of-gender-equality.23932/> Viewed 30 September 2019. Some authors distinguish between a fundamental gender equality and differing social roles: “Sikhism does consider men and women to be different by virtue of their gender. However this does not imply superiority of one sex over the other. Men and women are equal under the eyes of God and should therefore be given equal opportunity. No position in Sikhism is reserved solely for men. Women can take part in prayers and serve as Granthi. Sikh women can also take part in any political role they feel fit to accommodate.” See also “Role of Women in Sikhism, <http://www.wahegurunet.com/role-of-women-in-Sikhism/>” (Sikhwomen.com n.d.). Viewed 25 June 2019.

accounting for aspects of the Dasam Granth's content. While material that relates directly to gender roles and at times explicitly comments on them is present in the text, suggesting that in some way it may bear on the ideal of gender equality, explorations of how this material relates to this ideal was for a long time largely absent in Dasam Granth discussions, though the question of gender equality and the Dasam Granth has in recent years made its presence felt in some online discussion forums related to Sikhi.³

The Dasam Granth, or "Book of the Tenth [Guru]," is a text attributed to the tenth Sikh guru, Guru Gobind Singh (1666–1708). However, not all Sikhs agree that Guru Gobind Singh composed the entire text, leading to what is often called the "Dasam Granth controversy," a contentious debate that has shown no signs of abating from the late nineteenth century right up to the present. The controversy centers on specific components of the text's content, especially its retellings of stories familiar from Hindu mythology, which raise questions for some about the nature of the boundary between Sikhism and Hinduism.⁴ Although Sikh commentators discussing gender equality in Sikhism often explicitly contrast the Gurus' views on gender with those of the wider Hindu culture, which they see as less supportive of gender equality, it has been rare for commentators on either side of the debate to invoke some notion of gender equality as a criterion for deciding the Dasam Granth authorship question. This would seem to suggest that in the discourse of constructing community boundaries and self-definition, gender equality has not achieved as high a level of priority as these other factors.

Nevertheless, two key gender-related themes are part of the Dasam Granth controversy—one is the figure of the goddess/sword [*bhagautī*], a theme throughout the text, particularly in portions of the Dasam Granth that relate the exploits of the goddess Durgā or Caṇḍī, and the second is the nature of women [*triya caritra*], a central topic of the longest composition in the Dasam Granth. Disagreements about the Dasam Granth and its status have addressed the fact that many of the text's compositions are concerned with gender with respect to the nature of both divinity and humans, and as such play a key role in the ongoing construction of notions of gender in Sikhism. However, these disagreements have not used the gender equality ideal as a central criterion for evaluating the Dasam Granth, and, until relatively recently with the rise of online discussion forums, female voices have been largely absent from this discourse. Given this intersection of the presence of goddesses and women but the relative absence of female voices in Dasam Granth exegesis, this paper explores the gender-related content of the Dasam Granth, demonstrating that the ongoing reception of the Dasam Granth has at times been a space in which the gender equality ideal is simply not a key factor, and that portions of the text itself may be read as instantiating constructions of divinity, femininity, and gender roles that may run counter to this ideal. However, as the issue of gender has achieved greater attention and prominence in Sikh discourse in India and the Sikh diaspora, there have begun to be voices proposing interpretive strategies that seek to reconcile some of the seemingly vexing aspects of the Dasam Granth, especially *Caritropākhīān*, with the value of gender equality.

The Dasam Granth, 1428 pages in the standard print edition, is a series of varied compositions in the Brajbhāṣā, Punjabi, and Persian languages, the majority of which may be dated to the 1680s and 1690s.⁵ Some sections, such as the opening *Jāp Jī*, a series of verses praising a formless God who cannot be named, and the 1705 "Zafarnāmā," Guru Gobind Singh's missive to the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb chastising him for failing to keep his word, are relatively uncontroversial. Significant portions of the text relate stories familiar from the Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa, Purānas, and other tales generally associated with Hindu traditions, and as such their authorship has been questioned by those who

³ For an introduction to the types of discussions found online, see <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-controversy-of-the-Dasam-Granth>, or the various links at <http://www.sikhawareness.com/search?q=dasam%20granth>.

⁴ See, for example, (Jaggi 1965, 1966), in which he argues that much of the Dasam Granth is derived from the Hindu Puranas.

⁵ For further details regarding the Dasam Granth, its composition, compilation, additional compositions not found in the standard edition, and subsequent debates, see (Rinehart 2011).

believe that Guru Gobind Singh would not have chosen to compose poetry on such subjects.⁶ There are also three separate compositions that depict the goddess Durgā or Caṇḍī's battles against a series of demons who were usurping the power of the gods, each roughly following the outline of the *Devī Māhātmya* portion of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāna*. Some Sikh critics have questioned the authorship of these compositions as well⁷, but others who accept Guru Gobind Singh as the author argue that while these goddess compositions serve a specific purpose, they do not advocate worship of a Hindu goddess.⁸ The longest composition within the Dasam Granth is also the most hotly contested. *Caritropākhiān* is a series of 404 *caritras* or "character sketches"⁹ that is sometimes also referred to as "*Triya Caritra*," or "Character Sketches About Women." Many of these stories are graphic in their depiction of male/female interactions and sexual escapades, leading some to question whether Guru Gobind Singh would have written in this vein and hence cast doubt on *Caritropākhiān*'s authorship.

Though many parts of the Dasam Granth generate heated debate, *Jāp Jī* and other passages are a regular part of Sikh prayer. For example, the opening verses of *Vār Durgā Kī* (also known as *Caṇḍī dī Vār*, the "Ballad of Durgā" or "Ballad of Caṇḍī"), one of the compositions about Durgā, are used as the first part of the *ardās* prayer, and the "*Bentī Caupāī*" hymn comes from a passage in the closing tale of *Caritropākhiān*. Various verses from the Dasam Granth are used in Khalsa initiation rites as well, and stories from *Caritropākhiān* may form the basis for devotional singing or *kīrtan*. While Sikhs may not always be familiar with the text in its entirety, portions of it play a critical role in everyday Sikh liturgy and ritual. Indeed, the Dasam Granth is sometimes referred to as the "second scripture of the Sikhs."

In exploring Dasam Granth discourse with respect to gender, it is important to take note of the overall context within which the Dasam Granth controversy is situated. Sikh theology describes God as formless, nameless, and beyond comprehension, yet nearly all the names and terms that point at God are masculine in gender. When a grammatically feminine term that may refer to the deity such as *bhagautī* is used, it often generates a specific type of analysis focused on the gender of God that does not occur when male terms for the deity are employed.¹⁰ Sikhism in theory is open to people in leadership roles from any gender identity, but the Gurus were all male, and most *granthīs* and other leaders have been male. Khalsa initiation is open to both women and men, but the first five people to receive that initiation, the *Pañj Piāre*, were all males. The Dasam Granth is a text composed by a male author or authors (depending on one's view on its authorship), and it tacitly addresses a primarily male audience. When addressing matters of gender, it does so from a male perspective; *Caritropākhiān*, for example, is situated within a frame story involving a male king, his son, and his male ministers, and the stories themselves are addressed to males. While some critics reject *Caritropākhiān* outright on the grounds that its graphic nature renders it incompatible with Sikhi¹¹, debates about this composition often focus on whether the stories of *Caritropākhiān* are appropriate specifically for women to hear or read, indicating that some commentators believe that there should be gender inequality with respect to access to particular subject matter.

Although key aspects of the Dasam Granth controversy are directly related to gender, for most of its history, the controversy has not centered on finding instances within the text in which gender

⁶ See, e.g., (Jaggi 1965, 1966). A later, more polemical version of this argument is made in Gurbakhsh "Kala Afghana" Singh's 1995 six-volume text, *Biprān kī Rīt Ton Sacch dā Mārag* (Amritsar: Sri Akal Sahay Society).

⁷ See, for example, Madanjit Kaur's article "Devi Worship Story: A Critique" (https://sikhinstitute.org/fundamental_issues/ch13.html). Kaur argues that the *devī* compositions were the work of Guru Gobind Singh's court poets.

⁸ See, for example, the (Kohli 2005) "Introduction" to *The Dasam Granth: The Second Scripture of the Sikhs written by Sri Guru Gobind Singh* (Delhi, India: Munshiram Manoharlal).

⁹ Within *Caritropākhiān* itself, the phrase "*triya caritra*" or "women's *caritras*" is also used, and sometimes the composition is referred to by this title. It is difficult to capture fully the term "*caritra*" in one English word; it may refer to a specific deed or behavior, or characteristic (hence the use of the term "wiles" as one translation) or more broadly to a person's nature or character.

¹⁰ For a summary of Sikh analyses of the usage of *bhagautī*, see Jaswant Singh Neki and Giani Balwant Singh's entry "*Bhagautī*" in Harbans Singh, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Sikhism vol. 1* (Patiala, India: Punjabi University, Patiala), pp. 319–22.

¹¹ (Kohli 2005, p. xxxii), for example, did not include *Caritropākhiān* in his 2005 English translation of the Dasam Granth, arguing that its tales of "crafty and wily women" were simply not in keeping with Guru Gobind Singh's character.

equality by any definition is mentioned, or on using the ideal of gender equality as a criterion for analyzing the text or assessing its authorship. Portions of the text itself present complex pictures of female and male natures that do not always thoroughly mesh with the notion of equality between the sexes, however it might be defined. The authorship debate about the text has typically not used assertion or denial of gender equality as a criterion. The scholarship and exegetical commentary on the Dasam Granth, both by Sikhs and others, has been for the most part written by males. Online discussions and debates about the Dasam Granth are predominantly male, though with increasing numbers of female voices in recent years. However one may understand gender equality, in the context of the Dasam Granth controversy, it does not mean equality of representation. Stating these facts is not meant to challenge the Sikh *ideal* of gender equality, but rather to highlight the gap between this ideal, and the reality that the ideal has not been fully realized within the ongoing Dasam Granth discourse.

Generally, statements about gender equality in Sikhism point to specific verses in the Guru Granth Sahib, such as Guru Nanak's verses regarding the fact that "man is born from woman" and that from woman, kings are born.¹² Such statements also highlight key female figures in Sikh tradition, such as Guru Gobind Singh's wife Mātā Jīto, who stirred the *amrit* for the *Pañj Piāre* at the establishment of the Khalsa, and women such as Māi Bhāgo who valiantly fought in battle. Such statements may also note that there are no restrictions on women taking leadership roles in Sikh practice. Yet such instances of female leadership are more the exception than the rule. The underlying understanding of gender equality at times seems to focus mainly on equality with respect to spiritual ability, and equality with respect to the availability of roles within religious practice. However, it is often less focused on why the gender equality ideal has not been fully realized in terms of women, for example, taking more leadership roles. To borrow the terminology used by (Sponberg 1992, pp. 8–18) in his analysis of attitudes towards women and the feminine in early Buddhism, Sikh tradition preserves a multiplicity of voices or perspectives regarding gender. These include, significantly, soteriological inclusiveness—the notion that both women and men are capable of spiritual liberation—but also institutional androcentrism, i.e., the dominance of men and male perspectives in the institutional structures of Sikhism. These different perspectives exist simultaneously and at times in tension with one another. Institutional and social forces as well can hinder the realization of ideals such as gender equality.

Doris Jakobsh, in her study of gender in Sikh history (Jakobsh 2003, pp. 8–18) identified four principles that are at work in Sikh conceptions of gender, and these principles provide another means of highlighting the multiplicity of perspectives identifiable in the Dasam Granth controversy. The principle of silence—the lack of female voices, the lack of evidence recording their experiences and perspectives—is illustrated, for example, by the fact that there is silence within the text regarding a female perspective, especially in the case of *Caritropākhiān*, narrated by a male for a male audience. Negation, the phenomenon whereby heterogeneous voices that may challenge a dominant narrative are downplayed, is illustrated by the fact that in those contexts in which gender equality has become a dominant narrative, the aspects of the Dasam Granth that seem not to support gender equality may simply remain unacknowledged or be downplayed. (It is worth noting, however, that Sikh interpreters who challenge Guru Gobind Singh's authorship of some or all of the Dasam Granth have occasionally invoked the negative portrayal of females in *Caritropākhiān* as evidence that it cannot be the work of a Sikh Guru.¹³) Accommodation is a principle or process whereby contemporary commentators seek to accommodate values that are currently important, such as gender equality, by giving them more prominence in the past than those values might have had. Highlighting the usage of the concept of "*bhagautī*" as a celebration of the feminine aspect of divinity—and therefore illustrative of the gender

¹² Sri Guru Granth Sahib p. 473. Widely available online in Punjabi transliteration with English translation; see, e.g., <https://www.sikhnet.com/oldsikhnet/siggs/translation/0473.html> or <http://www.sikhawareness.com/search/?q=dasam%20granth>.

¹³ See, for example, Rattan Singh's 1966 analysis of *Caritropākhiān*, in which in addition to highlighting internal inconsistencies within certain *caritras*, he argues that Guru Gobind Singh would not have written such stories (Jaggi 1966, pp. 155–65).

equality ideal—is one example of the principle of accommodation with respect to the Dasam Granth. The principle of idealization involves glorifying infrequent examples of female leadership, participation in battle, etc., as normative when such examples are actually rather rare; this happens when the few examples of women fighting in battle in *Caritropākhiān* are accorded prominence (discussed in further detail below). Further, it is worth noting that the complexity and delicacy of the Dasam Granth controversy illustrates a principle of silence in another way, not simply with respect to gender equality, but in terms of efforts to quell or even silence controversy, as in 2000, when the *jathedār* of the Akāl Takht issued a directive requesting that Sikh scholars simply not comment publicly on the Dasam Granth (because the controversy had become so heated).¹⁴ Female figures and statements about gender are present in the Dasam Granth, but the issue of how these aspects of the construction of gender and the nature of gender relate to the controversy itself has for much of the history of the controversy largely been absent, especially with respect to gender equality.

For the purposes of this analysis, “gender equality” will be understood broadly to mean the perspective that men and women should enjoy the same rights and opportunities, and that they are equal in terms of their spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical potential and/or capabilities. It is of course possible to define a more circumscribed version of gender equality; one could, for example, posit that females and males are equal in terms of spiritual capability, but that they may fulfill different social roles, or that while females and males should have equal opportunities, they may have different characteristics and abilities that lead them in different ways. Indeed that is a strategy that some interpreters have adopted, particularly in analyzing the stories in *Caritropākhiān*.¹⁵

2. Bhagautī and the Role of the Goddess in the Dasam Granth

The term “*bhagautī*” appears frequently throughout the Dasam Granth, particularly in the invocatory phrase “*srī bhagautī jī sahāī*” [“with the aid of revered *bhagautī*”] which occurs at the beginning of a number of Dasam Granth compositions.¹⁶ Placed in the wider context of Brajbhāṣā and early modern Hindi literature, this term is a form of the Sanskrit word *bhagavatī*, a feminine noun derived from the root *-bhaj*, which is also the source of terms such as the masculine noun *bhagavān* (“lord” or “god”) and *bhakti* or devotion. In this wider Indic context, *bhagavatī* most often means “goddess” and indeed this phrase occurs at the opening of many Dasam Granth compositions, including those that relate stories about the goddess Durgā or Caṇḍī. It is also familiar because it occurs in the opening lines of the *ardās* prayer, drawn from *Vār Srī Bhagautī Jī Kī* [a.k.a. *Vār Durgā Kī*], one of the three compositions concerning Durgā or Caṇḍī’s battles against demons in the Dasam Granth. While some readers may be tempted to understand “*bhagautī*,” therefore, primarily to mean “goddess,” especially as a title for Durgā or Caṇḍī, within Sikh discourse and Dasam Granth exegesis, it is more frequently taken to mean “sword.” In other words, the figure who in Hindu mythology is understood as a goddess is in Sikh exegesis generally understood in a more instrumental sense as a weapon wielded by the supreme deity. Or, *bhagautī* may be interpreted in an even more abstract way.¹⁷ Pritpal Singh Bindra, for example, includes a note regarding the usage of the term “*bhagautī*” in his translation of the *Caritropākhiān*; he explains that while it may be perceived in the material form of the sword, it in fact is “Shakti” and “represents the celestial authority and eternal power” (Bindra 2002, vol. 1, p. 13).

¹⁴ See (Rinehart 2011, p. 49).

¹⁵ See, for example, Pritpal Singh, “Sri Guru Gobind Singh Sahib Jee on women in the Charitropakhyan,” <https://sikhunity.wordpress.com/2014/01/14/sri-guru-gobind-singh-sahib-jee-on-women-in-the-charitropakhyan/>. 14 January 2014. Viewed 2 October 2019. Pritpal Singh argues that the poet composing the *caritras* did not see the image of females as sexual in nature, but rather it was “libertines” such as the king in the composition who cannot see women in their true form, in which their positive power is formidable.

¹⁶ These include *Akāl Ustati*, *Caṇḍī Caritra*, *Caṇḍī Caritra Ukti Vilāsa*, *Vār Durgā Kī*, *Giān Prabodha*, *Caubīs Avatāra*, *Rudra Avatāra*, and *Sastra-nāma-mālā*. *Caritropākhiān* includes the similar invocatory phrase “*srī bhagautī ai nāma*.”

¹⁷ See, for example, the entry for “*bhagautī*” in (Nabha 1990) *Mahān Kosh*, p. 901.

The use of the term *bhagautī* in the three Dasam Granth compositions that relate the goddess Durgā or Caṇḍī's defeat of demons (and which refer explicitly to the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*) does suggest that at least one level of interpretation, the term refers to or can at least have a very clear connection to a goddess—in other words, to some aspect of divine power construed as a female figure. In the *Devī Māhātmya* section of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* that provides the broad outline from which the Dasam Granth's three goddess narratives are drawn, the focus clearly is on a goddess, who was created by the gods specifically to defeat demons who are otherwise invincible, and part of the purpose of telling her deeds is to promote reverence for and worship of the goddess. Indeed many other Sanskrit and vernacular versions of these goddess stories include verses that detail the benefits that accrue to those who worship the goddess and recite the verses about her deeds.¹⁸ The Dasam Granth, however, notably does not include similar verses, and in Sikh discourse the stories are generally taken as inspirational tales for warriors that nonetheless do not promote goddess worship. By emphasizing that these Dasam Granth compositions do not advocate goddess worship, of course, this discourse, even when interpreting *bhagautī* more abstractly, tacitly acknowledges that these stories, however one chooses to interpret them, may indeed be read as concerning a goddess.

When the term *bhagautī*, which elsewhere denotes the goddess or *devī*, is taken in the Sikh context to mean “sword,” the more direct associations with a female deity fade, and the grammatically feminine “sword” becomes an instrument or tool of a greater, more abstract (but grammatically masculine) divine power. In the context of the tales related in the Dasam Granth, if *bhagautī* is taken in the sense as a sword rather than a goddess, as a weapon (a theme emphasized in another Dasam Granth composition, the *Sastra-nāma-māla*), there is still the implication that the feminine sword, or *sakti*/power is secondary; in other words, while male terms can point towards the formless (and by definition therefore presumably beyond gender) God, a female term cannot. Some commentators, even while noting that the term *bhagautī* does indeed occur in compositions that depict Durgā's slaying of demons, have suggested that even though the term is grammatically feminine, it does not refer to a “Female.” The entry for “*Bhagautī*” on the “Sikh Encyclomedia” webpage SikhiWiki illustrates the wide range of interpretations.¹⁹ For example, one definition of *bhagautī* provided there is “one who knows Bhagavant (i.e., God)”; another is the “intuitive and discerning mind” which cannot be a female body because it is a spiritual (and therefore not corporeal) form; another is that *bhagautī* is the divine command. The gist of each of the explanations provided is that *bhagautī* in the Sikh context does *not* refer to a goddess or an explicitly female conception of divinity. One commenter on this webpage, highlighting the complex of the concept as well as the effort to distance *bhagautī* from the idea of a goddess, “This is indeed a very difficult topic handled very intelligently.”²⁰

A key aspect of the difficulty seems to be the fact that *bhagautī* is a grammatically feminine word, which in other contexts does refer specifically to a goddess. In the Dasam Granth, its usage occurs within compositions that retell stories about that goddess and her battles, but the interpretation that has gained more traction is one that downplays the representation of a female deity in favor of a more abstract understanding of *bhagautī*. Similar explanations of the figures of other Hindu male deities mentioned throughout Sikh texts, such as Indra and Viṣṇu, point out that Sikhism does not advocate worship of them. Presumably, therefore, one could make the parallel argument that Indra or Viṣṇu are not male when mentioned in a Sikh context in which God is understood as formless, but this

¹⁸ At the close of the *Devī-Māhātmya*, the goddess proclaims that those who recite the hymns about her deeds will not suffer from misfortune, poverty, the threat of enemies, fires, or floods, and so forth. See (Coburn 1992, pp. 79–81).

¹⁹ <https://www.sikhi.org/index.php/Bhagauti>. Viewed 23 September 2019. SikhiWiki is a site sponsored by SikhNet.com, an organization formally incorporated in the United States with a global staff. For further information, see <https://www.sikhnet.com/about>.

²⁰ <https://www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Talk:Bhagauti>.

argument is emphasized only with respect to the female deity.²¹ Interestingly, however, in the case of *bhagautī*, there is also an effort not only to emphasize that the goddess is not to be worshipped, but also, significantly, to distance one's interpretation of *bhagautī* from anything associated with the female or feminine.²²

One exception to this tendency to downplay or make abstract the idea of *bhagautī* is the work of Sikh scholar Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh, who has written extensively about Guru Gobind Singh and the figure of Durgā. Rather than downplay the depiction of a deity who is clearly female in other contexts, she has emphasized Guru Gobind Singh's choice to devote significant attention to tales of the goddess in the Dasam Granth. She mentions the goddess Durgā as "Guru Gobind Singh's favorite literary subject," which he chose deliberately to validate "the female experience in the society, aesthetics, and religion of the Sikhs" (Singh 1990, pp. 245–46).²³ She sees his retelling of Durgā's story as "unequivocal acknowledgement of women's power," arguing that she is "singled out by the Sikh Gurū as the model of moral force and martial prowess—for both men and women" (Singh 1990, pp. 248–49). Her analysis is that Guru Gobind Singh deliberately chose the story of Durgā as an affirmation of female power, for Durgā triumphs even when the male gods have been vanquished, and that she became a paradigm to "abolish unjust political authority and social inequalities and to forge a new structure based on the values of egalitarianism, justice, and freedom" (Singh 1990, p. 252). She includes *bhagautī* among the terms used for the sword, and in her reading, Guru Gobind Singh's recollection of Durgā is a "metaphor within a metaphor" that provided encouragement to Sikhs who had struggled under political subjugation. Noting the usage of the term *bhagautī* in the *ardās* prayer and in the invocatory line of various Dasam Granth compositions, as well as the fact that both Sikh women and men carry the *kirpān* or sword, on her reading Durgā, (that is, a conception of the divine with feminine connotations) in a metaphorical sense, is still recalled by Sikhs (Singh 1990, p. 261). For Singh, this is a recognition of the feminine principle, and as a metaphor within a metaphor, as goddess and sword, *bhagautī* signifies victory over evil, not just in battle, but also in overcoming negative psychological forces (Singh 1990, p. 263). She has also argued (Singh 2005, p. 120) that Guru Gobind Singh, in his Durgā compositions, made Durgā and her sword interchangeable, suggesting that it is not necessary to remove the goddess or female aspect of divinity from the concept of *bhagautī*.

Nikky Singh's analysis illustrates the possibility of viewing the presence of *bhagautī* in the Dasam Granth as multivalent and supporting the value of gender equality in terms of representing the deity, but this particular reading has not as yet, at least, assumed much prominence in the continuing Dasam Granth controversy. Interpretations that abstract the female deity into a weapon or instrument, thereby downplaying the female or feminine aspect, are more common, although, as noted above, there is not a similar effort to downplay the maleness of deities such as Indra or Viṣṇu.

3. *Caritropākhiān*

This composition, which comprises about 40% of the Dasam Granth as a whole, is often characterized as being focused on "the wiles of women," and as such is of course relevant to constructions of gender. Some of the *caritras* are graphic in their description of sexual encounters, and to avoid the controversy over its content, some printed versions and translations of the Dasam Granth simply leave it out. But there is more to *Caritropākhiān* than just explicit stories. In his

²¹ Sikh interpreters of the Dasam Granth do sometimes emphasize that any mention of Hindu gods or goddesses should not be read as a call to worship them, but unlike with the goddess, there is no effort to dissociate the Hindu gods mentioned as not being male.

²² For a parallel analysis of the nature of God and gender in a context in which the normative theological understanding is that God is beyond gender, yet most frequently described with grammatically masculine terms, see the chapter "God: Reimagining the Unimaginable" in Judith Plaskow's 1991 classic *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (HarperCollins).

²³ For a similar discussion within a broader analysis of the "feminine principle" in Sikh conceptions of the transcendent, see (Singh 1993), especially Chapter 4.

study of the Dasam Granth, (Loehlin 1971, p. 49) categorized the stories of *Caritropākhiān* as follows: there are 78 which concern the bravery, devotion, or intelligence of women; 269 which concern the deceitfulness and unscrupulousness of women; 26 which concern the deceitfulness of men; 10 which concern gambling, drinking, and opium use; and 19 which are retellings of well-known folktales. This accounting illustrates the variety of the *caritras*, but also shows that a substantial number of them indeed do in some way focus on women as deceitful or unscrupulous. Many of the *caritras* include characters and stories familiar from other sources, including the Hindu epics, Sanskrit story literature, and occasionally Persian traditions as well. In his 1959 study of the Dasam Granth, Dharam Pal Ashta identified eight main sources for the *caritras*: the Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa, Purānas, historical stories of Rajput women, the *Pañcatantra*, Persian texts, popular tales, and stories from Pathan and Mughal times (Ashta 1959, p. 151). Among the well-known folktales that are retold in *Caritropākhiān* are the love stories of Sassī and Punnū (*Caritra* 101), Hīr and Rānjhā (*Caritra* 98), Sohñī and Mahīwāl (*Caritra* 101), and Mirzā and Sāhibān (*Caritra* 129).

It is not just women who are often portrayed as unscrupulous in *Caritropākhiān*; male religious leaders of various backgrounds, including Hindu *sādhus* and swamis and Muslims *pīrs* and *qāzīs*, are shown to be duplicitous at times, and none too bright either. J.C. Oman, in his 1905 study of *The Mystics, Ascetics, and Saints of India*, translated five of the *caritras* concerning sadhus and their “amatory intrigues with ranis [queens]” to illustrate the fact that there is some skepticism about renouncers and their commitment to the rules of celibacy (Oman 1984, pp. 83–91).

Sikh scholar R.S. Jaggi, who produced some of the most important scholarship on the Dasam Granth, argued in his early work (Jaggi 1966, pp. 154–64) on the text that some of the events described in the *caritras* were simply not in keeping with Guru Gobind Singh’s personality, largely due to the explicit nature of many of the stories depicting various sexual indiscretions, and that they also contradicted teachings about gender equality from the Guru Granth Sahib. On these and other grounds (such as the use of different pen-names by the poet, such as Siām, Rām, and Kāl) he concluded that Guru Gobind Singh could not be the author of this particular composition. Pritpal Singh Bindra, in a short paper entitled “Could Guru Gobind Singh Write Such Things” (Bindra 2000) characterized the contents of many of the *caritras* (as well as some of the Persian *hikāyats* that follow *Caritropākhiān* in the Dasam Granth) as “pornographic” and “ludicrous,” and also decried the references to intoxicants such as alcohol and opium. He also published the only full English translation of *Caritropākhiān* with the subtitle *Tales of Male-Female Tricky Deceptions*, opening the text with the statement “I leave it entirely to the judgement of the readers to ascertain whether such language and such stories could emanate through the mind and the pen of Guru Gobind Singh who has endowed us a unique code of living a moral and courageous life” (Bindra 2002, Author’s Note). His earlier statement seems to suggest that the translation was meant, through making the stories more widely available in translation, to demonstrate that the subject matter of these stories was such that one should not entertain the possibility of such a text being the work of Guru Gobind Singh. It is worth noting that in both instances, though reading the text with a quite critical eye, these Sikh authors did not specifically assess *Caritropākhiān* with respect to gender equality. Rather, it was primarily the sexually explicit nature of the *caritras* that they found troubling. Using the principle that gender equality is a core tenet of Sikhism, one argument that could be made is that if the stories in *Caritropākhiān* do not illustrate or otherwise endorse the value of gender equality however it may be defined, this could be an indicator that the stories are best not understood as the work of a Sikh Guru. However, other than the concern that the portrayal of women in *Caritropākhiān* is at times too graphic in its depiction of human sexuality, and therefore should not be read by or recited in the presence of women, analyzing the contents from the perspective of gender equality has typically not been a feature of the discourse.

Among Sikh interpreters who do accept *Caritropākhiān* as the work of Guru Gobind Singh, there are varying explanations of the nature of its content. For example, some argue that the text was meant specifically for the moral instruction of [male] soldiers away from home, or more generally for the moral instruction of men. This view, like that of those who reject *Caritropākhiān* as the work of Guru

Gobind Singh, reads the text from a specifically male perspective, and is not an analysis of the text with respect to the principle of gender equality. Singh (1967, pp. 251–62) in his interpretation of *Caritropākhiān*, suggested that rather than reading the *caritras* as being about men and women, one could read them metaphorically with the female characters representing the human body, and the male characters the intellect. Arguably, such an interpretation moves closer to the ideal of gender equality insofar as it does not attribute specific, negative characteristics and tendencies to women, but even so it perpetuates a very common gender stereotype that identifies “the female” more closely with the physical and “the male” with the intellectual, and thus is difficult to reconcile with the ideal of gender equality.

What, then, do the *caritras* suggest about this mysterious nature of females? Viewing representative examples of *caritras* through the lens of gender equality illustrates aspects of the depiction of gender in this composition, and suggests ways in which these stories could potentially enrich the discussion regarding representations of gender in Sikh texts. The opening *caritra* within *Caritropākhiān* is a lengthy account of the battles of a goddess, characterized more abstractly as “*sakti*” by some commentators.²⁴ In the midst of a detailed description of a battlefield scene, the opening *caritra* includes the statement that the mysteries of a child in the womb, a king, and a woman cannot be solved [*Caritropākhiān* 1:44], the first mention of such mysteries. After this opening benedictory section, the second *caritra* introduces the frame story for the text as a whole.

A king, Citra Singh, married an *apsarā* or female celestial being, and the two had a son named Hanvant Singh. But after some years of wedded bliss, the *apsarā* chose to forsake earthly life and return to her heavenly abode. Devasted, Citra Singh searched far and wide for a woman who looked like his *apsarā* in order to replace her, and when such a woman was located, his military forces fought a battle to win her hand in marriage, killing the young woman’s father. Successful in battle, the king then wed a second time, but his new wife found that she was more attracted to her stepson Hanvant Singh than her husband. When she sought to seduce her stepson, and he rebuffed her attempts at romance, she angrily scratched her own face and then told her husband that his son had tried to force himself on her. The king, at first believing his wife’s account of what had happened, resolved to kill his son, but his minister sought to calm him down by explaining that women’s natures [*triyā caritra*] are difficult to understand [CP 2:30]. Somewhat mollified, the king put his son in prison instead rather than execute him, and then had him brought out of his prison cell daily to hear the minister provide instruction in the form of stories.

This frame story clearly shows that the stories are crafted for a male audience in order to understand various mysteries of life including the nature of females. The female character, the king’s new wife, is not a part of the discussions, nor is her perspective portrayed, though one could surmise that it might not be surprising that a young woman would find a young man in her age range more attractive than the presumably much older king. Her husband, the king Citra Singh, chose her solely on the basis of her appearance, and killed her father to win her. The underlying gender framework portrayed here is one in which a woman is under the control of her father, and subsequently her husband, and in this story, at least, the woman has no agency in the selection of her marital partner. The young woman is characterized not so much as an individual, but rather according to a generic female nature that men must know about and be wary of, even if, as the minister explains, they cannot fully understand it. Granted, the portrayal of the king and his minister is not particularly detailed either, but in contrast, there are no blanket assertions about the nature of men’s characters beyond their susceptibility to women’s machinations. The frame story as a whole, with its assertion that women’s natures are mysterious, seems to run counter to the notion of gender equality (and indeed arguably, the Sikh principles of warfare, traced to Guru Gobind Singh, according to which battle should be waged for just cause [*dharam yuddha*], and that in the context of battle women must not be molested in any

²⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the opening *caritra*, see (Rinehart 2011, pp. 114–16).

way). Many of the *caritras* that follow also may seem difficult to reconcile with the ideal of gender equality, however it may be defined.

Most often, the *caritras* portray males as rather hapless, helpless figures who are routinely outwitted and deceived by clever women. For example, *Caritra* 42 depicts an elderly Muslim *pīr* or holy man in Multan. Because the *pīr* and his wife Rustamkalā did not have a son, Rustamkalā went to another local *pīr* and requested the blessing of a child because her husband was so old that he could not perform sexually. She requested that this other *pīr* give her a clove, meant to symbolize the blessing of a pregnancy, and then secretly she and this *pīr* had sexual relations. Nine months later Rustamkalā gave birth to a son. She managed to fool her husband into thinking that the child was his, and likewise the *pīr*'s followers spread the word that he had the power to grant a woman's wish to bear a son. The female character here is thus portrayed as quite effective in her scheming, and the portrayal of the *pīrs* is rather irreverent as well; Rustamkalā's husband thinks that he has fathered a child, and the other *pīr* is content to have people believe that his blessing allowed a childless woman to conceive. It is also worth noting that the story specifically mentions the desire for a son, not a child or a daughter.

In a similar vein, *Caritra* 107 relates the tale of a Jat couple, Jodhan Dev and Main Kuari. Main Kuari would sneak out at night to meet a lover while her husband slept. One night, she returned home to find that thieves had broken into the house. She roused her husband and chastised him for not waking up sooner to chase away the thieves. After they and some neighbors successfully managed to fend off the would-be robbers, Jodhan Dev praised his wife for her actions, completely unaware that his wife had earlier slipped away for her extramarital escapade. It is implied in this and many other *caritras*, including the frame story, that some, perhaps even many women, are inclined by nature to pursue multiple sexual partners and cover up their actions through deceit. Thus an implied principle here concerning gender roles is that while women should have only one partner, their nature is such that they will seek others, and that therefore men must ever be watchful of them. It is the woman's nature or character that is seen as more problematic than that of the men who engage in extramarital sexual relationships with women. Women are defined by their sexuality to a far greater degree than are men. While the minister often advises that men should be wary of women, there is no parallel advice for women regarding men, even though they are of course just as much involved in the intrigues the *caritras* relate.

Throughout the *caritras*, there are occasional, passing comments on women's and men's natures in general. For example, *Caritra* 20 is about a beautiful woman who deceived her loving husband. The woman was entertaining in her home a raja who had become enchanted with her, but when her husband arrived, she disguised the raja as a pillow on the bed where she and her husband slept that night, the raja sneaking away in the morning with the husband none the wiser even though his wife's lover had been in bed with them all night. This *caritra* closes with the minister's opining that even the wise men of this world are fools if they fall in love with women. Two key underlying presuppositions of this view are that women and men are different by nature, and, given that women's behaviors or natures are risky to wise men, they are clearly not equal. Such *caritras* do not seem to present male/female relationships that are grounded in a principle of equality, or would require a more detailed model of gender that in some way accounted for differences in male and female behavior while still maintaining that they are equal.

Among the occasional asides about the character of women and men's helplessness before them, there are also comments about the fact that even the gods are unable to understand fully the ruses that women concoct. *Caritra* 332 ends with the observation that women's *caritras* (here, the term *caritra* implies a component of a person's overall character, namely the ability to deceive, i.e., feminine "wiles") are limitless, so much so that even the creator cannot fathom them. Similarly, *Caritra* 336 closes with the assertion that not even Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva, or the very creator who made women can understand their fickle nature. Men and even the gods are helpless before a woman's power to deceive and get her way. As such, the responsibility for sexual indiscretions is placed almost entirely on women, although the men in the stories are willing participants as well, even if they do not fully realize what is going on.

Caritra 395 is the tale of a merchant's daughter who was unable to seduce a prince who had captured her fancy. Undaunted, she summoned a ghost to torment the prince, and finally the prince's father sought the assistance of someone who could scare away the spectral being disturbing his son. The young woman then disguised herself as a man, proclaiming that he had the power to save the prince from the ghost. While in disguise as a man, she announced to the king that the only way forward was for the prince to marry a specific woman who had the ability to chase off the ghost—that is, marry the merchant's daughter herself. And so she was able to wed the man she desired. This *caritra* ends with the comment that even the creator is astounded at the range of women's schemes. Thus there is a power that women have that even the gods cannot fully understand or control, and this power, clearly connected to their sexuality, is manifest when women's desires are not met within the bounds of marriage.

The *caritras* are not entirely negative about women's actions. Some present women who fight valiantly in battles, or cleverly outwit thieves and other miscreants. Nor are the *caritras* wholly positive about men's actions either; as the above examples show, often the men in the *caritras*, whether village peasants, mighty kings, or even gods are shown as thoroughly gullible and susceptible to women's schemes. Overall, *Caritropākhiān* suggests a rather cynical view of human nature, both male and female. Even so, its abundant stories of women deceiving men suggest that women are responsible for sexual acts in a way that men are not, that men are by nature helpless in the face of female scheming, and that they therefore must protect themselves against it. This, after all, is the point of the frame story for the text (although, interestingly, the frame story is not taken up again after the early *caritras* other than the occasional reference to the minister relating the tales). While Sikhism overall is a householder religion that does not promote renunciation and celibacy (with the exception of groups such as the Udāsīs), the *caritras*, particularly in their retelling of stories familiar from elsewhere in India's story literature, draw upon an Indic conception of human sexuality in which females are an impediment to male spiritual progress (particularly the progress of the male renouncer), and a resultant gender framework in which the responsibility for regulating sexual desire and attraction is placed squarely on females, who are cast as temptresses. Women's sexual allure accords them great power over men, but it is considered only with regards to how it affects men. The implicit concern is for the moral behavior and spiritual progress of males; females figure in only insofar as they are obstacles to male attainment. This is another way in which the principles espoused in *Caritropākhiān* can seem difficult to reconcile with a notion of gender equality.

The cases of women who disguise themselves as men to fight in battles illustrate another component of the ambiguity or multivocality inherent in models of gender in Indian cultures and beyond. In *Caritra* 96, a Pathan woman chastises her husband for his cowardice in shying away from a battle. She then dons his clothing and fights fiercely in a skirmish, boldly plucking arrows out of her body and shooting them back at the enemy. After the battle, she leaves her husband because of his cowardice. *Caritra* 102 relates the tale of Kaikeyī, one of King Daśaratha's wives (and mother of Bhārata) as portrayed in the Rāmāyaṇa, wearing the uniform of her husband's chariot driver and fiercely protecting Daśaratha in a battle against enemies. On the one hand, the fact that a woman can fight valiantly and hold her own on the battlefield against men portrays women as both physically powerful and strategically adept. But the fact that a woman must disguise herself in a man's clothing to do this shows that she cannot make use of these abilities while acting as a woman. In all such examples, the woman tacitly accepts this gender difference because she makes a point of disguising herself as a man before using her own battle skills. Thus in the *caritras*, women and men are not entirely equal with respect to the possibility of fighting in a battle.

This gender distinction extends to mythological females and goddess figures as well. In the closing *caritra*, number 404, an extended narration that spans the four cosmic eras or *yugas*, a battle involving both gods and humans is described. In this battle, a female being was born from amidst the flames fanned by the striking of weapons against one another. This mighty female soon realized that there was no male worthy of being her lord and controller, so she vowed to perform extensive meditation and

austerities in order to locate or manifest such a lord [*pati*]. Despite her incredible power, she is depicted as recognizing that she must have a lord to control her—she is a female figure who is unwilling to consider herself independent. In this *caritra*, notably, there is some representation of a female figure’s perspective and thought process, whereas in the other *caritras* women’s thoughts are typically reported only with respect to their desire to ensnare or deceive some man. This female figure born of fire does exercise her own agency, but it is for the express purpose of finding a male figure to exercise control and authority over her. If we read such *caritras* in light of the ideal of gender equality, the equality does not apply to the ability of females to fight independently in battle as females—tacitly, it is only men who may do so, and even the most powerful of female beings willingly seeks male authority.

Although throughout the *caritras*, the minister-narrator makes occasional comments about women’s natures, he rarely draws explicit morals from the stories. *Caritra* 380 concerns a queen who cavorted with a prince, partaking of opium and cannabis, concealing her behavior by convincing her mother that the prince was a female friend, and her husband that the prince was her mother. The *caritra* closes with the minister’s reckoning that “No one can fathom the mysteries of women.” Here, too, the story is adopting a predominantly male perspective, because of course, women presumably can fathom their own mysteries, and perhaps those of other women as well, as the *caritras* themselves suggest given that women in these tales often conspire together. But there are no parallel stories in which women learn about the mysteries or vagaries of the male character; indeed there is no generic “male” character presented that is analogous to the “female” character or nature.

Several *caritras* relate popular romance stories, depicting another aspect of gender relations. *Caritra* 98 describes the love of Hīr and Rānjhā. There are multiple versions of this popular Punjabi love story from Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh authors, the most celebrated being Waris Shah’s 1766 version.²⁵ The basic outline of the story is that a handsome young Jat Muslim, Rānjhā, and a stunningly beautiful Jat Muslim young woman, Hīr, fall passionately in love. But Hīr’s family disapproves, and so marries her to another man. Rānjhā then disguises himself as a yogi or fakir so that he can visit her. Some versions of the story end happily with the young couple reunited; in others, Hīr is killed and Rānjhā dies from grief. Hīr’s love for Rānjhā is sometimes interpreted as an allegory for the soul’s quest for union with the divine.

In its version of the Hīr/Rānjhā story, the Dasam Granth version incorporates characters familiar from the Hindu epics and Purāṇas. Rānjhā is introduced as a young man who appears to be a Jat Muslim peasant but is in fact the son of a king and queen. Hīr has assumed human form on earth as a Jat Muslim, but in reality she is Menakā, a beautiful *apsarā* who had distracted a sage from his meditation [the sage, though not named here, is Viśvamitra in other stories about Menakā], leading him to curse her to be born on earth as a Jat. This sage also foretold that the god Indra would be born as Rānjhā. Hīr happened to meet Rānjhā when he was out grazing cattle, and the two fell immediately, madly in love. Hīr’s family was so concerned about her ceaseless fixation on Rānjhā that they rushed her into marriage with another man, and then sent her to live with her new husband and his family. But Rānjhā disguised himself as a mendicant so that he could visit Hīr in her new home, and then spirited her away. The two died and went to heaven, where Rānjhā resumed his form as Indra, and Hīr as Maneka. As in the frame story, there is an *apsarā* who falls in love with a human, though here the human is really a deity who has taken human form. The *caritra* describes a mutual, all-consuming love that challenges social conventions. Hīr, like the *apsarā* in the frame story, is willing to flaunt social convention and the wishes of her family to meet her true love. As in other popular Punjabi romances, the female heroine tries to take some control of her own destiny, and romantic love has a power that challenges and can sometimes overcome social norms. Unlike other versions of the story where Hīr is killed and Rānjhā dies of grief, the two die, but they die only to their human existences, to be reunited in their celestial forms. Intriguingly, these *caritras* do not include any commentary from the minister

²⁵ For a fascinating analysis of this and other similar stories, see (Mir 2010).

about women's natures. In a sense this story is at odds with some of the other *caritras* in which a male's passionate love for a female is portrayed as foolish. In these retellings of popular romances, such love is celebrated, though often doomed to fail on earth.

Is it possible to reconcile these kinds of stories with an ideal of gender equality? This is fundamentally dependent on how exactly one defines gender equality, of course. There are particular interpretive moves a commentator could make that might bridge the gap between the *caritras'* assessment of female character and the ideal of gender equality in Sikhism. In the wider context of the Dasam Granth controversy, one strategy would be to argue that because the *caritras* generally do not accord with the principle of gender equality, the poet who produced the composition must therefore not have been Guru Gobind Singh. But as noted earlier, even among those who reject *Caritropākhiān* as the Guru's work, the gender equality ideal has only very rarely been cited as a contributing rationale for rejecting the composition. For those who do consider Guru Gobind Singh the author, another possibility would be to posit that gender equality obtains only in situations in which women are acting according to particular dharmic norms. That is, one could argue that the women in the *caritras* are not due equal status not because they are women, but because their particular behavior has made them ineligible, whereas more virtuous women would be accorded equality with men. One commenter in a Dasam Granth online forum makes a version of this argument by suggesting that the moral of the *caritras* is that "one" [implicitly male] can trust one's wife and evolved and spiritual women, but not "lustful women."²⁶ Such arguments, however, limit the breadth of the equality ideal, and, as in the example cited here, are typically made from a specifically male perspective. And it would presumably imply that males, too, should be held to such a standard, but the men in the *caritras* for the most part are not held equally responsible for their various sexual peccadilloes, though they are willing participants.

In any case, however one might reconcile the ideal of gender equality with these stories, it remains the case that the *caritras* represent a male perspective, with a male storyteller gearing his advice towards a male audience (the king and his son). There is no report of any instruction provided to Citra Singh's wife, for example, though arguably she too might benefit from moral guidance, and indeed it is her actions that are the impetus for storytelling. Another means of realizing the ideal of gender equality would be to interpret or retell the stories from a female perspective, exploring what women could learn from the stories of other women's behavior. But this perspective is not represented in *Caritropākhiān*, even in those *caritras* in which it is men who are acting deceitfully, nor it is an approach taken in the interpretive discourse surrounding this composition. Thus if one implication of gender equality is that the stories within sacred texts are equally relevant to males and females, the *caritras* do not fully accord with such an ideal. A key underlying theme of the entire composition is that women are obstacles to good leadership (implicitly male leadership). The frame story presents a king and his son who are in conflict with one another, but their conflict is not resolved through an examination of their own actions. Rather, it is implicitly resolved through a focus on women's behavior. The minister is effectively teaching the lesson that the father and the son can restore a good relationship if they both learn from the stories about women's devious characters.

Some Sikh commentators have highlighted the specifically male perspective of this and other parts of the Dasam Granth in the extensive debates that take place online in various Sikh forums. For example, in a 2015 discussion of *Caritropākhiān* on the *sikhawareness.com* site, one commenter, using the name "CdnSikhGirl," expressed skepticism about the authenticity of the text, and asked how the Dasam Granth in its entirety could be seen as a universal text for all Sikhs given that *Caritropākhiān* contains a message that is meant for male leaders. Further, this commenter asked, why were there no

²⁶ <https://answers.sikhnet.com/question/210/chritropakhyan-of-dasam-granth/>. 2012. Viewed 25 June 2019. For another version of this approach, see Sanjam Kaur, "Charitropakhyan and I, a Woman." <https://sikhunity.wordpress.com/2014/01/06/charitropakhyan-and-i-a-woman/>. Viewed 30 September 2019.

warnings to Singhnis (i.e., female Sikhs) to be wary of males?²⁷ A later commenter on the same thread sought to address this concern by suggesting that Sikhs should understand the title of the text not to refer simply to “wiles of women,” but to “wiles of humans.”²⁸ Addressing the same issue in a different way, another online commentator, Sanjam Kaur, in an article posted on another Sikh website, wrote about reading *Caritropākhiān* in its entirety with her two daughters, arguing that the text challenges its readers or listeners to acknowledge that both men and women can commit evil acts, even though girls growing up might hear more about men’s potential to act badly. Kaur did not interpret the *caritras* as critical of women, but rather as intended to help both men and women understand how to live the householder’s life without being unduly influenced by the lustful influences of the popular culture surrounding them.²⁹ Her approach is akin to those who make a distinction between spiritually adept women and lustful women, with the additional strategy of placing the blame for sexual misconduct on the influence of popular culture (and not necessarily a specific component of the female character).

Other commentators have presented similar interpretations that, while not explicitly defining gender equality, seem to presuppose an understanding of gender equality that nonetheless ascribes different roles to males and females, or alternatively could be seen as presupposing that humans have as yet to foster a society in which the ideal of gender equality has been fully realized. Pritpal Singh’s short online piece “Sri Guru Gobind Singh Sahib Jee on women in the Charitropakhyān” argues that there is a “primitive male-dominated social order” which views women as sexual objects, and that it is this social structure that creates the environment in which men constrain women, thereby pushing them towards destructive acts rather than allowing the female’s “peerless strength” for the “growth and betterment of humanity.” Pritpal Singh sees *Caritropākhiān* as calling males to decide whether they choose “destruction or “progression,” for “the path to equality of men and women leads to progression, while inequality will most certainly be about destruction and chaos.”³⁰ As in Sanjam Kaur’s argument, the responsibility for the poor behavior of women depicted in *Caritropākhiān* is displaced onto some component of a surrounding social structure which implicitly is at odds with Sikhi. These recent online analyses of the Dasam Granth do suggest that the issue of gender equality in *Caritropākhiān* is becoming more prominent in the ongoing controversy about the text overall.

4. Conclusions

The increasing availability and accessibility of online forums discussing Sikhi have created a space for a wider range of people, including increasing numbers of women, to join the debate about the Dasam Granth. Put another way, the presence of gender-related themes in the text is now complemented by the presence of women’s voices and more focused attention on gender construction. These lively and at times contentious online arguments and counter-arguments reflect the growing tendency to explicitly incorporate the Sikh ideal of gender equality in this controversy, adding an important component to the existing scholarly literature which for the most part has been silent on such matters. As the examples explored here suggest, thus far the emphasis has been on understanding how the notion of the female character or female behaviors as depicted in *Caritropākhiān* might be reconciled in light of the gender equality ideal. Interestingly, with the notable exception of the work of scholars such as Nikky Singh, there has as yet been less exploration of the complex issues related to gender and divinity that are raised by the goddess compositions and the usage of the term *bhagautī* in those and

²⁷ CdnSikhGirl. Response to thread “Charitropakhyān or Erotica? viewer discretion advised.” 26 July 2015. <http://www.sikhawareness.com/topic/16831-charitropakhyān-or-erotica-viewer-discretion-advised/>. Viewed 25 June 2019.

²⁸ Guest, Response to thread, “Charitropakhyān or Erotica? viewer discretion advised.” 26 July 2015. <http://www.sikhawareness.com/topic/16831-charitropakhyān-or-erotica-viewer-discretion-advised/>. 27 July 2015. Viewed 25 June 2019.

²⁹ Sanjam Kaur, “Charitropakhyān and I, a Woman.” <https://sikhunity.wordpress.com/2014/01/06/charitropakhyān-and-i-a-woman/>. Viewed 30 September 2019.

³⁰ Pritpal Singh, “Sri Guru Gobind Singh Sahib Jee on women in the Charitropakhyān,” <https://sikhunity.wordpress.com/2014/01/14/sri-guru-gobind-singh-sahib-jee-on-women-in-the-charitropakhyān/>. 14 January 2014. Viewed 2 October 2019.

other sections of the Dasam Granth. Given, however, that the Dasam Granth controversy as yet shows little sign of waning, that notable absence may as yet make its presence known.

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Interrogating Gender in Sikh Tradition and Practice

Satwinder Kaur Bains

South Asian Studies Institute, University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, BC V2S 7M8, Canada;
Satwinder.Bains@ufv.ca

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Abstract: In contemporary Sikh society, what we consider religious is constantly being challenged, but for Sikhs, what remain constant are Sikhi's sacred texts—they continue to be the paramount teacher and guide. Within this consistency, I ask the question: how can Sikh feminist ideas of representation and identity find expression in response to our understanding/practice of our faith, our institutions, and of the everyday Sikh symbols? This paper critically examines the gendered nature of the Guru Granth, practices within the gurdwaras, and focuses on a part of the *Rahit Maryada* (Code of Conduct) as an area of exploration in the understanding of the everyday ascribed five symbols of Sikhi (*punj kakar*) through a feminist lens. I undertake this in order to gain a gendered appreciation of how the scriptures, religious institutions, and the articles of faith resonate with the feminine.

Keywords: Sikhs; gender; Siri Guru Granth; *Rahit Maryada*; *punj kakar*; gurdwara; feminist thought

1. Introduction

As a canonical text for Sikhs and the faith's sacred scripture, the Sri Guru Granth Sahib (Guru Granth) informs my spiritual practice in a very personal manner. As an initial reference for the reader, the Guru Granth is also known as the Adi Granth, "the adjective *Adi*, or first has been appended to distinguish this Granth from the second sacred scripture of the Sikhs, the Dasam Granth, which contains the works attributed to the tenth (dasam) Guru, Gobind Singh" (Singh 2000, p. 1). While acknowledging its premier position "as a supertextual source of authority within the Sikh Panth" (Singh 2000, p. 266) and that personal knowledge of the Gurmukhi language is required in order to engage with the original form of the Granth, for this paper, I have also relied on English translations of various texts to fully understand and appreciate the form and meaning of the *Gurshabad* (the Word) and the Sikh code. As a feminist, my contextual study of religious text interpretations is laden with critical questions that are not encouraged in formal institutional structures of the faith; nevertheless, many questions rise from within me. As a young religion, Sikhism (est. 1469) is only recently deconstructing the long-forged and existing power relations within third-wave feminist activism and beyond into fourth-wave feminism, including social, technological, textual, and dialogical aspects. The central question of this paper is the following: what are the issues that Sikh feminists need to explore in order to further develop a Sikh feminist hermeneutic? I take a largely emic view of Sikh tradition even as I critically analyze Sikh texts and history.

Although not yet fully theorized, Sikh feminism's critical goal has been to de-center the notion of normatively androcentric hermeneutics and to (re)raise the textual and practical meaning that surveys Sikh thought and understanding. (Singh 2014a) suggests, "There is a lack of feminist hermeneutics. Consequently, the existential correlation between the sacred text and daily life has yet to be made in the Sikh world. Whereas Sikh scripture has been radically open, the community has been reticent to acknowledge and implement its innovative ideas" (p. 618). The time presents itself to challenge old and new interpretations as a first step—a critique of the religious interpretations in light of misogyny, feminism examines the status quo with new understandings of the text. (Singh 2000) poses many questions on the ability of any Sikh to understand the canon's oral and written exegesis based

on the following estimate, “all interpretive activity is subject to particular cultural predispositions, the historical situation of the interpreter, inevitable change in the modes of attention and the nature of interaction between the past and the present” (p. 240). He further suggests that “in the case of literary interpretation one approaches the text without preconceived intention in order to explore the many possibilities of its meaning and confronts the world in front of the text” (p. 260). I suggest that this immediate, personal, and contemporary approach combats traditional interpretations that have neglected the feminine.

Keeping this in mind, this paper investigates and undertakes a literary interpretation of how Sikh texts, codes, and practices may be understood and interpreted through a feminist lens placed on historical texts, various interpretations, contemporary views, and personal sense-making (via spiritual learning and lived realities). The feminist lens allows me to analyze how women are represented and portrayed in comparison to men in Sikh texts. Feminist political, cultural, and economic movements have worked to bring about equal rights and legal protection for women through the three waves of feminist history, growing the positionality of feminist thought. Positioning an analysis of Sikhi’s sacred texts and codes of conduct through third-wave feminism seeks to challenge the binary opposition and subsequent interpretations/transliterations present in the texts.

While medieval India was the stage for Nanak’s reform movement, I turn our minds to the rise of postmodernism’s third-wave feminism, which “embraces multivocality over synthesis and action over theoretical justification” (Snyder 2008, p. 175). Third-wave feminism collapses both the category of “women” by foregrounding personal intersectional narratives of lived experiences and the judgmental policing of boundaries of feminist politics. We are aware that the politics of coalition have dogged feminism since its early days of self-identification to the third wave that attempts to break down the rigid structures of feminist ideology. In a similar manner, Nanak was a reformer attempting to break down centuries-old, rigid codes of faith ideologies, practice, and culture in India in the late 15th and early 16th century. His construction of the thirty-eight stanzas of the Japji Sahib are what Rabindranath Tagore called an anthem for the world. Just as, today, feminism is something different to every individual, so did Nanak provide the means to understand Sikhi through a very personal lens and made it available for a personal relationship and interpretation. He suggested that it is “not about hearing voices from God, but it is about changing the nature of the human mind and anyone can achieve direct experience and spiritual perfection at any time” (Mandair 2013, p. 31). The Guru Granth is the only text penned by a faith’s teachers, as well as philosophers from other religions. While no modifications can be made to the text, unique to Sikhi is the personal interpretation and will of application of the *Gurshabad*. Nanak’s critique of inherent privilege and illuminating the vast caste and gender divides in India led to a philosophy of Sikh equality of all

At this juncture in the twenty-first century, I suggest that global Sikhs may want to recognize how contemporary Sikh feminists see themselves not just as interlocutors but as vital meaning makers of the faith, its various interpretations and through its inherent impact on their lives. In the past, “the educated elite among the Sikhs, by virtue of their proficiency in the language of their erstwhile conquerors, took advantage of their position, claiming full authority to translate, elucidate and define new parameters, particularly for those who were closest and most subordinate to them, their womenfolk” (Jakobsh 2003, pp. 201–2). However, today, this has changed, and we are in the midst of a largely quiet Sikh feminist revolution that seeks to challenge traditionally-accepted androcentric textual understandings. At the same time, I am humbled (and cautioned) in my analysis by (Singh 2000)’s suggestion that “it is the text that illuminates the interpreter like radiance, not the interpreter who illuminates the text” (p. 260). This illumination is not without its dark corners, and I attempt to bring the issues of Sikh praxis together.

In this paper, my investigation leads to the text in the *Rahit Maryda* (Sikh code of conduct) that codifies a *Khalsa* Sikh’s personal duty and responsibility to the five *kakars* (*punj kakars*). These are the five articles of faith through which I suggest the ethical *Khalsa* (a collective of spiritual and worldly Sikhs that are pure of thought and action) is imbued with gender neutral/supportive personal and spiritual

agency on an everyday basis. Further and more broadly, I start at the beginning of our introduction to the Sikh scriptures. Emancipatory feminism allows for an understanding that the all-encapsulating first words in the Guru Granth *Ikk Oan Kar* have universal appeal and can be reconnoitered, and different interpretations of parts of the Guru Granth can be critically surveyed (Beasley 2004). My interpretation is directly affected by the daily representation of a contemporary female reality that is embodied in Sikhi for me. This reality is informed by my feminine consciousness as a global Sikh living in a diaspora and through taking part in and observing practices at the Sikh religious institutions—projecting forward as it were into an anticipated world.

The genesis of Sikh feminist thought can be attributed to the founder of the faith, Guru Nanak Dev ji (born 1469), who revealed a new inclusive ontology and theology of difference whereby his understanding of the creator’s formless quality allowed for deliverance from caste discrimination, gender bias, or hierarchy and was a move away from the worship of idols (Grewal 1969; Kaur 1990; Jakobsh 2003; Singh 2000, 2005, 2014a). Nanak’s third way (Nanak *Panth* or path of Nanak that nine other Gurus followed) teachings follow *nirgun bhakti*, defining a Sikh’s devotional goal to become one with the One (*Ikk Oan Kar*), omnipotent, omnipresent, fearless, and loving—without form (*nirankar*), and without attributes (*nirgun*) (Mandair 2010; Grewal 2009; Takhar 2005; Shackle and Singh 2005). Critically important is the fact that Nanak does not evoke the contradistinction of the formless One who has neither male nor female attributes yet is completely subsumed within manifested attributes and is complete and whole. (Singh 2011) states,

“It is critical that we do not put Guru Nanak’s truly unique configuration of *Ikk Oan Kar* into any pre-existing molds. The standard translation ‘There is One God’ does not quite express the vastness and plenitude or the intimacy bursting forth in the original. Instead of an opening into limitless possibilities as envisioned by the founder Sikh Guru, scholars and translators have selected, structures [sic] and shaped *Ikk Oan Kar* into a male god”.

(p. 68)

She further states that “[a]s the inclusive numeral shatters the dominance of male imagery, it creates a space for the Divine to be experienced in other new and important ways” (p. 607). As the opening words (*Ikk Oan Kar*) of the Guru Granth in the *Mul Mantar*, (Singh 2000) suggests “the numeral (‘IK’) at the beginning of the *Mul Mantar* represents the unity of the ultimate reality, a concept which Guru Nanak interprets in monotheistic terms” (p. 85). While affirming the single supreme essence (“supreme being”), (Singh 2000) departs from the idea of one and unity and corroborates with (McLeod 1968) transliteration with the following male-default androcentric colonized interpretation from the Guru Granth’s verse on page 350: “My Master is the one. He is the one, brother and he alone exists” (p. 85). The transliteration from the original Gurmukhi text is as follows: *Sahib Mera Eko Hai. Eko Hai Bhai Eko Hai*. In Gurmukhi colloquial terms, *sahib* is a prefix/honourific given to a male of significant stature and status, but I suggest that, today, it can be accorded gender-free teacher (guru) designation *here*, rather than the word Master (male); and the word *Bhai* colloquially in this context can generally be calling upon a person (not only a man) and does not have to be the (male) brother—but rather those in the collective *sangat*. In the online SriGranth.org translation, the interpreters put in the superfluous word Lord and also add Master—“My Lord and Master is One” (SriGranth.org, p. 350) and further interpret the stanza: “He is the One and Only; O Siblings of Destiny, He is the One alone” (p. 350)—and here how the interpretation of *Bhai* signifying ‘siblings of destiny’ is not fully understood. (Jakobsh 2014) is right in suggesting that the honourific *Sahib* has masculine utility, but I suggest that in terms of the Guru Granth’s inclusive views in this regard, *Sahib* can also be a guide/teacher for the learner and can be inculcated as such. In analyzing the androcentric colonized mentality of the translations of the Guru Granth, (Singh 2014b) suggests that “[w]hereas the Divine is the transcendent, metaphysical One, it is invariably translated into a Western monotheistic ‘God’ and given a male identity” (p. 619).

While global Sikhs in the diaspora have long been attuned to their colonial history (British Raj), they mostly rely on available translated texts for religious knowledge if the mother language has

become lost (Punjabi in this instance); however, many exegetes have their academic study rooted in Western texts and through that training have been influenced by western religio-philosophical concepts. Singh (2007) suggests that in her analysis of the various translations, “English words imbued with Jewish and Christian meaning have come to dictate Sikh ideals. Key theological concepts from western philosophical tradition—alien to Sikh worldview—bury scriptural translations and obstruct real affinity between Punjabi and English” (p. 37). She further suggests that the master–subject relationship of the British Empire continues to have credence in the diaspora, “younger generations of Sikhs in Canada, England and America are not familiar with the original verse. Sadly, it is in *his master’s* voice that many Sikhs relate with their sacred books” (p. 37).

Key concepts such as *Ikk Oankar* are misconstrued or narrowly construed in translation, signifying a male God (commonly understood to mean ‘there is one God’)—because it closely follows *Satnam* (commonly understood to mean ‘His name is truth’). (Singh 2007) clarifies the two differences, “There is One Being, Truth by Name” versus the versions of eastern and Western intellectuals, “There is one God, Eternal Truth is His name” (p. 38). She clarifies thus:

“‘There is One God’ is a monotheistic conception, which does not quite invite the multiplicity and poly-imagination of Nanak’s numeral One. A specific male ‘he’, with pronounced male pronouns, horribly distorts Nanak’s original language of plenitude and destroys the elemental modality of ‘Ikk Oan Kar’. The dynamic processes set in motion at the very outset of Sikh scripture are immediately aborted in the English translation”.

(p. 38)

Does the interpretation of the *Gurshabad* receive social justice when female subjectivities are ignored or are superimposed by patriarchal hermeneutics? For example, if repeatedly exegetists (e.g., Gurcharan Singh Talib, Gopal Singh, Pritam Singh Chahil) of the Guru Granth transcreate that the way to union with the Divine is through the feminine, is the quest then to see how the male adherent finds his feminine side in order to complete the union? Jakobsh (1999) suggests, “addressing the Divine through the feminine voice leads one to conclude that there is a concerted effort to maintain the masculine identity of God, the female overcome with love for the Bridegroom, her Love, can thus only be male” (p. 31). The online SriGranth.org (, p. 38) interprets a verse in the Guru Granth in this vein:

She who knows her husband Lord to be always with her, enjoys his constant presence—

jini piru sange janiai piru rave sada haduri

O woman, you must walk in harmony with the Guru’s will

Mundhe tu chalu gur kai bhai

Night and day, you shall enjoy your husband, and you shall intuitively merge into the True One

an din raevh pir apna sehje sach sama e

Attuned to the Shabad, the happy soul-brides are adorned with the True Word of the Shabad

Sabad rai a sohagani sachari sabad sigar

Within their own home, they obtain the Lord as their Husband, with love for the Guru

Har var pa in ghar apani gur kau het pi ar

Upon her beautiful and cozy bed, she enjoys the Love of her Lord. She is overflowing with the treasure of devotion

Sej suhavi har rang ravai bhagat bhare bhandar

Does the Sikh male see himself represented in devotion as a female, or is that negated to a (subsumed/secondary) female position metaphorically? (Singh 2005) suggests that “it is imperative that a one-sided memory of Sikh sacred verse and its male application be rectified” (p. 141), but what of

the exegesis of a hyper-sexualized female representation as the devotee to a male Lord? It is true, as she posits, that “[i]n the literature of the Gurus, female images serve as vital reminders of the Transcendent One, and they are greatly valued for cultivating spirituality; but the minds of the Sikh community lack the ability to store this rich symbolic data” (Singh 2005, p. 141). The question that arises is whether the Guru Granth’s exegesis provides the full benefit to all adherents of the faith, regardless of genders?

2. Results

Gurus, Sikhs, and the Text

Nine gurus followed Guru Nanak, the first Guru, and each one built on the previous Guru’s work, all of which were enshrined in the Adi Granth as devotional poetic scriptures for Sikhs (Shackle and Singh 2005; Singh 2005, 2007, 2014b; Grewal 2009). After the ten Gurus, the Guru Granth replaced the living Guru as prescribed by the Tenth—Guru Gobind Singh in Sikh consciousness (Singh 2004). As the living Word (*Gurshabad*), (Singh 2011) explains it thus:

“The Sri Guru Granth is the physical body that bonds the Sikhs metaphysically with the Divine One, historically with their ten Gurus, and socially with their community. By attributing the Granth as the person of the historical Gurus, the Tenth intended to allow his Sikhs to imagine unprecedented ways of being in the world. His semantic innovation shatters the tyrannical division between body and mind, temporal and eternal, language and reality; it opens up a space for Sikh men and women to experience the sacred and the sensuous in their daily lives”.

(p. 58)

This experience of the sacred for average Sikhs is foremost assigned within places of worship, at the Sikh gurdwaras (house of the Guru) or in their own homes where the Sri Guru Granth is ceremoniously housed and obeisance is offered to it on a daily basis through devotional worship (Singh 2000). Singh (2014b) states that the position of the Granth as the guru has become “the ultimate authority within the Sikh tradition, for a wide range of personal and public conduct” (p. 134). However, a new area of research might be the philosophy of diaspora-born young Sikhs (or Sikhs generally perhaps) who regard the gurdwaras or religious institutions as unimportant on a day to day basis and find their spirituality in other multiple ways.

In keeping with the Guru’s tenets, Sikh Gurdwaras are built on the philosophy of an egalitarian space (all that enter are equal) where the *Gurshabad* is invoked from within the Granth (the supreme and everlasting teacher) for learner-centered spiritual guidance, religious instruction, and social direction for all humankind and especially Sikhs (the learner). Considering the religion’s particularly theorized commitment to an egalitarian social and religious order (Singh 2014a, 1988; Takhar 2005), it is interesting to note that the institutional leadership has mostly been traditionally patriarchal-bound and male (Singh 1993, 2014a). While the religion is purposely devoid of a priestly class (Singh 2014b), one might assume that men and women would have equal access to the affairs of organized institutionalized religion—but these are almost all managed by men, with women being relegated to “female” tasks of food preparation and general cleaning. In direct contrast to the theory of equal access to faith, worship, ritual, and practice, “by and large Sikh women’s agency has been ignored, displaced, dislocated and disavowed from the religio-aesthetic matrix in the gurdwara” (Bains 2012).

Furthermore, the formal exegetical task for the Guru Granth has been undertaken (thus far) only by males (Sikh and non-Sikh) who have produced, in all nature of things, particularly patriarchal viewpoints. For example, feminist Sikh scholar (Singh 2011) points out that the interpreters expound all Sikhs to relate to a soul,

“In spite of the fact that the original verse (in the Sri Guru Granth) does not contain any reference to the soul, it is lavishly present in English translations. Its usage dichotomizes the

fullness of the Guru's experience and vision, and sends misogynistic and geophobic messages to readers. New gender-inclusive, female-sensitive translations are urgently needed".

(p. 118)

Translations, transliterations, and transcreations by female scholars demand a full justification of the spiritual experiences promised within the Guru Granth for all Sikhs. As Singh (2010) suggests,

"The Gurus regarded woman as physically, psychologically and spiritually more refined, adopting a female voice and tone to express their love for the Divine . . . In both praxis and poetry, the Sikh Gurus created a window of opportunity for women, an opening through which women could achieve liberty, equality and sorority".

(pp. 213–14)

However, Sikh women continue to have limited or no access to feminist thought or measure in relation to the translated text or in the hierarchical, patriarchy-bound practice of the faith within religious institutions. While a few feminist organizations have attempted to create female-centred space, in the day-to-day practice of Sikhi, women must actively seek out their sustenance; it is not embedded in everyday life. Reasons for lack of female agency in the halls of Sikh religious institutions are still to be fully researched. While all Sikhs are encouraged to be baptized as *Khalsa* (the pure ones), (Jakobsh 2014) points out that "early texts, for the most part, focus on the male *Khalsa* identity and are either silent about women's inclusion into the order or are highly contradictory" (p. 127).

As global Sikhs living in a diaspora, this limited focus is sharply felt by Sikh feminists, like myself, who are searching for meaning in the texts that inform our practice. Exclusion and contradiction of female access and agency create difficult pathways in realizing inclusive Sikh thought. Global Sikhs have created a plethora of Sikh organizations that address topics such as gender, environment, philanthropy, international aid, racism, discrimination, business networks, feminism, service, research, etc. These organizations have provided platforms for further discovery. However, one must be tech-savvy and literate to engage within the organizations and find the one (or more) that meets a personal fulfillment target.

Sikh Feminist Identity

Ideally, a Sikh would be able to self-define the act of knowing by situating oneself within the history of personal experiences with one's faith. However, challenges of gender, power, and privilege place Sikh women outside the realm of shared knowledge and experiences because of the hegemony of androcentric ideology in the practices of the Sikh faith and interpretations of the Sikh scriptures. For example, women are still not welcome to take an active part in the *prakash* (raising and installation of the scriptures in the early morning) of the Guru Granth at most gurdwaras in India. They are not allowed to serve as the *Punj Pyare* (five beloveds who may be called upon for leadership) or carry any of the paraphernalia surrounding the scriptures. With the exception of the 3HO Sikhs (converts to Sikhi who live and practice the faith outside India), and who follow their own egalitarian interpretation of the faith in their gurdwaras abroad (Elsberg 2003), narratives abound of women worshippers being pushed away and verbally-chastised for even getting too close to the Holy Scriptures, let alone being allowed to lend a shoulder to the *palki* (palanquin that carries the Guru Granth) at the time of the Guru Granth's *prakash* (morning rising) or *sukhasan* (night repose). The 1994 English-translated Sikh *Rahit Maryada* that is posted for public consumption on the Shromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) Amritsar's website states, "When the Guru Granth has to be taken from one place to another, the *Ardas* should be performed. He/she who carries the Guru Granth on his/her head should walk barefoot, but when wearing of shoes is a necessity, no superstitions need be entertained" (Chapter iv, (g)). However, my observations of the daily practices at the Golden Temple in Amritsar show a visually and aggressively male presence with the *prakash* of the Guru Granth, and a woman's close association is further forbidden by male worshipers as well, men who are not even gurdwara workers actually

performing the service. Additionally, Sikh women have not been allowed to perform hymns in the inner sanctum of the Golden Temple or other major gurdwaras in India. In the *Times of India* (27 July 2019) Balvinder Kaur Saundh, Chair of the Sikh Women Alliance, UK, is quoted as follows: “I have been saying for the last 20 years that Guru Nanak and our religion gave us equality. It is the men who have interpreted it to control our religious scriptures” ([Times of India 2017](#)). She also suggests that women should be allowed to shoulder the palanquin at the early morning *prakash* without interference. The Guru Granth itself does not prescribe a code of conduct for Sikhs (to do with rituals or practices), as it is a devotional text—this code is contained in the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* (Code of Conduct), the rules of conduct to be followed by all Sikhs.

By applying a critical feminist lens to the issues of inclusion, a more nuanced, gendered critique provides a medium to question theories and knowledge by examining that which is within the center. Feminist theorist ([Irigaray 1999](#)) states “the ability to enter into relation with one (man or woman) who is other than oneself in the respect of difference(s) is, according to me, what permits the constitution of a proper human subjectivity” (p. xi). This subjectivity must uncover and transform the constructions of subjectivity by de-constructing the patriarchal discourse that has up to now underwritten the interpretive texts and practices for Sikhs. Women are faced with texts that have male-dominant interests, along with the realization that these interpretations are historically and politically-charged. Regardless, there is also an acknowledged realization that ways of knowing that are constructed from hierarchically-favoured forms of knowledge repeatedly perpetuate dominant views. Critical thought does not argue that “all referents for meaning and representation have disappeared: rather, it seeks to make them problematic, and in doing so re-inscribes and rewrites the boundaries for establishing the condition for the production and meaning and subjectivity” ([Giroux 1991](#), p. 227).

[Greene \(1993\)](#) famously questioned how women can work to name their existence if there is so much falsehood around them? In view of this, Sikh feminists work to deliberately create interpretative spaces that introduce, incorporate, and inform the (mis)represented texts and question the false assumptions and assertions of gendered othering ([Singh 2011](#)). Deconstructing the politics of power and difference in order to achieve the full potential for those that are relegated to the margins must be undertaken so as to share in the power/knowledge of what Michel Foucault calls truth/untruth ([Foucault 1998](#)). New knowledge and truth concomitantly induce effects of power that constitute new objects of inquiry. Judith Butler suggests the following: “If identities were no longer fixed as the premises of a political syllogism, and politics no longer understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects, a new configuration of politics would surely emerge from the ruins of the old” ([Butler 1990](#), p. 149). It is exactly this promise of a new configuration that motivates the need for inclusion of Sikh feminist thought and practice in both the practices of the faith and its current interpretations.

Five centuries ago, the gurus started theologizing the Guru Granth, for which “there has been no disclosure of feminist possibilities because it has only been the male elites who have served as intermediaries. Their one-sided, androcentric approach has dominated interpretations and commentaries” ([Singh 2011](#), p. 117). Such is the exegesis of the text—Sikh feminist thought has not been debated, argued, or developed in a robust manner in the darbar hall, in discourse, or in text, although in recent times, there is a considerable amount of academic work developing in the field ([Singh 1995, 2005, 2011; Jakobsh 2003, 2010](#)). While there is acknowledgement that the entire Guru Granth is derived from a male pen, ([Singh 1995](#)) suggests that “the feminine voice speaks for all humanity, Sikh scripture opens out the definition of ‘man’. The Sikh view is that a separation between male and female denies the wholeness of human nature” (p. 4). A feminist translation of the text has the promise of knowledge production that hitherto has not been fully explored. However, it is not for the sake of translation by feminists (or others) that we re-signify this work but, rather, for the purpose of giving new meanings to a familiar Sikh scripture with feminist modes of inquiry for all Sikhs. Feminist writer ([Butler 2004](#)) suggests the following:

[T]he point is not to assimilate foreign or unfamiliar notions of gender or humanness into our own as if it is simply a matter of incorporation of alienness into an established lexicon. Cultural translation is also a process of yielding our most fundamental categories, that is, seeing how and why they break up, require resignification when they encounter the limits of an available episteme: What is unknown or not yet known.

(p. 39)

This discursive practice of resignification will produce an ongoing, deeper engagement with the faith for Sikh women and others who adhere to the faith or want to understand it.

3. Discussion

The contemporary need is to critically examine how we see ourselves as Sikh women and the effect on us from those around us who inform our thoughts, our ideas, and our beliefs (like our families, our community, the Sri Guru Granth, etc.)—our proud tradition as *sevadarnis*, as keepers of the faith, as women who share our past and our traditions with our children, families, and the next generation while valuing what the older generations of women have given us as their legacy. Upholding this interrogation of Sikh women's identity through a reinterpretation of narrative agency as (Bhabha 1994) suggests, finds room "in between disavowal and designation" (p. 50). (Singh 2010) suggests that at no time in the history of Sikhism were women barred from active participation in society: "women spoke, saw, and acted and they were heard, seen and followed. They were active subjects in all spheres of the evolving Sikh tradition" (p. 213). While evidence to the contrary or support is thinly developed, in upholding a desire for equality, it is abundantly clear that it is not enough to function through representation that is constructed by the "other". In the contemporary world, Sikh women may choose not to rely on theologians, scholars, or exegetes and may want to create their own personal relationship with Sikhi, the text, its practice, and its *Rahit* without a mediator. While the first words of the Sri Guru Granth—*Ikk Oan Kar* have universal appeal, textual interpretation can be explored on an individual level. *Ikk Oan Kar* (One, manifest as Word) is believed to represent the unified primal cosmic essence of existence (*urja*), consciousness (*surti*), and bliss (*anand*)—one with everything and connecting the One with the infinite. The verses of the Guru Granth allow for a personal interpretation, not as a method but, rather, as an orientation of one's own self toward *gurbani* (devotional poetry of the Gurus). The verses repeatedly call the subject to be open to a personal experience of a union with the One in spiritual love. Sikh studies scholars agree that Sikhism as a religion categorically espoused that "[n]either social mores nor gender were to bar humanity from attaining liberation from the cycle of rebirth (*jivan mukti*), according to the Sikh Gurus. Whether rich or poor, high or low caste, male or female, the divine light (*jot*) resided within" (Jakobsh 2014, p. 594).

In contemporary Sikh society, the gender neutral, spiritually and ethically significant *punj kakars* (commonly referred to as the five Ks) provide both Sikh women and men with the pre-requisite of spiritual form and order. However, in practice, it was not always thus: in the eighteenth century, *Chaupa Singh Rahitnama* (code of conduct) prohibited women from exercising a full and wholesome right to practice their faith (McLeod 1997; Jakobsh 2003). However, in varying degrees from the late nineteenth century onwards, different perspectives came to bear (McLeod 2008; Grewal 2009; Dhavan 2010), and women have slowly taken back some of what had not been realized, as we witness with Sikh women in the diaspora and their prescription to the Dastar (turban/*pagh*) as an identity marker (Singh 2005). While the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee's posted *Rahit* (1994) states that a Sikh woman may or may not tie a turban, there has also been a modern secularization of symbols in the faith, where the turban is a clothing accoutrement to many Sikh men without the accompanying significance to the *punj kakars* and initiation (Virinder 2006). For women, however, the *dastaar* has taken on significance as a symbol of their commitment to the "exterior markers becom[ing] the dominant signifiers of Sikh identity" (Jakobsh 2014, p. 595). (Virinder 2006) further suggests that while the turban may have represented "the marking of a male space in which honour and status come to be

symbolized through the turban . . . women who wear the *pagh* use their position to undermine much of the patriarchal heritage associated with the symbol” (p. 82). (Jakobsh 2014), however, states that “gender differentiation however remains clearly in place with regard to normative codes” and “a highly gendered, normative *Khalsa* identity thus remains strongly in place” (p. 596). At this current time, I would suggest that both views represent a contemporary evolution of gender identities and representation of faith.

As external markers of the faith, pioneering Western Sikh feminist and scripture scholar (Singh 2005) suggests that “they (the 5 Ks) are concerned with forming an ethical citizen situated within an active, social, political and religious world” (p. 98). Sikh feminists undertaking interpretations of the *punj kakars* with a goal to emancipate Sikhs from a narrow androcentric view that is so prevalent in the faith is much needed. (Singh 2005, 2014b) has provided this first feminist interpretation. New frameworks that address difference and diversity of understandings codify the need to firmly accommodate gendered viewpoints into the philosophy, form, and function of Sikhism. One such form is the Sikh’s personal articles of faith that likely play a role in the formation of their personal identity—the *punj kakars*—*kacchahira*, *kangha*, *kes*, *kirpan* and *kara*. It is these articles that I turn my mind to in order to understand upholding the code of the Sikhs with precise feminist hermeneutics.

I find this undertaking critically important, because, as (Singh 2005) poignantly suggests,
“The five Ks have come to dictate who is to soldier, and who is to submit, who is to demand and who is to give, who feels superior and who feels inferior, who expresses anger and who suffers in silences, who inherits the father’s land or business and who so left out, who is a credit and who is a debit, and ultimately who is rejoiced over in birth and who is aborted”.
(p. 101)

Nikky-Guninder Singh takes a deep and enriching dive into her interpretation of the accoutrements of the *Khalsa* in her book *The Birth of the Khalsa* (Singh 2005) precisely because “the range and subtlety of male interpretations are bewildering” (p. 101) to a feminist scholar questioning “if symbols that are intrinsically paradoxical and multivalent can be masculine why can’t they be feminine as well?” (p. 102). It is the potential of gender inclusivity that appears to lie at the heart of Guru Gobind’s philosophy of eradicating gender-based discrimination and bias that informs the *Rahit*.

I start my personal analysis and interpretation with five *kakars* that have intimacy with the body and its associated discipline for the *Khalsa* and in our personal relationships with the symbols. It cannot be argued that there is a critical impact and effect of the five symbols on the female (or male) individual. Developing a Sikh female hermeneutic is vitally important as my proposed interpretations provide dialogical interaction between the symbols and the self, seen as necessary in our socio-religious construction as Sikhs.

The *kacchahira*, (also known as *kacha*) or simple, loose, cotton shorts/undergarment (up the knees), is a practical garment. It is indicative and representative of a Sikh woman and man’s consistent maintenance of a modest, virtuous, and moral character within the world, along with a spiritual and personal commitment to conjugal/partner fidelity, and it conflates the physical differences in human sexuality with one’s duty to uphold that equality of commitment. Because the scriptures consistently integrate the physical and the temporal, the *kacchahira* affirms the ontological unity of mind (*man*) and body (*tan*) and disavows any duality. It is my suggestion that as a marker of the vow of a *Khalsa*, the *kacchahira* is the crucial symbol representing the breaking down of any divisions and barriers that contribute to gender politics. Prescribed in the exact manner to both women and men, its wearing indicates that a Sikh has a holistic understanding of the spiritual self as a natural sexual being. This article of faith demands strict adherence to the commitment to one partner throughout one’s life—without taking away personal agency to be a practicing Sikh. This same adherence forbids male/patriarchal/misogynist dominance over a life partner and binds life partners in mutually ethical respect. (Singh 2005) suggests that “[t]he wearer of the guru’s *kacherra* recognizes each body as the

home of the Divine (*harimandir*), and not a battleground for domestic violence, economic deprivation, forced sterilization, forced pregnancy, female feticides or honour killing” (p. 132).

The *kanga* or wooden comb is used in the morning and evening to groom a *Khalsa's* uncut hair (*keshas*) as bidden in Guru Gobind Singh's *Rahit Nama* (Virinder 2006). Twice-daily (*dono vaqt*) grooming using the *kanga* involves undertaking personally enduring reflection (*dhiraj*), silent meditation (*birti*), and focused prayer and introspection (*simran*). Grooming signifies a personal commitment to self (body) and society for purity of thought, personal hygiene, and spiritual discipline driven by a just mind. The *kanga* supports physical cleanliness and continuous rigor for a moral mind and gives timely order to the body and mind. Even before the *Khalsa* were enjoined to do so in 1699 by the Tenth Guru, women and men were already involved in the tradition (Jat custom) and rigor of character in relation to *kes* by maintaining uncut hair (McLeod 2008). The feminist ideal of personal physical discipline and spiritual rigour is perfectly in tune with the same immutable truth. Daily grooming of the uncut hair by using the *kanga* is symbolic of the removal or working toward a resolution of relationship entanglements and personal struggles.

The *Khalsa's* uncut hair on the body—*Kes*—represents the natural and physically harmonious commitment to see the body as the home of the divine, with a goal to simultaneously attain spiritual maturity along with the process of hair growth as a young adult. The *kes* (hair) on the head is protected by the wearing of a *keski* (small turban), which guards the *Dasam Dwaar* (the Tenth Gate), a spiritual opening at the top of the head. The *keski* is further covered by a full *dastar* (turban/*pagh*), and these two conjoined articles of Sikh faith are significant, because they are the most visible and identify an independent-minded Sikh adherent who is committed to being moral, just, disciplined, and socially responsible. All Sikhs initiated into the *Khalsa Panth* keep their hair uncut, covering it with a *keski*. From a feminine re-understanding, as bearers of visual difference, *kes* and *keski* are sacred as a submission to the gender-neutral will of the divine. The turban declares sovereignty as a powerful identification of the *Khalsa*—and thus a Sikh embodies personal dedication to moral character, self-respect, courage, social justice, and piety.

The *kirpan* (small sword) is worn by the *Khalsa* on the left hip sheathed in a *gaatra* (over-the-shoulder holster). The *kirpan* claims to represent an egalitarian commitment for all Sikhs toward social justice, fighting oppression, defense of the weak, conquering narcissism, and maintaining personal dignity and personal power at all times with an unconquerable spirit (*chardi kala*). The word *kirpan* finds its origins in the word *kirpa*, meaning compassion, and *an*, meaning grace as exemplified in the idea of every Sikh being *sant/sipahi* (saint/soldier)—a tradition/responsibility that is accorded to all genders. The *kirpan* urges Sikh women and men to commit to courage that will allow her/him to defend anyone against oppression of any kind—be it by thought, action, or deed. This courage is justly codified both as internal (personal character and behaviour) and in various appropriate external responses. The *kirpan* demands that a Sikh's personal knowledge of the self recognizes the duality of subject and object. According to Guru Nanak, the sword is to be understood as a means to “tear away with the duality of subject and object, and connect us back with our essential Self” (Singh 2005, p. 117). The sword moves beyond its literal meaning to defend to be a symbol of knowledge and a woman who utilizes the sword [of knowledge] in such a manner is described as follows in the Sri Guru Granth, p. 1022: “By taking up the sword of knowledge, she fights against her mind and merges with herself” (Singh 2005, p. 117).

The *kara* (iron bangle worn on the wrist) is a symbol of dedication to one's faith and an acknowledgement of the circle of life in its simplest form of acceptance of the divine will. The *kara* is a representation of something that is intrinsically feminine (bangle, accessory) and has become traditionally bound to the 5 Ks. The *kara* is a universally connecting article of faith for all Sikhs, signifying a pledge of high moral thinking, humility, claim to identification, personal restraint, and gentility while acknowledging unity with an eternal and infinite spiritual universe, with the circle representing the impermanency of life in the life/death cycle. The *kara* also importantly elicits a commitment by the wearer toward honest and ethical duty, to perform noble acts in mind and in deed. The adornment that is reiterated in the *Rahit Maryada* is the steel bangle codified through the

Khalsa. The origin of the steel *kara* is found through the female body and her connection with the divine in the representation of an egalitarian code of conduct *and* belonging for all Sikhs. It demands that Sikhs of all genders be held to a high standard (of truthful living) and consciousness activation. Its impact as a singularly traditional female accessory in the five articles draws out the complimentary and cooperative nature of male and female binaries.

Although embodying symbols such as the *punj kakar*, having a personal relationship with the text of the Sri Guru Granth, seeking guidance through the Sikh *Rahit*, etc. liberate Sikhs from domination—these acts are not enough to guarantee freedom from the domination of patriarchal thought and practice. Emancipatory feminist thought establishes new patterns of behaviour, attitudes, and religious understanding to ensure that relations of power are shared between and amongst genders. The clarion call to Sikh feminist thought has been attuned to by scholars, historians, and translators to produce much-needed perspectives and interpretations (Jakobsh 2014; Singh 2014a). (Singh 2000) correctly states:

“The Adi Granth as a scriptural text has inexhaustible hermeneutic potential. In oral as well as written exegesis, each generation of Sikh interpreters has drawn its meaning from differing perspectives. In fact, plurality of interpretations has remained part and parcel of the Sikh approach to the Adi Granth throughout history. Each encounter with the text of the Adi Granth provides a fresh experience of unfolding a divine mystery”.

(p. 287)

The Guru Granth provides the learner with a limitless pool of egalitarian emphasis that today faces an urgent need to reach the spirit and mind of the female adherents of the faith. (Singh 2005) continues

“The symbols worn by the *Khalsa* are not weapons of war to spark violence in the public or domestic spheres. Nor are they tools that cut and divide us from the human family. Nor are they hand-me-downs from fathers and brothers. Our female understanding of the hair, the comb, the bracelet, the underwear, and the sword intimates and activates each wearer’s consciousness of the Infinite and knowledge of our common humanity”.

(p. 178)

4. Materials and Methods

I rely on the Guru Granth and the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* as two original sources of both religious instruction and religious conduct respectively for all Sikhs. While there are many translations of the Guru Granth, as a Sikh, I can take full liberty to understand the text without any interpreters. The Tenth Guru—Guru Gobind Singh (1666–1708) “hailed the book as the Guru precisely to reiterate a personal and direct relationship between the individual and the text. It is imperative then that men and women access their scriptural Guru on their own” (Singh 2014a, p. 620). It is true that for many Sikhs, the Guru Granth gives “a sacred focus upon which to reflect and in the process discover the meaning of life as Sikhs. It [provides] a framework for the shaping of the Panth and [is] a decisive factor in shaping a distinctive Sikh identity” (Singh 2000, p. 281). As part of the *Panth* or collective and as a feminist, my personal and public identity is informed by how the sacred text speaks to my need to relate to the authority of the *Gurshabad* and the *Sikh Rehit Maryada* to my daily practice. As (Jakobsh 2003) suggests, “Analysis of the discursive structures in the formation of ritual identities from a gender perspective allows for a more complex understanding of the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion” (p. 235). The *punj kakar*’s everyday use, meaning, affect, materiality, corporality, and feminist hermeneutics are all relevant to our discourse in contemporary times.

5. Conclusions

Both the Guru Granth and the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* as extant historical sources allow for contemporary assertions that help us evolve our understanding of and responses to the text and practice. Because the

Rahit prescribes conduct based on the teachings of the Guru Granth, Bhai Gurdas di Vaars, and the Banda Bahadur's *hukam-namas*, it directs its instructions to Khalsa Sikhs—those initiated into the *Khalsa Panth* (Fenech 2014). However, because the Guru Granth is accessible to every individual Sikh, they are roused to accept the Guru Granth after the invocation of the *Ardaas* by singing the *Dohra* written by Guru Gobind Singh as the metaphysical embodiment of all the Gurus (*guur Khalsa maneeyeh, pargat guru ki deh*), and those who wish to meet the Divine, must search for it in the Word (*Jo sikh moh milbe chahey, khoj eneh men le*):

Dohra

Guru Khalsa maneeyeh, pargat guru ki deh

The Guru pure one is to be believed, as the visible body of the Gurus

Jo sikh moh milbe chahey, khoj eneh men le

Any Sikh that seeks to meet the divine, must delve into the shabad.

This *dohra* is recorded in the Bhai Prahlad Singh *Rahitnama* and is attributed to Guru Gobind Singh (<https://archive.org/details/RehatnamaBhaiPrahladSingh/page/n1>). It is in the Word (*Gurshabad*) that meanings are interpreted and assigned by the individual or by the collective or by those who undertake to translate the texts. Critically important then in this hermeneutic process is the need and opportunity to create and engage in more gender expansive and inclusive discursive spaces, interpretations, and application. Different hermeneutics can help to provide heightened and more nuanced understandings of the role of women and men in organized religion, in the fulsome practice of Sikhi, in the exegesis of sacred texts, etc. Understanding the literary form of the text is an important task for all Sikhs, because the Guru Granth plays such a central role in the lives of all Sikhs. For Sikhi, most commonly, Guru Nanak's *locus classicus*—"Bhand Jamiye, Bhand Nimiye" (as part of a larger text in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib at page. 473)—translates into: "from women we are born, from a woman a man is conceived" and provides the basis for a gendered egalitarian understanding, and it is most often used to declare our theoretical acceptance of this principle. We all agree that it is the starting point when we search for the idea of gender equality within the faith; however, it is not the end of the discussion—it is just the start of a hermeneutic opening in our contemporary world.

At the very end, should Nanak's clear text hold for all of us a finite interpretation that requires no further exegesis on the question of equality? Moreover, can we forgive the interpreter's bias on all other parts of the text, knowing full well that it is close to impossible to set aside any bias in the pursuit of creating meaning of a sacred text? Furthermore, how culpable is the reader who "chooses between equally valid possibilities based on personal reference. It is the reader who develops criteria for what is universal and what is culturally specific, what is translatable and what is transcultural" (Johnston 1986, p. 35).

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Article

‘Woman Seems to Be Given Her Proper Place’: Western Women’s Encounter with Sikh Women 1809–2012

Eleanor Nesbitt

Centre for Education Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK; eleanor.nesbitt@warwick.ac.uk

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Abstract: Over a period of two centuries, western women—travellers, army wives, administrators’ wives, missionaries, teachers, artists and novelists—have been portraying their Sikh counterparts. Commentary by over eighty European and north American ‘lay’ women on Sikh religion and society complements—and in most cases predates—publications on Sikhs by twentieth and twenty-first century academics, but this literature has not been discussed in the field of Sikh studies. This article looks at the women’s ‘wide spectrum of gazes’ encompassing Sikh women’s appearance, their status and, in a few cases, their character, and including their reactions to the ‘social evils’ of suttee and female infanticide. Key questions are, firstly, whether race outweighs gender in the western women’s account of their Sikh counterparts and, secondly, whether 1947 is a pivotal date in their changing attitudes. The women’s words illustrate their curious gaze as well as their varying judgements on the status of Sikh women and some women’s exercise of sympathetic imagination. They characterise Sikh women as, variously, helpless, deferential, courageous, resourceful and adaptive, as well as (in one case) ‘ambitious’ and ‘unprincipled’. Their commentary entails both implicit and explicit comparisons. In their range of social relationships with Sikh women, it appears that social class, Christian commitment, political stance and national origin tend to outweigh gender. At the same time, however, it is women’s gender that allows access to Sikh women and makes befriending—and ultimately friendship—possible.

Keywords: Sikh; western women; status of women; India; colonial; diaspora; missionaries; travelogue; suttee; infanticide; friendship

1. Introducing the Western Women

Women’s writing is almost completely absent from published collections of European source material on Sikh history (see, for example, [Singh 1969](#); [Grewal 2012](#)). Yet some eighty ‘lay’ western women have provided accounts of encounters with Sikhs, or at least with the Sikh religion, between 1809 and 2012 (see [Nesbitt 2020](#)). Here the adjective ‘lay’ is used to distinguish the European and North American travelers over the past two hundred years—the wives of soldiers and administrators and the novelists, artists, missionaries and other travelers—from the professional women scholars (of whatever ethnicity or religious identity) in late twentieth and early twenty-first-century Sikh Studies. The specific subject of Sikh women—whether living in north India, or outside India in, for example, the Malay Peninsula ([Bird 1883](#)) or, more recently, in the UK—is mentioned by some of these eighty women, along with features of Sikh life such as their sacred writings and sacred places, and Sikh soldiers and princes.

Many of these female commentators on Sikh women have been upper middle class—the wives of senior army officers and administrators, including Viceroy. Some were daughters or wives of Church of England clergy and a number were themselves protestant missionaries, mainly with the Church Missionary Society. Most of the women—at least in the nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries—shared both a Christian worldview and unswerving certainty of the rightness of British rule over India (Nesbitt 2018, 2019). Helena Blavatsky, a Russian and the co-founder of the Theosophical Society, and her friend and successor, Annie Besant, are among the significant exceptions.

Blavatsky, Besant and some of the other women—for example Emily Eden—have been the subject of substantial scholarship, but their attention to Sikhism and, more specifically, to Sikh women has not been investigated.

2. Writings of Feminist Scholars

Scholars have examined colonial and post-colonial representations of Indian women more generally (Ray 2000); they have considered ‘the white woman in colonial India’ (Sen 2017; Chaudhuri and Strobel 1992), and the literary output of these memsahibs (e.g., Ghose 1998a, 1998b; Raza 2006). Some of the Victorian women cited in the present article (Harriet Martineau, Flora Annie Steel and Annie Besant) are themselves regarded as feminists and Penelope Tuson has published their selected writings on Indian women (Tuson 1995). Feminist scholars’ attention has focused on colonial representations rather than on post-1947 portrayals of South Asian women.

The historian John C. Webster studied the women of Amritsar—Hindu, Muslim and Sikh—through late nineteenth-century missionary eyes (Webster 2005). He questioned the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society’s generalised characterisations of ‘the secluded middle class women of late nineteenth century Amritsar as in bondage to religiously sanctioned custom and the patriarchal joint family’ (Webster 2005, p. 284). As well as suggesting the possibility of the women’s agency and their ambivalence about their situation, he suggested that Christian missionaries opened up for them new opportunities and choices.

Webster refers to publications (not specifically on the women of Amritsar) by Ramusack (1992) who recognised British women in colonial India as activists who gave voice to a ‘maternal imperialism’, by trying to influence British public opinion. He also notes that Burton (1994) demonstrated how British women tended to view Indian women as a foil to gauge their own progress, while Fleming (1992) focused on their vision of Christian womanhood/domesticity.

Sangeeta Ray’s analysis (Ray 2000) of women in nationalist fiction by both Indian and British writers includes attention to descriptions of suttee by the nineteenth-century female authors, Harriet Martineau (sometimes called ‘the first woman sociologist’), and Flora Annie Steel, a prolific writer and a champion of girls’ education.

Jakobsh is unusual in having looked at colonial representations of Sikh women in particular (Jakobsh 2003, pp. 50–83), and at the representations and self-representations and identity of Sikh women over a longer period than the British raj (Jakobsh and Nesbitt 2010). Jakobsh cites Flora Annie Steel, along with many male colonial sources (Jakobsh 2003, p. 71). However, scholars have not so far examined a wider range of western women’s accounts of Sikh women (or, for that matter, of Sikhs and their religious tradition more generally), whether before or during the raj or after 1947 in India and the diaspora. Consequently, scholars have not yet considered the possible contribution of these female western observers to constructions of Sikh womanhood. It is this gap that my research flags up and begins to address. In so doing, it asks whether the women writers’ ‘race’ trumps their gender in their representation of Sikh women. Certainly, in the case of colonial representations of India’s women, Indira Sen has noted that western women ‘were writing in a colonial context where the factor of race (that is, white women belonging to the ruling race) far outweighed the factor of ‘gender’ (that is, the commonality of their being women)’ (Sen 2008, p. xxv). The material quoted in the present article provides a basis for considering how far race, class, or indeed religion trump gender in western women’s presentation of Sikh women and whether the start of imperial rule over Punjab in 1849 or the end of empire in 1947, or the settlement of Sikhs in Britain in the twentieth century, mark any shifts in their perspective.

The Women's Writings on Sikhs

The women's literary genres overlap, since journals were written like letters and letters sometimes reproduced journal pages (as in the case of Juliette Low, founder of the Girl Scouts of the USA¹) and both letters and journals were later published as, or provided the basis for, travelogues and memoirs. Sikhs feature in the 1830s' journal and letters of General Sir Henry Fane's daughter, Isabella Fane (Pemble 1985), and the journals of the Governor General's sisters, Emily and Fanny Eden (Eden 1997; Dunbar 1988 respectively). Authors of published travelogues and memoirs, based on journals, include the intrepid solo traveler, Hervey (1853), as well as Honoria Lawrence, the devoted wife of the distinguished military officer and administrator, Henry Lawrence (Lawrence and Woodiwiss 1980) plus Julia Maitland, whose first husband was a senior merchant in the East India Company (1846) and both the evangelical Christian traveler, Baring-Gould (1901), and the Irish cyclist and travel writer, Murphy (1965). Landscape architect Sarah Lloyd's memoir of her life with a Sikh villager, Pritam Singh ('Jungli'), with its incidental comment on Sikh women, was published to critical acclaim (Lloyd 2008).

Two British women published works solely devoted to Sikhism, namely Annie Besant's lecture for the Theosophical Society (Besant 1979) and Dorothy Field's articles (Field 1912, 1913a, 1913b) and monograph (Field 1914). Other women have written carefully researched fiction featuring female Sikh characters. In the UK, this includes Carol Lake's 'Ajit's Story' (Lake 1989), which appears to present the author's real-life contact with a hard up, ailing Sikh single mother. Best known is J. K. Rowling's novel *The Casual Vacancy* (Rowling 2012) featuring the Jawanda family in the imagined English village of Pagford.

The missionary women wrote books and booklets (e.g., Hewlett 1886; Hooker 1989)—one, Margaret Wardell, co-authoring with a male author (Gidoomal and Wardell 1996). More often, the missionaries produced reports or short magazine articles (e.g., Hilhouse 1903; Wauton 1907; Guilford 1915), which include reference to Sikh women. One prolific volunteer missionary, Charlotte Tucker, produced fictional stories, as 'little bullets against idolatry' (Tucker n.d.). Writing of '[t]he women of Amritsar through missionary eyes' and focusing on just one missionary society's annual reports and on articles in its magazine, John C. Webster identified 'four different literary forms' in these source materials for 'the missionaries' perceptions of Amritsar's women' (Webster 2005, p. 271), namely generalisation; anecdote; biography/character sketch and analytical description. This taxonomy is pertinent too for the wider range of genres, deployed by western women more generally, with anecdote and generalisation being the most frequent of Webster's 'forms' of output on which the present article is based, while Ranjit Singh's mother, Raj Kaur, and his youngest wife, Jind Kaur, were the subject of brief 'character sketches'.

Two of the women illustrate the 'maternal imperialism' identified by Webster: though not writing specifically about Sikh women, Harriet Martineau sought, in the immediate aftermath of the 1857 'Uprising', to influence the British public's understanding of India by informing them about its history. Just over fifty years later, Dorothy Field's stated aim was to impress upon Government the vital role that a reinvigorated Sikhism could play in British rule over an increasingly unsettled India and the need for Government to come to the religion's aid (Field 1912, pp. 350–65). Women writing with other clear agendas were Flora Annie Steel, publishing out of her concern to further female education in Punjab, Annie Besant, with her nationalist message, and the missionaries, Guilford (1915); Hewlett (1886), Hooker (1989), Charlotte Tucker (Giberne 1895), Wauton (1907) and Margaret Wardell (Gidoomal and Wardell 1996) who all hoped to win Sikh women as converts. Sen noted colonial women's goal of modernisation while stereotyping the 'unchanging east' and assuming the impossibility of change (Sen 2017, pp. 74–75) but none of the women encountered in the present study were activists regarding, for example, the issues that a few mentioned of suttee or infanticide. Isabella Bird did, however, promote medical care in Punjab and Kashmir many years after her observation of Sikhs in the Malay Peninsula. Moreover, with regard to the women of Harnal village, bereaved in World War 1, Eva

¹ Low, Juliette journal available at https://dlg.usg.edu/collection/jgglow_jglowc (accessed on 1 April 2019).

Bell 'became not only a campaigner for their educational advancement but also an advocate for closer relations between them and the wives of British soldiers with whom they had so much in common' (Allen 2017, p. 37). Rachel Scott's narrative indicates how a teacher in the UK tried to educate Sikh and other South Asian school-leavers about the patterns and values of the society into which they had been plunged. It had to be made clear that here in the West the position of women was profoundly different from that to which they were accustomed . . . (Scott 1971, p. 184).

The women's scope for observing, and even interacting with Sikh women, changed over the decades. Whereas Ann Deane had reported a chance encounter in 1809 with Ranjit Singh's wives (Deane 1823), Isabella Fane and the Eden sisters were actually introduced to them in 1837 and 1838 respectively. In contrast with these early encounters with royalty, it is often village women who feature in the accounts of missionaries and also in the writings of Eva Bell. Bell wrote sometimes as Mrs G. Bell and sometimes as John Travers. Her husband, Captain George Henry Bell of the 27th Punjabis, died in service in 1916. Bell then visited the mothers, wives, widows and daughters connected with her husband's regiment in Harnal, a village near Rawalpindi. Her aim was to 'share a few days of the anxiety and mourning together' (Travers 1918, p. 348). Women crop up too in Sarah Lloyd's narrative of living among Sikhs in a village near Amritsar and in a *dera* (religious settlement centred on a *baba* or spiritual head) in the early 1980s (Lloyd 2008). On occasion, western women received wedding invitations and they observed and described the brides (Hilhouse 1903; Scott 1971, pp. 180–83). In the second half of the twentieth century, women befriended Sikhs who had recently moved to the UK (Scott 1971; Lake 1989; Hooker 1989). Only with J. K. Rowling's interviews, in 2012 does one sense friendship with a young Sikh woman on an equal basis.² In this case, a shared language (English), a non-colonial context, and a lack of evangelical agenda combine to allow Rowling to listen receptively. Her assessment of Sikhism as emancipatory fits the dramatic need of her plot for an element of 'religious morality' and for 'second generation Britons' who are 'insiders and outsiders simultaneously' (see <http://www.sikhnet.com/news/how-sikhism-fits-jk-rowlings-new-book> [accessed 25 June 2019]).

Writing about colonial women travellers, Indira Ghose recognised:

There is no specifically female gaze. Instead there is a wide spectrum of gazes by woman travellers. (Ghose 1998b, p. 159)

What western women wrote about their Sikh counterparts reflects not only the historical period and particular circumstances of their encounters but also their own differing personalities and approaches, and, in the case of contrasting character sketches of Jind Kaur, it reflects the women's diverse political views.

3. The 'Sikh'—'Western' Binary

The dichotomy between 'Sikh women' and 'western women' needs to be examined before proceeding further, as these groups are no longer mutually exclusive. In north America especially there are women of European ancestry who self-identify as Sikh. Moreover, many women of Sikh heritage have grown up in Europe and North America. Furthermore, Sikh women worldwide are implicated in 'western' culture in a way that was, however, unthinkable for most of the two centuries spanned by this article. Among the women writers featured in the present article, and the women they described, only Bamba Sutherland (described by Juliette Low) blurred an otherwise uncontroversial distinction. Although Low met her in Lahore, and although her grandfather was maharaja Ranjit Singh, Sutherland had been living in Britain, spoke English rather than Punjabi, her mother was a half German, half Abyssinian Christian and Bamba had been brought up as a Christian.

² See <http://www.sikhnet.com/news/how-sikhism-fits-jk-rowlings-new-book> (accessed 25 June 2019). See also 'Front Row', BBC Radio 4 27 September 2012 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01mx27g> (accessed on 25 June 2019).

Perhaps more problematic is the basis for identifying women as Sikh in the women's writing. Apart from accounts of wedding ceremonies and visiting the Golden Temple in Amritsar and other gurdwaras, there is no account of women's specifically Sikh ritual activity and certainly no reference to their having been initiated into the Khalsa.

In general, the women's religious identification as Sikh results from being the daughter, wife or mother of men who identified as Sikhs rather than from their articulating this identity themselves. Eva Bell provides an exception in World War 1 when:

A widowed Sikh brought her all to the King—her only son . . . she gave her reasons very simply. 'I am a Sikh,' she said. ([Imperial Publishing Co Khosla Brothers](#), p. 131)

Whereas European and north American travellers frequently noted the distinctive appearance of male Sikhs—in particular Akali warriors—they mentioned no distinctively Sikh aspect of women's appearance. Emily Eden's watercolour showing a distinctively accoutred and turban-wearing woman in an Akali family is the one exception.³ The sources informing the present article did not draw attention to any way in which Sikh women's attire, jewellery or hair style differed from their Hindu or Muslim peers.

4. Western Women on Sikh Women's Appearance

Sikh women's appearance was, nonetheless, a recurrent theme. Fane and the Eden sisters described Ranjit Singh's wives. For example, Emily Eden described Partap Singh's mother: as 'one of the prettiest little creatures I ever saw . . . with the longest almond-eyes in the world, and with hands like a little child's' ([Eden 1997](#), p. 236) and in her sister Fanny's words she was 'really beautiful; very little, very fair, with enormous black eyes and a pretty, clever expression' ([Dunbar 1988](#), p. 198). By contrast, a second wife was 'immensely fat, and rather ugly' ([Eden 1997](#), p. 236). Perhaps this was Kharak Singh's mother whom, a year before, Fane had written off as 'old, wizened, fat and hideous' ([Pemble 1985](#), p. 210).

Women's hairstyles received attention, though far less so than the men's. Thus, in the 1870s, Harriet Murray-Aynsley noted how 'their women appear to wear their hair rolled up in a coil at one side of their head, though I could not see exactly how it was dressed, as a square veil of some bright coloured stuff, in many cases richly embroidered with coloured silks, enveloped the head and the greater part of the person' ([Murray-Aynsley 1879](#), p. 253). Clothes were described in detail, including their adaptation to the British climate ([Login 1916](#), p. 213 on Jind Kaur's remarkable adjustments in London and [Scott \(1971\)](#) on Punjabi mothers in a northern UK city). Western women observed, too, the spectacular jewellery of maharanis ([Login 1916](#)), the 'large nose-jewel', four necklaces' and silver bangles on the arms and ankles of a Sikh sergeant's wife in the Malay peninsula ([Bird 1883](#), p. 370), and Sikh pupils' love of jewellery in Britain ([Scott 1971](#), p. 38). In Britain, a bride's dress fascinated her teacher, Rachel Scott ([Scott 1971](#), p. 181) and in Punjab a missionary, Agnes Hilhouse, described how the bride was completely covered and was 'shuffled round' and how she felt sorry for her having her hair pulled as the silver ornaments were fixed ([Hilhouse 1903](#), p. 223).

5. Western Women on the Status of Sikh Women

As well as their appearance, the women's status in relation to men and (rather less frequently) their personalities elicited comment. Frequently, the western women's attitudes to the place of women in Sikh society are expressed via comparisons that highlight their approval or disapproval. Sometimes such comparisons are implicit in their comments on Sikh women, but in many cases the binaries are explicit in their contrasting of contemporary norms and the Gurus' teachings; Sikh women and other

³ Lahore Family of Akalis, Emily Eden, Trustees of the Victoria Memorial, Kolkata VM-EE-R.435 (120).

Indian women (of a different faith community or a different part of India); Sikh women and western women; or as compared with Sikh men.

Only occasionally did a western writer compare the Gurus' teachings and reported actions with more recent treatment of women. Thus, Mrs Hervey wrote 'Nânuk forbids the rite of *Suttee*, (i.e., the practice of women burning themselves with the bodies of their deceased husbands)' (Hervey 1853, vol. 1, p. 424). This tendency to contrast an idealised Guru period with modernity still continues particularly in the writings of Sikh authors.⁴ Jakobsh has pointed to the tendency to contrast a lapsed present with the Gurus' teachings, as in Sikh apologetics (Jakobsh 2003; Jakobsh and Nesbitt 2010, p. 19), and to present any such lapse as due to the other—whether Hindu or Muslim. Our women did not make this point, but, in commenting on Sikh women's situation, they drew occasional comparisons with their Hindu and Muslim counterparts and with women from outside Punjab, although it needs to be stressed that the Punjabi women they mentioned were not always differentiated as Sikh, Hindu or Muslim.

Blavatsky cited one Hindu–Sikh difference as she recalled an Akali 'explaining to them the advantages of the Sikh religion, and comparing it with the faith of the "devil-worshippers", as he called the Brahmans' and apparently contrasting Sikh practice with the 'unconditioned civil death' awaiting Hindu widows, even if they were small children. Edith Baring-Gould mentioned the freedom of both Hindu and Sikh women to come out 'not being shut up closely in zenanas' and so to visit the Golden Temple (Baring-Gould 1901, p. 42). Here the unstated comparison was with Muslim women. Commenting on Sikh girls' lack of freedom in the UK, Scott pointed out that 'for centuries Sikh women have enjoyed greater freedom than their Muslim sisters' (Scott 1971, p. 184).

On the subject of child marriage, the activist and Indian nationalist Annie Besant had contrasted Punjabi women with women of other parts of India, asking: 'Can that be said, most of all, of Bengal, where child-marriage is at its worst, infant-marriage at its most terrible?' (Besant 1913, p. 65; cf. Jakobsh 2003, pp. 72–74). Publishing in 1899 on the conditions of women in India, Steel challenged the belief of 'nine-tenths of English women who manifest that somewhat over-sentimental interest in their Indian sisters' that 'every girl is married, not betrothed, before her teens', while acknowledging that it was family interests and not the young woman's that delayed the date of her marriage (Tuson 1995, p. 257). She wrote:

For their own convenience, the parents will delay this till sixteen; and among some agricultural tribes, notably the Jâts, it is no unusual thing for a forlorn husband to have to sue for the possession of a virgin wife out of her teens, some buxom lass whose services are valuable on the ancestral farm. (Tuson 1995, p. 258)

Similarly, the Theosophist and women's rights activist, Annie Besant, praised 'the Punjabis and Sikhs' for their rejection of child marriage, a view that she stated was not shared by other regions of India:

Go up north among the Punjabis and Sikhs. They do not marry their girls for the most part until they reach 16 and 17 years of age. With what result? That there are no virgin widows, the most pitiful class of Indians ... (Besant 1913, p. 65)

While Steel and Besant approvingly singled out Punjabis, including Sikhs, for the higher age at which young women married, others mentioned child brides' ages without passing comment. Thus, Isabella Fane recorded non-committally that '[t]he bride is ten years old' when recounting the wedding of Nau Nihal Singh in 1837 (Pemble 1985, p. 198).

As for comparisons with their male counterparts', Steel observed too that 'in rural India the women do a lion's share of outdoor work' (Steel 1905, p. 162 cited in Sen 2002, p. 51). When Sikh families later

⁴ For example, Nikky Singh comments: It is sad to see today that ... [w]omen stay in the places ascribed to them in society and family by the male members ... (Singh 1993, p. 254).

settled in England in the twentieth century, their local contacts were struck by how restricted girls' lives were in comparison to their brothers' lives, as well as in comparison to their English peers'. Local people probably did not realise the significance of *izzat* (family honour) in determining what female family members could do or, indeed, could be rumoured to be doing. Migration had not changed centuries-old values but had increased the challenges for the migrants. Mixing socially with unrelated males would not only prejudice a young woman's own chances of marriage but also bring shame on her wider family. This is the context for Scott's observations:

So strong were the conventions limiting the activities of women to the family circle that few older girls, whether Sikh or Muslim, had any chance of pursuing hobbies or interests outside the home . . . so much that to us seemed innocent enjoyment was regarded as sinful by their elders, that their lives continued to be almost as circumscribed as in their Punjabi village. Youth Clubs where both sexes met for dancing or amateur dramatics were absolutely taboo, since no respectable girl could ever make an exhibition of herself on stage, and dancing, except in private, was beyond the pale . . .

Yet boys were allowed out alone and late at night . . . (Scott 1971, p. 176)

Here 'respectable' is the key word and, as Scott realised, this code of behavior applied to Punjabis, regardless of their faith identity. Scott illustrated her commentary with the case of her Sikh pupil, Jagindro: as her father had thwarted her career aspirations, 'Jagindro stayed at home and helped to look after the babies and cook chupattis until she was old enough to look after her own babies and cook her own chupattis' (Scott 1971, p. 177).

At the same time, Scott detected signs that change was underway (again for the benefit of others rather than of the young women concerned), as some young women were now 'going out to work in mills, factories and tailoring establishments before they marry'. She mused that centuries of prejudice might give way to men's discovery that women could be a financial asset to the family (Scott 1971, p. 177).

In many cases, however, western women wrote approvingly both of Sikh women's modest behaviour and of their subordinate status. The unsalaried missionary Charlotte Tucker's reading of the Guru Granth Sahib persuaded her that '[w]oman seems to be given her proper place' (Giberne 1895, p. 288). In Tucker's view, woman's 'proper place' by no means meant full equality with men, and certainly did not mean that a woman could be a Guru. Tucker had heard from a 'native narrator' that the third Guru, Amar Das, had been so moved by his daughter's unflinching bravery and devotion as to present her with the Guruship. Much to Tucker's relief, 'the young Sikh shrank from the strange post of spiritual leadership to which her father's love would have raised her . . . she cried 'O true Guru, my father! Give this dignity to my husband!' Tucker commented tartly 'The offer tells more of parental affection than of wisdom, for a female Goru [sic] would have been somewhat analogous to a female Pope' (Tucker n.d., pp. 73–74).

Dorothy Field's strong interest in women's rights, and her approval of Sikhism's contribution, is evident in her 1914 monograph on the Sikh religion. She struck a different note from Tucker by emphasising 'the emancipation of women'. Yet, the examples she provided of this 'emancipation' included women serving men. Under the heading 'Position of women', she explained:

But the most notable social improvement was the emancipation of women. Many women found salvation through the Guru's teaching. A woman assisted at the inauguration of the Pahul and another was the only disciple who managed to enter the prison where Teg Bahādur was confined before his martyrdom.⁵ She brought him food and drink and otherwise ministered to him. Guru Amar Dās refused to receive a Ranee who had visited him while she

⁵ The reference to a woman who ministered to Teg Bahadar is obscure.

was closely veiled, and on more than one occasion the Guru protested against the tyranny of the *parda* [purdah or veil]. (Field 1914, p. 59)

What Field wrote echoed Macauliffe (1909) rather than being based on personal encounter with any Sikh women. However, western women who did interact with Sikh women similarly expressed approval of their ancillary role. For example, in India, in the early twentieth century, as Sen points out, the assertive Flora Annie Steel ‘projected the paradigm of the submissive and sacrificing Indian wife whom she described as the epitome of “the greatest amount of self-negation”’ (Steel 1923, p. 159), as the female role model for western women to emulate’ (Sen 2017, p. 74). Rather similarly, in the 1980s, Sarah Lloyd, an independent woman traveller, whose relationship with ‘Jungli’ flouted local Punjabi convention, nonetheless reported getting used to women being considered as ‘appendages of their men’: the question that people asked was ‘*Whose* is she; never *who* is she’ (Lloyd 2008, p. 208). She reflected on the norm of women eating only after their husbands and concluded:

India taught me to be a woman. I discovered how much more simple, pleasurable and dignified life became when men and women had separate, and clearly defined roles.’ (Lloyd 2008, p. 210)

However, when a woman’s deference to her husband meant that she could not openly declare herself a Christian, a missionary was less impressed. Much as in western women’s own society, as Annie Besant experienced when her marriage to a clergyman ended for this very reason, wives were expected to defer to their husbands in matters of religious belief. Sarah Hewlett wrote of ‘a very strict Sikh woman’ who had eventually admitted:

She could no longer believe in her own religion, but she *must* keep to it, as her husband is a kind of priest, and keeps near his house a little Temple in which is a copy of the Granth. (Hewlett 1886, p. 134)

6. Western Women on Infanticide and Suttee

Although Sen points out that ‘Social evils was a subject that white women, especially missionaries, wrote copiously on’ (Sen 2008, p. 125), the women in the present study seldom focused on ‘social evils’ in relation to Sikh women. That being said, suttee and son preference—to the extent of female infanticide—were mentioned by a number, though, as with child marriage, they generally wrote in a non-judgemental, matter of fact way.

Here, for example, is Mrs Hervey on the high incidence of female infanticide among Guru Nanak’s descendants living in Dera Baba Nanak, a phenomenon already noted by Herbert Edwardes in 1851. Historian Anshu Malhotra has pointed out the oddness of the British insistence on regarding Sikhs ‘as a community more inclined to treat their women well’, given their discovery of infanticide among the Bedi families of Dera Baba Nanak in 1851 (Malhotra 2010, p. 88). Hervey explained: ‘This family is considered so holy, that the daughters (not being permitted to intermarry) are stifled at their birth, as it would be considered highly derogatory to a female descendant of Baba Nānak to marry into any other family’ (Hervey 1853, vol. 2, p. 39). She showed none of Malhotra’s scepticism about the reasons (pride and poverty) that Sikh leaders fed to the British. Instead, Hervey is as unquestioning as the later administrator and ethnographer, Herbert Rislely, who ‘went to great lengths to justify the practice among the Sikh Jats and Rajputs’ and ‘noted that the more “refined” type of infanticide was associated with a sense of honour . . . highly esteemed by Victorian values’ (Jakobsh 2003, p. 70). Female infanticide continued in the twentieth century and was similarly mentioned without comment by Carol Lake in her story of Ajit, whose aunt:

had seven daughters. This was unusual in India in those days. Most people killed them after the first one or two, because they were an expense with nothing to show for it. (Lake 1989, p. 156)

Likewise, son preference was reported neutrally by Sarah Lloyd:

When a child was born, people rejoiced. If a girl came they weren't so pleased. (Lloyd 2008, p. 81)

On the much rarer, but more public, practice of suttee, Flora Annie Steel reported that Emily Eden had 'greatly disapproved' of the immolation of Ranjit Singh's wives and slaves, and Edward Thompson, in his annotation of Emily's *Up the Country*, mentioned 'the horror Miss Eden felt when the news came through' (Eden 1997, p. 404). In her letter from Shimla, dated 2 July 1839, Emily wrote: 'Two of his ranees have declared their determination to burn themselves with him; but as their stepson Kurruck has implored them not to do so, it is to be hoped they will give it up, if they are sure of kind treatment' (Eden 1997, p. 309). The following day, she wrote, 'Those poor dear ranees whom we visited and thought so beautiful and so merry, have actually burnt themselves' (Eden 1997, p. 310). Stronger condemnation was expressed by the Edens' contemporary, Julia Maitland, in her *Letters from Madras* to her mother. Maitland was outraged, not least at the non-intervention of the British Resident, and demanded:

Have you heard yet in England of the horrors that took place at the funeral of that wretched old RUNJEET SINGH? Four wives and seven slave-girls were burnt with him; and not a word even of remonstrance from the British Government! J- says there cannot be a doubt that a word of disapproval from the British Resident would have stopped it at once, for the whole power of the Punjab depends on our will, and they profess to follow our wishes in everything. Is it not shocking? (Maitland 1846, p. 134).

Helena Blavatsky reported that four of maharaja Ranjit Singh's wives 'voluntarily allowed themselves to be cremated alive' but she did express the hope that the cremation of his female slaves had been 'likewise voluntary' (Blavatsky 1961, p. 38).

7. Western Women's Characterisation of the Women

The children's educational writer, Julia Corner, assessed Ranjit Singh's mother as an 'ambitious, unprincipled woman' (Corner 1854) and Julia Stone, the US Consul's wife, commented on her management of affairs during her son's minority (Stone 1877, p. 496). One woman above all, Jind Kaur, maharaja Ranjit Singh's youngest wife, roused strong reactions from Europeans. Lena Login recalled 'stories told in those days of her beauty and fascination, as well as her talent for diplomacy and strength of will' (Login 1916, p. 210). While her British contemporaries were damning, Helena Blavatsky wrote with admiration and sympathy, as well as considerable inaccuracy.

This slight, weak woman . . . , reared in luxury, passionately loved by the Old Lion of Panjab who caused England so much trouble, became on the death of her Maharaja a heroine whose courage dimmed all the heroic exploits of the Sikhs, Alone and surrounded by treachery she risked all for the sake of her son. Having induced a large following in Panjab to revolt against the projects of the East India Company, she placed herself at the head of her army and, it is said, fought no worse than the bravest among her Sikhs. (Blavatsky 1961, p. 39)

Jind Kaur's subsequent plight drew this response from Lady Login, who met her in England in 1861, two years before her death:

It was with a sense of disillusionment and compassion that . . . I found myself in semi-darkness confronting an aged, half-blind woman, sitting huddled on a heap of cushions on the floor. (Login 1916, p. 211)

For the most part, individual Sikh women's personalities are unrecorded, although Lloyd mentions the creative skill of Jungli's mother (Lloyd 2008, p. 19) and Lake's character, Ajit, too had artistic talent as a student in India and taught handicraft classes in the UK (Lake 1989, p. 162). Two strong female characters are the fictional Dr Parminder Jawanda depicted as ambitious, critical

and unloving, and her daughter, Sukhvinder, who was bullied, under-achieving and self-harming and then unhesitatingly heroic.

It was not only fiction writers, or women writing after India's independence, who tried to imagine Sikh women's lives. In 1838, Fanny Eden's meeting with Ranjit Singh's wives left her wondering how they spent their time:

We could not make out what their amusements are. I fancy they sleep away a great deal of their time. It does strike me, every time I see them, that their lives must be quite unbearable. (Dunbar 1988, p. 196)

In summary, the 'spectrum of gazes' found Sikh women to be pitiable because of circumstances (the failing Jind Kaur) or because of their need of Christian salvation (Wauton 1907), as well as robust and hard-working. They were submissive (Hewlett 1886; Hooker 1989), and a UK schoolgirl could experience discrimination for being hairy (Rowling 2012). They were also courageous (Bell in Imperial Publishing Co Khosla Brothers; Rowling 2012), resourceful and creative (Lake 1989; Lloyd 2008) and adaptive (Login 1916, describing Jind Kaur's adjustment of her dress to her British context; Scott 1971).

8. Women's Reflections

The spectrum of gazes discloses change in individual women's views at least as much as a shift in perspective over the two centuries. Thus, the Eden sisters see themselves through Sikh women's eyes, Lady Login's feeling towards Jind Kaur changes, Sarah Lloyd's understanding of women's roles alters and the schoolteacher Rachel Scott's initial misgivings about arranged marriages disappear when she attends her pupil's wedding: 'I had entered the temple with thoughts full of sadness for Kulwant and this strange, loveless marriage but by the end of the ceremony my doubts were dispelled' (Scott 1971, p. 183). Probably echoing her Sikh informants, Scott further commented: 'That a girl will grow to love her husband is to them as natural, as self-evident as that a child will grow to love its parents, though in neither case has free choice entered into the matter' (Scott 1971, pp. 179–80).

Unusually among the women, Scott reflected on the future.

I knew in my heart that for her all would be well, but for her children and her grandchildren, torn between the customs of East and West as they would surely be, I felt no such certainty. For them, a wedding might not be the happy, memorable occasion that this one, at least, had been for me. (Scott 1971, p. 183)

'Only the children who are born here, who grow to maturity within the framework of our freer society, enjoying the benefits of our equal and liberal education, will find difficulty in accepting the age-old custom. (Scott 1971, p. 180)

Unusually too, Pat Hooker acknowledged that changing western ideals affected her assessment of an eighteen-year-old who had 'admitted that: 'with this cloistered background, she was quite incompetent to voice an opinion, much less make the choice of her future husband'. Hooker commented that 'the girl is typical of many in her passive resignation. Her whole upbringing had been designed to mature in her the qualities of meekness, submissiveness and humility' (Hooker 1989, p. 14). She then acknowledged Christian societies' historical shift in attitude towards this as a quality 'which used to be encouraged in young Christians and which we learn from the example of Christ' but which was 'popularly censured in the West today ...' (Hooker 1989, p. 14).

Indrani Sen mentions colonial white women's awareness of being rejected 'on the grounds of caste, social customs and habits of female dress' (Sen 2008, p. 277) and cites Flora Annie Steel's 'strategy of looking through "native" eyes as a means of controlling the Englishwoman's public display of sexuality and policing her dress and conduct' (Sen 2017, p. 74). The Bengali scholar and poet, Ketaki Kumari Dyson's, assessment that 'the English diary has been dominated, developed, and made highly self-conscious by women writers' (Dyson 1978, p. 4) is borne out by, for example, Emily Eden's

awareness of Indian women's perceptions (Eden). As another Indian scholar, Indira Ghose, commented 'The traveller was also, of course, the object of observance by the observed—a fact either effaced or registered with various emotions, ranging from detached amusement to rage and fear.' Thus, we read that one of Sher Singh's wives wanted to observe the Edens' maids, Jones and Wright, more closely. On 19th December 1838: 'After a long study of Jones, she told her bearers to carry her round to the other side of the elephant, and desired Wright to put up her veil, that she might have a good look at her (Eden 1997, pp. 221–22). The Edens knew how shocking their independence appeared to Sikhs.

Similarly, a century and a half later, Lloyd relays Sikh women's horror at westerners kissing publicly etc. (Lloyd 2008) and, in the UK, Pat Hooker reported both on her Sikh students' assumptions that tea at her house might involve alcohol and drugs (Hooker 1989, pp. 14–15) and on her Sikh neighbours' view of westerners' inappropriate behaviour in public places:

Many Sikh people look on what they perceive from television to be the norms of English family life with horror and contempt. Perhaps it is not surprising that when she [Gurdev] was asked whether there was anything that repelled her about what she knew of English life, Gurdev replied in a whisper of embarrassment, 'Young people kissing in the street.' (Hooker 1989, p. 14)

9. In Conclusions

Future studies are needed in order to explore further to what extent female accounts of Sikh womanhood differ from contemporary male accounts and also to examine in more detail individual women's portrayals of Sikh women and womanhood.

While the commentary of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British women does indeed support the view that race outweighed gender, Blavatsky's observations—not only on Jind Kaur but on, for example, the ridiculousness and the destructiveness of British rule—point to a key factor of British women's race being not just whiteness or Europeaness but the fact of their country's colonial power.

As regards the question whether 1947 was significant in relations between Sikh women and western women, certainly, over thirty years after the ending of the British raj, Sarah Lloyd's experience of India was very different from her predecessors'. But profound changes in British social mores were probably a more decisive factor in her relationship with the Sikh villager, 'Jungli', than India's independence was. What is more striking is the resonance between western women's approaches across the centuries. Thus, Rowling's receptivity to what she learned of Sikhism as an 'egalitarian' faith was of a piece with the Dorothy Field's enthusiastic endorsement of Sikhism's 'emancipation' of women a century earlier (Field 1914, p. 59). Well before the raj, Fanny and Emily Eden had tried to imagine the lives of Sikh women and, post-raj, not only J.K. Rowling, but a teacher and a missionary were making similar efforts of sympathetic imagination. Moreover, the similarities between the CMS missionary, Emily Wauton's, article (Wauton 1907) and Gidoomal and Wardell (1996), which both focused on tactics for converting Sikh women, demonstrate that, in the case of at least some Christians, neither the ending of colonial rule nor Sikh migration overseas changed their perception of Sikh women's predicament as lost sheep in need of a salvation only available through Jesus Christ. Declining commitment to Christian observance in the West did however, outside missionary circles, result in a less overtly, or even implicitly, Christian framing of western women's encounters throughout the twentieth century (Nesbitt 2018, 2019).

A key shift has been from simply observing Sikh women, or having fleeting encounters (hindered by having no shared language), to forging friendships. This is a matter of changed circumstance at least as much as being a matter of attitude. On the last day of 1838, after seeing Ranjeet Singh's wives, Emily Eden wrote: 'I should like to see some of these high-caste ladies several times . . . so as to hear their story, and their way of life, and their thoughts' (Eden 1997, p. 237), but the Edens' schedule did not give them this opportunity.

Emily's statement suggests that class and 'caste' were elements in any feeling of affinity, whereas in fact actual instances of befriending between British and Sikh women often took place across class

lines—between middle-class Britishers and Punjab villagers. As well as the deliberate strategy of befriending that was practised by missionary women in the zenanas of Punjab, there was Eva Bell's friendship with the village women of Harnal, that arose from their shared experience of bereavement (Travers 1918). Then, in the late twentieth century, Lake's 'Ajit's Story' and Scott's *A Wedding Man is Nicer than Cats, Miss* are evidence of kindly disposed British residents stretching out the hand of friendship to needy immigrants, as too is Hooker's call to 'a ministry amongst people of other faiths' (Hooker 1989, p. 4).

It is in their time spent with women—whether, albeit very briefly, in Ranjit Singh's zenana, or in Punjab villages or British industrial cities—that the factor of gender most clearly differentiates women's writing about women from men's, as men could not have the same readily acceptable access. This was especially true given the culture of *izzat* which, as Scott's and Hooker's comments showed, survived strongly in diaspora Sikh society. The nature of the women's relationships changes from a somewhat unequal befriending, with an agenda, to the friendship between J.K. Rowling and the young Sikh woman whose confident presentation of her faith led, many years later, to Rowling placing the Jawanda family, with its strong female Sikh characters, at the heart of *The Casual Vacancy*.

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Article

'In Our Whole Society, There Is No Equality': Sikh Householding and the Intersection of Gender and Caste

Nicola Mooney

Department of Social, Cultural and Media Studies & South Asian Studies Institute,
University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, BC V2S 7M8, Canada; nicola.mooney@ufv.ca

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Abstract: Sikhism is widely understood and celebrated as an egalitarian religion. This follows from its interpretation as a challenge to the caste schema of Hinduism as well as readings which suggest its gender equality. This paper explores the intersection of caste and gender in Sikh society in relation to Guru Nanak's tenet that Sikhs be householders. Nanak's view that householding is the basis of religious life and spiritual liberation—as opposed to the caste Hindu framework in which householding relates only to the specific stage of life in which one is married and concerned with domestic affairs—was one of the most important social and ritual reforms he introduced. By eliminating the need for an asceticism supported by householders, or in other words the binary framework of lay and renunciant persons, Nanak envisioned the possibility that the rewards of asceticism could accrue to householders. For Sikhs living at Kartarpur, the first intentional Sikh community, established by Guru Nanak as a place of gathering and meditation, Nanak's egalitarian ideals were practiced so that women and members of all castes were equal participants. Guru Nanak's model for social and ritual life presents a radical challenge to the hierarchies and exclusions of Hinduism, and yet, contains within it the basis for ongoing caste and gender disparity for Sikhs, since most Sikhs continue to arrange their householding around caste endogamous marriages and social and domestic arrangements which privilege men. Taking the position shared by a number of Sikh ethnographic informants, and supported by a number of feminist scholars, that the realization of an equal Sikh society remains incomplete, I juxtapose the continued acquiescence to caste and gender with the vision of an ideal and socially just society put forward by the Gurus.

Keywords: gender; caste; intersectionality; householding; Sikhism

Ethnographers have long been trained to attend to the gaps between what is said and what is done, or in other words, the ideal and the real, for these third spaces are instructive sites for analysis and critique. As an ethnographer among Sikhs in India and the diaspora over the past two decades, I have often been struck by incommensurabilities between Sikh doctrine and actual social practice. Indeed, these contradictions, especially manifest around the egalitarian principles that we are told outline a casteless and genderless Sikh society, are noted by most scholars. While Sikhs certainly demonstrate Sikhi(sm)'s social justice credentials in some obvious ways in society at large, as we see in the Sikh institutions of *seva* and *langar*, it is also clear that caste and gender hierarchies are ongoing. As a member by marriage of the Jat Sikh community, I have frequently had my attention drawn to their social centrality and supposedly superior status among Punjabis, a trope that continues into the popular cultural sphere. And, having met Jat Sikhs in at least their several hundreds, I can count on one hand the number who use just Singh as their only surname, one of the consummate Sikh practices to erase caste consciousness. As well, I have often heard Sikh women (and particularly Jat Sikh women) describe a range of oppressions and lament that the gurus' egalitarian utopia is not manifest; collectively, they lend their voices to the title of this paper: 'in our whole society, there is no equality'.

During fieldwork interviews in the late 1990s among Sikh women in northwest India (who were primarily but not exclusively Jat), I commonly met with statements like: ‘a boy does not have to behave virtuously, like a girl’; ‘Jat men do not listen to their wives’; ‘in our society, women are inferior to men’; ‘taking birth as a man is better’; and ‘our religion says we are equal, but in reality, we are not’. And while older women were rather more likely to insist that conditions were improving (Mooney 2010), they still said things like ‘a woman won’t have too many problems if she takes care of the household’; ‘if we go out, here and there, our men will criticize us’; ‘in good families, they don’t trouble the women that much, but elsewhere, they are kept down’; and ‘we must try to make our kids understand that they should not marry beyond our caste’. In the years since, my nieces, nephews, students, and friends (again, primarily but not exclusively Jat) have also reminded me of the continued operation of gender and caste, both enmeshed within a dynamics of honour and shame, and in diaspora inflected with new inequalities—and potentials for transgression—as concerns with race and Western nuances of class are introduced. (Colleagues such as Jakobsh and Nesbitt (2010) and Kamala Elizabeth Nayar (2010) have also noted similar encounters). Some Sikh youth have been raised without explicit caste awareness and are variously puzzled, intrigued, or shocked to find that the caste system is still operational among Sikhs (or indeed at all). Others have grown up in castecentric and even casteist settings with a(n anti-Sikh) sense of their own status and distinction. Still others fall in the middle, living an everyday life that is largely untouched by caste but aware that it will enter their lives when they consider marriage. A relative few have shared tales of outcasting related to marriage beyond the caste group. Not only marriages but psyches and lives can be made or broken in these intersections of gender and caste. For Jats, there is or will be much pressure to marry another Jat; while marriage outside of the community is only sanctioned if to somebody white. Jat boys, whose fitness for marriage no longer rests on village land, must demonstrate wealth via material markers that evoke class, but may be bereft of its finer distinctions. Meanwhile Jat girls, attuned to the gender imbalances and traditional expectations of their homes, and well aware that these are likely to force upon them a life trajectory more limited than those of their brothers, often strategically remain in school for as long as possible so as to avoid marriage. Clearly, caste and gender inequalities in Sikh society are ongoing, even though they may take different shapes as they traverse the moving spaces and sundry places of contemporary Sikh society. Inderpal Grewal has observed that “the question of how millennial modern subjects are being made by disavowing the existence of patriarchy even as gendered subordination and violence continues is crucially important for feminist research, both theoretically and empirically” (Grewal 2013, p. 3). This proposal might be productively reframed to suggest, as I do here, that it is critical to further understand the ways in which contemporary Sikh subjects are produced via assertions of religious reform and social equality at the same time as gender and caste hierarchies continue to be present and even resurgent.

If the standard narrative of Guru Nanak’s egalitarian intent is more than “ideological self-image” (Jodhka 2016, p. 585), why, five hundred and fifty years since his birth, and given the otherwise successful establishment of his vision for religious and social reform, do such inequalities persist among Sikhs? In this paper, I explore some of the dimensions of this question. Observing that gender and caste intersect is scarcely groundbreaking: the feminist study of gender and caste practices and hierarchies in India is a substantial field (e.g., Basu 1999, 2005; Caplan 1985; Chakravarti [2003] 2018; Channa 2013; Chowdhry 1994, 2007; Dube 1997; Grewal 2013; Harlan 1992; Jeffery and Jeffery 1996; Kapadia 1995, 2002; Kolenda 2003; Liddle and Joshi 1989; Minturn 1993; Oldenburg 2002; Puri 1999; Raheja and Gold 1994; Sangari and Vaid 1990; Wadley 2002), and within it, attention to Punjab is growing (e.g., Grewal 2010; Jakobsh 2003, 2010; Malhotra 2002, 2010; Mooney 2010, 2013b; Purewal 2010). However, there are few studies that explicitly link caste and gender inequalities, as occurring simultaneously and produced and experienced in intersection with each other, and thus in an intersectional frame, to Sikhism. The continuation of caste and gender inequities also points to the vexed nexus of religion and culture, aspects of social architecture and worldview that are also complexly intersected. Taking such an intersectional approach, I suggest that the household is a central aspect of

these ongoing inequities among Sikhs for the key locus of Guru Nanak's new religion yet remains the site of unreformed traditional patriarchal kinship practices that depend on the intersection of gender and caste and thus reproduce their hierarchies. Rather than being a strictly empirical paper, I attempt to think through the gap between the egalitarian ideal and lived practice among Sikhs. While some of what I write here may seem obvious to the reader familiar with Punjab, Sikhism, and Sikhs (and perhaps especially Jats), there are few studies of the nexus of these inequalities. Moreover, for the reader that is relatively unfamiliar with the region and its people—as well as for students grappling with the complexities of gender, caste, and Sikhism in their own lives—there are few concise sources that attempt to account for these pressing issues. While what I accomplish here is far from comprehensive, it is one point of entry into some of these challenges.

Implicit in the Sikh community's discourse on equality as noted above is the idea that the Guru's Sikhi successfully reformed the religious domain inherited from Hinduism, but not the—gendered, caste-centric, and casteist—cultural one. However, the egalitarian reading of Sikhism is normative. Sikhs widely assert that Sikhism is an egalitarian religion while academics argue that Sikhism challenges the caste schema of Hinduism (e.g., McLeod 1989; Takhar [2005] 2016), and advocates gender equality (e.g., Mahmood and Brady 2000; Singh 2005). Guru Nanak's universalistic and humanitarian Sikhi proposed a utopian reform of society contingent upon the eradication of caste-based priestly authority and the elaborate rites of the Hindu life course, as well as the life cycle stages of everyday life, which compartmentalize spiritual and social pursuits such that only some people—none lower caste, and very few women—might attain mokṣa (or freedom from the karmic cycle). The Guru proposed instead that all Sikhs, regardless of gender or caste, could perform the few rituals of Sikhism, and moreover that Sikhs should be householders permanently engaged in both society and spirituality as the means to mukti (or spiritual liberation). Regardless of the actualities of these tenets, a matter that is at the crux of this paper, Sikhism proposes critical socioreligious engagement in marriage and family life at all (adult) ages across the life course for women and men of all castes even as both women and men are to be equally and simultaneously engaged, as individuals and soul partners in religious practice and spiritual pursuit, “one light in two bodies” (Guru Granth Sahib, 788; cited in (Singh 2005, p. 133)). For instance, even as they suggest gendered difference, the Sikh surnames of Kaur and Singh challenge patrilineality and assert gender and caste equality, while Sikh first names are largely gender-neutral. Despite these egalitarian social and religious formations, caste and gender differences and inequities continued to manifest in Guru Nanak's new society. Scholars point out that women are far from equal in Sikh institutions (Jhutti-Johal 2010); the Guru's message may be out of step with contemporary feminist perspectives (Nayar 2010, p. 269); and—perhaps most critically—the masculinized, and Khalsacentric, Sikh body is not only normative but hegemonic (Axel 2001). Meanwhile, Sikhs continue to assert caste privilege and prejudice and even casteism: beyond unequal marriage and reproductive arrangements, caste is pronounced and widely observed in everything from patterns of village settlement to national elections (Jodhka 2016, p. 583). Encounters with the West under the raj, in diaspora, and amid modernity and globalization have entrenched and exacerbated inequalities by introducing new economic and status pressures which map onto gender, kinship, and household dynamics (e.g., Mooney 2011; Padhi 2012).

In this paper, I argue that ongoing inequalities of gender and caste among Sikhs are related to the Sikh practice of householding, which was a key aspect of Guru Nanak's reframing of Hinduism. Rather than becoming the key site of Sikh spiritual development, householding has remained the prosaic—and deeply unequal—site of kinship, and thus the intersection of gender and caste. From this site, the profound and pressing inequalities of gender subordination and caste hierarchy emanate. Viewing Sikhism as a reform movement with aims to establish a new model society that was otherwise largely successful, as evidenced by the establishment and growth of Sikhism, I examine the promise and paradox of Sikh egalitarianism, arguably, a key proposition of the promised transformation. I begin by describing Guru Nanak's revitalization of Hinduism and the routinization of Sikhi(sm), paying particular attention to the doctrine of householding, or gṛhastha, in which ongoing inequities

of caste and gender are located. I then articulate some of the key contexts of gender and caste among Sikhs so as to demonstrate their significant divergence from the Sikh ideal of social equality. I propose that the necessary intersection of gender and caste within the traditional kinship and marriage system, which remain relatively untouched by Sikh revitalization, has prevented social equality from becoming manifest and indeed even reproduces regional and diasporic forms of intersectional disparity and domination.

Before commencing, a few further words on my approach to the argument are in order. I take the perspective that there is no essential Sikh and no essential form of Sikhism, just as there is no essential Sikh woman or man, nor Jat nor Mazhabi nor Khatri, (just as there is no one form of Hinduism), and, that Sikh subject formation transcends these categories; in this, religious principle coheres with cultural theory. This reflects a constructivist approach which seeks to avoid deterministic and bounded interpretations by viewing culture and religion as the unfixed, fluid, and evolving products of particular periods, encounters, expectations, and experiences (e.g., Appadurai 1996; Clifford 1988; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Although it is in some ways an unsatisfactory paradigm, I largely view religion as an aspect of culture: Western secular framing treats religion and culture as theoretically separable (e.g., Asad 1993; Geertz 1973)—the whole of the one (religion) constituting the part of the other (culture)—and yet I am also aware that they are mutually imbricated and enmeshed phenomena, as clearly evidenced in the idea of worldview. Political and other domains of culture are also part of this complex cultural whole (e.g., Asad 2003), in keeping with the holistic paradigm of anthropology. Proceeding from this, while for the purposes of this broad and exploratory comparison I treat both Hinduism and Sikhism as mutually exclusive, distinct and isolable traditions, at the same time, I recognize that in Punjab they emerge from and coexist within a shared regional culture in which religion has historically overlapped so that these distinctions are, at certain times and within certain contexts, not only analytically problematic but also socially contentious. This approach blurs the differences within Sikhism, and there are certainly other, particular forms of Sikhi, such as the Khalsa formulation, that go unexplored here. Fortunately, other scholars (e.g., Jakobsh 2003; Mahmood and Brady 2000; Singh 1996, 2005) have explored at least their gender dimensions closely. Another proviso is that readings of the religious traditions of South Asia—such as the idea that India is ‘spiritual’, the distinction between ‘other worldly’ and ‘this worldly’ and the very category ‘Hindu’—have historically been deeply embedded in complicated processes of translation that have produced orientalist frames (King 1999; Said 1979), whether prejudicial or romantic (Inden 1986), even though engaging with such readings remains foundational to contemporary scholarship such as my own.

Beyond modes of religious understanding and being, modes of social organization such as caste and gender are also susceptible to considerable distortion, if not outright colonization, if read through an ethnocentric lens (and again, via a process of translation). Critical, non-canonical perspectives on religion by academics and particularly ‘outsiders’ are often unwelcome. These sensitivities in part reflect the fact that Sikhism was and continues to be colonized in multiple ways during the long centuries after its founding in encounters with Islam, the raj, modernity, development, Hindu nationalism, and globalization. The urge of these ‘others’ to categorize, fix, reduce, and suppress has understandably produced anxieties over diversity of form: “the process of creating a self through opposition to an other always entails the violence of repressing or ignoring other forms of difference” (Abu-Lughod 1991, p. 140). To observe that Sikhs have disavowed the Guru’s commitments to equality is perhaps inevitably confronting given that both gender and caste were reconfigured in these historical processes, so as to become much less aligned with Guru Nanak’s poetics and praxes of equality and much more subject to sexism and casteism. Given that the West is yet to address its own rampant sexism, racism, and severe and growing inequalities, there is no scope for superiority here. Reading Sikhism through feminist, intersectional, and even antiracist perspectives—particularly by a Western scholar—may be problematic for those members of the Sikh community who are sensitized to these histories and thus concerned with misreading and misrepresentation. Others may dismiss

such interpretations as part of a “tangential lexicon” (Singh 2016, p. 606). Such refusals would suggest the continued need to commit to, and take on, the challenging work of decolonization, incumbent on us all. In this, I am as enamoured of Sikhi’s potential for radical equality and transformative social change as are many Sikhs.

1. Guru Nanak’s Equal Society

Sikhs are celebrating the 550th year since their founder Guru Nanak’s birth in 2019. The hagiography we have of Guru Nanak holds that he was born in the village of Talwandi, later renamed Nankana Sahib in honour of the Guru, in present-day Pakistan on 15 April 1469. Undivided Punjab at this time was an “enchanted universe” (Oberoi 1994) of pluralistic and heterogeneous folk traditions that we might characterize as broadly Hindu, but was colonized by the Moghul empire and as such both influenced by regional traditions of Sufism and threatened by the spectre of conversion (although there was considerable diversity within both the Muslim and Hindu communities). Beyond the rituals of everyday agricultural life and the rites of passage, bhakti Hinduism expressed devotion to the deities, while mystics of the sant, nath, and Sufi traditions sought communion with the divine through a range of practices including asceticism. Guru Nanak’s Sikhi bears the influence of his religious contemporaries, bhakts, sants, and Sufis, and yet expounds a unique tradition that is neither Hindu nor Muslim.

The janam sakhis (birth stories) outline a dramatic foundational episode when Guru Nanak was swept into a river while bathing, transported by divine revelation, and feared drowned. Three days later, he returned with his universal message ‘na koi Hindu, na koi Mussalman’, (there is no Hindu, there is no Muslim). Although it has been read this way, this statement was less a refutation of both religions, or an invitation to conversion to an as yet amorphous Sikhi, and more a means to establish a third, and common, ecumenical, universalist—and even feminist (Singh 2005)—truth. Having received this inspiration, Guru Nanak travelled throughout the Indian subcontinent and beyond, preaching “a common humanity ... [transcending] all racial, social, religious and gender barriers” (Singh 1996, p. 22) before establishing the first Sikh settlement and community at Kartarpur in 1515. It should be noted that Guru Nanak’s egalitarian reforms, later reiterated in Guru Gobind Singh’s founding of the Khalsa, are part of a long trajectory of protest against the hierarchies of caste Hinduism and its distinction between worldly and spiritual life, whether in Siddhartha Gautama’s ancient assertion that caste (and gender) were inconsequential in pursuing the middle path between worldliness and renunciation (Omvedt 2003); medieval, and ongoing, Nath traditions encompassing householding, ritual inversion, and asceticism (Nath and Gold 1992); or modern critiques of the caste status quo, inspired by social reformers such as Ambedkar, that recuperate the value of work of all kinds in a practice of ‘disciplined householding’ among the Dalit-Bahujan (Ilaiah 2009, p. 91).

Although Guru Nanak’s Sikhism—pluralist, quietist, and mystical—was forced to adjust to the pressures of its routinization and growth under the sharpening of Mughal attention under later gurus, culminating with the birth of the Khalsa in 1699 under the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, Guru Nanak clearly laid the foundations for Sikhi and Sikh society within his lifetime. Sikhi rests on mindfulness and meditation on the name (nām) of the singular yet formless divine (ek onkar) alongside simultaneous social engagement, as practiced in honest labour and conduct, humility and selflessness, unity and equality, service and shared prosperity. Guru Nanak’s legacy is encapsulated in the exhortations: *vaṅḍ chhakō* (sharing and assisting the needy), *kirat karō* (earning an honest living through one’s own labour), and *nām japō* (contemplation and recitation of the names of god, also known as *nām simran*). This meditative practice sought to confront and overcome the spiritual and social problem of *haumai* (ego), or individual identity, and all of its potential accretions—*lobh* (greed), *kāma* (lust), *krodh* (anger), *hankar* (pride), and *moh* (attachment).

It has been proposed that this apparent founding of a new religion was likely unintentional, and rather, what became Sikhism was initially a Hindu reform movement (McLeod 1989). This is in part how I read Sikh householding and egalitarianism here. It is interesting to consider just how forcefully

Guru Nanak, “a pious god-loving Hindu of gentle disposition” (Madan 1986, p. 258), refuted the extant traditions with his famous unitary dictum, there is ‘neither Hindu nor Muslim’. While this position refuses the claims that either might make to exclusive practice or identity, it also thereby suggests that Nanak was as interested in reforming social and religious categories as in spiritual liberation. Indeed, to some, Nanak was a revolutionary (e.g., Singh 1988), who found little “in contemporary politics, society or religion ... commendable” (Grewal [1990] 1997, p. 28). Sikh texts and practices demand “no priests, no commentators, no hierarchies between reciters/singers and listeners, no social or gender obstacles” (Singh 1996, p. 8), and moreover, as is widely noted, include verses from both Hindu and Muslim saints. Guru Nanak’s unitary theology was inclusive and pluralistic. One recent interpretation suggests Guru Nanak, as ‘enlightenment personified’, was a harbinger of several core aspects of twenty-first century social justice, including multiculturalism, women’s liberation, human rights, and socialism (Singh 2019). Despite this, Guru Nanak counselled Hindus to follow Hindu tenets, and Muslims to follow Islamic tenets (Singh 1996, p. 22). And yet for those Hindus who would become Sikhs, Guru Nanak outlined a transformative religious and social vision.

Importantly, Sikhism can be (re-)interpreted through a feminist lens, even if gender equality is not the prevailing condition of Sikh society. Certainly, Guru Nanak’s rejection of the androcentrism of the Hindu model of the stages of life can be read as challenging patriarchy (Nayar and Sandhu 2007, p. 108). It is interesting, too, to consider that the Guru Granth Sahib may metaphorically link gender and caste equality. A widely cited passage on gender equality emphasizes women’s roles in birth and social reproduction:

From woman, man is born; within woman, man is conceived; to woman he is engaged and married. Woman becomes his friend; through woman, the future generations come. When his woman dies, he seeks another woman; to woman he is bound. So why call her bad? From her, kings are born. From woman, woman is born; without woman, there would be no one at all. O Nanak, only the True Lord is without a woman (473).

Elsewhere in the Granth, women’s childbearing bodies are viewed as the site of an originary and perfect social equality: “In the dwelling of the womb, there is no ancestry or social status. All have originated from the Seed of God” (324). Moreover, nonbinary gender metaphors are featured throughout the writings of the Gurus to communicate divine transcendence. According to Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, the Gurus used “the language of intimate human relationships” (Singh 1996, p. 3), and of marriage in particular, to describe human relations to the divine. She writes: “The Gurus often speak from the point of view of a woman, a bride awaiting her divine Groom, who addresses the Formless One as ‘Beloved’” (4). This is exemplified in gurbani, such as in the stanzas of the anand karaj (Sikh marriage rite, literally ‘blissful union’), which describe the bride and groom as ‘one soul in two bodies’ who are enjoined together to pursue divine peace. Singh argues that Sikhism thus rejects distinctions between male and female in comprehending divinity, and by extension, in human society. Marriage is both a metaphor for divine union and a spiritual tool for its realization, which bride and groom are to utilize equally, as partners. Singh amply demonstrates that if we read and translate gurbani in feminist (and humanist) ways, the Gurus envisioned, idealized, and urged us to realize an equal society. While this is no doubt a moving and inspiring interpretation of equality in Sikh marriage, it must be pointed out (as Singh herself does) that ritual, symbolic, and social inequalities between brides and grooms and their families remain. For instance, during the four lavān (circumambulations) during the anand karaj (Sikh wedding), brides must follow their grooms around the Guru Granth Sahib. More onerously, the bride and her family are the groom and his family’s inferiors throughout the wedding arrangements, at the ceremony, and into the marriage thereafter, as the troubling custom of dahej (dowry practice) makes plain. (Even more disturbing, there is also a scarcity of Sikh brides, given pronounced sex ratio imbalances arising in female foeticide; e.g., Purewal 2010, p. 38). Similarly, there are ritual constraints on women’s equality in the Khalsa initiation ceremonies (Singh 2005, pp. 139–40). Perhaps unsurprisingly, while the Guru’s compositions also express the ideal of caste equality, this too goes unrealized.

2. Householding

Although a tradition of worldly ascetism, in which renunciation “is the ethos characterizing the ideal householder” is known in other Indian contexts (Cohen [1978] 2002, pp. 236–37), it is most well known in Sikhism. Guru Nanak’s egalitarian, humanitarian, and universalistic reforms intended to eliminate Hindu rites of passage and the caste-based authority of priests which unwittingly separated social and spiritual life. Sikhism does not formally separate practitioners from priests, and thus needs no caste or gender divisions, for all Sikhs are to be both social and spiritual. In comparison with ‘other worldly’ Hinduism, Sikhism outlines a way of attaining divine realization in this world. In a single telling sentence, Surinder Jodhka observes that “it was perhaps the emphasis on just such a ‘this-worldliness’ which ensured that the social and personal world of the Sikh Gurus and subsequently of all Sikhs could not be caste-free” (Jodhka 2016, p. 585). Householding is the particular social formation that accomplishes Guru Nanak’s this-worldly reform, but also, lays the framework for our further consideration of gender and caste: in providing a basis for kinship, gender, and caste, householding is the very formation that enables the continuation of gender and caste distinctions. Here, I briefly outline the Hindu notion of āśramadharmā, the religiocultural ground from which Sikh householding emerges and diverges. In this regard, it is important to note that my understanding of householding has emerged from and is largely concerned with the context that it provides for Sikhism, rather than a specific concern with Hinduism.

In the concept of āśramadharmā (or stages and duties of life), Hindus are provided with an explicit model for the life course. The āśramas outline four age-appropriate roles for Hindu males from the elite, twice-born castes (Brahmin, Kṣatriya or Vaiśya) across the four stages of their lives, so that they may fulfill the dharma or responsible conduct of each. The āśramas are linked to a series of rites of passage or saṃskāras which enable life transitions and initiate men into their expected social roles, although most are concentrated in childhood. The saṃskāras depend on the ritual authority of priests, the elite category of which is foundational to both the conduct of ritual and the caste hierarchy of Hindu society. The āśramadharmā, as described in the Dharmaśāstras such as the Manusmṛiti, explains that in the Hindu life course, one is first brahmacārī or student (and celibate), then gṛhastha or householder (and married), and then vānaprastha (or retiree), essentially in retreat from society and the world. The fourth ‘stage’ or status, saṃnyāsa or ascetic renunciation, which was not part of the original schema (Doniger 2014, p. 28), is neither incumbent upon all Hindus (for many simply ‘retire’), nor always the final stage (for one can enter from any other point in the life course), but is—in allowing saṃnyāsīs to get closest to moksha—the culminating phase of the ideal Hindu life. The saṃnyāsī renounces the world and lives an ascetic life beyond society, or more precisely, the social world as represented through the activities, responsibilities, and relationships of study, householding, and retirement. Becoming a saṃnyāsī requires social death (Narayan 1989, p. 74) and thus erases one’s caste and kinship ties. Given that women can also renounce (Hausner 2007), arguably, if not always demonstrably, renunciation renders gender equality. In the permanent liminality of the world beyond the social, the renunciant is liberated in this life (Narayan 1989, p. 75).

In terms of the political economy and organization of society, gṛhastha supports all of the other stages, and within the household family structure in particular, the brahmacārī and vānaprastha phases. As well, householders financed ritual. Gṛhastha is thus essential to the system. But importantly, gṛhastha inverts the normative social order of the other stages of āśramadharmā: the householder is spiritually subordinate to the student, retiree, and renunciant, and yet, socially powerful via control of household resources (Cohen [1978] 2002, pp. 202–3, 277). And, in terms of the potential for karmic accretions, gṛhastha is the most onerous stage (Klostermaier 2007, p. 123), in no small part as it is embedded in caste, gender, kinship, and other social formations and bound up with the expected pursuits of artha (material wealth) and kāma (pleasure). Gṛhastha thus lends spiritual force and necessity to vānaprastha and perhaps even saṃnyāsa since its bonds and responsibilities, not to mention its pleasures and desires, obscure engagement with spiritual questions. For Hindus, spiritual

development is best pursued in retreat to the forest ashram in vānaprastha or otherwise entirely beyond the social and bodily in saṁnyāsa.

Sikhism explicitly rejects the Hindu stages of life framework, along with the saṁskāras and the associated ritual authority and social status of Brahmin priests. Instead, it emphasizes permanent householding as the means of the ideal religious life. Yet some of the aspects of āśramadharmā will be familiar to Sikhs, who also use a temporal life course model derived from the Manusmṛiti in the idea of rāt de char pehar or the four watches or quarters of the night. The rāt de char pehar frames the stages of the Sikh life course around the womb, childhood, marriage and household life, and advancing age and preparation for death, which is mapped onto the amrit velā, or ambrosial period just before dawn, although there is no retreat to a forest ashram as in vānaprastha nor indeed the possibility of renunciation or saṁnyāsa at this later stage of life (or any). This may pose problems for individual Sikhs as they age and live the final stages of the life course (such as those with few social ties or desirous of a more solitary spiritual engagement), although the fourfold framework does address the later years of the life course, which are ideally to be lived with sons and grandsons in joint, extended, and patrilineal households which accommodate, and view as valuable, a heightened spiritual engagement among the elderly. Nevertheless, māyā or attachment is apparent throughout the stages (Nayar and Sandhu 2007, p. 108). Even for Hindus, the idea of renunciation is not simply and easily contrasted with immersion in social life (e.g., Madan 1991). Indeed, “techniques of detachment” are a means of “dealing with the world and the intensity of affections and attachments that extended living in the world entails” (Lamb 2000, p. 141).

The āśramadharmā being a model for the heteropatriarchal male life course means that the reproductive capacities of women are an essential basis of the social system and thus are harnessed and constrained. At the same time, women are effectively beyond the system as marriage is the only life cycle rite of any consequence to a woman’s life, in that it links her to the husband whose householding she will serve and whose retreat—in the classical sense, to the forest hermitage or ashram in vānaprastha—she will follow, should he so choose. Should the husband opt to renounce and become saṁnyāsī, his wife effectively becomes a widow. Good Hindu wives are kanyadān (virginal) upon marriage (Fruzzetti 1982; Malhotra 2002) and pativrātā, (devotees of their husbands) thereafter (Leslie 1989; Malhotra 2002): servants, protectors, and conduits of their husbands’ dharma (Nabar 1995), not to mention his honour (izzat), although this is a form of maya or illusion (Nayar 2010, p. 269). Hindu texts describe the duties of the pativrātā, who was to be “like a slave when at work, a courtesan when making love, . . . a mother when serving food, and a counsellor when her husband was . . . distress[ed]” (Nabar 1995, p. 149). The idealized tradition of sati, the self-immolation of the wife upon her husband’s death, reflected that she was a ‘good woman’, chaste, virtuous, devoted, and committed to the protection of her husband by making sacrifices on his behalf (Harlan 1994). Clearly, Hinduism sits within, if not emerges from, an explicitly heteropatriarchal and patrilineal milieu, and women—despite their importance to bhakti and other domestic rituals (e.g., Hancock 2000)—are socially positioned vis-à-vis their kin relations to men (fathers, husbands, and sons) at all stages of their lives, and ideally, at least in the religio-social sense, ‘protected’ by those men, often in ways which are culturally elaborated so as to subvert true protection, such as the gender paradigm of honour and shame and via traditions such as dowry. In addition to gender biases, the āśramadharmā system articulates significant inequalities around caste and asserts these differences on both ritual practice and everyday life. Indeed, the fact that the system is often termed varṇāśramadharmā emphasizes that caste is the overarching social and ritual construct of Hindu life (Uberoi 1996, p. 14). Of course, this social system constrains more than women and lower caste men, for it rigidly scripts a masculine, even hypermasculine, and exclusively heteronormative framework for gender, as well as ascribing fixed caste roles at birth with which individuals may or may not identify and which moreover assert, by various violent means, casteist and racialized social hierarchies.

Amid this context, Sikhism proposed a ‘conscious sociological model’ (cf. Leaf 1972) for an intentional and utopian community of householders. In contrast to Hinduism, Sikhism “holds

a definite and uniform position against the path of renunciation as a valid means to liberation” (Nayar and Sandhu 2007, p. 4). Ang 71 of the Guru Granth Sahib describes householding as one among several forms of (Hindu) practice, including renunciation, yet within this framework, it is ineffective. To become so, householding must be conjoined with renunciation. The renunciant householder is exalted in several passages from the Guru Granth Sahib: “Blessed is the Gurmukh, householder and renunciate. The Gurmukh knows the Lord’s Value” (131); “Those who are attuned to the Naam, the Name of the Lord, remain detached forever. Even as householders, they lovingly attune themselves to the True Lord” (230); “Immersed in family life, the Lord’s humble servant ever remains detached; he reflects upon the essence of spiritual wisdom” (599). Kamala Elizabeth Nayar and Jaswinder Singh Sandhu argue that Guru Nanak ‘denounced’ the traditional householder framework even as he employed the ascetic terminology of the Nath yogis, a Śaivite sect, to describe his vision of ‘living in this world’ as a new kind of householder (Nayar and Sandhu 2007, p. 6). Sikhs, by name, were to actively learn throughout life (rather than in a distinct first stage), living simultaneously amid worldliness and asceticism, and pursuing spiritual development in the midst of family and community life. (Even Sikh ascetics, to the extent that they exist among subgroups like the Nihangs, marry and participate in household affairs). Enlightenment was not to be mediated by priests as in Brahmanical and later forms of Hinduism nor sought outside of family life and society as among *saṃnyāsīs*, Buddhists, and Jains, but rather through disciplined engagement in the life of the world, and equally, the contemplative realization of its illusory nature. For Guru Nanak, detachment was best and truly practiced amidst the daily distractions and attachments of life, so that the ideal Sikh is what Nayar and Sandhu have called a ‘socially involved renunciate’ (Nayar and Sandhu 2007), or learning to become one, in the spirit of the meaning of Sikh as learner. J. P. S Uberoi on the other hand describes Sikh practice as ‘the renunciation of renunciation’, according to the following formulation: “Whereas (the Hindus) had sought to achieve emancipation and deliverance through individual renunciation and what amounted to social death, . . . the new Sikh community was called to affirm the normal social order as itself the battleground of freedom. . . . the Sikh initiation rites makes the positive theme of investiture prevail wholly over the negative theme of divestiture, and taking certain widely established customs of Hindu renunciation, emphatically inverts them” (Uberoi 1996, p. 11). Kesh or unshorn hair is an important example of this, as is the refusal of priestly (and caste-based) authority. The worldly engagement of householding thus also becomes privileged means to the realization of the divine for Sikhs. Thus, as Max Weber (Weber [1930] 2001) has so productively demonstrated of the Protestants, Sikhism too espouses the challenge of renunciation amid worldly realities.

For Guru Nanak, householding was both a means of personal spiritual realization and the moral means to social reform. The Guru Granth Sahib exhorts Sikhs, as gurmukhs, to “look upon all with the single eye of equality” for “in each and every heart, the Divine Light is contained” (598). At Kartarpur, radical praxes of equality in which everyone contributed to farming and everyone shared equally in its fruits placed the householder at the centre of a new society. Nanak wanted “the disciples who had gathered around him to continue to live differently” from the Hindus and Muslims around them (Madan 1986, p. 261). Life at Kartarpur was “a fellowship of men and women engaged in the ordinary occupations of life” (Nesbitt 2005, p. 23), but here in this consciously Sikh community, several key Sikh institutions—*seva* (voluntary social service), *langar* (community kitchen), and *sangat* (congregation)—were developed and helped to establish “the values of equality, fellowship and humility, and in affirming a new and dynamic sense of ‘family’” (23) in which there was neither marked retreat nor renunciation. Moreover, in these praxes, “the neat horizontal divisions and vertical hierarchies of society were broken down” as “Guru Nanak brought to life a ‘Sikh’ consciousness” (Singh 2011, pp. 11–12).

In laying out this new socioreligious ideal and the means to attain it, Sikhism fulfills several of Anthony Wallace’s (1956b) elements of the revitalization movement: it intends to construct a more satisfying culture through utopian reform of beliefs, ideals, and practices, and it is led by not one but ten charismatic leaders, and now the eternal guru as word. As well, according to Wallace’s (1956a) principle

of mazeway resynthesis, the development of Sikhism is both socially and individually therapeutic in its efforts to establish reform. The Sikh householder, whether amritdhari or not, adopts a set of values that support the establishment of a just society and is ideally engaged in a broad range of institutionalized social practices (such as vand chhakna, seva, langar, etc.) that enhance its equitable development. Sikh householding as a mutual embrace of quotidian and spiritual life is also echoed in the idea of sarbat da bhala or the wellbeing of all, and the later formulation of mīrī-pīrī, the refusal to distinguish between sacred and secular realms, and its figuration of the sant-sipahī or saint-soldier. The inseparability of the historical and worldly domains of life from its sacred dimensions assert Sikhism's lived ethics of social justice. In his reformulation of householding and social life, Guru Nanak urged Sikhs to pursue the detachments of spiritual ends in the midst of family, community, society, and sociality. And as they rejected the separation between worldly and ascetic life, the Guru's Sikhs rejected the binary and bounded distinctions between Hindus and Muslims, Brahmins and Sudras, women and men. Had Sikhs continued to live collectively in what some have called 'communes'—as at Kartarpur—immersed in the worldmaking potential of the utopia, it may well be that the genderless, casteless society might have been realized. However, the continuation of normative Punjabi kinship practices upon which everyday Sikh householding is based has ensured the continuation of caste and gender inequalities for femininities and masculinities, caste identities, and group formation are grounded in the household.

3. The Intersection of Gender and Caste

It goes without saying that householding depends on the ghar or household, which in India is an economic, social, and ritual unit with important domestic, familial, and moral meanings. Social relationships within and beyond the household depend primarily on kinship, a foundational aspect of human society. Collectively, kinship, family, and household map and pattern social relations and produce human societies via an assemblage of social, cultural and moral practices. In most societies, "relationships to ancestors and kin have been the key relationships in the social structure; they have been the pivots on which most interaction, most claims and obligations, most loyalties and sentiments, turned" (Fox 1967, p. 13). In short, kinship provides one's basic identity and orientation to the social world. Another important aspect of kinship is its power to allocate access to and control over economic resources. Feminist anthropologists have long drawn attention to the patriarchal nature of the social customs and norms around particular kinship roles that enable these processes, delimit women from economic agency, and render them dependents (e.g., Sacks [1979] 1982). Even in societies that are not overtly and binarily gendered, men tend to have public cultural roles, while women's natural reproductive capacities tend to confine them to the domestic realm (e.g., Ortner 1972; Rosaldo 1974). For instance, Doris Jakobsh (2003, pp. 7–18) elucidates that the history of Sikhism silences and negates women while at the same time holding them to unrealistic ideals, at times within a colonial project. Sikh historiography puts forward a few extraordinary women as emblematic illustrations of gender equality, resiliencing and further negating ordinary women in the process. As if in illustration, Nikky Singh (2005, p. 102) writes forcefully of her belated realization that the five Ks, "intrinsically paradoxical and multivalent", were just as much feminine symbols as masculine.

Central to all of these concerns are arranged, endogamous marriages, which reproduce gender, caste, and power. Marriage and the reproduction of (male) heirs it facilitates are paramount concerns across South Asia (e.g., Dumont 1970; Mandelbaum 1970). This is no less the case for Sikhs, among whom the cultural imperative is that both women and men be married, ideally as arranged by their parents (Mooney 2011, p. 92). Within these marriages, women's social roles are still overwhelmingly circumscribed to those located in kinship and household (daughter, wife, mother, etc.). Wives reproduce culture, community, and the caste group through bearing and raising children, especially sons; embody the community through chaste moral practice; and represent essentialized, sacralised, and feminized domesticity and interior modes of identity. Anjali Bagwe (1995) has proposed the telling phrase 'of woman caste' to suggest the separate and unified category of South Asian women subjects beyond the pale of all other social differences. And yet, matrimonial advertisements clearly articulate caste

group identification, not to mention racial (e.g., ‘wheatish complexion’) and gendered stereotypes (e.g., ‘innocent, issueless divorcee’). Even as love-cum-arranged marriages increasingly become the norm in India (Mooney 2011, p. 98) and the diaspora (Pande 2016, pp. 389–90), the fact that transnational marriage remains an important migration strategy (Mooney 2006) means that arranged marriages retain their force.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most Sikhs continue to maintain caste endogamy, and to apply gendered cultural codes to their marital and family relations and within their everyday lives. North Indian gender practices broadly reflect the inferior social position of women. The feminist literature on South Asia demonstrates that a litany of gender issues accumulates around kinship, marriage, and family, as well as bodies, reproductive capabilities, and selves. These include patrilineality, patrilocality, hypergamy, dowry, son preference, sex selection/female infanticide/foeticide, levirate marriage, seclusion (purdah or ghund), socioeconomic subordination and dependency, disempowerment of women from rights over property, domestic abuse, and the paradoxical location of family, lineage, and caste status in the bodies of female kin, as reflected in the honour-shame paradigm. Presenting a list such as this risks essentializing gender practices and implying that all women are constrained and even victimized by them; my intention, rather, is to summarize and name those aspects of gender subordination that I have witnessed among or discussed with Sikh women in both my personal and professional life for the past quarter century. These practices are not Sikh-specific, and some of them are quite uncommon; moreover, many Sikh women live beyond these constraints. Nevertheless, all are still found in some measure in the Sikh community at large.

As this list suggests—cautions against gender universalism (Mohanty 1984) aside—India is an archetypal patriarchy. Men dominate socioeconomic relations and occupy most positions of power and authority, cultural norms and values are defined in relation to manhood, masculinity, and male dominance and control, and men are focal in most cultural spaces, and certainly those in the public realm. To varying degrees, and depending in considerable part on the organization of everyday household and kinship relations, women lack agency and rights to property, are discouraged from attempts to claim authority or exercise power, are subject to male (and proxy female) scrutiny, hegemony and sovereignty, and are held to different standards of conduct, while men compromise women’s social, economic, political, and bodily autonomy in multiple ways. Women’s submission to this gendered hierarchy is policed and negotiated, or misogynistically coerced, via various cultural means, and in instances when it is not secured, it may be forced through violent subjugations of non-consenting women’s bodies. Patriarchy, indeed heteropatriarchy, also demands the submission of lower status men to its hierarchical structure, as seen in the everyday submissions of sons to fathers and younger brothers to older ones, but also men outside the heteronormative frame, as well as men of other groups, who are often subjugated via their female kin, as evidenced far too amply by intergroup rape, for instance, as evidenced at Partition (e.g., Butalia 2000; Menon and Bhasin 1998; Mooney 2008).

The heteropatriarchy is infused with, oriented against, and expressed through a discursive moral code oriented to the gendered values of honour and shame, which are mapped onto a purity-pollution framework and script a feudal model for retributive justice. While these concepts refer broadly to social status, symbolic capital and public reputation, typically of the patriline and by extension the caste group, they also have explicitly gendered and sexualized dimensions. Veena Das (1976) proposes that honour is the cultural principle—and moral code—that is applied to the natural mechanisms, or biological and sexual aspects, of Punjabi kinship. Significantly, honour is associated with men: *izzat* is the male register, conveying reputation, dignity, and respect(-ability), and connoting influence, power, and authority, whereas *sharam*, the female register, is literally translated as shame, but more accurately refers to its prevention via modesty, humility, and sexual propriety, in other words, by maintaining purity as formulated and expected by men. When women are shameless, and even when they are not, they are called *besharam* (without shame), an epithet often used to regulate women’s behaviour; while shameful behaviour is referred to as *bezhti* (without honour). (As an aside, it is interesting to consider that lower caste names are also used in dominating and perjorative ways). Jat Sikhs explain

that ‘a man’s izzat is his women’s sharam’. This epistemological containment of sharam, the concern of women, within izzat, the purview of men, evokes the containment of the domestic in the public (Rosaldo 1974), of the natural in the cultural (Ortner 1972), and of female lives and subjectivities in male ones. Women—mothers- and sisters-in-law being notorious here—themselves surveil and regulate other women’s sharam so as to uphold (men’s) izzat (Mooney 2010, 2011). At the same time, women are always guarded by male kin, with endogamous marriage transferring guardianship—along with body and progeny—from the paternal to the conjugal line; men always have authority over women (Chowdhry 2007, pp. 4–5). As part of this social contract, violations of male honour warrant retribution; this may take the form of “physical, mental, or emotional assault” (Virdi 2013, p. 111), and even, honour killing.

Although India has a diverse ‘kinship map’ (Karve 1993), Hindu kinship is “subtly equated” with and subsumes other forms of Indian kinship (Uberoi 1993, p. 39). In fact, there are many regional commonalities between Hindu and Sikh kinship in Punjab (and neighbouring states such as Haryana). The unreformed nature of Sikh kinship is illustrated in several ways in the course of Sikh history. It is often remarked that the gurus were Khatri and thus originated, married, and had children within a single caste community, and a twice-born one at that; as well, there are patrilineal connections among the later six gurus. Hew McLeod (1976, pp. 87–88) interpreted this in terms of the gurus’ concern to reject caste as a vertical, but not a horizontal, principle of social organization. Meanwhile, Eleanor Nesbitt (2005, p. 21) speculates that Guru Nanak’s name (and that of his older sister Nanaki) may reflect that they were born at their nanke (maternal parents’ village). This tradition is rooted in ideas about pollution so as to prevent defilement of the patrilineal household into which the baby is born. Despite the Guru’s defence of these natural and life-giving processes (Singh 2016, p. 612), the practice of giving birth at the nanke continues in India today. Village midwives (dais) were from those low caste communities now called Scheduled Caste or Dalit, who in addition to attending births were routinely called upon to perform female infanticide. This practice also continues, although it has been medicalized (Purewal 2010). Doris Jakobsh asserts that “a patriarchal value system was firmly established throughout the guru period, and by the end of the seventeenth century ... [it gave] religious, symbolic, and ritual sanctioning to a specific gender hierarchy” (Jakobsh 2003, p. 238). Anshu Malhotra (2010, p. 98) argues that seventeenth century Khatris (the caste of all of the Gurus) and Bedis in particular (the patriline of Guru Nanak) encouraged female infanticide so as to limit their daughter’s exposure to marriage to men from lower castes such as the Jats who were at the time adopting Sikhism in large numbers and thus to maintain Bedi “ritual superiority” over them. The hypergynous ideal was thus of greater importance to the Bedis than female lives. This example conjures what Srinivas (1956, 1989) would term Sanskritization (and Sheel (1999) calls Brahmanisation), the concern of twentieth century Hindu castes to demonstrate their greater ritual purity so as to secure changes (or in this case maintain distinctions) in how the group is perceived and classified. Moreover, reading between the lines of Malhotra’s account, we see concern for not only caste boundaries but also izzat, that profound attachment to masculine identity, ego, and lineage.

All of these practices demonstrate the intersection of gender with caste. Indeed, kinship is the key site for the intersection of gender, class, race, ethnicity, and nation, as well as caste, and like all intersectional axes is a space of shifting and complex structures of power. Feminist scholars (e.g., Abu-Lughod 1991; Behar and Gordon 1996; Bridgman et al. 1999; Collins 1998; Kaplan and Grewal 1994; Kandiyoti 1991; Narayan 1993; Ortner and Whitehead 1981; Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989) have variously described how gender is embedded in complex webs of relationships and differential power, drawing attention to forms and systems of social and cultural difference—gender, race, class, language, religion, ethnicity, and so on—as mutually constituted, and to the ways in which they overlap, converge, and amplify each others’ effects in producing identity, marginality, privilege, dominance, and discrimination. Social life is constructed and shaped by the borderzones in which frameworks, structures, systems, and experiences of identity, power, and oppression meet, make space for, refuse to accommodate, or subjugate difference. The intersectionality

approach recognizes that race (which we might read here as caste), class, and other forms of inequality are entangled with and compound those of gender (as well as sex and sexuality), etcetera, so as to produce a ‘matrix of oppression’ (Collins 2000). Associated with third wave feminism and critical race theory, intersectionality was proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) in response to the white middle-class homogeneity of second wave feminism (although both are being challenged in the nascent fourth wave). The intersectional approach attends to multiple aspects of lived culture, multiple social locations, and multiple axes of both identity and oppression. In this, intersectionality in some ways eclipses earlier feminists’ focus on patriarchy (Patil 2013), as it suggests that women’s oppressions result from more than gender. Nevertheless, intersectionality critiques can be productively applied to understanding the complex but clear relationships between gender and caste.

To a considerable extent, ideas about what constitute equality and inequality are products of their times. Feminism “perennially . . . [contends with] . . . the important question of what it means to be a woman under different historical circumstances” (Brah and Phoenix 2004, p. 74). Before the advent of academic feminism, which has considerably addressed gender bias, writers were likely to read the Guru’s egalitarianism primarily through the caste lens, so that gender inequality was a byline. This is in keeping with Padma Velaskar’s argument that “caste and class studies have a strong masculinist sub-text” that both ignores women’s voices and constitutes women as “gateways to caste” via their reproductive roles and a purity lens (Velaskar 2016, p. 391), suggesting that caste studies are ripe for feminist readings. The oppressions of gender find parallels and agglomerations in the oppressions of caste. Much like gender is arguably a key trait of South Asian society, Nicholas Dirks states that “caste has become a central symbol for India, indexing it as fundamentally different from other places as well as expressing its essence” (Dirks 2001, p. 3). Yet it cannot be taken as “a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all ‘systematizing’ India’s diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization” (Dirks 2001, p. 5). Rather than the immemorial and immutable ideology of perfect social order (e.g., Dumont 1970) that orientalist texts might describe (Appadurai 1986), caste is viewed today as shifting and contextual (Raheja 1988), diverse and situated (Gorringe et al. 2017), and evoking the idea of “multiple hierarchies” (Gupta 2005, p. 424).

Thus, the term ‘caste’ is a vastly simplistic gloss on the complex and perhaps so wide-ranging as to be almost all-encompassing social phenomena it attempts to render into English. A colonial mistranslation of the Portuguese *casta* (for breed, race, or type), the English word caste—which is of course used in elite discourse in India—must render almost every nuanced aspect of Indian social relations. Little surprise that it has come to be so emblematic and essential, despite being a clumsy universalizing framework for the subtleties and intricacies of local socialities. In its Indian iterations, caste entails a far more particular—although still overlapping—range of social forms. These include *varna*, a ritual, social, and racialized ranking based in Brahminical Hindu ideals of hierarchy and purity; *varna* is ‘caste writ large’ (and sometimes rendered as ‘class’ by Indian scholars). Another aspect of caste is *jāti* (Punjabi: *zāt*), a hereditary category that traditionally denotes occupation and ascribed social role; this is ‘subcaste’. *Jāti* determines one’s position within the *jajmāni* system of patron-client relations, the rural socioeconomic framework that organizes caste in relation to the—now diminishing (Srinivas 2003)—feudal or peasant economy. Still other aspects of the ascribed nature of caste are the kinship categories *gotra* (or clan, and thus surname), and *biraderi* (variously lineage, fraternal relations, and community). Ronald Inden observes that “the ideal, Brahmanical scheme of four *varnas* or classes is ever at odds, empirically and historically, with the multiplicity of *jātis*, castes and subcastes, and there are always discrepancies between caste rules and actual behaviour” (1986, p. 428). Here, we see the logic of McLeod’s (1976) suggestion that the vertical (*varna*, *jāti*) and horizontal (*gotra*, *biraderi*) principles of caste must be differentiated, as he argues they were by the gurus. Yet the conundrum remains, for the horizontal organization of kinship relations supports caste’s vertical differentiation.

Caste references a complex organizational framework of ‘traditional’ social relations, both inter- and intra-group, with regard to daily social relations as expressed in commensality, marriage, inheritance, and other kinship practices (including *jāti* endogamy and *gotra* and *biraderi* exogamy), as well as

notions of ritual and racialized purity, ideas about rank, hierarchy, and status, and understandings of community. Originally manifest in the village context, today these aspects of caste have global reach. Subcaste, clan, and lineage are the most salient aspects of the caste system among Sikhs today, for these regulate everyday social obligations and alliances, determine the possibility of creating affinal relationships within arranged marriages, and express the importance of patriarchy to sociality, reiterating the ways in which caste is closely mapped onto gender. Since there is relatively little attention to varna among Sikhs, it is worth considering whether this might be read as evidence of Guru Nanak's successful eradication of caste, at least in the vertical register, even as jāti, gotra and biraderi awareness continue. More critically, while caste performs numerous functions of social organization, including group formation and identity, it also expresses a racialized system of comparative power relations in which Dalits are subaltern. Since, like gender, caste is an ascribed social category embedded within everyday life, these marginalities are difficult to avoid and indeed become normalized and hegemonic. Caste groups construct themselves such that "caste comes to be viewed, narrated, embodied, and performed by social actors simply as pre-existing 'natural' cultural difference or identity" (Natrajan 2012, p. 5) rather than as highly structured and antagonistic power relations.

In his village fieldwork in the early 1970s, Paul Hershman (1981) observed that the "essentials of the Hindu caste system" remained prevalent in Sikh society, and despite the routine proposition that urbanization diminishes caste practices, I found considerable caste awareness in my fieldwork among urban Sikhs twenty-five years later; indeed, while I had planned to document the incidence of intercaste marriages for my doctoral dissertation, the Jat Sikhs I met insisted that they had never engaged in such practices. Rather than dying out, caste has adapted itself to contemporary sociopolitical regimes, arguably evolving from the basis of village social relations as apparent in "endogamy, heredity, and relative rank" (Reddy 2005, p. 548) to a forceful and entrenched political concept. There is certainly evidence that it has become the racialized and ethnicized basis of contemporary local, regional, national, and even transnational politics, and particularly so after the Mandal reforms (e.g., Gupta 2000, 2004, 2005; Jodhka 2012, 2014, 2015; Judge 2014; Srinivas 1959, 1987, 1996, 2003). Even in the diaspora, caste remains a deeply emotive and controversial practice, although some Sikhs are unwilling to admit its tenure (Takhar 2018). All of this suggests that caste still has considerable social force and impact.

These politicizations of caste, for the most part read in non-feminist terms, nonetheless reiterate its dependence on kinship and gender—including the honour and purity nexus—to maintain group identity (even as they may erase women). As well, the existence of dominant castes such as Jat Sikhs poses additional paradoxes for Sikh equality. According to Srinivas (1956, 1987), the dominant caste refers to those groups with low positions within the classical varna scheme, typically Shudras with traditional manual occupations in farming and as labourers, who are able to claim and assert social privileges and power owing to their demographic and socioeconomic preponderance—and as is readily apparent in the Jat case, their control of land as a key economic resource. Little surprise, then, that the incidence of landowning and independent cultivation among Punjab's scheduled castes is among the lowest in India (Jodhka 2002). A whole assemblage of everyday custom and popular culture coalesces around Jat dominance, privilege, and castecentrism in Punjabi village society (Mooney 2013b). At the same time, there is something of a narcissism of small differences or perhaps more accurately a status inferiority complex in the Jat claim to dominance, which emerges—highly aware of the Jats' original status in the varna formulation—from considerable and proliferating marginalities under post-coloniality and globalization. It is problematic to assert in this context (although I do elsewhere) that the particular losses and anxieties of Jats over the past three-quarters of a century—around Partition, the Green Revolution, 1984, migration, Hindutva, and so forth—are likely to amplify assertions of dominance, including over women and other castes, as these slights and traumas are read as assaults on the masculine Jat body, which, emasculated, retaliates in hypermasculine ways. As this point suggests, it is worth noting that the practices, performances, and meanings of caste patriarchy were solidified in the colonial encounter. For instance, hypermasculinity responds in part to British constructions of Indian men as feminized, and at the same time was actively channeled for some communities such

as Jat Sikhs via the martial race framework as part of the calculus of colonial rule (Mooney 2013a). Meanwhile, Anshu Malhotra has suggested that the very idea that Sikhism is an egalitarian religion may have been propagated by the British (2010), and, it is well worth acknowledging that the social virtues today attributed to the Gurus may be anachronistic. It is also provocative to consider the possibility that caste in diaspora may be evolving into an ethnic frame in response to the emergence of multiculturalism (as touched upon by Takhar 2018, p. 304). All of this points to the complexities of yet other intersections—femininities and masculinities, tradition and modernity, colonizer and colonized, roots and routes, (and so on)—themselves complexly inflected through historical processes such as colonization, migration, the emergence of Hindu nationalism (and so forth). These are matters for future consideration. And yet the point remains: if Sikhi had truly transformed Sikh society, would the very construct Jat Sikh exist?

4. Householding and Equality, Revisited

This paper has described gender and caste as mutually related aspects of Sikh society that have as yet been elided from the Guru's egalitarian reforms. Guru Nanak proposed an idea of householding radically different – at least in its' emphases and goals - from the version evident in most contemporary Sikh households. As I have demonstrated, the Hindu construct of householding offers the possibility of social equality and spiritual liberation only to renunciant males from the upper twice-born castes, while Sikhism theoretically offers these possibilities to every Sikh regardless of caste or gender in every stage of the life course. Surinder Jodhka (2016) has noted that, on the whole, caste is different and more muted among Sikhs than Hindus. This would seem to imply that partial social reform of the caste hierarchy was indeed actualized as Sikhism became established. And yet, I have described how heteropatriarchal concerns with purity, honour, socioeconomic prowess, and group identity which link women's bodies and lives with masculine caste status and identity still circulate across both communities, producing inequalities of resources, status, privilege, influence, authority, and power.

Sangeeta Luthra has written that Sikh women's issues—like Sikh men's—are “existential threats” to the community demanding “parity between women and men” (Luthra 2018, p. 324). The problem of casteism that intersects gender subordination and oppression echoes this and also urgently demands resolution. I have located the prevailing inequalities of caste and gender in the ongoing kinship practices that Sikhism theologically and ideologically opposes. Given that gender and caste inequalities jointly underlie and emerge from the kinship system, the fundamental basis of human society, they perhaps are likely to persist for some time to come. Yet the signs are not all bleak. The intersectional approach does not privilege either gender or caste as the foundational basis of social discrimination for the premise of intersectionality theory is that forms of oppression augment each other rather than compete. Hence, since gender and caste are enmeshed phenomena, their eradication would seem to depend on mutually conjugated efforts. Opinderjit Takhar has recently described mobilizations around caste discrimination in Britain, noting that “mixed caste marriages are becoming more acceptable in the British Sikh community” (Takhar 2018, p. 304). Similarly, ongoing gender inequalities have recently materialized resistance in the form of challenges around gurdwara seva (Jakobsh and Walton-Roberts 2016; Singh 2011, p. 118). Meanwhile millennial Sikh activists employ new forms of “creative agency in translating Sikh tradition and identity through and across the contexts they inhabit” (Luthra 2018, p. 283) to engage not only Sikh issues but global ones (Mooney 2018). Luthra describes a “rapidly expanding Sikh American civil society” that enables “new social spaces, networks, and forms of expression for all Sikhs” that hope to establish “a Sikh praxis of equality for all” (Luthra 2017, p. 326). As well, as noted at the outset, there are other, more specific modes of Sikhi, unexplored here, that may already offer greater equality (or at least a greater tolerance of at least some forms of difference).

Sikhi's resistant and emancipatory egalitarianism rejects the very premise of social inequality based on caste and other distinctions such as gender and religion. At the same time, to state that Sikhism is egalitarian is perhaps effectively to claim that caste and gender inequalities do not exist, or at least are not meaningful, for there is no conceptual space for them, and they are silenced, which also

means they cannot be addressed. Thus, the demonstrated persistence of these inequalities potentially produces a cognitive dissonance reliant upon the separation of religion from culture. In opening this paper, I noted that Sikh youth today still grapple with the “shameful continuities” (Malhotra 2010) of gender and caste. Often, they attribute these difficulties to their culture rather than their religion. In doing so, they are following a learned cultural script that locates unequal thinking and practice in an unevolved and even debased regional culture that they share with Hindus (and Muslims) rather than in the surely perfected and exalted religion that Guru Nanak initiated and they have learned to revere. At times, their regard for Sikhi is such that I too want to be convinced by their argument that culture rather than religion is to blame for these ongoing issues. It would be ideal to separate these two fields, but they are deeply intertwined, much as are gender and caste.

In this paper, I have explored the idea that the intersection of cultural and religious practices in the creation of a new Sikh society may, inadvertently and unintentionally, have left a religious space in the commitment to householding—which is, in its Hindu antecedents, the fundamental location of caste and gender—for the continuation of these unequal practices. Gurdwaras (despite being among the most private of public places) for the most part remain predominantly male spaces while caste-based gurdwaras are a detrimental diasporic norm. This being the case, contemporary programs aiming to reform gender (and caste) discrimination from within religious structures and institutions, while surely necessary and welcome forms of “consciousness raising” (Jakobsh 2016, p. 601), may yet be inadequate to fully realize a genderless and casteless Sikh social order. At the same time, to seek to resolve inequities through rights-based legal channels within a secular context seems to divorce caste and gender from religion, negate the ethos of *mīrī-pīrī*, and potentially rupture the possibility that Sikhs might “live out the emancipatory praxis birthed by their guru” (Singh 2005, p. xi). Here, we return yet again to the problematic intersection of religion and society: “Nanak’s thought . . . was marked by comprehensiveness and consistency: its theology entailed its sociology, or, . . . its sociology is incomprehensible without reference to its theology” (Madan 1986, p. 260). While doctrine and practice remain at odds, or are described by Sikhs as being so, Guru Nanak’s vision remains a deeply inspiring, but as yet elusive, utopia.

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Article

Negotiating Ambivalent Gender Spaces for Collective and Individual Empowerment: Sikh Women's Life Writing in the Diaspora

Jaspal Kaur Singh

Department of English, Northern Michigan University, Marquette, MI 49855-5301, USA; jsingh@nmu.edu

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Abstract: In order to examine gender and identity within Sikh literature and culture and to understand the construction of gender and the practice of *Sikhi* within the contemporary Sikh diaspora in the US, I analyze a selection from creative non-fiction pieces, variously termed essays, personal narrative, or life writing, in Meeta Kaur's edited collection, *Her Name is Kaur: Sikh American Women Write About Love, Courage, and Faith*. Gender, understood as a social construct (Butler, among others), is almost always inconsistent and is related to religion, which, too, is a construct and is also almost always inconsistent in many ways. Therefore, my reading critically engages with the following questions regarding life writing through a postcolonial feminist and intersectional lens: What are lived religions and how are the practices, narratives, activities and performances of 'being' Sikh imagined differently in the diaspora as represent in my chosen essays? What are some of the tenets of Sikhism, viewed predominantly as patriarchal within dominant cultural spaces, and how do women resist or appropriate some of them to reconstruct their own ideas of being a Sikh? In Kaur's collection of essays, there are elements of traditional autobiography, such as the construction of the individual self, along with the formation of communal identity, in the postcolonial life writing. I will critique four narrative in Kaur's anthology as testimonies to bear witness and to uncover Sikh women's hybrid cultural and religious practices as reimaged and practiced by the female Sikh writers.

Keywords: gender, religion and sexuality; Sikh literature and gender representations; Sikh diaspora and gender; lived religions and Sikhism; postcolonial life narratives and gender; trauma, testimonies and bearing witness

1. Gender and Religion: A Theoretical Framework

Gender, understood as a social construct (by Butler, among others), is almost always inconsistent and is related to religion, which, as a construct, is also almost always inconsistent in many ways. According to Ursula King,

Gender issues relating to religion are ubiquitous, but religion and gender are not simply two analogues which exist side by side and can be related to each other at the same level. They do not exist independently from each other, for patterns of gender are deeply embedded throughout *all* religion. (emphasis added; King 2005, p. 3)

Indeed, as King further explains, "This very *embeddedness* means that gender is initially difficult to separate out from other aspects of religion until one consciously makes a 'gender-centric turn'" (original emphasis 3). The Sikh religion, also a construct and presented as singular in dominant cultural spaces, is actually fluid and constantly shifting and changing through lived experiences of Sikh religious practitioners of all genders. The universal Spirit—*Akal Purakh*—is considered formless and timeless and one can be in communion with it simply through meditation and *naam japna*—the recitation of the name, as most Sikhs do. Guru Nanak (1469–1539), the founder of Sikhism, was a mystic, who,

as a wandering ascetic, sang praises of one truth, describing it as *Ek Onkar, Sat Nam, Karta Purakh, Nirbhau, Nirvair, Akal Purakh, and Ajuni Sahibang* (there is one God whose name is Truth, is the doer, is fearless, formless, without enmity, manifested in the material world, and is neither created nor destroyed; author's translation). Women within the Sikh faith, I argue, practice the right to have an individual relationship with *Akal Purakh* and consider themselves true Sikhs even when estranged from their families or isolated from the Sikh community. While there is a considerable corpus of Sikh literature regarding Sikhism and some work on Sikh gendered identity, I will not be delving on the whole body of work, as it is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, in order to examine gender and identity within Sikh religious practices and culture for this article, I will analyze a small collection of creative non-fiction pieces, variously termed essays, personal narrative, or life writing, in Meeta Kaur's edited collection of personal essays, *Her Name is Kaur: Sikh American Women Write About Love, Courage, and Faith*—through an intersectional and postcolonial feminist framework. To understand the writers' negotiation for empowering identities within their families and their ideas of being Sikh as understood by them within the Sikh community in the diaspora, my critique will also include my own life narratives because, and as I have argued in my 2006 article *Contrary Narrative Spaces and the Sikh Women*, a gendered understanding of dominant narratives "necessitates a shift in the scholar's attention from the public to the private" by including "everyday accounts" from the private spaces of the home (Didur 2006, p. 7).

In the collection of essays, diaspora Sikh women showcase multigenerational and cross-cultural perspectives in terms of what it means to be a Sikh woman in transnational, often conflicted, social spaces. As Meeta Kaur, the editor of the collection, writes:

Sikh American women do the lion's share of organizing and executing the business of the Sikh community, and they straddle multiple lives and worlds—cross-cultural, intergenerational, occupational, and domestic—yet their experiences of faith, family, and community are virtually invisible in the North American milieu and have yet to be understood, documented, or shared. (Kaur 2014, p. 1)

Meeta Kaur's book attempts to fill the gap in Sikh gender literature by highlighting women writers who "celebrate their identities, [share their] stories, and [show their] capacity to love as Sikh American women" (Kaur 2014, p. 1). As diasporic Sikh women in the US, their stories are "woven," as N.G.K. Singh notes in the "Foreword," with "Sikh ideals, values, spaces and identity" (Singh 2014, p. 6), adding:

[They] share the greeting *Sat Sri Akal* and the ubiquitous *Waheguru*; they share the morning routine of the *Japji* and the evening *Rahiras*; they share the ceremonies of *Anand Karaj* (wedding) and *Antim Ardas* (at cremation); they share the feeling of exultation in the Babaji's room (enshrines Sikh sacred scripture); and the mesmerizing beauty of the Harmandir Sahib; they share the heartbreak of the 1984 violence back in India and the tragic 2012 shooting at the Gurudwara Sahib in Milwaukee. (Singh 2014, p. 6)

Sharing their stories bring the women together as a community, a "sangat" of Sikh men and women, according to Singh; for the purposes of this paper, I explore how the writers practice their *Sikhi* in the predominantly heteropatriarchal spaces of both their homes and the nation for individual and collective empowerment as they form their own ideas of *Sikhi* and "sangat."

N.G.K. Singh asserts that in the collection, *Her Name is Kaur*, the writers, mostly cisgendered women, assert their agency, for "Kaur" is an expression of radical change in the patrilineal structure (Singh 2014, p. 7). It is understood in Sikhism and Sikh culture that male Sikhs were given the name Singh, Lion, by Guru Gobind Singh, the last guru of the Sikhs during the Khalsa initiation rite of 1699. In recent publications, however, it has been revealed that the name "Kaur" was bestowed upon Sikh women during the various reform movements when India was under British colonial rule. According to Nikky Singh, however, the name "Kaur" is traced to Guru Gobind Singh ("Preface", *Her Name is Kaur*). Doris Jakobsh contests this claim. In her book *Relocating Gender in Sikh History*, Jakobsh argues it

was during the Singh Sabha Reform Movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in India that the name Kaur was given to Sikh women (Jakobsh 2003, p. 218). Before this event, many Sikh women were either called Kumari or Devi (my maternal grandmother, a Sikh, who was born in Amritsar at the turn of the twentieth century, was named Maya Dai or Devi, but after she was married to an *amritdhari* Sikh man, she was renamed Bishan Kaur). Noting the difficulty of analyzing the “normative naming practices of the Sikh females” due, as Jakobsh notes, “to the scant sources available with regard to the appellation Kaur,” she argues that “certitude can only be replaced by speculation—at best until the beginning of the twentieth century, Kaur as a feminine epithet can only be understood as indicative of a diffuse *cultural* identity but having not *religious* signification” (original emphasis; Jakobsh 2003, p. 223). Khushwant Singh, in his discussion of the names “Singh” and “Kaur” given to males and female Sikh by Guru Gobind Singh writes, “In making all Sikhs Singhs (and Kaurs) [Gobind Singh] made them into one casteless fraternity” (*The Sikhs* (Singh 2001)); as can be surmised from the above quote and the use of parenthesis, Kaurs are almost always parenthetical in the discussion of Sikh identity in Indian and Sikh literature and, it appears, as seen from Jakobsh’s *Relocating Gender in Sikh History* (2003), in Sikh history.

Meeta Kaur defines the writers as “Sikh women, daughters of the Sikh Gurus” (Kaur 2014, p. 2), and having struggled to find empowering Sikh female voices, she decided to ask, “Sikh American women living in the United States” to tell their “truest stories of love” (Kaur 2014, p. 2). The fact that most of the essays (except for one queer narrative, which I shall discuss in some detail below) about finding empowerment and about “revisiting, renewal and rebirth” are about heteropatriarchal alliances—or love—with heteropatriarchal and turbaned *amritdhari* Sikh males is telling.

How can I, as a reading subject, a critic, a Sikh woman, interpret the testimonial life writing essays in ways that I can attempt to bear witness to their journey and struggles to find empowering spaces within a religion that promises gender equality but which is performed in dominant religious spaces as predominantly heteropatriarchal and masculinist? Can I provide “faithful witnessing” as a “decolonial” (Lugones 2003, p. 5) and anti-sexist practice? As Lugones argues, bearing witness challenges dominant narratives to locate multiple perspectives, particularly from those that are deemed invisible or placed in the margins. Faithful witnessing will uncover moments of collusion or resistance, violence or love with patriarchal ideology which are otherwise not clearly visible; they are located within the liminal spaces of the text and have to be uncovered through a postcolonial feminist and intersectional lens. I attempt to provide “faithful witnessing” to some of Kaur’s collection of essays below to uncover resistant practices, but also to show female Sikhs’ maneuvering within patriarchal spaces for a return to and reconciliation with the estranged traditional Sikh community.

My reading asks the following questions: What are “lived religions” and what are the everyday practices, narratives, activities, and performances of ‘being’ Sikh, particularly as they relate to women (cis and queer) practitioners, as represented by the writers? What are some of the everyday practices of Sikhism, viewed predominantly as patriarchal, and how the writers resist them to reconstruct their own ideas of being Sikh? Have religious boundaries shifted for Sikhs in the contemporary era, and if so, what are some of the innovations in *Sikhi*, the practice of Sikhism, particularly in terms of gender construction and representation for these writers?

In Kaur’s collection of essays, there are elements of traditional autobiography in Sikh women’s postcolonial life writing. For example, Gillian Whitlock, in *Postcolonial Life Narratives: Testimonial Transactions*, writes:

Traditional assumptions about autobiographical authorship and authority prioritize authenticity, autonomy, self-realization, and transcendence—western enlightenment values that, as Linda Andersen observes, associate autobiography with essentialist or romantic notions of selfhood and the ‘sovereign subject’ of autobiography as it was traditionally understood. (Whitlock 2015, p. 3)

While there are elements of traditional autobiographical selfhood—“western enlightenment values”—in Kaur’s collection of essays, what I am interested in are components of postcolonial and decolonizing

life writing. Whitlock, quoting Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, notes, “For postcolonial theory, the more expansive category ‘life writing’ is critical in de/colonizing literary cultures. The traditional sovereign subject of autobiography and the less exalted collective subject of life writing are entangled in western modernity” (Whitlock 2015, p. 3). Whitlock calls these hybrid entities “proximate subject of autobiography” (ibid., p. 3). We have to read narratives, such as the collection in Kaur’s anthology, as testimonies “entangled in western modernity” by culturally hybrid writers. Whitlock, quoting Robert Young, notes that in testimonies the writers are intimately connected to the reader:

[Young] is right to suggest there is something dynamic and interactive about testimonial discourse, which is generically rhetorical and dialogic: an appeal to the addressee, a text in search of a witness, a desire to invoke witnessing public. We speak of *bearing witness* to indicate the weight of responsibility and affect that follows the transfer. Testimony enables accounts of social injustice and oppression, of violence and suffering. (original emphasis; Whitlock 2015, p. 8)

Subaltern subjects (which I consider Sikh women to be, myself included) are, according to Whitlock, “not voiceless and nor are they victims, however, their visibility, legibility, and audibility are tactical, contingent and constrained” (ibid., p. 8). As Meeta Kaur notes, Sikh women voices are lacking in the dominant narrative spaces, as male writers are provided a more privileged space in Sikh literature. Whitlock adds, “Testimonies can create a piercing and transformative ‘bearing’ witness that triggers advocacy, responsibility, accountability, which move the reader and produce collective ‘witnessing publics’” (ibid., p. 9). In my critical reading of essays from Kaur’s collection, I attempt to bear witness to Sikh women’s life writing in order to create a circuit of communication (Kopf 2009) through reading the gaps and ellipses in their writing. According to Martina Kopf,

Writing and reading are two poles, and all listening, witnessing, experiencing and remembering constantly move between one and the other. Good writers are maybe above all good listeners. That is to say, their skill consists to a large extent in the ability to be simultaneously sensitive to themselves, to the narratives of their time and to what these narratives evoke in themselves and in others. Furthermore, they are—or should be—able to hear what the narratives and *the people of their time and their social surroundings conceal* . . . The same holds true to a certain degree for the reader. Reading—like writing—is a cultural practice that can be exerted with more or less quality. Literature as trauma witness does not only demand attentive writing but attentive reading as well. Active listening and a reading aware of the structure of trauma and of the effects of violence form part of the narrative transmission and transformation of traumatic memory. (emphasis added; Kopf 2009, p. 53)

Sikh women writing about religion, love and gender identity as US women of color within the patriarchal Sikh community asked to be read attentively, particularly for those of us who perform the act of witnessing to uncover alternative meanings for the writers and excavate ideas that might be “concealed” in the margin of the narratives within patriarchal communities.

First, let’s examine gender broadly, as it is understood in gender and sexuality studies. Gender is constructed, circulated, and performed within patriarchal societies through social customs. As Susan Shaw and Janet Lee remind us,

It is important not to reduce . . . ‘performativity’ associated with gender to a voluntary act or understand it as something over which we have perfect control. In this sense it is not merely a theatrical performance. Rather performativity is constrained by social norms. What this means is that gender is not only what we ‘do’; it is a process by which we ‘are’ or ‘become.’ (Shaw and Lee 2015, p. 117)

To understand how gender is shaped within society and how individuals express their gender, we need to examine, as Shaw and Lee posit, “gender assignment, identity and expression” (ibid., p. 119);

the first is “usually assigned at birth and determined by our physical body type to be male or female;” the second “concerns how one feels internally about one’s own gender . . . and may or may not match one’s assigned gender at birth;” the last—gender expression—is “how we perform or express gender to those around us” (ibid., p. 119). In this way, as Shaw and Lee remind us, “Gender is a pervasive theme in our world, shaping social life and informing attitudes, behavior, and individual’s sense of self . . . It is . . . one of the foundational ways societies are organized (Shaw and Lee 2015, p. 119). Most cisgender women within the Sikh tradition perform their gender and their *Sikhi* in specific and socially prescribed ways, as they see Sikh religion as egalitarian (Parveen Kaur and Asif Jawaaid Mongal, among others), although individual Sikh women—cis or queer—engage with traditions in their own, often resistant, ways since “Sikhness” or Sikh identity is often narrowly defined in Sikh tradition through the male body (as can be seen from various writers such as Doris Jakobsh’s *Relocating Gender in Sikh History* and Sharapal Ruprai’s *Seva* 2014).

Sikhs believe in a formless God who can be realized through daily prayers and meditation, as discussed above. Sikhs are supposed to believe in gender equality; for example, throughout my youth, I heard women, too, can be priests and perform the *path* and can preside over *anand karaj*; to be sure, I attempted to find textual proof, but I only found examples of them in articles, such as *Role of Women in Sikhism* on websites such as “WaheguruNet” or other religious sites. Yet, when we read or discuss about Sikh identity, we are predominantly relating the issue with the *amritdhari* (initiated into the Khalsa order) Sikh male, as I discuss below. Ruprai, for example, struggles between her identities as a Sikh and as a woman. She writes as a Sikh woman growing up in a Sikh Canadian household, “I feel a tug of resistance, that is, ‘being Sikh’ on one side and ‘being a woman’ on the other . . . The interconnection between the two is lived within my own body and both shapes and is shaped by my personal environment” (Ruprai 2014, p. 33). Her writings in *Seva*, her poetry collection, highlights her resistance to patriarchal authorities within the *gurudwara* community attempting to ghettoize her within the kitchen spaces by rebelliously continuing to serve in the *langar* hall (Ruprai 2014, p. 35).¹

For the Sikhs, trying to define a definitive Sikh identity within the overarching account of the *amritdhari* (initiated) *Khalsa* (Sikh male identity made distinctive by the five Ks, *kesh*/long, uncut hair, *kara*/steel bracelet, *kirpan*/sword, *kangha*/comb, and *kachha*/long underwear) tradition within India and in the diaspora is still riddled with conflicts (Pashaura Singh, Harjot Oberoi, J.S. Grewal, W. H. McLeod, and Khushwant Singh, among many others). Through various reform movements and legal and structural changes (Jakobsh 2015), Sikhs have come to define themselves as distinct from Hindus since the British colonial period to contemporary times. Although the form that came to define and embody what a Sikh is through the *amritdhari* male (Brian Keith Axel, Jasbir Puar, and Harjot Oberoi, among others), the practice of *Sikhi* is believed to be varied and plural.

Harjot Oberoi argues in *The Construction of Religious Boundaries* that there was great diversity in the Sikh *panth* before the colonial period and certainly until the late nineteenth century (Oberoi 1994). He argues that contemporary Sikhism then became defined and identified by the *Khalsa*, whereas in earlier times, the definition and practice of Sikhism was more open and inclusive and incorporated many forms and practices. However, his thesis regarding the earlier and myriad Sikh forms that ultimately consolidated into a singular Sikhness drew ire among many traditionalists in the Sikh community. Nikky Singh, who although not actually defending his thesis, calls his narrative a “delightful reading,” still finds issues with it, stating, “Oberoi seems to be more at home with the writings of Western sociologists than with that of the Sikhs” (N.G.K. Singh *Book Review* 1996). Yet, Nikky Singh also writes,

Is Oberoi also mistaking identity for boundaries? With Guru Nanak, Sikh identity is firmly established but boundaries were not demarcated, nor have they been to date. Is it that

¹ For more on Sikh gender identity and resistance, see my forthcoming book, *Violence and Resistance in Sikh Gendered Identity* (Singh 2019).

the author is trying to construct parameters and reify the dynamic and ever-accumulating traditions of Sikhs? Sikh identity is a revisioning and practical living out of the essential and universal truth which lies beyond exclusions and boundaries. (Singh 1996, p. 762)

In other words, even though the dominant Sikh identity is that of the Khalsa within the contemporary Sikh tradition, which Oberoi seems to be arguing for, N.G.K. Singh posits that it is a dynamic and shifting one. Is it? Has it ever shifted to where the *Khalsa* is seen in the image of the female gender? Or, does it shift and change to accommodate various forms of male Sikh *Khalsas*?

As Pashaura Singh, in *Re-imagining Sikhi ("Sikhness") in the Twenty-First Century: Toward a Paradigm Shift in Sikh Studies* states,

It is instructive to note that the Sikh *panth* [community] has never been a monolithic or homogenous group. Among the twenty-five million Sikhs in the world today approximately twenty percent are the *amrit-dharies* ('initiated') who represent the orthodox form of the Khalsa. There is, however, a large majority of those Sikhs who 'retain their hair' (*kes-dharies*) and maintain a visible identity. In particular, the male Sikhs are easily recognized by their beards and turbans. They follow most of the Khalsa *rahit* ('code') without having gone through the initiation ceremony. (Singh 2013, p. 45)

Pashaura Singh provides various other permutations of the Sikhs, particularly in the diaspora, discussing "*mona*" or "*shorn*" Sikhs who are clean shaven but who follow the major precepts of Sikhism. This is similar to my own experiences as I was initiated as an *amritdhari* in a *gurdwara* in Burma. For those who follow Sikhism without the outward signs of unshorn hair and turban, he proposes that they be called "*ichha-dhari*," "one who follows one's own 'desire' or 'free choice'" (Singh 2013, p. 45). For Singh, there are two ways to be "*ichha-dhari*": those who "desire" to keep their hair intact but have to cut them due to extenuating circumstances (as we did for our son in the US, although his father chose to keep his hair and beard even in the diaspora) and those who cut their hair out of "choice" but follow the *Khalsa* way (ibid., p. 45), as I did when I had to work in a minimum wage job as a sales person in a retail store in North Carolina. However, Singh argues that Sikhs can move freely from one category to another as their identities are not "predetermined" or permanently fixed, unlike the caste system in Hinduism (ibid., p. 45). In his analysis, one would assume Sikh identity to be fluid, but in reality, particularly in dominant cultural spaces, it is far from it. One important aspect, in terms of my paper, is that most of the studies regarding Sikhism concern themselves with the outward performance and embodiment of the Sikh through the male body—whether *amritdhari*, *mona*, or *ichha-dhari* in India and in the diaspora.

In his article titled, '*Performance' and 'Lived Religion' Approaches as New Ways of 'Re-Imagining' Sikh Studies*, Charles M. Townsend writes, "As Sikhs have migrated to places around the world, they have demonstrated remarkable abilities to adapt and thrive within diverse global situations, while sustaining and continuously re/interpreting Sikhism within new contexts" (Townsend 2012, p. 172). He also argues that the new way of "re-imagining" the Sikhs is through the custom of "lived religion" (McGuire 2008) for example in everyday practice (Townsend 2012, p. 172). To understand the idea of "lived religions" in my discussion, we must first ask: What, then, do we mean when we say "lived religions" with everyday practices and the performances of being part of a religious community, particularly as they relate to gender construction within the Sikh diaspora. How is the practice reimagined by women practitioners?

Many Sikh women in India and the diaspora practice Sikhism in traditional ways, as they see Sikhism as a religion of gender equality (Kaur and Moghal, and Dorothy Field, among many others). For example, Kaur and Moghal, after writing about the social reforms of the Sikh gurus where they attempted to abolish unequal ideas such as the impurity imposed on women in childbirth and menstruation ... [their unequal] status in marriage and child marriage, widow remarriage, the practice of 'sati', the introduction of mixed congregations and free community kitchen in the *gurdwaras*, 'dowry', veil wearing and female infanticide, conclude that "The overall picture of Sikhism on women

is one of equality and dignity ... [and Sikhism] can be seen as a progressive religion" (Kaur and Moghal 2014, p. 79). However, I argue that there are countless other Sikh women who resist certain traditions for social change and gender equality within the community through practicing forms of Sikh "lived religion" by creating their own ideas of personal religion, yet who attempt to remain within the folds of the Sikh community.

Sikh women have been contesting and transforming gender roles in various national and diasporic—public and domestic—spaces for generations; for example, Amrita Pritam (1919–2005) wrote about religion, love and marriage in her novels, short stories, and poetry and embodied resistance to traditional patriarchal mores during her lifetime (see also Khushwant Singh, Deepti Dharmani, and Anshu Sailpar, among others). As a *moni*² Sikh in the US since 1984 after I migrated to the US, I used to organize, along with my husband, religious ceremonies in Oregon with other Sikh community members, sometimes with the *granthi* (ceremonial reader) and the *ragis* (musicians) from the small Salem *gurudwara* predominantly run by white American Sikhs, and sometimes just the small community in Corvallis praying and eating *langar* together. The small Sikh community, a few *amritdharis* and many clean-shaven—men and women—from India, Kenya, Malaysia, Burma, among others, conducted prayers and served the community. I considered myself a Sikh. Although my role was predominantly within the kitchen, I would occasionally sing *kirtans* (singing of hymns) with other women; while certain religious expectations, such as being the cook in the kitchen rather than the server where we all sat and partook of the food was irksome to me, I took to lecturing on gender equality to the women and girls and to some of the young men, since I had learned at the Oregon State University's Gender Studies class³ to break the silence on gender oppression. While I was being the "good wife and mother" and the *langer* cook within the Sikh community, I was also practicing a form of resistance by being a role model to my young daughter and other youth about the power of speaking up.

For example, Meredith B. McGuire argues,

There may be enormous diversity—even in relatively stable traditional societies in the gendered aspects of people's lived religions. Especially when we focus on people's everyday beliefs and practices (rather than, for example, formal roles in public rituals), we realize the considerable complexity of all the ways people's religion and spiritually are lined with their gender expectations of self and others, their relationship with human and divine others, and their root sense of identity and community. Religion maybe genuinely ambivalent, serving both as legitimation for institutionally approved traditional gender roles and gender hierarchies and as a source of gender-role contestation, transformation, and innovation. (McGuire 2008, pp. 160–61)

Thus, the ambivalence present in the practice of *Sikhi* provided me space to participate in religious practices and to resist gender expectations at the same time.

Sikh women practice lived religion within the domestic spaces of the home in various ways; however, the same practices are not accepted within the larger Sikh community. If, for example, as a woman with short hair, I participate in kirtan singing at home, will I still be held as an example of a true Sikh in the *gurudwara* community? Or, will I, like some community members, hide my short hair under hair extensions, in order to participate in public fund-raising activities in the various *gurudwaras* around the US? They are only accepted if they "perform" what it means to be a "true" Sikh woman as prescribed by traditionalists—with long uncut hair and certainly married to a patriarchal Sikh man.

² Although an *amritdhari* for most of my young life in Burma, I cut my hair in my teens when I was exiled from Burma to India in the 70s. After I married an *amritdhari* Sikh, I grew back my hair at his request. When I migrated to the US in 1984, I began cutting my long waist length hair, as I was told by my relatives that I needed to assimilate into mainstream US society if I wanted to succeed in getting a good job. My husband then took the scissors to his thick beard to thin it out to appear groomed for work, although he cried when he did so.

³ I took Gender Studies courses for my MAIS degree (Master in Inter disciplinary Studies).

I know of instances where ideas of compliance and resistance are practiced variously by Sikh women. For example, I know of a woman, born in India but raised in the UK and living for most of her life in the US, took down her Facebook page about her everyday life (with short hair and western-style clothing and occasionally seen in a swimming suit) when she became a hugely successful fundraiser for a Sikh *sant* (Sikh holy man) in India who was building an educational institution based on the tenets of Sikhism. She then replaced the page with another one with a new photo where her hair appears tied up and covered by a white *chunni* (scarf) in a submissive stance without any of her children or her clean-shaven *mona* Sikh husband's photos. Thus, compliance and resistance are closely allied in her Sikh identity, as will also be seen in the authors of my selected essays.

Religion is practiced within a social context, so how, then, do feminists practice forms of lived religion within patriarchal institutions? Nyhagen (along with Khanum Shaikh and Saba Mahmood, among others) show that "agency can be expressed in submission and religious piety as well as in overt oppositional practices that contest men's power and gender inequalities" (Nyhagen 2017, p. 497). Many Sikh feminist scholars and writers work within the religious framework to recover the feminine principle in religion. As Nyhagen claims, "Feminists who work to reform religious traditions from within reject the idea that religions are by necessity patriarchal, and in many religious contexts women have made significant advances towards gender equality" (Nyhagen 2017, p. 496). Feminists such as Shaikh (2013) and Mahmood (2005) show that agency can be acquired through ideas of submission as well as resistance to contest male power within patriarchies. Sikh women practitioners, writers, and scholars function within the Sikh community in India and the diaspora to work with and in opposition to traditional ideas of Sikhism to reimagine and reconstitute gender identity and ideas of equality. For example, Shauna Singh Baldwin, in her novel *What the Body Remembers*, uses hybridity to tell the story of Sikh women, who are hybrid creatures melded from various cultural influences and looking for a way to work through Sikh cultural and personal traumas. The author had to "pull Sikh women's history out from under Sikh men's history," a history that is not "silent, only undiscovered" (Baldwin 1999). In other words, since females within the Sikh community do not have access, for the most part, to dominant cultural space to tell their stories of gendered oppression and resistance, or they lack the language or words to tell them due to repression, an artist, such as Baldwin, and I, as a critic, can attempt to uncover, retell and reimagine the accounts of feminist resistance. As Svetlana Peshkova, in *Women, Islam and Identity: Public and Private Spaces in Uzbekistan*, argues, individual Uzbek women's "relational existential power" to Islam, although a practice of individualism, is exercised "in relation" (original emphasis; Peshkova 2014, p. 13) to each other. She adds that "Individuals develop knowledge about a relationship between human and divine worlds by increasing self-knowledge through a practice of thinking, feeling, and acting, which results in a cognitive opening that leads to individual moral change" (Peshkova 2014, p. 14). In other words, while there exists an idea of "national," "traditional," and "politically correct" Islam, Peshkova argues, "individuals are not constituted by but create discourses on religion" (Peshkova 2014, p. 14). Individuals within a nation, society, or community create a notion of personal religion within the larger national or communal religion, as many Sikhs such as myself and Meeta Kaur do within our community in the diaspora for personal and communal empowerment.

Diasporic cultural spaces can often be contentious and conflicted due to the intersections of race, class, sexuality and other social constructs; within these spaces, Sikh identity takes on special meaning and Sikh gender identity becomes specially troubled and troubling. For example, in *Gender, Religion and Diversity: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, Anne Sofie Roald argues,

Identity can be divided into smaller components. It has as much to do with how one views oneself, i.e., one's *self-definition*, as it has to do with how one is perceived by others. In certain situations, *self-definition* might concur with others' perceptions. In minority/majority conflicts, however, others' perceptions tend to be expressed in stereotypical terms. Self-definitions also tend to change according to circumstances. (Roald 2005, p. 186)

In my chosen texts, I attempt to uncover women's negotiation for empowering identities where they resist "others' perceptions" of the *amritdhari* Sikhs in reductive and masculinist ways, while they reimagine Sikhism through acts of "self-definitions" in their own unique, often ambiguous, ways in the diaspora.

2. Meeta Kaur and "The Way Home": Negotiating Ambivalent Religious and Cultural Landscapes for Empowerment

Now that I have laid the edifice of the critical and theoretical framework, along with providing historical and personal contexts, I will discuss in detail some of these self-definitions of what it means to be a Sikh and what it means to be a Sikh woman in my selected text within the diaspora. In her short essay, *The Way Home*, Meeta Kaur suggests that she was estranged from her parents' Sikh culture as a diasporic subject, but the return "home" was facilitated by her alliance with an *amritdhari* Sikh man. The narrative begins with Kaur stating: "It never occurred to me that I'd marry a Sikh, let alone a *sardar*."⁴ Having grown up with *amritdhari* Sikh men her whole life, she notes the men in her family always had "turbans that were neatly tied, and their beards were neatly set for both professional and personal events. They often matched their turbans to crisp ironed shirts, neatly tailored slacks," among other things, and even though a "seed of expectation" was sown in her, she "was determined to make [her] own way in the world" (Kaur 2014, p. 209). Reading the ellipses in her text, I can determine that she didn't practice a traditional form of Sikhism, although she saw the males in the family as true Sikhs due to their "neatly tied" turbans and beards, as she suggests she was estranged from her parent's culture. She was surprised, later on, to return "home" to it.

Meeta Kaur had questioned her identity, "Who am I?" and her parents, who she says, "never understood," always gave the same answer, "You are a proud Sikh" or "You are a lion. Our future" (Kaur 2014, p. 210). Her parents expected her to be a Sikh; what that identity was, she didn't know. They never understood, she claims, what she "needs" (*ibid.*, p. 210). After she had "sworn off marriage," however, she finally decides to date online. She flies from California to New Jersey for a conference and from there goes to meet her date in Manhattan. In a telling statement, she says "had my family known, they would have had the police, the FBI, and a SWAT team looking for me" (*ibid.*, p. 211). While she might mean this as a joke, the policing of young women's sexuality and identity in many minority communities, and particularly the Sikh, is apparent in this statement.

When Meeta Kaur meets Banjot, an *amritdhari* Sikh man, wearing a turban, she also sees another piece of the notables five Ks, "a black strap. [a] *ghatra* [holding/his *kirpan*, a scared dagger" (Kaur 2014, p. 211). She declares she was "captivated" by the strap, yet also adds: "I had met people who wore kirpans but never entertained dating a person who wore one" (*ibid.*, p. 211). Clearly, she dated *mona*- or non-Sikhs before she made the decision to seek out an *amritdhari* male Sikh. She claims that seeing the strap "secured me in the present moment" (*ibid.*, p. 211) and the relationship began to unfold. The relationship with an *amritdhari* Sikh man signified more than love, for Kaur writes,

Connecting to Banjot *reconnected* me to my parents. He became the translator for the *silence*—all they felt was expressed through his simple presence. If they had words for it, I believe they were trying to say, "He is so satisfied within himself as a Sikh. This is what we want for you, so you can live a life of *sukh* [happiness]." And he *translated* what my mother could not say: How critical it was for me to discover who I was as a Sikh woman in the world, a Kaur, a daughter of Singhs and Kauras, a carrier of the Gurus' lineage for future generations. (original emphasis; Kaur 2014, p. 212)

Let's take a moment to unpack the semiotics of the quote above. Meeta Kaur has not only been alienated from her religion, she has been estranged from her parents as well. She was disconnected

⁴ A turbaned Sikh with the five Ks intact.

from her parents and had faced silence, as she had refused to practice a form of *Sikhi* that her parents mandated which included not only dating, but also marrying an *amritdhari* Sikh man. The scenario suggests that dating an *amritdhari* Sikh man would reestablish Sikhism for Kaur and reconnect her with her parents and her community. She writes, “[Banjot’s] unspoken spiritual faith . . . [and] his resolve anchored me in my own spiritual journey” (Kaur 2014, p. 212). Her parents’ “silence” translated by Banjot’s spiritual resolve constructs Kaur as a Sikh woman, for she realizes how important it was for her as a Sikh woman to understand her role as the carrier of future Sikh generations, suggesting Meeta Kaur is merely as a vessel for the future of Sikhism and Sikh heteropatriarchal values, while Banjot becomes the transcendental signifier for true Sikhness. Her earlier form of individual Sikhism without the outward form represented by Banjot’s “ghatra” was rejected by her parents, but she had carried on with being a Sikh nonetheless through “a religion-as-lived” (McGuire 2008, p. 15), and through “private conversations [she has always had] with *Waheguru*” (212). Although she accepts that marrying a turbaned Sikh will return her to true Sikhism, she also attempts to find her own way and path towards religion in her everyday life.

According to McGuire, the “logic” for those who practice “religion-as-lived” are able to experience, rather than simply think or believe in, the reality of her or his religious world (McGuire 2008, p. 13); practicing lived religion “makes sense in one’s everyday life, and it needs to be effective, to ‘work,’ in the sense of accomplishing some desired end (such as healing, *improving one’s relationship with a loved one*, or harvesting enough food to last the winter)” (ibid., p. 15) emphasis added. Kaur practices her *Sikhi* through the “private” acts of dialogue in order to improve her relationships with her parents and to “hand over every hurt, every doubt, every worry, every concern—to lay them all at *His/Her* feet and simply step away knowing all will be taken care” (original emphasis; ibid., p. 213). The pain of estrangement from the family will heal, one supposes; here, Meeta Kaur reconstructs the dominant signifier in Sikhism as neither masculine nor feminine but both by using the pronoun “His/Her” for *Akal Purakh*. She continues to state that it “helped me shed the confines and labels the world places on me as a minority woman or a strong woman of color or a Sikh woman—a *this* woman, a *that* woman, a *woman*—and instead became a beam of light that can merge with the greater world and universe. In turn, I can see the light in everyone I meet” (Kaur 2014, p. 213). She attempts integration and healing through practicing a form of lived religion through seeing the light—*Nur*—in everyone she meets, while at the same time redefining her self-identity.

Quoting Thich Nhat Hanh, McGuire asserts that practicing “lived religions” can bring “inner awareness and mindful being that produces peace—not merely subjective or personal peace, but indeed the kind of objective effective peace that can end wars and other social violence” (McGuire 2008, p. 13). Kaur remembers past instances of pain at labels, including one that the world had placed on her, that of being a “Sikh woman;” she refuses such labels and gives them up. While the message of light—*Awal Allah Nur Upaya*—is recited often in Sikhism, the interconnectedness Kaur feels with the universe and other Kauras come not from practicing an orthodox form of religion, what McGuire calls “institutionally frame[d]” (McGuire 2008, p. 15) religion, but from practicing a form of lived religion. Through the practice of lived religion, Meeta Kaur is able to reach out to other Sikh women whose voices are silenced or unheard through the act of collecting, editing, and publishing *Her Name is Kaur: Sikh American Women Write About Love, Courage, and Faith*.

3. Harsohena Kaur and the Daily Prayer: Sikhism as Inscribed on the Body and the Individual Practice of *Sikhi*

In another short essay, *My Sikhi Simarna*, Harsohena Kaur writes about going through a phase of questioning Sikh religious practices, although her love of the Sikh Gurus and their sacrifices were inscribed on her body through her “*Naniji’s*” (maternal grandmother) stories about the torture of Sikh gurus by violent Mughals and their eventual “*shaheedi*” (martyrdom) (original emphasis; Kaur 2014, p.113) when she was very young. Harsohena Kaur, however, learns to question the lack of gender diversity within the *gurudwara* community: “Where were the women at the moment in *Anandpur Sahib*

where *Guru Gobind Singh* asked for a Sikh to give up his life? Why didn't He call for the women? Why didn't they answer the call? Were they even allowed to answer the call?" (Kaur 2014, p. 118). She is appalled by the truth that even now, "neither [her] sister Sikhni nor [she] are allowed to do *seva* (community service through being elected as *gurudwara* management committee members) in the inner sanctum" of the *gurudwara* (Kaur 2014, p. 118). By "inner sanctum," Kaur may also mean being elected to the position of *Jathedar* of the *Akal Takht*, the highest temporal seat of the Sikhs, or she must also mean being the head *granthi* or president of a Sikh *gurudwara*; or she may simply mean being able to distribute the food in the *langar* hall as opposed to being cooks in the community kitchen (see my discussion of Sharanpal Ruprai or my own example for the feminization of certain *seva* as opposed to being resisted to cooking in the kitchen). Such discriminatory practices lead to "hurt, anger and frustrations at the broken promises and the unfairness against women" which become a "pulsating bead" in her "simarna" (prayer) (Kaur 2014, p. 118). She rejects dominant religious narratives about what it means to be a Sikh, and particularly a *Sikhni*, and attempts re-inscription and an individual form of lived religion through resistance.

Harsohana Kaur's retrospective looks at the 1984 Sikh Massacre in India and the "choices" women made to "sacrifice" their sons and husbands for the cause of Sikhism when they refused the demands of the crazed Hindu mobs to cut off their sons and husbands' hair and who were eventually murdered, lead her to question her faith (Kaur 2014, p. 119). Did the woman who took her sons in, tied their *dastaars* (turban) and said (as the mobs demanded her to bring out her sons), "They are not my sons. They are guruji's sons" (ibid., p. 119) perform true Sikhism? The woman narrating the story to Harsohana Kaur quietly said, "The mobs just smashed kerosene bags on their heads and set them on fire" (Kaur 2014, p. 119). The collective trauma of the violence of 1984 leads Kaur to ask,

Would I do the same? Is that courage or insanity? Was there even a choice, given the intent of the mob? Was she at peace that they had died in *sarooop* (outward appearance of the Sikh) rather than have their hair shorn? Or did she wonder if they would have been spared had she cut their hair? Was this vile hate really the will of the Waheguru? (Kaur 2014, p. 119)

While the event of 1984 solidified her *Sikhi*, she still faced many "challenges and choices" which "determines the course," writes Harsohana Kaur, of the Sikhs' future (ibid., p. 119). What were those challenges and choices? "As an almost adult," she notes, "she fell in love with a non-Sikh" (ibid., p. 119), and even though it was predominantly a "long distance" relationship "via letters," it led to an internal struggle "between the reality and three-dimensionality of [her] flesh and blood love and the abstract reality and a love for [her] religion" (ibid., p. 120). She asks, "Did I have the right to give it all up for my personal desire? Or did I need to sacrifice those desires to fully realize my faith?" (Kaur 2014, p. 120). She finally came to the realization that it was not her "Sikhi that was making [her] hesitate" but the "pragmatic" realization that she needed "commonality" of the Sikh practice with her life partner (ibid., p.120). Her sister had married a non-Sikh and was estranged from her natal family (ibid., p. 121). Following traditional norms, when a woman marries outside of the community, she is either thrown out of the family or excommunicated from the Sikh community at large.⁵ Regarding her sister, Harsohana Kaur claims, "These were actions beyond the realm of even imagined possibility and tore our family apart. For years, the sheer disbelief paralyzed us, and the hurt and pain bled like a non-healing wound" (ibid., p. 121). This crisis in the family led her to question individual choices versus communal well-being. Her fear and her pragmatism led her to "choose" an *amritdhari* Sikh man. She soon met "an unbelievably smart and handsome *sardar* with a super-wattage smile and amazing energy" to whom she said "yes," and whose presence provides her with a non-feminine perspective of what being a Sikh means (ibid., p. 121). Having grown up with only sisters, she only had

⁵ I know of a case where a Sikh woman married a man of another race and the family not only threw her out of the house, there was even a discussion of honor killing; one male member of the family said, "If a finger becomes rotten, then it is best to cut it off to save the hand."

the “feminine” perspective of *Sikhi* (ibid., p.121). She writes, “Now I walk beside my turban-wearing husband, I realize how much that charges him with being different. He stands out, stands apart, and stands alone. And my son follows the same path” (ibid., p.121). Her husband is proud of his *Sikhi* and looks on his turban as a “way to leave his mark” (ibid., p. 122). She writes, “I hope my son lives with that sense of pride as well” (ibid., p. 122). When faced with loneliness or troubles, she says her faith and the reading of the Guru Granth Sahib sustains her.

While being aware of *Sikhi* in terms of the masculine form and hoping her son will follow the path, she mentions her daughter only once in the essay when she talks about gender discrimination and domestic violence within the Sikh community; she mentions the silence about gender oppression. “How,” asks Harsohena Kaur, “do we give life to women’s dreams” (Kaur 2014, p. 122)? Her hope for her daughter’s dreams is a “bead” in her “simarna,” her prayer. While she makes life changes in order to continue to be part of the Sikh community and upholds the traditions and customs as far as her husband and son are concerned in concrete actions of their turbans and long uncut hair, her actions for her daughter’s identity and future are translated to prayers and telling of the beads, of “simarna.” Will the telling of the beads allow her daughter to provide *seva* in the inner sanctum of the Sikh religious *gurdwara* spaces? Will it end gender discrimination in the Sikh community and religious sites? Her role in the Sikh community is that of mother, the one who transmit knowledge of “Gurmukh” life, hoping the same will be replicated in her children’s life. Her choices are limited, so she finds a way to be with *Waheguru*—through “simarna” and prayers.

Thus, in Harsohena Kaur’s practice of *Sikhi*, it is through marrying a *gursikh*, an *amritdhari*, that she is enabled to stay within the community. While the same may not provide gender equality, as she still thinks about the various heteropatriarchal and heterosexist practices within the Sikh religious spaces, she negotiates these by making sure that her son and husband will remain *amritdhari* so that Sikhism may continue to flourish; women, in this scenario, although merely the vessel, the *ghara*, that holds the knowledge empowering male Sikhs, while women remain in subordinated positions within the “inner sanctum” (Kaur 2014, p. 118)—read as the kitchen area of the *gurdwara*—they attempt to form an individual relationship with the divine through submission and hoping for gender equality for the next generation of women by asking, “How do we give life to women’s dreams?” Is there hope for gender equality for Sikh girls and women in the context of Sikh male violence—ones perpetrated on male Sikh bodies and ones perpetrated by them? Is she hoping that as readers of her texts, feminist critics such as myself, might address the issues of gender oppression within the Sikh traditions and create a circle of care for each other? One continues to hope.

4. Harleen Kaur and the Sikh Turban: Resistance, Appropriation and Self-Empowerment

For some young women, being Sikh and practicing *Sikhi*, being marginalized in the “inner sanctum” (Kaur 2014, p.118), not being allowed to provide *seva* in the main *langar* hall, but only in the kitchen (see Kaur 2014 and Ruprai 2014, among others), cause them to change and alter the meaning of, or rather the performance of, gender. If gender is a performance (Butler) and a masquerade (Riviere 2013), can Sikhness too, as a social construct, be performed in alternative or transformative ways, in subversive or resistant ways? While the following narrative by Harleen Kaur titled *Moving Forward* (sic) may not provide examples of young women appropriating the male turban for empowerment in any institutional way, there are many instances of individual women taking up the turban, particularly in the diaspora, although, of course, there are many instances of these moments occurring in India as well (see Mahmood and Brady’s *The Guru’s Gift* (Mahmood and Brady 1999) for more on the phenomenon of women donning the Sikh turban in the diaspora). However, while individual women have donned the turban for empowerment and to practice *Sikhi* in their own individual ways, it is still the *amritdhari* Sikh male that becomes the epitome of Sikhness and women continue to be sidelined and marginalized, as seen in Harleen Kaur’s *Moving Forward* when she heard about the 2012 shooting and killing of Sikhs at the Oak Creek *gurdwara* in Wisconsin. Harleen realizes that one of the persons who has been murdered was her music and kirtan teacher, Satwant Singh Kaleka, “an uncle,” from the

gurudwara community she used to mingle and pray with before she moved on to live in Plymouth, Michigan. In Plymouth, “strangers [approached]” the male members of the Sikh community and provided “condolences” to them, but such gestures of sympathies were never personally provided for her. She thought, “Well, I’m a Sikh. Why doesn’t anyone talk to me?” She continues, “That’s when it hit me: I don’t look like a Sikh” (p. 233). She realized that she has been saying to people all along that the “most visible identifier of the Sikh” is the turban (ibid., p. 234), yet here she was, she rationalizes, being marginalized because she herself has not “accepted the Sikh identity” (ibid., p. 235). Here the Sikh identity is clearly equated with the male turban. In the formation of the *Khalsa*, according to Jakobsh, “Traditional male roles became increasingly valued and female roles devalued with the institutionalization and politicization of the Sikh panth. While there were exceptions to the rule, the ethos dominating the developing Sikh community was clearly patriarchal, hierarchical, and masculine” (Jakobsh 2015, p. 43). As a diasporic Sikh woman, I, too, have been at the receiving end of this hierarchical patriarchal treatment, particularly as it pertains to the Sikh practice; within our home, when I was married to a *kesdhari* (a Sikh that wears the 5ks, but is not formally initiated) Sikh, whenever we had *path* (prayer) or *kirtan* at our home, my then husband took up the role of *granthi* and performed *ardas* (formal prayer of supplication). I, on the other hand, was relegated to the kitchen *sewa* (service) and could, at the most, contribute a *kirtan* after begging or cajoling to do so, and it could only typically be *poota mata ki asees* (a mother’s blessing; the word “poota” is traditionally understood as “son”). Although, as I had noted above, I found ways to resist patriarchal ghettoization through either discussion of gender equality with younger community members or by playing the *dholak* and singing provocative Punjabi folk songs, my *Sikhi* is considered secondary by patriarchal norms and by the Sikh community members in relation to my turbaned husband, as I’m considered *patit*, or lapsed Sikh.

Through trying to come to terms with the Sikh *gurudwara* shooting tragedy and through learning about the impermanence of life, through trying to recognize the ability of non-Sikhs to understand the Sikh community, through trying to find an empowering space within the predominantly patriarchal Sikh tradition, Harleen Kaur took a radical step. She claims, “I have been wearing the *dastaar* (turban) for over a year now, but every day is a struggle” (original emphasis; Kaur 2014, p. 235). She knows by donning the turban, she will practice her *Sikhi* in an individual, although ambiguous, manner—in the manner of the male *Khalsa* Sikh—but she also understands that the struggle will continue on: “I will continue to question and work on myself in the coming days, weeks, and years, but I will never question my progress. Because no matter how difficult or frustrating it seems, it is all truly that. Progress” (Kaur 2014, p. 235). Thus, for Harleen Kaur, her *Sikhi* leads her to taking up a masculinist attire, and although it will lead to constant struggle due to her ambivalent position in the in-between spaces of the *gurudwara*, she will continue on to live and fight like a *man*, for in the epigraph, she uses the following quote from Jorge Luis Borges, “Any life is made up of a single moment, the moment in which a man finds out, once and for all, who he truly is” (Kaur 2014, p. 230). Social construction of gender and religion has predominantly provided space for the patriarchal male as dominant; it is also true in the Sikh tradition and community. As McGuire notes, while religions

Provide myths and symbols of origin and creation ... offer narrative of redemption, healing and salvation ... [are] captivated by the lure of the divine and the all-consuming, all-transforming fire of the spirit. [It has] also created and legitimized gender, enforced, oppressed and warped it, but also subverted, transgressed, transformed and liberated it. (McGuire 2008, p. 8)

The three Sikh cisgendered women’s narrative that I analyze here provide an examination of Sikh tradition and the space available for cis women to participate in Sikh traditions while also practicing forms of lived religion through resistant practices. While Meeta and Harsohana Kaur practice *Sikhi* through an alliance with *amritdhari* males to reclaim the Sikh *panth* (community) and communal spaces for the family, Harleen Kaur crosses the gendered space and appropriate male-centric tools to be able to negotiate from an in-between and ambivalent, although often individual and isolated, space her identity as a true Sikh.

5. Mandeep Kaur and Neesha Kaur: Gender, Difference and the Personal Experience of the *Gurbani*

In Mandeep and Neesha Kaur's "A Different Kind of Love," we understand what it means for them to be practicing *Sikhi* as members of the queer community. Mandeep and Neesha met as two freshman college students. Told from the perspective of both Mandeep and Neesha alternatively, the narrative encompasses both their journey into love—a "different kind of love story" (Kaur and Kaur 2014, p. 112)—for two Sikh women who navigate cultural, sexual, and religious boundaries to understand and accept each other. Almost two years after they met and became friends, Neesha continues to try to understand her growing attraction to Mandeep, but unable to articulate her desire for her, she sees her walk away "in the arms of someone else" (Kaur and Kaur 2014, p. 108). At this point, she realizes that she couldn't be with someone like Mandeep; she writes, "My family and culture would never accept it. The harder I tried to compose myself, the more my heart would hurt" (Kaur and Kaur 2014, p. 108). Here, we understand that due to her Sikh family and her Indian American culture, where heterosexism is dominant, homosexual love was not going to be easily accepted. Additionally, as Takhar, et al. note, "Sikh women are subject to a high degree of surveillance in their daily lives both physically through the censure by parents and peers of dress, appearance and demeanor but also more profoundly through cultural expectations which impinge on their sense of self" (Takhar et al. 2008, p. 100). This idea of surveillance is particularly harsh in the diaspora and more so after 9/11 and the various attacks against the *amritdhari* Sikh bodies (see Puar 2017 and Axel 2001, among others). Eventually, however, Neesha tells Mandeep, "I really like you, and I've taken a long time to think about it, but I really want to be with you" (Kaur and Kaur 2014, p. 111). Afterwards, they both go to the park and hold hands; Mandeep writes, "I knew she was the one. She has always been the one" (Kaur and Kaur 2014, p. 111).

The end of the narrative merges both their voices.

I am a Sikh woman, and I fell in love with another Sikh woman. It doesn't matter that she was a man or a woman because I fell in love with her soul. Love is meant to be the harmony of two souls, not two pieces of the puzzle of what our culture expects. Within the realm of society, our love story puts us at risk of discrimination and harm from our families and community . . . For me, *Sikhi* was always a personal experience of the *gurbani* that should not be judged. I never rejected *Sikhi*, but rather the culture associated with the religion. *Sikhi* does not teach hate or discrimination, but people do. (Kaur and Kaur 2014, p. 112)

As can be seen from above, Mandeep and Neesha, lesbian lovers, reconstruct what it 'means to be a Sikh,' thought as individuals as they will most likely lose their community. They re-signify meaning in ways that *Sikhi* becomes a personal and not collective experience of the *gurbani*; and even though Sikhism is religious as well as cultural, they reject the cultural component of it. Thus, for them, being Sikh does not translate to the tradition of the heteropatriarchal male Sikh as the transcendental signifier of Sikhism and of *Sikhi*. It means to be able to see the personal journey of being Sikh and practicing *Sikhi* through the practice of *gurbani* and of love.

In spite of individual women resisting or appropriating certain cultural norms and practice a form of lived religion through individual acts, as I've discussed above, I argue that the majority of the narratives in *Her Name is Kaur* privileges the heteropatriarchal *amritdhari* Sikh male as the transcendental signifier of Sikhism and continue to define *Sikhi* and Sikhism through the masculinist idea of the turbaned male *amritdhari* Sikh—yet, I also argue, these women are able to create an individual connection with *Waheguru* through the practicing forms of lived religions.

The discussion supports my argument that when we think about Sikhs within dominant cultural spaces, the turbaned *amritdhari* male Sikh body is privileged as the embodiment of the Khalsa. Women attempt to wrest power within communal spaces as practicing Sikhs either through resistance or through appropriation of the idea of the "true" Sikh. There are those who attempt resistance and move in and out of social and cultural spaces to reclaim an individual Sikh religious identity, as Mandeep

and Nisha certainly do and as Meeta Kaur, Harsohena Kaur, and Harleen Kaur continue to struggle to do. However, within the majority of the selected narratives from *Her Name is Kaur*, the narrators are aware of what it means to be Sikh in terms of the male body—the turbaned *amritdhari* Sikh with the five Ks intact.

Within my own extended family in Burma, India, and the USA, the majority of the religious ceremonies within the *gurudwaras* or within our home are undertaken by male *keshdhari* turbaned Sikhs (whether *amritdhari* or not), as they embody what is understood as true Sikhism in the dominant cultural spaces of the Sikh community. When women participate in the ceremonies, they partake in *kirtan* singing and the preparation of the *langar*. My paternal grandmother, who was born and raised in Rawalpindi, Punjab (pre-Partition), but who lived her entire adult life in Burma, used to recite the *ardas* in our home in Burma, but within my extended family in India and within the US, it is always a male *amritdhari* Sikh who recites it. Yet, the majority of the women recite the daily prayers as Sikhs and even though some of us have short hair, we never felt we were unable to have a personal relationship with the *Akal Purakh*, the eternal and timeless being. We do, however, feel that within the *gurudwara* and dominant cultural spaces that we are always relegated to a secondary position, as wives, daughters or mothers of the male Sikh and as “impure” Sikhs due to our short hair. Within this troubled gendered space, women continue to negotiate, navigate, and practice forms of lived religion as Sikhs, even though the idea of who a true Sikh is and what form it takes continues to haunt the debates within the Sikh community and the daily lives of Sikh women in the diaspora.

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Article

Gendering Dance

Anjali Gera Roy

Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, Kharagpur 721302, India; anjali@hss.iitkgp.ac.in

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Abstract: Originating as a Punjabi male dance, bhangra, reinvented as a genre of music in the 1980s, reiterated religious, gender, and caste hierarchies at the discursive as well as the performative level. Although the strong feminine presence of trailblazing female DJs like Rani Kaur alias Radical Sista in bhangra parties in the 1990s challenged the gender division in Punjabi cultural production, it was the appearance of Taran Kaur Dhillon alias Hard Kaur on the bhangra rap scene nearly a decade and a half later that constituted the first serious questioning of male monopolist control over the production of Punjabi music. Although a number of talented female Punjabi musicians have made a mark on the bhangra and popular music sphere in the last decade or so, Punjabi sonic production continues to be dominated by male, Jat, Sikh singers and music producers. This paper will examine female bhangra producers' invasion of the hegemonic male, Sikh, Jat space of bhangra music to argue that these female musicians interrogate bhangra's generic sexism as well as the gendered segregation of Punjabi dance to appropriate dance as a means of female empowerment by focusing on the music videos of bhangra rapper Hard Kaur.

Keywords: hypermasculinity; misogyny; sexism; good girl; bad girl; bhangra; rap; Hard Kaur

1. Introduction

“Munde bhangra paunde te kudian giddha paawan [Boys dance to the steps of bhangra and girls to those of giddha],” Sukhbir’s chartbusting bhangra song of the 1990s, provides a glimpse into the segregated space of Punjabi dance with its generic gendered boundaries (Sukhbir 1996). Originating as a Punjabi male dance, bhangra, reinvented as a genre of music in the 1980s, reiterated religious, gender, and caste hierarchies at the discursive as well as the performative level. If their borrowing of folk formulaic composition made Bhangra texts inherit patriarchal Punjabi/Jat/Sikh gender and caste hierarchies, the dominance of male producers in the space of bhangra production, if not of consumption, marked it as an unmistakably masculine space. Although the strong feminine presence of trailblazing female DJs like Rani Kaur alias Radical Sista in bhangra parties in the 1990s challenged the gender division in Punjabi cultural production, it was the appearance of Taran Kaur Dhillon alias Hard Kaur on the bhangra rap scene nearly a decade and a half later that constituted the first serious questioning of male monopolist control over the production of Punjabi music. The tone of amused dismissal with which her arrival was grudgingly acknowledged by male bhangra legends such as Malkit Singh: “*Oh kudi jedi rap-shap kardi ai* [Oh, that girl who does rap-shap]” (Kaur 2006, personal communication) reflects the masculine paternalism underpinning the field of bhangra production. Although a number of talented female Punjabi musicians have made a mark on the bhangra and popular music sphere in the last decade or so¹, Punjabi sonic production continues to be dominated by male, Jat, Sikh singers

¹ Among these contemporary rising stars, one may include Mona Singh, Sazia Judge, Seetal Kaur, and Sarika Gill in Britain and Jasmine Sandlas, Kanika Kapoor, Sunanda Sharma, Nimrat Khaira, Neha Kakkar, and Miss Pooja in India. Talented singers like Jaspinder Narula, Satwinder Bitti, and Rani Randeep appear to have been reduced to singing other genres after the token recognition they received in the first decade of the 21st century.

and music producers. This paper will examine female bhangra producers' invasion of the hegemonic male, Sikh, Jat space of bhangra music to argue that these female musicians interrogate bhangra's generic sexism as well as the gendered segregation of Punjabi dance to appropriate dance as a means of female empowerment. The essay begins by tracing how traditional bhangra texts and remixes have constructed Punjabi/Jat/Sikh masculinity and femininity and bhangra. It traces the articulation of bhangra, which was not an exclusively Sikh music, to the Jat Sikh body and appropriated in the construction of a post-independence Sikh ethnocultural identity. It then shows how the Punjabi/Jat/Sikh customs and traditions of veiling, segregation, family honor, sexual "purity", and so on have been carried over in these texts through their fetishizing the female as beloved, whore, or mother. The essay will proceed by examining female performers' re-reading of the texts that enables them to challenge the hypermasculinist, sexist, and misogynist lyrics of bhangra music by focusing on the music videos of bhangra rapper Hard Kaur.

2. Gendered Space of Punjabi Dance

In addition to region, sect, instruments, rhythm, and movement, gender forms a crucial component in differentiating Punjabi dance genres from one another (Chandan 1987; Nahar 1988). Gender is the primary category along which Punjabi dance genres have been classified followed by those of region and religion. While *bhangra*, *jhummar*, *luddi*, *dhamal*, *julli*, and *dhankara/gatka* are defined as male dance genres, *giddha*, *sammi*, *kikli*, *teeyan*, and *jaggo* are considered appropriate for performance by females. Each dance genre, believed to have originated in a particular region in the *doabs* or interflaves of the five rivers of Punjab, is associated with beliefs, ritual practices, and festivals of different ethnic and sectarian groups (Schreffler 2013, p. 389). Unlike *julli* that is traditionally associated with *pirs* and performed in a sitting position at the *khanqahs* of Sufi saints, *dhankara* or *gatka* is a Sikh martial dance performed with swords or wooden sticks. The gender divide is equally visible in the gendered dance movements with male genres characterized by more robust, energetic, and vigorous movements requiring extraordinary stamina and strength in contrast to the gentle, swaying, graceful movements of female genres suited to the female body in which *malwai giddha*, a male genre with gentle, swaying movements originating in West Punjab, constitutes the sole exception. Additionally, the instruments accompanying each genre accentuate the gender divide through instruments requiring more strength such as the *dhol* attached to male genres and smaller instruments such as *dholki* to female ones. Finally, the stock themes of the lyrics of the genres are split along the masculine (alcohol, women, desire, hedonism, war, bravery) and feminine (longing, devotion, complaint, affection) grid.

Bhangra's movements have been alternatively traced back to martial or agricultural activities of warriors and peasants who were traditionally constituted as male and its vigorous beats (Randhawa 1954, p. 199) are injected with the *veer rasa*, the signature mood of the male warrior. Whether bhangra existed prior to the partition of Punjab or was a new dance invented through the amalgamation of a variety of Punjabi performance genres or not (Schreffler 2013, p. 395), its gendered boundaries remained unaltered through its many transformations. The dance performed by students of Mohindra College Patiala in the 1950s that formed the template for what came to be known as bhangra was simply presented as 'Men's Punjabi dance' (Schreffler 2013, p. 396). The eligibility criteria about height and chest size used by Bhana Ram, the hereditary *dhol* player from the *baazigar*² community who trained the team that included a number of Jat Sikh dancers (Pande 1999), in the selection of dancers unambiguously produced it as a martial male dance (Bai 2006, personal communication). Bhana Ram's inclusion of the robust, vigorous movements, leaps, and jumps from various male genres demanding physical strength, stamina, and energy to the exclusion of the gentle, swaying, graceful moves of the *malwai giddha* emphasized its strongly masculinist orientation. Additionally, the all-male composition

² *Baazigar* is a community of multi-source nomads found in Punjab who were also entertainers and performed acrobatics. Many of them were forced to migrate from west Punjab to east Punjab after the partition of Punjab in 1947.

of the same group of dancers who came to be known as the PEPSU team and performed at several official events over the following years naturalized its masculinist credentials. The raw energy and virility exuded by the team performing at the first Republic Day Parade in 1954 was summed up by the Hindi film actor Nargis in her exclamation, “*Pehli bar mardon ko mardon jaise nachte dekha* [I saw men performing as men for the first time], which reflected the gendered etiquette that has conventionally defined Indian dance (TNS 2003).

A coffee table description of Punjabi dance by eminent dancer Ashish Mohan Khokar reveals the extent to which the emblematic masculinity of bhangra has been assimilated by practitioners of the dance,

The dances of Punjab are earthy and robust, just like its people. The land of five rivers . . . Punjab has given to India a race [sic] that is daring and noble. The Punjabis symbolize freedom of spirit and daredevilry. They regard dancing as their birth right, and their dances reflect this attitude of supreme confidence and conviviality. The people are capable of strenuous work, yet nothing seems to sap them of their infectious zest for life. They do nothing by halves. So they launch into their dances with swaggering gusto and overflowing energy. Bhangra gives this Indian state its very identity. Performed by men, this folk style has jumps, leaps, swirls, skips and hops—just about any physical feat that a virile son-of-the-soil can attempt. It is punctuated by a lot of acrobatics, meant to showcase daredevilry. Clapping, snapping of the fingers, and a recitation of boli [witty couplets] are its specialties. . . . Gidda [sic] is the feminine riposte to Bhangra, no less colourful or vigorous. (Khokar 2003, pp. 19–20)

The newly invented bhangra’s foray into Hindi cinema through its attracting the attention of several Hindi film actors and directors is marked by twin transformations that impacted the traditional gendered segregated space of Punjabi dance. The first was the transformation of bhangra into a couple dance with female dancers joining the male dancers of the PEPSU team with their feminine steps and movements forming a perfect alterity to the male. The second was the well-known Hindi film actor dancer Vijayantimala’s integrating bhangra machismo, including *bolis*,³ in her dance composition after having watched it at the Republic Day Parade (Schreffler 2013, p. 397). If the insertion of female dancers in the first fissured the all-male space of traditional bhangra, the rendering of its masculine movements by a trained female dancer struck at its performative boundaries. It is the second, Vijayantimala’s interrogation of bhangra’s mapping on the male body through her deft execution of its masculinist moves in the song “*Tum sang preet ladai*” in the film *New Delhi* (Mangeshkar 1956), which inaugurated the feminine questioning of bhangra’s paradigmatic masculinity that has been carried over by contemporary female bhangra musicians.⁴

3. Lyrical Machismo

In addition to its performative space, beats, and movements, bhangra’s discursive space reflects a strong sexism and casteism through its lyrics that glorify male valor, courage, resilience, and reify women as the objects of male adoration or desire.⁵ Traditionally performed to *bolis* largely consisting of nonsense lyrics (Randhawa 1954, p. 199) whose themes ranged from celebrations to patriotism,

³ Bolis are call and response couplets that were traditionally sung by women but also by men in *malwai giddha*. Bolis have a uniform rhythm and their appeal lies in the inclusion of a meaningless rhyme. In bhangra, they were used to provide a breath pause in the vigorous, high-energy dance with either the *dholi* [dhol player] or one of the dancers singing a call with a formulaic couplet. The rest of the dancers would respond by naming an object and the lead singer would improvise a couplet to rhyme with the object inviting the rest to join in.

⁴ Gabbah Shareef Bhalwan introduces another twist to Vijayantimala’s borrowing from the PEPSU team’s dance by observing that the team, probably inspired by the men’s *giddha* of the local Malwa area (where they lived) did a set of *boliyan* that seemed like the malwa styles, which suggests that “bhangra” included some “giddha-like stuff” too (Bhalwan 2002).

⁵ Gayatri Gopinath, in her examination of bhangra as a diasporic genre, argues that “bhangra as a multivalenced text resists being read as purely patriarchal or sexist, yet it remains possible to identify certain dominant notions of gender and sexuality that surface in much of the music” (Gopinath 1995, p. 304). Through examining the music video of Bally Sagoo’s ‘*Mera*

social issues, and love, the textual component of bhangra gradually increased with nonsense formulaic improvised composition replaced by individual lyrics and poetry (Gera Roy 2010, pp. 203–4; Schreffler 2013, pp. 397–98). With the increase in the proportion of the lyrical content and individual composition, certain themes and motifs that often built on traditional formulae became attached to bhangra dance. The imagined subject of these lyrics is a Jat male whose patriarchal gaze either completely elides female presence or allows room for her only as an extension of the self. The lyrics that include themes like bravery, courage and risk-taking, patriotism, family, friendship, love, women, and hedonism uphold traditional patriarchal values and have been appropriated in the construction of new patriarchal structures. Through its turning to Punjabi folksong formulae or cannibalizing folk lyrics, contemporary bhangra inherits the sexist, casteist legacy of these songs in which traditional Punjabi cultural values have been enshrined.

An analysis of the song lyrics of legendary Punjabi folksingers reveals the extent to which they have been shaped by the Punjabi patriarchal ethos and socially sanctioned behavior. The Punjabi folksong defines typical male Jat behavior and pursuits that have become normalized as quintessential Jat attributes. These include indulging in carnal pleasures including eating, drinking, chasing women, making merry with friends that coexist with strong family values, patriotism, and piety. If folk legend Hazara Singh Ramta’s satirical take on the Jat’s proverbial love for drinking in “*Ramte peeni chadd diti hai* [Ramta has given up drinking] (Ramta 2015b)” indirectly celebrates his inability to resist alcohol as epitomizing Jat machismo, “*Charhi jawani Ramte nu* [Old man Ramta relives his youth] (Ramta 2015a)” adopts a tolerant stance towards the lusty elderly Jat’s virility and “*Ramte da dusra viyah* [Ramta’s second marriage] (Ramta 2004) justifies polygamy as a reaction to the Jat custom of early arranged marriages.

The Jat’s love for alcohol is equated with that for women in another legendary folksinger Lal Chand Yamla Jatt’s imagination where the comparison of a young woman with a bottle of whiskey who the Jat can pull out of his heart and have a swig from exhibits the collapse of the twin objects of the Jat’s adoration and endorses the complete reification of the woman

Whiskey di botal wargi main ik kudi fasa layi ae

Mere dil da bojha khali si ohde vich pa layi ae

Jad jee kardae main datt kholke haarha la laina

I have been able to catch a young woman who is like a bottle of whiskey

I have put her away in my heart that was free of all baggage

Whenever I feel like I uncork it and take a swig. (Yamla Jatt 2011, “*Whiskey di Botal Wargi*”)

In formulaic folk lyrics, the beloved’s beauty has an intoxicating effect on the Jat as in Asa Singh Mastana’s popular song,

Mele nu chal mere naal kurhe

Ho, ho

Tere nain jo peeti bhang kurhe

Tere nain jo peeti bhang kurhe

Te waang tamaater rang kurhe

Koi nazar na tenu laa deve

Jaadu na akh da paa deve

Come along with me to the fair, girl

laung gawacha, she shows that the way “bhangra most clearly reconsolidates hegemonic patriarchal constructions is in its deployment of gender and sexuality” (Gopinath 1995, p. 316).

Ho ho ho
Your dopey eyes, girl
Your dopey eyes, girl
And tomato red complexion, girl
Hope none casts an evil eye on you
And cast a spell on you (Mastana 1999b, “Mele nu Chal Mere Naal Kurhe”)

Traditional folksong’s gastronomic imagery has been standardized in bhangra songs to describe female beauty as an aphrodisiac that whets the male appetite,

Ni mitran di loon di dali
Ni tun mishri borobar jaani ni
Sajna di gadvi da
Mitha sarbat warga paani ni
You are like my lump of salt
but are known as a cube of candy
Like the water as sweet as sherbet
in my ewer. (Dhuri 2009, “Mitran di Loon di Dali”)

Alternatively, the male Jat fetishizes the beloved through fixing his gaze either on the female body or an object worn by the beloved,

Kali teri gut te paranda tera laal ni
Kali teri gut te paranda tera laal ni
Roop deeye raniye paraande nu sambhaal ni
Ho
Kanna vich bunde tere roop de shingar ni
Mithe tere bol moohon bol ik vaar ni
Pailan paandi e ni teri moran jehi chaal ni
Your braid is black and the *paranda* is red
Oh, Beauty Queen, mind your *paranda*
Your dangling earrings adorn your beauty
Your speech is sweet, say something
You wear anklets, you have a peacock’s gait (Mastana 1999a, “Kali teri Gut”)

Paralleling pleasure-seeking as an important rite of passage in the Jat’s journey is the Jat’s recognition that his true calling lies in serving his family, particularly his parents,

Ma piyo naalon duniya utte
na koi hor sakiri
Aenan di seva te wadi
nahin koi hor fakiri
There is no one in the world
More near and dear than one’s parents
Nor is there any pious deed
Greater than serving them. (Yamla Jatt 2006, “Maa diyan Asisan”)

The hypermasculinist Jat's devotion to his mother makes him a devoted son and a complete Mama's boy. Since the feminine is fetishized either as an object of male desire or affection in the Jat's imaginary, a woman who poses a threat to patriarchal authority must be disciplined through prescriptive labelling.

It is the folksong that performs the function of the construction of the idealized female of the Jat's imagination through its prescriptive overtones. "*Ik ran asli and ik ran nakli*" polarizes the authentic and inauthentic female/wife through the degree to which she guards family honor and makes sacrifices for the sake of her husband and his family,

Ik ran asli te ik ran nakli

Solah baat utaraan

Asli chundi kakh liyave

Nakli kare baharaan

Asli suchhe khandan chon neki niyat akhvave

Andar baiti bhuki pyasi apni laaj bachave

Nakli ai khudgarj mijaji

Jide yaar hazaraan

The real wife and the fake one

What I am saying is completely true

The real one picks and fetches the fodder

The fake one whiles away her time

The real one is known for being good-natured in the entire family

She remains inside hungry or thirsty shielding her family's honour

The fake one has a selfish disposition

And thousands of male friends. (Yamla Jatt n.d., "*Ik Ran Asli*")

Jat masculinity may be constructed as strong, fearless, aggressive, arrogant and amorous as an alterity to weak, helpless, submissive, self-abnegating femininity. The paradoxical sexualization and eroticization of female bodies in folksongs that is accompanied with the strict regulation of female sexuality through prescriptive behavior replicates the binary of the mother and the whore through which patriarchy has traditionally represented women. Although the sexualized body of the object of the Jat's desire that is used to accentuate Jat virility is contrasted with the apotheosized figures of the beloved and the mother, neither the whore, nor the beloved or the mother, can escape being fetishized.

4. Bhangra and Sikhism

Locating the making of modern Sikh kirtan to the Singh Sabha reformation, Bob van der Linden argues that "music was certainly part of the Singh Sabha redefinition of the Sikh self (van der Linden 2008, p. 2)." However, unlike julli that is associated with Sufi pirs and gatka with Sikh practices, bhangra, which emerged as a rural Punjabi dance, particularly in West Punjab, by the 19th century and came to be associated with the annual Baisakhi festival, was not an official Sikh tradition (Schreffler 2013, pp. 389–90). As van der Linden points out, Punjabi popular culture was considered "morally repulsive" by the Singh Sabha who opposed female dancing, censored the sexual content that originally was part of Punjabi qissas, bhajans, and ghazals, and were highly critical of bhangra (van der Linden 2008, p. 10). However, bhangra has become synonymous with Sikh culture in the popular imagination through its appropriation in the construction of a transnational Jat Sikh identity, which is a cause of great concern for both Sikh religious organizations and dance scholars. Reversing East Punjab Jat Sikhs's dismissal of dancing and singing as an effeminate vocation traditionally assigned

to derided lower caste Muslims before partition (Brard 2007, p. 312), the self-conscious mapping of Sikhism on bhangra dance and music has made it a signifier of Jat Sikh subjectivity.

Rajinder Dudrah, Nicola Mooney, and Harjant Gill have thrown important light on the connection between bhangra's agrarian origins and "the rural imaginary" that defines Jat Sikhs. Mooney defines Jat Sikhs as "a caste of farmers and landlords with significant regional status" and views them as embodying "the autochthonous Punjabi identity" despite their leading urban and transnational lives. She ascribes Jat Sikhs' symbolic association with the region to their "landed attachments to the region, whether expressed in actively agricultural practices, emotive rural nostalgias, or religiously nationalist Khalistani aspirations (Mooney 2008)." Maintaining that "the jat [sic], and his female counterpart the jati [sic], are portrayed through respectively stereotypical notions of male strength articulated with farming skills and youthful prowess and a feminine beauty that is 'sharp' in looks and allegedly unique to this caste", Dudrah notes the privileging of the Jat subject in bhangra (Dudrah 2002, p. 376). Mooney avers that "Bhangra is thus understood, practiced and represented as a primordially Jat phenomenon, related to both language and beat, as well as to the organic embodiment of Jat identity in its performance (Mooney 2008)." Gill's emphasis is on bhangra's articulation of a certain kind of masculinity or hypermasculinity that is both mapped on the Jat Sikh body and appropriated by the caste in its self-constitution (Gill 2012). Mooney demonstrates that bhangra "privileges a Jat-centric hierarchy of caste, gender and ethnicity" (Mooney 2013, p. 279) and explores "how Jat Sikhs, or specifically Jat masculinity, exercise particular dominance in bhangra themes, performances and discourses (Mooney 2013, p. 280)."

Yet, bhangra's translation of 'the rural imaginary' of the Jats does not quite explain its articulation to Sikhism or Sikh identity (Mooney 2011). A careful analysis of bhangra texts reveals that although the Jat caste can be found across religious boundaries and bhangra is reported to have been performed by the Jats (Schreffler 2013, p. 390), the dance is increasingly used for the articulation of specifically Jat Sikh masculinities. The most telling cue about the collapse of the Jat with the Sikh is the frequent substitution of the term Jat in the song lyrics with Singh or Sardar. In the Bhangra vocabulary, the frequency of the terms Jat, Singh, and Sardar is matched with the frequency of their interchangeability. A random sampling of the songs of some of the best-known Punjabi singers reveals that they constitute eulogies to the Jat. From Kuldip Manak's "*Jat ho giya sharaabi peeke poori vodka* [the Jatt got drunk having gulped down a full bottle of vodka] (Manak 1984)" and "*Ni putt jattan da halh wohnda vatte tadke da* [Oh, the son of Jats begins ploughing at the crack of dawn] (Manak 1979)" to Pammi Bai's "*Do cheeza jatt mangda, daaru ghar di bandook baran bor di* [The Jat asks for only two things, country liquor and a 12 barrel gun]" (Bai 2002) and "*Jatt jattan da te bholu narayan da bai gallan sachian kare* [The Jat of Jats might be a simpleton but tells the truth]" (Bai and Tharika Wala 2003), Surjit Bindrakhia's "*Ni toon jatt di pasand, jatt ne vihauni hai* [Oh, you are the choice of the Jat, the Jat wants to marry you] (Bindrakhia 2011) or Jazzy B's "*Kehra jamm piya soorma jehra jatt di charat nu roke* [Which champion is born who can dare to stop the Jat's rise?]" (Jazzy B 2006), the Jat is praised in hyperbolic terms. Out of the songs recorded between 2014 and 2019, an overwhelming number of titles include the term Jat.

The Jat is further produced as Sikh rather than Hindu or Muslim through his sporting specifically Sikh bodily signifiers and symbolic markers such as the sword, the *khanda*, the *kada*, and the *dastaar*.

*Dushman v hove bhav dastaar kade ne lahi de
je khud chahiye satkar, ta sabh di ijjat karni chahidi*

Give respect to one and all, if you wish to be respected!

Never take off the turban, even when confronted by an enemy! (Sartaaj 2011, "Dastaar")

Additionally, allusions to Sikh religious icons and concepts particularly to the Sikh gurus in bhangra songs reveal the appropriation of bhangra music and dance in the consolidation of Jat Sikh or even Sikh identities. Sartaaj's invocation of the figure of the *sant sipahi* in "*Dastaar*" is an unambiguous allusion to the Sikh guru Gobind Singh,

Jihna bacheya izzatan te jo sabh kujh tetho vaar gaye

Maaif jamir ne karna nai je oh vi dilon visaar gaye

Hai mehangi ai kurbani . . .

Mehangi ai kurbani bhul na jaiyo sant sapahiye de

The one who saved your honour and sacrificed his everything for you

Your conscience won't forgive you if you were to forget him too.

Priceless is the sacrifice of the Saint Soldier, don't you forget his sacrifice. (Sartaaj 2011, "Dastaar")

Instead of perceiving material success and consumerist ethics as incompatible with deep piety, the Singhs' success in the material realm reflected in their display of conspicuous consumption is attributed to the blessings of the Waheguru in Jazzy B's song "*Singhan diya Gaddian*".

Satgur diyan mehran ne

Singhan diyan gadiyan rehn sada ladhiyan

Chap de note poora kam loot te mouja laggiyan

Babbe diyan meheran ne

Singhan diyan gadiyan rehn sadah ladhiyan.

The Almighty's blessings are with us!

Let the trucks of the Singhs always be laden

Let them mint money, bag all the jobs and enjoy life

Baba Guru Nanak's blessings! (Jazzy B 2014, "*Singhan diya Gaddian*")

5. Dance, Masculinity, Resistance

Celebratory narratives of bhangra's acquisition of the status of the ethnocultural signifier of South Asian, Punjabi, or Sikh identity and its emancipatory potential were undercut by grave academic anxieties about its affirmation of traditional Punjabi/Sikh/Jat patriarchies through its gendered discursive and performative space (Housee and Dar 1996). Concerns about bhangra's perpetuation of traditional hypermasculinity and heteronormativity voiced by some producers and scholars were relegated to the background in the emancipating possibilities it offered for the consolidation of resistant Asian subjectivities. In addition to the fact that *giddha*, the traditional dance performed by women in Punjab remained invisible in contrast to the visibility and appropriation of bhangra in diasporic identity formation (Purewal and Kalra 2010), the conspicuous female absence in bhangra production shows that bhangra's resistance to racism did not unsettle gender hierarchies.⁶ Although young South Asian women's convergence on bhangra performance in resisting hegemonies of race and gender was synchronous with those of their male counterparts, bhangra's emancipatory effects in their lived experience were restricted to the consumption of music and performance of dance. Several interviews, essays, and studies have examined the resistance by young women to the gendered narrative of bhangra by insinuating their way into the hypermasculine space of bhangra production and consumption and challenging gender stereotypes (Gopinath 1995; Bakrania 2013). The early work of Gayatri Gopinath

⁶ Invisible or marginalized as producers, women are conspicuously visible in the bhangra music videos as the reified objects of the Jat's desire. The fetishization of the female body in traditional bhangra lyrics is accentuated in the visual genre as the camera's lascivious gaze lingers on the exposed female body to sate global voyeuristic pleasures (Gera Roy 2010). In particular, the misogynist male gaze of bhangra rap videos fixed on sexualized female bodies represents women as promiscuous temptresses who may be exploited with impunity. As Gera Roy points out, "the Jat space is represented in Bhangra texts as an exclusively male space from which the woman must be banished or controlled and invited to play the role of the machista by admiring their manliness (Gera Roy 2015, p. 178)."

looks at bhangra's complex negotiation of race, nation, and gender. Gopinath argues that, bhangra, "as a performance of diaspora becomes complicit in Hindu hegemonic projects to the extent that it reinforces dominant articulations of gender in its construction of a (male) diasporic subject" and of the woman as an embodiment of a pure, unsullied tradition and homeland (Gopinath 1995, p. 316).

Falu Bakrania's *Bhangra and the Asian Underground* focuses on the club-going activities of a group of educated, professional women that interrogate the construction of the Punjabi/Sikh/Asian woman as the guardians of tradition through their visiting clubs in London, an activity that would be considered taboo for 'good' girls (Bakrania 2013). Yet, the clubgoers in Bakrania's book construct themselves as 'good' girls by differentiating themselves from promiscuous 'bad' girls. Clubgoing could be viewed as constituting a resistant gesture that replies to traditional patriarchal injunctions against partying and clubbing through which female conduct and sexuality are regulated. In their responses to ethnographers, female clubgoers confess to enjoying the freedom that the mere act of stepping out of the house, wearing certain kind of attire, consuming alcohol, or dancing in mixed gender space signifies with respect to the breaking of patriarchal taboos (Bakrania 2013). However, although female clubgoers' challenging Punjabi/Sikh patriarchy through the forbidden act of clubbing, drinking, and dancing is perceived as emancipatory, they paradoxically identify with the sexualized, reified object of the male desire in the bhangra text through their pleasure in the consumption of bhangra. Thus, the female clubgoers, in their rejection of the patriarchal stereotype of the coy, vulnerable, virginal Sikh woman, unwittingly succumb to the risk of auto-objectification.

Sandeep Bakshi's uncovering of "the availability of queer infra-politics in Giddha performances" reveals that "a critique of heteropatriarchy" could be located "within traditional Punjabi female genres" (Bakshi 2016, p. 13). However, resistance to the gender hierarchies governing the space of bhangra production and consumption have largely been addressed by the interrogation of bhangra's sexist, hypermasculinist, patriarchal ethos through women's usurpation of positions traditionally assigned to men. If female bhangra DJs like Radical Sista and Ritu in Britain, Rekha in New York, or Ameeta in Canada were the first to challenge the gendered norms of Punjabi performative traditions (Ballantyne 2006, p. 153), UK's first female drummer Parv Kaur formed her dhol band 'Eternal Taal' to deconstruct the stereotype of the male dhol player through demonstrating that women's physical difference was no barrier to their ability to handle heavy instruments that required strength and stamina.

The examples of pioneering DJs like Radical Sista, Ritu, Rekha, and Ameeta, dhol players like Parv Kaur and all-female bhangra teams demonstrate that resistance to gendered hierarchies can be performed in innumerable ways. The image of the salwar kameez clad Radical Sista who was the only female DJ in the 1990s and felt isolated but resolutely refused to "dress up and play a role" or "take any crap" from the male clubgoers suggests that resistance to patriarchy could take place without women having to adopt aggressive masculine behavior (quoted in Kalia 2019). In sharp contrast to Radical Sista, Rekha, who has successfully challenged the masculinist stereotype through hosting a very successful Bhangra night in New York City, does so through a complete rejection of stereotyped Punjabi female attire or conduct. On the other hand, Parv Kaur, who began to play the dhol at the tender age of 12, disengaged the conventional signification of the dhol as a masculine instrument through co-opting the masculine characteristics of strength, energy, and stamina in her feminine ensemble. The all-female bhangra teams claim to be motivated by the desire to disprove that its strong, masculinist movements are impossible or inappropriate for female performers and to dissolve the segregated boundaries of Punjabi dance.

The discursive construction of the woman as an embodiment of tradition in the bhangra text through the figures of the self-abnegating mother and the virginal beloved is inverted in the lived space of performance through the resistive acts performed by female DJs, musicians, or dancers. In their wrestling of the right to indulge in vocations, activities, and conduct that is traditionally sanctioned by Punjabi/Sikh patriarchy for their male counterparts, female producers and consumers unwittingly assume a masculine or hypermasculine posture. This shattering of gender stereotypes is believed to be progressive and liberating and is celebrated in analyses of bhangra as providing agency, albeit limited,

to women. However, these resistant acts are unable to demolish the patriarchal ideological structures underpinning bhangra texts that are glorified in the song lyrics or the gendered violence through which relations between male and female consumers are governed in the space of the club. The assumption of gender roles such as playing the dhol, deejaying at nightclubs, performing in bhangra teams, or visiting clubs could be perceived as an emancipatory act so far as it challenges Punjabi/Sikh patriarchy. None of these resistive gestures, however, question the hypermasculine, sexist, casteist aesthetic naturalized both in the bhangra text and performance.

6. Hard Kaur: The first Asian Female Rapper

In view of the fact that only an insignificant number of female singers with the exception of Rani Ranbir, Satwinder Bitti, Rajeshwari Sachdev, or Kamaljit Neeru were able to make a dent in the male bhangra monopoly in the 1990s, the emergence of the first female rapper on the hypermasculine arena of bhangra rap a decade and half later could be considered a major breakthrough. A revisiting of Taran Kaur Dhillon alias Hard Kaur's pathbreaking incursion into the hypermasculine, misogynist rap space reveals that grit, determination, and sheer bravado can, in fact, surmount any obstacles that a female performer might face in infiltrating the male dominated bhangra scenario. Born in Kanpur to Sikh parents, Hard Kaur migrated to UK in 1984 after her mother was turned out by her paternal grandparents following the death of Kaur's father and was coerced by her own parents into remarrying an older Sikh. It was Kaur's direct experience of racism, sexism, and classism in school and abuse at home that transformed her from a demure Sikh girl to a fighter, "They'd say stuff like why've you got two plaits? Did you live in a hut in India? Did you have a toilet? I used to cry when I came home (quoted in Sharma 2008)." When she returned from school one day to find her mother's face completely bruised after the battering she had got from her stepfather, she beat up her stepfather and reported him to the police. "After the police took him away, I told my mom that she doesn't need a man. I said, 'I'll be your husband, your son, and your daughter (quoted in I for You Team 2019)." She recalls that it was her refusal to put up with bullying in school that won her the respect of her peers and led to her turning to hip hop, "I wasn't taking it from anyone anymore. In school, I stood up to a girl who was bullying me. Another group of girls were impressed and introduced me to Hip Hop (quoted in I for You Team 2019)."

Hard Kaur's struggle with race, class, and gender during her adolescent years toughened her and fueled her determination to break all barriers. Her explanation for assuming the name Hard Kaur was the beginning of her questioning of Sikh gendered norms that enjoin a Kaur to be gentle, demure, and obedient.

I was a 'soft' Kaur. I used to obey and follow everything, that people asked me to, which was not of worth I later realized. This world has made me Hard Kaur. And I am thankful to people who are an obstacle for me and created problems for me, which is where I developed my urge to succeed from. (quoted in Walia 2013)

Hard Kaur has been alternatively vilified and applauded for her willful transgression of Punjabi/Sikh patriarchal gender hierarchies and norms. Her daredevil image and unconventional behavior have been exploited by the press for its shock value even as her pioneering efforts in the field of music have been commended. The juxtaposition of these twin opinions reveals that while her shattering of the stereotype of the Asian female musician or Hindi playback singer along with her innovative, original brand of music have been perceived as emancipating the Asian sonic space, her attire and conduct at live events has attracted the wrath of traditionalists. Her generalized subversion of Hindu and Sikh patriarchal strictures in her early albums was perceived as an empowering gesture for female singers not conforming to the stereotyped construction of the female voice quality, themes, and behavior in the Indian music industry. However, her turning up drunk at events, hurling expletives, and using disrespectful language at an event in Chandigarh offended the sensibilities of Sikhs present there (JSinghnz 2013). More recently, she was booked for her abusive social posts against Hindu

nationalist leaders like Yogi Adityanath, the Chief Minister of UP, and Mohan Bhagwat, the Chief of the Hindu nationalist organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), when she went a step further by challenging the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and right wing activists of the RSS to a one to one duel and extended her support to the pro-Khalistan movement by posing with separatist Khalistanis (Arya 2019). Whether her acts, speech, and conduct have been intentionally cultivated to approximate the stereotyped image of the rap singer or timed and calculated to boost her album sales or not, they are in complete opposition to the patriarchal construction of the Sikh woman.

An analysis of Hard Kaur's public image produced through visual, vocal, and kinetic signifiers reveals the extent to which it has been meticulously cultivated to fit into that of the female rap performer. Hard Kaur claims to have been introduced to rap and hip hop while she was in school and acknowledges the appeal that rap lyrics and style, which emerged from the privations, abuses, and violence faced by working-class black migrants in Britain, had for an Asian woman like her subjected to domestic violence and racism. She has also shared the possibilities that the musical genre, which naturalized both violence and resistance, offered her to articulate her experiential angst emerging from the intersection of class, race, and gender in the oppression of black people in Britain. She has often spoken about how her induction into the rap scene through her schoolmates enabled her to cope with the domestic and professional pressures she was confronted with in her lived experience. She uses rap, a male-dominated black music characterized by its misogynist lyrics, violence, and gangland culture, as an effective tool for confronting Asian/Punjabi/Sikh hegemonic structures. The question whether the image was carefully cultivated as a strategy to break into the male dominated bhangra or rap scene or was a logical step propelled by a similar experience of domestic violence and racism shared by working class Punjabi/Sikh immigrants with black migrants remains unanswered. However, a rearrangement of her life story to match the life narratives of oppressed black women and doubly oppressed black women that would enable a Sikh young woman to enter the black rap scene cannot be completely ruled out.⁷

The music of female rappers reveals the diverse ways they respond to the five themes undergirding rap's misogynist lyrics: (a) Derogatory naming and shaming of women, (b) sexual objectification of women, (c) legitimization of violence against women, (d) distrust of women, and (e) celebration of prostitution and pimping, which have been identified by Ronald Weitzer and Charis E. Kubrin (Weitzer and Kubrin 2009). Female rap represents the female perspective on the experience of racial, class, and ethnic discrimination faced by working class black youth that supplements the male viewpoint with the neglected question of gender. Female black rappers, therefore, focus on the oppressive effects of racial violence faced by black males in the public space on the black domestic space in the form of domestic violence and sexual abuse. However, as Matthew Oware points out in "A 'Man's Woman?' Contradictory Messages in the Songs of Female Rappers, 1992–2000," there are very "high numbers of female self-objectification, self-exploitation, and derogatory and demeaning lyrics about women in general (Oware 2009, p. 787)" in female rap that apparently provides an emancipatory forum for the marginalized or oppressed such as women. In Oware's view, "these contradictory lyrics nullify the positive messages that are conveyed by female rap artists, consequently reproducing and upholding hegemonic, sexist notions of femininity, and serving to undermine and disempower women (Oware 2009, p. 787)." Taran Kaur Dhillon's transformation into the rapper Hard Kaur is contingent upon her adoption of the stance of black female rappers, who resist the hypermasculinist, misogynist, sexist, and violent language of male rappers through foraying into the misogynist field of rap and empowering messages but ironically convey and reproduce male hegemonic notions of femininity.

Shanara R. Reid-Brinkley argues "that black women construct an oppositional response to dominant representations of black femininity, while simultaneously engaging in the disciplining of

⁷ For instance, although her father did not die in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, she did not correct the press when it projected her as a victim of the anti-Sikh violence whose family had sought asylum in UK (Kaur 2006, personal communication).

black women's subjectivity (Reid-Brinkley 2008, p. 238)." Reid-Brinkley's analysis of internet responses to the sexual objectification of women in rap music in which she shows that the readers' responses unwittingly borrow the binary of the good and the bad black woman in dominant representations of black women in their upholding of the notion of 'the black queen' who represents traditional black values in order to reverse the sexualized image of the 'ho (whore)' in rap music. Reid-Brinkley points out that black women construct diverse subject positions "around the performance of race, class, and gender as a means to resist dominant representations of black women, while simultaneously engaging in disciplinary practices that constrain black femininity (Reid-Brinkley 2008, p. 236)." Hard Kaur resists dominant white representations of the Asian and (non) dominant Punjabi/Sikh of the Punjabi woman respectively through her assumption of the position of the bad woman or the whore of the male rap video. Her resistance to the notion of respectability through which the good Sikh woman is constructed is expressed through her breaking of the taboos against drinking, mixing, and sex by which Sikh/Punjabi femininity has been disciplined. The "Glassy" song that catapulted Hard Kaur to fame has her indulging in the masculinist pleasure of drinking,

Ek glassy, do glassy teen glassy char (One glass, two glasses, three glasses, four)

Put ya hands in da air like u jus dun care, cuz u feel

Lika supastar

Ik glassy, do glassy teen glassy char

Ur drunk as hell, n u dunt feel well, but u still go

Bak 2 da bar. (Kaur 2007a, "Ek Glassy")

Her self-representation as an independent hardworking woman entitled to drinking and partying at the end of a busy week in "Peeney do" replies to bhangra songs normalizing drinking as a quintessential male Jat weakness,

Yo I need a drink

Yo need a drink

I'll be working all week

And I need a drink (that's right)

Aha ho ja sharabi (Let's get tipsy)

Aha ho ja sharabi (Let's get tipsy) (Kaur 2012, "Peeney Do")

In simultaneously replying to rap's misogyny through demystifying the stereotype of the easily available bad girl or whore by threatening to kick the male who dares to misbehave with her, she points to alternative subject positions available to women other than that of the 'the black queen' and the 'ho' (Reid-Brinkley 2008).⁸

Do all da rudeboyz, try n cht

U get sum attention n ur try n kiss

Betta keep ur hands of maa skurt

Cuz I will turn around and kik ur whr it hurts. (Kaur 2007a, "Ek Glassy")

⁸ The young clubgoers in Bakrania's book, similarly, refuse to fit into the stereotyped representation of the teetotaling, domesticated, reticent good Sikh/Asian girl even as they reject the sexualized position of the bad girl or whore who self-objectifies herself through wearing provocative attire and makes herself easily available to one and all (2013).

In her refusal to occupy the position of the sexualized object of the Jat's desire in the bhangra song and threatening to break the leg of the guy who dares to talk dirty, she suggests that strength, daredevilry, and violence are not the sole prerogative of the Sikh male,

Jo ladka bola gandhi baat

Tod ke rakh du uski laot

The guy who talks dirty

I will break his leg. (Kaur 2007a, "Ek Glassy")

In "Move your body" where she exhorts all 'sexy gals and boys' to dance, questions the idea of dancing in the club as an exclusively male pastime by legitimizing dancing as every woman's fundamental right,

O yeah all da sexy gals, all da sexy boys

(Got ya move ur - 3 body tonite) - 2 like this . . .

Move ur body baby - 3 *jab kudiye*

Move ur body baby, move ur body baby (u got to) *soni baliye*

(Got ya move ur - 3 body tonite) - 2 like this like this like this

Like this n that n this n that. (Kaur 2007b, "Move your Body")

While refusing to conform to the image of the fetishized object of the Jat's desire, she celebrates her own sexuality and inverts bhangra's gender imbalance by repositioning the male as an instrument for the gratification of her needs in "Dilli Wali Zalim Girlfriend",

Nachna bada ni tera kaim lagda (Your dancing is very pleasing)

Chakhna pauga tera taim lagda (I want to taste it but it will take some time)

Hey boy *zaalim dilli* is gonna beat to the drum

Hey boy I'm calling you

Won't you come and give me some

Hey boy won't you pick me up

Tu le mera naam (Call out my name)

Zaalim Delhi meri jaan (This evil Delhi is going to take my life). (Jazzy B and Kaur 2015, "Dilli Wali Zalim Girlfriend")

In expressing her desire for a 'sexy boy' in "Sexy Boy", she invokes the imagery of gangsta rap to displace the desirable female of the male rapper's imagination with that of the desirable male. Through voicing her choice of a desi guy, she speaks back to the allegedly sexist lyrics of Apache Indian's "Arranged Marriage" in which he fetishizes the '*soni kudi*' (beautiful girl) from the heart of Punjab by a conscious play on the lyrics of the male bhangra rapper's iconic song. The '*lafanga* (bad guy)' or gangster who is posited as an alterity to the girl who is "sweet like *jalebi*" in Apache Indian's song parodies gendered patriarchal Punjabi/Sikh norms in which a trace of 'wildness' is deemed desirable in a Jat male but not the Jat female,

Gimme a desi . . . a desi guy

Gimme a desi . . .

who looks so fly

I want a man that rocks my world cuz I need a gangsta

Don't know about you girl but I need a gangsta

Ek sona munda (A good-looking guy)

I need a gangsta *te thoda sa lafanga* (and who's bit of a cad) cuz I need a gangsta. (Kaur 2007c, "Sexy Boy")

Beginning with the choice of a stage name that retains her Sikh qualifier, Hard Kaur has never shied away from acknowledging her Sikh origins, which are accentuated by her insertion of Punjabi lyrics and use of Punjabi laced Hindi. In her more recent albums, her self-conscious referencing to specific Jat cultural and Sikh religious concepts has made her Sikh antecedents more pronounced. The titles of some of these songs allude to specific Punjabi literary tropes, Jat cultural codes, and Sikh religious imagery.

The song "Ranjha", the name of the male lover in the legendary Punjabi folk epic *Heer Ranjha* that has become a metaphor for the lover in the Punjabi popular imagination, may be viewed as a subversive reinscription of the Punjabi epic romance. Hard Kaur borrows the trope of the legendary love of Heer and Ranjha as a signifier of true love to redefine the role of the modern day Heer within hypermasculine Jat hierarchy. Her amused response to her male lover's reassuring her not to be afraid, "*Tu darr na kudiye ni. Tu darr na dudiye ni* (don't be afraid girl)", invokes the proverbial fearlessness of the Jat female not only to overturn the stereotype of the protective Jat but also to gain feminine agency,

Aanh.. di.. anything for the boy

Tu jo bhi bol (whatever you say)

This my lover boy

I loveem Hard Kaur

He see now, __ is clear

Aa gaya [he's here], save better,
get out here

I'm by your side or die

Jatti kabhi nahi dari (The Jat female is never scared)

Main tere naal khadi (I'm by your side)

Mera ranjha Deep Money (My Ranjha is Deep Money). (Hard Kaur with Deep Money 2015, "Ranjha")

In "*Sherni*", Hard Kaur appropriates the Sikh metaphor of the '*sher*' (lion) in her parodic play on the male braggadocio and swagger in rap music that equally addresses Jat hypermasculinity. She co-opts the Jat equivalent of the rap swagger called '*bakre bulan*,' a loud roar/call like 'Bruahhhhhhh' in bhangra boliyan often used by male singers to celebrate masculinity, in her own swaggering act to decouple it from Jat masculinity. At the same time, her assumption of the feminine equivalent '*sherni*' of the symbol of the *sher* or lion invokes the religious reinscription of the Sikh male as a courageous warrior by the tenth Guru Gobind Singh to lay a genetic claim to the Sikh warrior legacy in addition to the honorific of Kaur or Princess given to all Sikh women,

My name is Hard Kaur

I'm staying here

You hear?

KIA ... KIA

I got too much swagger in my DNA

Sherni hai, sherni hai, Sherni hai jatti (The Jat woman is a lioness)

Bol diya so bol diya main piche nahi hati (She speaks out when she needs to and does not go back on her word)

Aankh mila lo aur tuda lo (If you make eye contact, you are asking for getting broken)

Free mein apni haddi (your bone for free)

I am a champion. (Kaur 2016, "Sherni")

Hard Kaur was charged with sedition in 2019 for her naming the Indian Prime Minister a terrorist in her new song "Khalistan to Kashmir" (Kaur 2019) and her social media account was suspended for her equally vituperative charges against other right wing Hindu politicians (The Wire Staff 2019; Online Desk 2019). The controversial music video has provoked the anger of not only sympathizers of the Hindu party, but also of her former admirers who include Sikhs. Hard Kaur's repeated use of the word rape and obscene language in her social media posts and video has been justifiably criticized for their unparliamentary character. The wisdom of her charging powerful politicians with having committed heinous crimes without evidence and extending her open support to the Khalistani cause has been challenged and led to allegations of her receiving Pakistani support. However, her inversion of the idiom of rape standardized by male rappers to vociferate misogynist sentiments in order to draw parallels between rape as a symbol of hypermasculine anxiety in the sonic sphere of rap music and the political sphere has been overlooked. First of all, she frames her response to death and rape threats by sympathizers of the Hindu party within the hypermasculine idiom of rap in which rape constitutes the most brutal form of sexual violence through which hypermasculinity is defined,

"Why (are) you doing all these girly things? Like sedition charge, 'we're gonna rape you ... we're gonna kill you ... ' Come and fight like a man," she challenged the two veteran politicians. (quoted in TNN 2019)

The second emerges from the proverbial Sikh contempt for the attacker who lacks the courage to make a frontal attack as a dastardly feminine act unbecoming of a real man. Hard Kaur's veiled allusions to Sikh cultural norms in her earlier albums find a culmination in her declaration of her unambiguous commitment to the Khalistani cause in her new video.⁹

Thus, Hard Kaur adopts a hypermasculine bhangra genre to address the misogyny, sexism, and violence of rap to reverse the sexualized, reified Punjabi female of male desire in rap, bhangra, and Punjabi folksong through adopting a number of subject positions that are apparently contradictory. She rejects the binary construction of the idealized *soni kudi* or the good Punjabi/Sikh girl and the bad girl or whore in bhangra and rap music, respectively, to assume the subject position of the strong, independent, hardworking modern Punjabi female. However, she appropriates the features that have traditionally served to define Punjabi/Jat/Sikh masculinity and glorified in bhangra music from the Punjabi/Jat/Sikh male to constitute herself. She constructs this new Punjabi/Jat/Sikh woman through an amalgamation of the qualities of mental strength and courage associated with the Jatti (Jat female) or Sikh woman in the Punjabi popular imaginary and of the bad girl of bhangra who takes an undisguised delight in her beauty, femininity, and sexuality. In her return to rap resistivity in her new albums, she takes on both the Sikh and Hindu patriarchal regimes through invoking Sikh religious symbols and Punjabi cultural tropes.

⁹ Kaur marries the hypermasculinist imagery and language of rap with hypermasculine Sikh symbols in her album to invoke and affirm stereotyped representations of the bold, fearless, just Sikh warrior. Her braggadocio in challenging Hindu leaders, dissenting and name-calling, and open contempt for the oppressive regime echoes rather than interrogates the hypermasculine narrative of Khalistan. She places herself in opposition to the emasculated Hindu male through assuming the position of the hypermasculine warrior.

7. Conclusions

The space of Punjabi dance has traditionally been a strictly segregated space in which male and female performativity is regulated and disciplined by traditional gender norms and expectations. Since the 1980s, bhangra, classified as a Punjab imale dance and co-opted in the production of Punjabi ethnocultural identity in the state of Punjab and Asian/Punjabi/Sikh identity in the diasporas, gained unprecedented global visibility whereas female Punjabi dances remained marginalized. Not only is the space of bhangra production heavily male centric in its inability to make room for female participation except as consumers, but its lyrics are also highly masculinist, sexist, and casteist that perpetuate Punjabi/Jat/Sikh patriarchal structures and gender hierarchies through the reification of women as the good beloved and the bad whore. In their consumption of bhangra and embracing it as the signifier of Asian/Punjabi/Jat/Sikh identity to resist racist regimes, female clubgoers and musicians unwittingly accept its disturbing gender hierarchy. However, a number of female musicians have successfully interrogated Punjabi/Jat/Sikh patriarchies through refusing to conform to the idealized image of the demure, obedient, good Punjabi/Jat/Sikh girl by opting for diverse subject positions that include performing movements or playing instruments requiring strength and stamina, borrowing features of the bad girl through dancing, drinking, and visiting nightclubs, or by establishing themselves as successful singers to challenge patriarchal definitions of femininity. The bhangra rapper Taran Kaur Dhillon alias Hard Kaur, through her refusal to fit into the binary of the good or bad Sikh girl, foregrounds the disciplining of the female body implicit in the expectation of identification or disidentification with either subject position and carves out a new definition of femininity through blending elements of the masculine and feminine, the good and the bad girl in her self construction.

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Article

Disruptive Garb: Gender Production and Millennial Sikh Fashion Enterprises in Canada

Zabeen Khamisa

Religious Studies, University of Waterloo, Waterloo, ON N2L 3G1, Canada; zabeen.khamisa@uwaterloo.ca

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Abstract: Several North American Sikh millennials are creating online values-based fashion enterprises that seek to encourage creative expression, self-determined representation, gender equality, and ethical purchasing, while steeped in the free market economy. Exploring the innovative ways young Sikhs of the diaspora express their values and moral positions in the socio-economic sphere, one finds many fashionistas, artists, and activists who are committed to making Sikh dress accessible and acceptable in the fashion industry. Referred to as “Sikh chic”, the five outwards signs of the Khalsa Sikh—the “5 ks”—are frequently used as central motifs for these businesses (Reddy 2016). At the same time, many young Sikh fashion entrepreneurs are designing these items referencing contemporary style and social trends, from zero-waste bamboo kangas to hipster stylized turbans. Young Sikh women are challenging mainstream representations of a masculine Sikh identity by creating designs dedicated to celebrating Khalsa Sikh females. Drawing on data collected through digital and in-person ethnographic research including one-on-one interviews, participant observation, and social media, as well as fashion magazines and newsprint, I explore the complexities of this phenomenon as demonstrated by two Canadian-based Sikh fashion brands, Kundan Paaras and TrendySingh, and one Canadian-based Sikh female artist, Jasmin Kaur.

Keywords: Sikhs; Sikh women and gender; Sikh diaspora; Canadian Sikhs; Sikh millennials; Sikh chic; Sikh entrepreneur; Sikh values; Khalsa; Sikh fashion

1. Introduction

When exploring the innovative ways in which millennial Sikhs of the diaspora are expressing their religious identity and values in the socio-economic domain, it is hard to miss the plethora of young Sikh fashionistas, designers, models, bloggers, photographers, and activists who are committed to making Sikh dress stylish by way of the fashion industry. Referred to as the “Sikh look” (Gell 1996) or “Sikh chic” (Reddy 2016), the turban and the five outward signs required of the Khalsa Sikh, known as “the 5ks”—*kesh* (uncut hair); *kangha* (comb); *kirpan* (sword); *kachh* (cotton breeches); *kara* (steal or iron bangle)—are central motifs for the many fashion and accessory lines designed by young Sikhs in the 21st century. From beard oils to printed turbans, young Sikh fashion and accessory designers are blending religious garb styles with contemporary style and social trends, including zero-waste bamboo kangas and hipster-stylized printed turbans. Some scholars have highlighted how this growing phenomenon of Sikh chic has demonstrated how the creation of new strategies of branding of Khalsa Sikh identity in the global free market has contributed to the centering of a normative Sikh masculine identity in the Sikh mainstream and the broader public, mainly by way of the growing number of popular Khalsa Sikh male fashion designers and models in America and in the UK; in many cases, where South Asian women are depicted in fashion ads, their Sikh identity is rendered as invisible, as they may not be donning the 5 ks and are viewed as merely extras in these photoshoots (Reddy 2018, p. 188). However, there has been a simultaneous contemporary movement to feminize the Khalsa—via the establishment of new Sikh institutions, websites and blogs, and conversations in online chat groups—where Sikh

women discuss wearing the 5 ks or are shown wearing them, as well as the turban (Jakobsh 2015a). I suggest that exploring the recent development of the Sikh fashion industry in Canada serves as another avenue in which a small group of Sikh millennial women are making strides to feminize the Khalsa by creating designs that reflect a Khalsa Sikh feminine form. In doing so, I argue that their designs and fashion enterprises intertwine Sikh values and fashion, while engaging discourses around gender equality and Kaurhood/sisterhood, self-determined representation, intersectionality, diversity, and, in some cases, ethical purchasing.

I explore the complexities of this phenomenon as demonstrated by two Canadian-based Sikh fashion lines, Kundan Paaras and TrendySingh, and one Canadian-based Sikh female artist, Jasmin Kaur. In each case, each designer legitimizes their fashion enterprises by referencing shared—and commonly held—Sikh values. For this essay, I draw from data collected through digital and in-person ethnographic research, including one-on-one interviews, participant observation, and social media, as well as fashion magazines and newsprint. This study is part of my larger doctoral research about Sikh millennial innovators in Canada.

2. Sikh Chic or Khalsa Chic? The Canadian Context

In the “Epilogue” of her book *Fashioning the Diaspora: Beauty, Femininity South Asian American Culture* (2016), Vanita Reddy outlines a contemporary Sikh diasporic phenomenon: the ways in which male fashion entrepreneurs in America and Britain have been aestheticizing their Sikh bodies, what she terms “Sikh chic”. In the cases that inform Reddy’s discussion of Sikh chic, it is the normative Khalsa Sikh aesthetic that is stylized, produced, and commodified in the marketplace—that is emphasized. As such, the qualities that define Sikh chic presented by Reddy and how they operate in the marketplace are more reflective of the particular lived experiences of Sikh males and a historical trajectory that contributed to the construction of a normative Khalsa Sikh male identity.

While not all Sikhs maintain or identify with the full expression of the *amritidari* Khalsa Sikh dress (Singh 2018, p. 263), scholars have made note of the fact that the turban—by way of the turbaned Sikh male—has come to be the primary marker of Sikh identity (Jakobsh 2015a; Singh 2018). Of course, there are many factors that have contributed to this. More broadly, historical Sikh movements, such as the intrareligious transmission of Khalsa Sikh ideals undertaken by the Singh Sabha in the 20th century, included a marketing strategy that aided in the construction of a normative Sikh male identity (Oberoi 1994; Jakobsh 2003). A significant aspect of the Singh Sabha movement was that the many leaders and members of the Singh Sabha—mainly Sikh males—made notable use of the print technologies of the time to publish numerous books, newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets, in which writers defined the boundaries of what constituted a true Khalsa Sikh identity and practice, reflective of their own perceived ideals and experiences. In doing so, perhaps inadvertently, these writings propagated notions of the ideal Khalsa Sikh male. These writings contributed to establishing a normative Sikh male identity that, in some cases, still maintains itself today (though not necessarily under the banner of the Singh Sabha).

However, beyond the internal construction of normative Khalsa practices, the turban and the turbaned Khalsa Sikh male also function as the primary marker of Sikh identity and “Sikh-ness” in the North American socio-political public (Singh 2018, p. 262). As the case studies I will be exploring in this essay are rooted in the Canadian context, I situate my research in Reddy’s broader discussion of Sikh chic in the diaspora by making reference to Canadian examples.

Reddy identifies two functions of Sikh chic in the diaspora (Reddy 2018, p. 185; 2016, p. 209). The first function of Sikh chic is to address the already existing “capitalist orientalist fashion aesthetic of turban chic”, i.e., the cultural appropriation of the turban by non-Sikhs in the fashion industry (Reddy 2016, p. 184). Reddy pinpoints the rise of the Sikh chic industry as a politicized response to non-Sikh designer, Jean Paul Gautier, and his Spring 2013 menswear collection at Paris Fashion week, which featured non-Sikh models wearing his “Sikh-style” turban designs (Reddy 2016, p. 207). Accordingly, Sikh chic can be understood as a practice of creative agency enacted to claim ownership

and authority over the Khalsa Sikh aesthetic to ensure authentic self-representation in the fashion industry. As young Sikhs “take-up-space” in the fashion industry by filling top positions or creating businesses—whether as designers, photographers, models, make-up artists, etc.—they strive to own and curate segments of the industry and, in doing so, define what Sikh fashion is (Reddy 2016, p. 186). As I was beginning my own preliminary research on Sikh activists in Canada around this time and conducting digital ethnography on Instagram and Facebook, I was able to examine the negative impact Gaultier’s fashion show had on young Canadian Sikhs, as critiques and claims of inauthenticity were circulated online via global and transnational social networks. The development of this new Sikh expression in America and the UK was being felt in Canada, so much so that, just a few years later, Sikh Foundation of Canada released a short film on YouTube called “Sikhs in Fashion”, which included a history of the cultural appropriation of the turban, but also proudly displayed the many ways in which Sikhs are actively engaged in the global fashion industry (Sikh Foundation of Canada 2015). More recently, in 2018, there was another incident in which a non-Sikh designer, Gucci, designed a one-piece turban for \$790 that was being sold by Nordstrom. Prominent American Sikh scholar-activist Simran Jeet Singh, as well as several young Sikh fashion entrepreneurs including Turban&Beard, an American Sikh fashion brand, and TrendySingh, Canadian Sikh fashion line, directly and publicly condemned the Gucci product using their Instagram and Facebook accounts. Just a few months later, Gucci removed the product from sale.

The second function of Sikh chic is to maneuver the “historical and ongoing anti-Sikh sentiment and violence” and the “turban’s historical associations with criminalized, terrorist South Asian masculinity” in the diaspora (Reddy 2018, p. 185). Specific historical moments have contributed to these associations. Sikh immigrants of the diaspora have faced discrimination since their earliest arrival to America, Canada, the UK, and Europe (Tatla 1999; Basran and Bolaria 2003; Jacobsen and Myrvold 2011; Singh 2011). The disenfranchisement of early Sikh arrivals came in the form of systemically established restrictions in Canadian institutions such as immigration laws, (for example, the tragedy of the Komagata Maru in 1914) and various aspects of Canadian daily life, including employment, home- and land-ownership, and voting restrictions. Being visibly distinct and disruptive to the Canadian imagination, Khalsa Sikhs have been particularly targeted, facing restrictions on wearing the turban and the kirpan in the public sphere (Wayland 1997; Walton-Roberts 1998; Dhamoon 2013; Jakobsh 2012). In cases of restrictions on employment, *amritdhari* Sikhs were at times restricted in being able to wear their turbans at work. These restrictions were met with resistance from Sikhs, including many legal cases and activism in labor movements, advocating for religious accommodation in the workplace, all in the name of human rights. Many of the efforts made by Sikhs to advocate for the allowance of wearing a turban on the job, while strenuous, were met with great success and led to the eventual change of restrictions on workplace dress codes. A prominent example is the case of Baltej Singh Dhillon, a turbaned Sikh man who eventually became the first officer in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) in 1990 (Morlock 2018). Dhillon was initially met with great resistance—not just from the RCMP, as the dress code forbid beards and wearing a turban in place of the uniform hat, but also from many Canadians. Dhillon was faced with a lawsuit that was organized by members of the RCMP that raised over CAD 100,000 to challenge the case (Jaremko 1994). Supporters of the lawsuit managed to get 210,000 signatures for a petition protesting against Dhillon and changes to the RCMP uniform. In addition, several Canadian vendors sold merchandise, such as calendars, satirizing RCMP uniform changes and anti-Sikh, anti-turban accessories such as pins (CBC 2017; Jaremko 1994; Morlock 2018).

For Sikhs in Canada—and many other racialized minorities—these restrictions are not something of the distant past but are still faced and challenged today. One need only consider Bill 21, the recent ban on religious symbols in Quebec which passed in June 2019, where religious minorities who don religious headwear have been restricted from working as public servants in the province. Amrit Kaur, an educator, activist, and President of the World Sikh Organization in Quebec—a Canadian Sikh advocacy organization—became one of the public personalities advocating against Bill 21. As a young

millennial Sikh turbaned female, Amrit Kaur had to relocate to British Columbia as she would not be able to keep her job as a public school teacher due to the passing of the bill (CBC News 2019).

In the aftermath of 9/11, a wave of hate crimes and violence was directed toward racialized visible minorities, including Sikhs who were being mistaken for turbaned Osama Bin Laden supporters. At this time, there was a significant shift in the lived experiences of the Sikh diaspora identified by numerous scholars who highlight the contemporary experiences of Sikh youth (Jacobsen and Myrvold 2015; Nijhawan and Arora 2013; Nijhawan 2016; Singh 2018; Singh et al. 2018; Verma 2006; Verma 2011). As a response to the injustices faced by the Sikh community, many young Sikh students and professionals, especially in America and Canada, felt a great sense of responsibility to educate their coreligionists, non-Sikh peers, colleagues, and the general public about Sikh religion and culture. In producing this new public outreach strategy, new networks, Sikh organizations, and websites were established, incidentally centering their activities around the Khalsa identity. For example, one of the more popular initiatives included hosting public turban-tying days in parks and on university campuses, to teach the significance of the turban, how to wrap it, and have them try it on themselves (Gill 2007; Singh 2018). In these moments, strategies to dispel xenophobic and racist stereotypes sometimes reinforce and reproduce the gender normativity of the Khalsa Sikh male, while such initiatives are conducted in the name of adequate self-representation and Sikh rights. Similarly, centering aspects of the Khalsa Sikh identity, such as the turban, in the fashion industry can be understood as an attempt to diffuse the fear and challenge stereotypes held in public perception of the Sikh tradition and make the turban appear “cool” and fashionable. As Reddy suggests, Sikh chic “refashions the violable, violent, and non-national Sikh male body into a fashionable, diasporic citizen-subject” (Reddy 2018, p. 185).

The development of the Sikh chic market can be understood as resulting from a religio-political response from Sikhs to the xenophobic discourse that equates a turban-wearing brown-skinned male with a national threat. The need to make the turban appear cool and trendy functions as a corrective to the xenophobic views held by some Canadians (and other publics) and offers a means to create dialogue around something that can otherwise seem like a barrier. It is important to note that a similar—and perhaps more comprehensive—strategy to use fashion as a means of addressing racism and xenophobia has been used by Muslims globally, particularly in the post 9/11 context, as a response to Islamophobia and cultural appropriation. Morlock reminds us of the following:

... religious minorities use dress to communicate their needs and goals to the larger Canadian society, in the process pushing the scope and advancing the parameters of human rights for all Canadians. So doing challenges the common but false narrative of Canada as a religiously neutral nation without many Canadians’ own equally fervently held belief system and venerated practices, and of religious minorities as an inherently threatening force to inviolable Canadian values ... In the hands of determined individuals, these items of dress can then become vehicles for legislative and cultural revisioning ... [D]ress functions as a means of communication within and between religious minority communities and the larger Canadian society. (Morlock 2018, pp. 3–4)

The formation of Sikh chic is one of the many strategies that have been implemented to address the limits placed on Sikh dress in the Canadian public sphere, including advocating for religious accommodations that allow Sikhs to wear the 5 ks in various forms of employment. One such Sikh that exemplifies this self-reflexive strategy is none other than Jagmeet Singh, the federal leader of the New Democratic Party (NDP) and also a turbaned Sikh male.

The Canadian political arena has, in some ways, functioned as a fashion runway for Jagmeet Singh, who has become a fashion icon. From postings on his Instagram and Facebook accounts to fashion shows and magazines, Singh is often making model-like poses and is often noticed for his colorful turbans and three-piece tailored suits (Toronto Life 2018). For Singh, wearing his Khalsa Sikh dress this way was an intentional campaign strategy. In their Special Issue Stylebook Fall 2013, Toronto Life selected Singh as one of “Toronto’s Most Stylish” sartorial superstars. In the magazine, he is

quoted as saying that his wardrobe staples are “Suits from Trend Custom Tailors and Garrison Bespoke, plus colourful turbans and pocket squares. Fashion is both social armour and a barrier breaker if I’m wearing a bright turban, for example, it’s a conversation starter” (Miranda 2013, p. 56). Shortly after the release of the Stylebook, Singh provided more context for the photoshoot in the magazine on his Instagram feed stating the following:

... I was born in Toronto, I love the city and Toronto Life is one of my favourite magazines. For this year’s 2013 Fall/Winter Stylebook Toronto Life chose me as one of Toronto’s Most Stylish. I have to give a huge shout out to the folks at Toronto Life for capturing what an amazingly diverse city Toronto is. Out of the 21 most stylish people Toronto Life chose 8 racialized people. “They featured 2 people of colour on their cover page and 1 person who is proudly wearing his articles of faith. This is pretty amazing given what’s going on in Quebec right now with the proposed Quebec Charter of Values, which would ban articles of faith in public places. While one province is rejecting diversity, the other province is embracing and celebrating it. I’m so proud of my city! Thank you Toronto Life! I always said I wanted to encourage people to foster a courageous sense of their self-worth. I hope I am doing my little party to demonstrate you can boldly display your identity and still gain recognition. Sat Sri Akal: Truth is Infinite. (Singh 2013)

Singh’s efforts to educate the public about his turban and Sikh identity has remained constant throughout this leadership and campaigning, sometimes out of direct response to firsthand experiences of racism and xenophobia and, at the other times, in direct response to Bill 21 (National Post 2019). In a GQ magazine, he was asked more directly about how his style became such an important part of his political career. In response, he noted the following:

So throughout my life, I realized that people would stare at me because I stood out. Some may feel awkward about that. Being stared at makes you feel self-conscious. I felt that if people are going to stare at me, I might as well give them something to look at. [laughs] I saw it as a chance to transform an awkward situation into an opportunity to show people who I really am. I wanted to show that I was confident and sure of myself—that I wasn’t afraid of who I was. That confidence fought off some of the stereotypes and prejudice I encountered, and I started to develop my style more when I realized I could tear down some of these stereotypes. A beard and a turban sometimes conjure up negative associations, but if you see someone with a lime colored, bright orange, or pink turban, it disarms people’s stereotypical notions of this image and it disarms people from those stereotypes. It became a way for me to extend my platform as a politician. Because I was considered stylish, with these colorful turbans and well-cut suits and showing myself as confident person, I could use that as a tool to talk about things like unfairness, injustice, poverty, and inequality in the public sphere.

(Nocos 2017)

Though not the focus of this paper, I mention Singh here because he is the most publicly recognized Sikh in Canada at the moment and is understood as being very fashionable in his Sikh expression. In Singh’s case, we can come to see how Sikh chic directly impacts the political sphere at the federal level in Canada. It is important to acknowledge that these experiences and events have not had a homogenous response. Making the Khalsa aesthetic fashionable in the 21st century is a religio-politicized response to the broader systemic barriers Khalsa Sikhs have faced in public life. It is merely one strategy in a multi-pronged approach in the politics of recognition and representation for Sikhs in the diaspora, on the one hand, and contributes to a modern mainstreaming of the Khalsa Sikh identity in the diaspora, on the other. These religio-political responses are rooted in an understanding of core Sikh values including *sewa* (selfless community service), *sarbat da ballah* (the well-being of others), and *miri piri* (the non-dualism and integration of spirituality and politics in daily life). These core Sikh values have operated as a framework for Sikh engagement in volunteerism (in and beyond the gurdwara);

politics, social activism, and philanthropy, as I suggest, also function as a guide for millennial Sikh entrepreneurs and values-based business (Desjardins and Desjardins 2009; Dusenbery and Tatla 2009; Jakobsh and Walton-Roberts 2016).

3. Sikh Values-Based Fashion Enterprises

Sikhs of the millennial generation are making innovative social, political, and economic contributions to establishing new modes of religious expression. Numerous second- and third-generation Sikhs are translating their religious and social values into new cultural productions that engage the economic domain, such as the fashion industry. From becoming multi-billion-dollar YouTube sensations (for example, Lilly Singh; See Bhagat 2016) to designing floral printed turbans, young Sikh entrepreneurs are expressing their religious identity, principles, and moral positions in the free market. In establishing new modes of religious expression in the form of innovative solutions to society's most persistent and complex social and environmental problems, young adult Sikhs are striving to create social change at varying scales.

Although seemingly commonplace initiatives, some scholars of religion argue that it is precisely in creating and participating in such socio-economic activities/activism that religious adherents may demonstrate faith as living practice. In other words, actions reflect guiding religious principles that are imbued with personal meaning and that impact their own spiritual lives (Bender 2003; McGuire 2008). While the ways in which millennial Sikhs engage the socio-economic sphere are extensive, the ventures discussed in this paper emerge specifically at the intersection of religion, fashion, design, feminism, and values-based entrepreneurship—or what is also referred to as social entrepreneurship.

Defining values-based business and social entrepreneurship has been a task taken up by both practitioners and researchers. While there is contention in defining these terms, scholars and practitioners alike recognize that these ventures are situated at the cross-sector of the public and private domains, operating within the social economy. In contrast to business entrepreneurship that maintains a bottom-line of financial gain alone, the bottom line of social entrepreneurship is threefold: financial, social, and environmental—where every effort is fostered and focused on the social mission of the initiative, and profits are mainly reinvested into the program. What is valued by such enterprises is the socio-political benefit their ventures provide, rather than simply achieving economic stability or profit. Religion is one of many major thematic ideologies that continue to inform values-driven entrepreneurship (Spear 2010, p. 32). In faith-based social entrepreneurship, guiding principles held by religious entrepreneurs motivate and align with the call-to-action and mission that are characteristic of values-based entrepreneurship. Sikh values such as *seva*, *sarbat da ballah*, and *miri pir* (as defined above) function as guiding principles for Sikh entrepreneurship, as noted earlier.

An underlying aspect of the functions of Sikh chic is that young Sikh fashion entrepreneurs believe that it is possible to create shifts in the public perception of Sikhs and broader socio-political change by engaging the (digital) market. The production of the Khalsa Sikh aesthetic in the modern fashion and accessory industry by Sikh entrepreneurs is framed and legitimized by Sikh values, and perhaps is another case through which to critically explore “a Sikh spirit of capitalism” (Mooney 2012, p. 422). McQuilten discusses how creative social enterprises, such as art- and fashion-enterprises, function as means for critical and political engagement with the socio-economic sphere (McQuilten 2017). She points out that “[o]f equal importance to the economic dimension of social enterprise is that these types of organizations provide, other non-monetary benefits for the artists involved, including the opportunity to make art, a space in which to explore and address issues of cultural identity in a changing global context, as well as skill development and participation in civic life” (McQuilten 2017, p. 71). McQuilten goes on to say that “[t]his generation of artistic and social value links to a range of other cultural movements emerging as counter-hegemonic practices such as the maker movement, ethical consumption, craft and social engaged art.” Inclusive of McQuilten's argument, the cases to be discussed in this article also demonstrate the ways fashion enterprises become a means through which religious individuals can engage with the politics of religious and gender identity production,

intra-religious dynamics, and cultural representation while using current technologies and trends of the market. It is imperative for a fashion social enterprise to address complex societal problems within and beyond the fashion industry. That said, Sikh fashion social enterprises may not only address Sikh issues, but may also address broader social, political, economic, and environmental concerns. Sikh values frame the ways in which Sikh fashion entrepreneurs engage contemporary commodity discourses. For example, we can see the intertwining of Khalsa Sikh aesthetics, Sikh environmental justice, and anti-plastic commodity discourse in Turban&Beard selling of plastic-free bamboo kangas. Participating in the free market as social innovators, young Sikhs continue to expand the parameters of what constitutes as *Sikhi* in practice and the role their faith has in social change. Young Sikh social entrepreneurs are not satisfied with the status quo, but rather look for a deeper meaning and creative engagement within their everyday lives, work, and social contexts.

4. “Feminizing the Khalsa”: New Market Segments of Sikh Chic

It is important to note that gender constructs are subjective, as is Sikh identity, and there is “no single way of being a Sikh. Punjabi Sikhs frequently move between different sub-identities according to their situation in life ... A mona [‘clean-shaven’] Sikh of yesterday could be a *keshadhari* [‘unshorn’] today and might be an *amridhari* [‘those who have performed the Khalsa enthronement ceremony’] tomorrow ... Therefore, to think of the five categories of Sikhs as ‘predetermined’ or ‘fixed’ permanently ... might be misleading” (Singh 2018, p. 263). Despite this diversity, it is still the Khalsa Sikh male donning the 5 ks and the turban that functions as the primary and normative identity marker of “being Sikh”, centering the lived experiences of Sikh males for reasons stated earlier in this discussion (Jakobsh 2015a). Without question, the authoritative Khalsa Sikh male identity has been largely reproduced in the fashion industry by Sikh male fashion entrepreneurs—by way of visual representation and by name. For example, many of the Sikh fashion entrepreneurs have named their fashion brands with some sort of play on words with the Sikh name Singh (lion), most commonly given to Sikh males (Jakobsh 2014, p. 595). Acknowledging this phenomenon begs the question: how are Sikh women being represented in the Sikh chic industry and by Sikh fashion entrepreneurs?

The limits on the discussions about Sikh chic and the focus on the Khalsa Sikh male aesthetic has more to do with the cases that scholars have focused on in their analysis than what is actually reflected in the market today. While Reddy gives us a strong theoretical foundation to understand Sikh chic, the Sikh chic industry has expanded and grown exponentially into a global, transnational, and digital phenomenon. The commodification of the Khalsa Sikh identity via fashion entrepreneurs has influenced how young Sikhs of all genders purchase, wear, and talk about the 5 ks in the 21st century. As the Sikh chic industry has grown in influence and as young Sikhs continue to participate in the modern economy as fashion entrepreneurs, new niche market segments have formed. So too have new ways of understanding how Sikh identity, values, and commodity discourses intertwine in the free marketplace and how they have become more salient. A discussion about all of the new possible market segments of Sikh chic would be far too extensive to outline in this article. Instead, I will focus on the ways in which young Sikh women in Canada are challenging the mainstream representations of a masculine Sikh identity, by creating fashion designs dedicated to celebrating the Khalsa Sikh female aesthetic, in all of its forms.

In her article “Feminizing the Khalsa: Text, narrative, and image within the virtual realm”, Doris Jakobsh discusses the ways in which “a small minority” of Sikh women are responding to the notion that “Sikh women have not ‘represented’ Sikhs and Sikhism” (Jakobsh 2015a, p. 190). While the Khalsa Sikh identity has been often represented by men, young Sikh women are challenging the mainstream representation of a masculine Sikh identity (Jakobsh 2012, 2015a, 2015b). Drawing from Anastasia Karaflogka and Peter Mandaville, Jakobsh makes the case that the internet easily allows for new spaces to be created in which subjective Sikh discourse about identity can take place (Jakobsh 2015a, p. 191). She examines “the online discourse surrounding the question of Sikh women’s identity, particularly with regard to women and turbans” in spaces such as websites, blogs, web archives, and online chat

rooms (p. 192). I suggest that the free market is another avenue in which the subjective religious can operate and that the fashion industry is another platform within which we see young Sikh women attempting to “feminize the Khalsa” (Jakobsh 2015a).

One possibility may be due to the new digital marketplace. In a neoliberal context and given the growth of the creative digital/craft gig-economy, several e-commerce platforms for digital stores and retail-point-of-sales systems have developed that help facilitate small businesses and pop-up shops, making it easier for independent artist to sell their products online. A few major examples include Shopify, Etsy, and Square. Such online platforms are marketed to millennials who perhaps may have multiple sources of income or side-hustles, including their own small shop, but still are unable to afford to open up an in-person store. Whether one is successful or not, it has become much easier to create a low-risk online store. In Canada, for instance, there are several female Sikh fashion entrepreneurs who have created online shops to sell their designs for Sikh women.

The creation of new fashion lines dedicated to the needs of Sikh women who don the 5ks segments the turban market, reaching potentially new audiences, and is perhaps reflective of a growing demand as more Sikh women are wearing turbans. However, it is important to note that while there is a general increase in the number of women wearing turbans in the diaspora, it is still the case in Canada that it is not the norm for Sikh women to wear the turban.

Jakobsh identifies themes in online discourse around Sikh women’s identity: seeking legitimacy, the search for historical validation, and meaning-making in the feminization of the turban (Jakobsh 2015a). In the feminization of the Sikh chic market, I suggest that the discourse around Sikh female identity is translated in the marketing of fashion brands and the production of gendered Khalsa attire and ad campaigns. For example, one of the ways Sikh female identity is represented in the marketplace is by the use of the Sikh female name Kaur (princess) for business and/or product names, in contrast to the many Sikh male fashion icons and designers who brand their businesses with a play-on-words of the name Singh (lion), as mentioned earlier. Sikh fashion designed for female turbaned Sikhs contributes to the movement to make Sikh women more visible.

For the three Canadian-based Sikh fashion enterprises that make up the case studies for this discussion, I argue that their designs and fashion enterprises intertwine Sikh values, fashion, and business, while engaging discourses around gender equality and Kaurhood/sisterhood, authenticity and self-determined representation, intersectionality, diversity, and, in some cases, ethical purchasing.

5. Case Studies: Canadian-Based Sikh Female Fashion

5.1. Kundan Paaras (Instagram: @KundanPaaras)

Originally based in Toronto, Kundan Paaras is a fashion line designed by Sikh women, for Sikh women, which has become an international brand that is available in London and New York. The Sikh female designers—Laveleen and Gagan Kaur—are almost inseparable best friends—or “two sisters”, as they often refer to themselves. Lavleen and Gagan have designed a couture-like brand, all handmade and custom tailored to fit their buyers. They draw inspiration from their ancestral roots in Punjab and their travels, including their residence in Korea. On their website store—which has recently been removed from Shopify (though they still have an active tumblr account: <https://kundanpaaras-blog.tumblr.com/>)—they state that their designs are inspired from “the majestic royal courts of the Punjab” as well as “contemporary silhouettes of Asia”. In total, they have managed to create three different collections, all modeled by young Sikh women who are often their own friends.

On 30 November 2013, they launched their first Fall/Winter collection and hosted a fashion show at the National Ballet School in downtown Toronto, which I attended. Their first collection was modeled only by young Sikh women, some of whom were donning stylized elements of the 5ks and uniquely designed turbans that matched their clothing designs. The mandate of the designers of Kundan Paraas was reflected in their support of other prominent Sikh millennial female artists from the Greater Toronto Area, who collaborated in organizing the event and performed during the fashion show. While none

of these artists wore the turban, they did maintain other elements of the 5 ks, including kesh and their kara. Some of the Sikh female artists who performed included the now-famous spoken-word poet Rupri Kaur; Keerat Kaur, a multi-media artist and singer; and singer Selena Dhillon. While in the audience, I got the impression that, as a collective, this network of young Sikh women was establishing their presence as a new generation of leaders. Each audience member was given a small fashion look book that included a biography listing of each of the Sikh women who helped put the show together, including make-up artists, hair stylists, and the DJ, emphasizing not only the strong network being established in the region, but also how the fashion show functioned as a platform of recognition of the creative entrepreneurial spirit of this network. In another way, the designers of Kundan Paaras maintain a transnational sense of this Kaurhood in that ten percent of the proceeds from ticket sales from the fashion show were donated to widowed women's programming in Punjab.

The central message the designers hope to convey in their designs and shows is that the turban or dastar is a royal crown. They emphasize that young Sikh women should be proud of their identities and the ways in which they express their individual religiosity, declaring their intentions on their website through statements such as "Sikhi & the Royal Crown: The Dastar. This is our pulse: Young Sikh women proudly living and thriving, with their Sikhi loudly displayed on their head and body. Kundan Paaras celebrates the Sikh armour and Sikh women in all their righteousness. From their hair on your body, to the dastar on your head, wear your identity with pride sistas, and remember, you were born a queen." For Lavleen and Gagan Kaur, creating Kundan Paaras is an "exploration of spirituality, politics, travel and the arts".

5.2. Trendy Singh (Instagram: @TrendySingh)

A collaborative project between a group of friends living in Calgary, Alberta, TrendySingh designs and sells printed turbans online with a signature floral print design. TrendySingh claims to be a social enterprise and is the only company of its sort in the region ([Asian Heritage Foundation n.d.](#)). Social enterprises, or values-based business, is a third-way approach to the private–public spheres of society, where generating profit—though necessary to fund such initiatives—comes second to meeting the social needs of citizens ([Quarter et al. 2009](#)). Rooted in Sikh values of *seva* (selfless community service) and equality, TrendySingh engages discourses around gender equality, as well as ethical purchasing. For designer and business manager, Jenn Nguyen, starting a fashion social enterprise based on Sikh values is a reflection of her own deep admiration for the Sikh faith, and her Sikh friends. When I spoke with Nguyen in an interview, she said that while she did not grow up in the Sikh faith, the fact that "Sikh" is defined as learner, deeply resonated with her own religious upbringing as a Catholic, and she has invested significant time in learning about the Sikh faith, engaging in Sikh practices, and becoming involved in Sikh institutions as a volunteer.

A significant aspect of TrendySingh's designs is that their printed turbans are presented as gender neutral, carrying the same designs for Kauras and Singhs. After discussing the ideation process behind the fashion enterprise with Nguyen, she mentioned to me that the initial reason she designed a floral printed turban was because many of her Sikh friends were experiencing discrimination in every day public spaces, such as on their daily bus commute, and that the floral turbans could act as an ice breaker for onlookers, perhaps encouraging strangers to ask questions about the turban (Interview). In an interview with an online culture magazine, Nguyen states, "There are so many misconceptions and racism towards Sikhs, especially after 9/11. People associate them with terrorists and that type of thing . . . the turban represents standing up for oppression, and I believe that is universal for everyone" ([Vern Magazine 2018](#)).

Nguyen also mentioned that her initial designs were meant for her female Sikh friends who felt their needs were not being met and that their experiences were being underrepresented. Holding degrees in art design, business management, and education, Nguyen did some market research and realized that the contemporary turban fashion market was primarily targeting turbaned Sikh males. Nguyen expressed an understanding that, while not all Sikhs wear turbans, those who do, are mostly

Sikh males. However, in marketing the printed turbans, Nguyen wanted to promote gender neutrality. As such, both Sikh men and Sikh women are presented as wearing the turbans on TrendySingh's website (which has since been removed from the internet) and social media profiles. Nguyen made it clear that presenting a more gender-neutral look was more in-line with Sikh egalitarian principles. TrendySingh has also produced a series of instructional videos on how to tie a turban in various ways that reflect current trends and has used Sikh male and female models as the instructors. These videos can be found on YouTube and Instagram. That being said, in the various ways TrendySingh markets itself, it also contributes to the production and circulation of *Sikhi* in the digital marketplace.

As a social enterprise, TrendySingh donates all earnings to pre-existing Sikh services, including Khalsa Aid, Sikh Relief, Nanak Naam, and the World Sikh Organization. In this regard, not only is the production of these printed turbans an act of *sewa*, according to Nguyen, the purchasing of them is also an act of *sewa*, as customers will be contributing to Sikh social services. For Nguyen, choosing to create a social enterprise is a more ethical approach to engaging the market, and she emphasizes that the priority should be on Sikh values, providing service to the Sikh community, and representing the Sikh community in the best way.

5.3. Jasmin Kaur (Instagram: @Jusmun)

Unlike Kundan Paaras and TrendySingh, which are both fashion brands, my third case study is a cultural creative by the name of Jasmin Kaur, who resides in British Columbia. A poet, an activist, a community organizer, a model, an illustrator, and a designer, Jasmin Kaur is a Sikh millennial Instagrammer and is a master of the contemporary gig-economy. While Jasmin holds a diverse portfolio, it is her design of a collection of graphic print t-shirts that caught my attention on my perusal of Instagram. Jasmin Kaur sells her t-shirts on RedBubble.com (<https://www.redbubble.com/people/jusmun/shop>), a website dedicated to selling works of independent artists. A few of her graphic print illustrations depict individual Sikh women wearing colorful turbans. Several of her designs have slogans such as “decolonize your body”, “decolonize your femininity”, and “the diversity of sisterhood”. One of Jasmin Kaur's most circulated illustrations is of three young Sikh women standing together—each with different characteristics, including different skin tones. One is wearing a colorful dastaar, while another has her hair in braids. One of the Sikh women in the illustration is holding a baseball bat, and one is wearing a sports jersey. Above the illustration is the caption “Support your sister”.

During an interview with Jasmin Kaur, she said that the inspiration behind her illustrations was to challenge the cliques that have been forming around the way young Sikh women choose to practice their *Sikhi*. The illustration described above reflects the idea that while not all Sikh women may look like her, i.e., wear a turban or keep their *kesh*, nonetheless, they are her Sikh sisters, and they should have each other's backs in a society that does not often support their existence (Interview). Kaur went on to say that her illustrations capture her desire to create spaces where Sikh women feel safe to be who they are, regardless of their identity and how they choose to practice their faith. As the “Support your sisters” image circulates online, via Kaur's Instagram and Twitter accounts, it is now often coupled with a poem of hers:

scream
so that one day
a hundred years from now
another sister will not have to
dry her tears wondering where
in history she lost her voice
(Jasmin Kaur)

In advocating for a Kaurhood through this image, Jasmin Kaur is also capturing the subjective: not all Sikh and not all Kaur experiences are the same. Similar to her co-religionists in this study, Kaur frames

her lifestyle, professional activism, and creative pursuits like these graphic t-shirt illustrations, through her own understanding of Sikh feminist values that are rooted in the Sikh notion of *miri piri*. As Jasmin Kaur indicated, if the spiritual and political are intertwined, and Sikhs are required to stand up against injustice and help take care of others, then it is her duty to address the systemic oppressions in society and acknowledge the intersectional realities Sikh women experience. For Jasmin Kaur, the Sikh *dastaar* represents a long political history of Sikhs challenging corrupt leadership, but that often Sikh women's experiences are ignored both by Sikh men and broader society. According to Kaur, as Sikh women have not been as visible—both in not traditionally wearing the 5 ks, as well as not visible in Sikh institutional leadership roles—the stories and experiences of Sikh women are not often heard or represented.

6. Conclusions

While there has been a long historical tradition of constructing a normative Khalsa Sikh male aesthetic, young Sikh women in the 21st century are challenging the mainstream representation of masculine Sikh identities that are made more visible today in the Sikh fashion industry or what has been referred to as Sikh chic. Contemporary movements to feminize the Khalsa have predominately formed online but have more recently been taken up in the economic domain. Millennial Sikh female entrepreneurs in Canada are creating Sikh values-based fashion enterprises to disrupt normativity in Sikh communities, the fashion industry, and broader society by creating new platforms of self-representation through fashion designs that reflect the lived experiences of Khalsa Sikh women and a new-found Kaurhood among this younger generation in Canada. Overall, this study contributes to an anthropological theory of Sikh values expressed in the contemporary digital marketplace and in the Canadian social economy.

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