

Article

# Autoethnography: A Potential Method for Sikh Theory to Praxis Research

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**Abstract:** The application of autoethnographic research as an investigative methodology in Sikh studies may appear relatively novel. Yet the systematic analysis in autoethnography of a person's experience through reflexivity and connecting the personal story to the social, cultural, and political life has synergy with the Sikh sense-making process. Deliberation (vichhar) of an individual's experience through the embodied wisdom of the Gurū (gurmat) connecting the lived experience to a greater knowing and awareness of the self is an established practice in Sikhi. This article explores autoethnography as a potential research method to give an academic voice to and capture the depth of the lived experiences of Sikhs: first, by articulating the main spaces of synergy of autoethnography with gurmat vichhar; second, discussing common themes such as inclusivity of disregarded voices, accessibility to knowledge creation, relational responsibility, and integrity in storytelling common to both autoethnography and gurmat vichhar. In conclusion, the autoethnographic approach has the means to illuminate nuances in understanding Sikhi that is transformative and familiar to the ancestral process of how Sikhs have made sense of themselves and the world around them.

**Keywords:** Sikh; autoethnography; lived experience; reflexivity; gurmat; diaspora; pandemic

## 1. Introduction

This essay aimed to evaluate the inherent subjective nature and flexibility of autoethnography as a potential methodology in Sikh Studies, in particular, in researching the lived experiences of Sikhs across the globe. Autoethnography is a narrative form of writing and research that is self-reflective, introspective, and “places the self within the social context” (Reed-Danahay 1997) to convey familiarity and meaning to readers by connecting the “personal to the cultural and political” (Ellis 2004, p. 37) while confronting the authority and privilege of the author. Sikhi<sup>1</sup>, as opposed to the “colonial construct” of Sikhism the religion (Mandair 2013, p. 5), is a term used by Sikhs to describe a way of living that involves continuous learning and sense making. Sikhi uses deliberation (vichhar) of personal experience through the embodied wisdom of the Gurū (gurmat) to gain a greater knowing and awareness of the self. The foregrounding of personal experience and use of reflexivity to unveil new understanding is common in autoethnography and Sikhi and would benefit further exploration.

The catalyst for this line of thought came during a period of self-reflection beginning on 11 March 2020 following the World Health Organisation (WHO) classification of COVID-19 as a pandemic, which resulted in a nationwide lockdown (World Health Organisation 2020). The private celebration of Vaisakhi, April 2020, was a stark contrast to the vibrant mass celebrations on the 550th birth anniversary of the first Sikh master Gurū Nānak (1469–1539) held in 2019.

<sup>1</sup> For detailed history of Sikhi and ‘Sikhism’ see A Singh Mandair’s work in *Sikhism: A guide for the perplexed*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Being in the midst of a pandemic has shifted everyday norms for many, including how religion is practiced in the collective and public spaces. Faith communities all over the world are limited in the ways they can congregate to celebrate, meditate, and pray (Paras 2020). The restricted access to places of worship has raised the question for many that have relied heavily on traditional institutions for worship, on what a connection to their faith and community may look like going forward (Bentzen 2020). I, like many others, had to go through a sense-making process: What is my experience of this period? How do I adapt in these unprecedented times? It prompted a review of the way in which nurturing a connection with myself and the Sikh teachings differed pre-lockdown in my home and in shared community spaces. My thoughts during this period were recorded in my journal and are shown as an extract below<sup>2</sup>.

*April 2020*

*I have varied experiences when it comes to marking Sikh festivals and events. Growing up, I remember taking the morning off school and attending the Gurduara with my dad. Later in the evening there was always lots of food of the fried variety, like hand made samosas and pakoras, (these were the days before filo pastry spring rolls). As an adult I also experienced living solo in cities where I was the only visible Sikh and with the nearest Gurduara a 3 to 4 h drive, so I guess the lockdown was not an entirely new experience. I had been working for a while on making sense of what religion and faith really meant to me. What really matters? (I feel now) is the intention or unsung force behind how things are done. Getting intentional is important, thoughts/words/actions, conscious or otherwise, impact at the particle level, such that an action may appear the same at the surface but can provide very different responses. Confession time: I often rush through when I recite a prayer before eating, during the lockdown I noticed I was a bit more deliberate in my prayer, there was no change in the words I used but I felt grateful and often added a spontaneous 'thank-you' prayer at the end of the meal.*

*So, is there a 'right' way of doing things? and if so, what makes it 'right' as opposed to a 'wrong' way of doing things? Can I map the process or create a checklist to ensure a good outcome? Is a checklist my ego's way of asserting control? Does a checklist deny and override my intuition? If yes, then how much external guidance and structure is necessary to still enable my intuition to carry forward my actions with integrity?*

Sikhi has slowly been infused into the fabric of my body home through music and Gurbani. My brick home lovingly amplifies what is created within it and my close networks have formed as an extension of that. Through my conversations with others, I recognize my privileges. I live in a safe, comfortable, spacious environment. I am able bodied and autonomous. I have the skill, ability, and time to read, research, and ponder gurbani, and play and sing gurbani kirtan. All of these have made the lockdown transition only a minor glitch in the 'matrix', where, to my five senses, everything appears the same but I *know* something has shifted in the fabric that makes up my world.

## 2. Background

It is on this backdrop that I examined autoethnography as a research method and its synergy with researching Sikhi from the window of lived experience, defined here as the "personal knowledge about the world gained through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events rather than through representations constructed by other people" (Chandler and Munday 2011).

Research that uses any number of methods to make meaning of religion from its ideas, thoughts, and scripture alone often provides a partial truth as theory and praxis diverge in the communities

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<sup>2</sup> I have integrated meaningful or demonstrative extracts to provide rich text and imagery in this essay. They are from my journal and contribute toward a part of my doctoral research into gurbani kirtan for which I am currently using the autoethnographic method.

that use it (Harvey 2014, p. 83). In comparison, the lived experience advocates a level of impartiality toward the study of religion from practice and not simply fixed to the contents of scriptures or doctrines (McGuire 2008, p. 185).

Sikhi has a traditional sense-making process that can be traced back from the Sikh Gurū period to present times. The lived experiences of Sikhs in history are memorialized in the *ardas*<sup>3</sup>, a prayer concluding the morning and evening recitations of *bani*, a collection of musico-poetic passages that are read or sung as a fixed prayer. The Sikh sense-making process is situated in the lived experience and involves a reflexive practice (Mandair 2013, p. 134). Similarly, in autoethnography the foregrounding of self is inherent: to understand and interpret the lived experience of others, relative to one's own position located in the culture. Our experiences unquestionably shape how we view the world yet should not be the only source upon which we construct our understanding of it. However, presenting a background on the relevant aspects of our values, privileges, and assumptions helps the reader to follow the threads of new knowledge creation (Greenbank 2003).

Autoethnographers approach their research from different orientations including performative, musical, poetic, visual, and narrative representations (Roulston 2018). It is impractical to apply the same criteria to all forms of autoethnography, thereby making it difficult to determine the rigor of the research, a fact not missed by critics of autoethnography. Developing a definitive criterion also risks recreating the foundationalism and inflexibility found in traditional positivist and empirically based research.

When undertaking research, autoethnographers have a set of shared “priorities, concerns, and ways of doing research” (Adams et al. 2015, p. 26). These design features when doing autoethnographic projects have two main spaces of synergy within Sikhi's established philosophical undertaking of *gurmat vichhar*. By its nature, *gurmat vichhar* includes a foregrounding of personal experience and use of reflexivity, which is also present in ways of doing autoethnography. In addition, there is an overlap with the relational responsibility in crafting stories and creating collaborative knowledge that is accessible to the communities researched. Finally, both exist as forms of resistance with the intent to shift power dynamics and offer a platform for disregarded voices and a transformative potential.

### 3. Autoethnography and Gurmat Vichhar—A Sense-Making Process

Every person operates consciously or unconsciously under an umbrella of core values and beliefs. In conjunction with genes, temperament, and environment it is the hidden influence behind every decision, behavior, and habit. Qualitative research is underpinned by reality and truth that is constructed and shaped through the interaction between people and the environment in which they live. In autoethnography “who you are has a central place in the research process, because you bring your [self] . . . to your research” (Kirkby and Kate 1989).

Autoethnography is a relatively young qualitative research method within the social sciences, which has been successfully used in exploring complex emotional and social topics including culture, space, religion, and education (Chang 2016; Adams et al. 2015; Alexander 1999; Harris 2008; Whitinui 2014). Autoethnographers utilize a personal, insider experience to demonstrate the complexities that shape their world views and by extension how they respond in different spaces and situations. Their back stories offer insights that others may use to gain a better sense of self and others. As a research method, autoethnography welcomes research that acknowledges a community's own internal method of knowing and being, regardless of whether one is formally represented in academia in the way indigenous, feminist, or postcolonial theories exist, thus making autoethnography open to a Sikhi-infused research paradigm.

For Sikhs, an indigenous mode of reasoning and thinking, central to the teachings of Sikhi, is one based upon a deep and complete awareness of the nature of *Ik* (One) that is not simply theorized

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<sup>3</sup> Literal translation: petition.

but directly experienced. It is a belief system rooted in gurbani. Etymologically, *Gur* is wisdom/Gurū and *Mat* is understanding/belief, originating with Ik Oankar<sup>4</sup>. The One being manifest as Word and expounded through *sabad*, the musico-poetic texts from the Gurū Granth Sahib, a linguistic, cultural, self-contained text of embodied wisdom compiled by the Sikh Gurūs. Gurbani vichhar is the contemplation-exegesis of the lived experience through a lens of Gurbani, the *living* word, which helps to build a greater knowing, recognition, and awareness of one's true nature beyond the subjective self-identity created from the ego-mind (Mandair 2013, p. 131). As an established philosophical undertaking, it helps ordinary Sikhs reflect upon the Gurū's teaching as well as offering insight on how to apply that knowledge effectively to life.

In history the lived experiences of the Gurūs demonstrated an embodiment of *knowing* Ik Oankar that extended outwards to a *being* of Ik Oankar in the personal and the universal, in the Nirgun<sup>5</sup> (invisible/absolute) and Sargun<sup>6</sup> (visible/manifest) spaces. For Sikhs today, this sense making exists through the presence of *living* word, the Gurū Granth Sahib (GGS) (Shackle and Mandair 2005).

What is the living word? Freire (2005) labels reflection and action as the two sides of the *true word*, which constitutes the "essence of dialogue". A deficiency of either renders the word *unauthentic* and incomplete, for reflection without action cannot transform reality and action without reflection is doing without praxis and direction. In the current digital era where information is widely distributed and freely accessed, there is no shortage of knowledge or data. However, accumulation of knowledge does not equate to wisdom without the self being an active part of the equation.

The body, heart, and mind synchronicity so often missing in modern life contributes to the rising number of mental health issues (Alberti 2009). Illustrating this, Jung analyst Woodman (1993) explains: "Unless an incident is made conscious, it does not happen in the soul. It has to be thought about, written about, painted, danced, made into music . . . it must move from literal to metaphoric if it is to assimilate into the soul's flowering". Music, art, poetry, etc. are a bridge between the head and heart. The poetic nature and the intentional ascribing of a musical measure (*raag*) to *gurbani* reiterates the emphasis for an emotional personal connection and multisensory engagement to *sabad* and, by extension, the present moment. It is an experience situated in the human body that facilitates a process of chiseling tangible transformation with, through, and by *sabad* at a subconscious level.

Autoethnographers are encouraged to consider if text alone is the most effective and accessible way to disseminate their work to a non-academic audience, especially where the intent is to maximize transformation potential and induce change. Music, dance, film, and photography can be readily shared via the Internet and are equally viable media for information exchange that do not require a high level of prerequisites, equipment, or access to resources. By being intentional in the 'rituals' of research and religion and taking ownership in the way things are done, there is a real potential for the wisdom of an earlier epoch to join with the present lived experience. Gurbani vichhar is a form of introspection arising from a curiosity of everyday thoughts and interactions: the lived experience and sense making that comes from ruminating on the *sabad*, resulting in an active application of new knowledge and understanding in the way we live our lives.

### 3.1. Bridging the Lived Experience

Universities are culpable of knowledge exchange built on research that is less and less about the communities they are situated in, earning the epithet 'ivory tower' (Kristof 2014). Research funders are strong influencers in determining the topics, methods, and findings of research, which may exclude particular less influencing, socially disadvantaged stakeholders and their interests. Academic institutions focus on jumping through hoops for outdated methods of ranking, such as the Research

<sup>4</sup> The phonetic symbol for the creative binding Force that exists in everything and the opening signifier of the Gurū Granth Sahib (GGS).

<sup>5</sup> The One in a non-existence, formless, wave potential, all pervading state that cannot be predicated.

<sup>6</sup> The One in manifested visible existence form that can be predicated.

Excellence Framework in the UK and the Times Higher Education World University Rankings. The consequences are strategic prioritizing of research likely to have measurable short-term impact on position and rank than on innovative work with the potential for shifting paradigms and redefining fields (Sayer 2014). High competition and low pay with little to no benefits and zero hour contracts are increasingly prevalent overall, disproportionately affecting members of historically disadvantaged groups (Hansson et al. 2015), subsequently reducing social and intellectual diversity in centers of learning.

Autoethnography emerged in response to a ‘crisis of representation’ in the mainstream relational, cultural, and political spheres (Adams et al. 2015, p. 11). The widening accessibility enabled nontraditional students (working-class, minority-ethnic, female, mature students, etc.) to study at higher education institutions, paving a path for new possibilities of thought and research methods (indigenous, feminist, critical race theory, etc.) to be brought into the current institutions (Gilardi and Guglielmetti 2011). These theories acknowledged and incorporated subjectivity and the lived experiences of the researchers such as epiphanies and traumatic interactions as factors in constructing sociological understanding, while acknowledging that the “perceptions of the insider are often unique, sometimes complex and at times subtle of a phenomenon” (Adams et al. 2015), ultimately bridging the subjective and insider experiences to a larger, external, relational culture.

The situating of personal experience to make sense of the wider culture is consistently demonstrated and referenced in the Sikh tradition. The Gurū Granth Sahib repeatedly refers to a knowing of the Divine Light (jot saroop<sup>7</sup>) from an experience of being, like the mute who tastes the sweet candy but cannot speak of it<sup>8</sup>. Contextualizing of experience is also found in other literary works of the Sikh tradition including (Bhai<sup>9</sup>) Gurdas’s<sup>10</sup> vars (ballads) and kabits (quatrains)<sup>11</sup>, in which rhetorical devices and metaphors are used to create a type of multisensory intratextual experience for the reader. Since words alone fall short, understanding of sabad through reflection of actions is a necessary catalyst. When actions are inseparable from the creator-source, like a dancer lost in the dance, an ∞ infinity loop is formed, such that the inspiration and source of the dance (gurbani) is both inseparable and undistinguishable from the dancer (practitioner); thus, the heart, mind, and body function in unison. In this way both autoethnography and gurnat vichhar value the personal perspective of the experiential as it is situated in culture, fostering an epistemology of self from the inside moments of lived experience. In addition, they both resist conformity to ‘legitimate’ forms of knowledge creation fixated in a positivistic perspective (Wall 2006).

While a disconnect between religious belief enshrined in text and the actual practice of religion is well documented, for Sikhs the establishment of a community by Gurū Nānak, the first Gurū of the Sikhs, at Kartarpur was an infinity loop of theory and praxis. (Bhai) Gurdas describes the establishment of Kartarpur in his vars, as ‘minting a new coin’ (Maariaa sika jagati vichi naanak niramal pandu chalaiaa, Var 1:45). Kartarpur was a communal experiment come to life, a blueprint of a village life with equal emphasis on spiritual and socio-political commitment. At a risk of overly romanticizing Kartarpur as a distant past utopia, there is evidence from the geographical location of the establishment of the Kartarpur community to support a confluence of “the urban culture of Khatris” (trader or business caste) who held positions of leadership and the “rural culture of peasantry” that made up a large proportion of the followers (Mann 2010). Although the exact social composition of the early Sikh community is difficult to confirm, there is significant evidence to suggest that it may have been at the lower end of the social-economical caste system, if part of the caste system at all (Singh 2010).

<sup>7</sup> The common light.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Jin eh chakee sohee jahni gongae kee mithiaee’ (Gurū Rām Dās, M4, Sorath 9, GGS, p. 607).

<sup>9</sup> Literal translation: brother, also a title given to acknowledge and honor a learned Sikh.

<sup>10</sup> Known in full as Gurdas Bhalla, renowned poet, writer, and theologian, whose work is an authoritative source for Sikh life (Gill 2017, p. 2).

<sup>11</sup> That extol the beauties of the spiritual experience (Gill 2017, p. 3).

In the Gurū Granth Sahib, there are four sabads that form the Babar Vani, which recounts a lived experience of the invasions of Babar (1483–1530), the first Mughal emperor of India. As an eyewitness to the political reality created during these invasions, Gurū Nānak captures the ferocity of the battle and the sufferings of the people in accents of intense power and protest (Singh 2020b). In addition, the author places the events in the larger social and historical perspective, including connecting the parallel decline in moral standards and a corrupt political system (Jakobsh and Walton-Roberts 2016). Ultimately, these verses cultivate “the spirit of speaking truth to power among the Sikhs at most critical junctures” (Singh 2020b) and, like autoethnographies, are unapologetically bound to social justice aims, with the intention to make a change in themselves and their cultures through their research.

### 3.2. Reflexivity—“Search Your Own Heart Every Day—Do Not Wander around in Confusion<sup>12</sup>”

The concept of reflexivity is relatively familiar among the research community. In autoethnography it involves acknowledging and critiquing one’s own place and privilege in society. In my parallel role as a registered health professional in the UK, I am required to submit a continuous professional development (CPD) portfolio to remain on the healthcare register. The portfolio includes written evidence based on a reflective cycle that may begin as an unplanned learning; “an event occurs that causes a learning activity to be undertaken or carried out without any prior thought or planning” (Dowdall 2018). Working from the inside out, autoethnography is similar to an *unplanned* learning activity, whereby an event or epiphany prompts a *pause and reflect* on our current understanding and beckons a second glance “inward—into our identities, thoughts, feelings and experiences—and outward—into our relationships, communities, and cultures” (Adams et al. 2015, p. 46). For the researcher, reflexivity involves critical self-reflection on the ways “social background, assumptions, positioning and behavior impact on the research process” (Finlay and Gough 2003, p. 14).

Self-reflexivity may be discursive, language dominated, where the observation unfolds through a symbolic medium like an internal dialogue or through a conversation with another. Concurrently, it can be embodied, i.e., physical sensation dominated, where the observation unfolds through a corporeal medium like meditation, music, or movement (Pagis 2009). Self-reflexivity, which is often closely linked with the discursive written or language medium, also benefits from embodied reflexivity, especially in cases where a practice of the other senses is involved, e.g., sound in music. However, even with an unconscious exclusion of other senses, there is usually some overlap. For example, if something makes you angry, you may say ‘that makes my blood boil’ and at the same time experience a physical response like a warm feeling or clenched fists. Being conscious of our feelings and emotions in a given moment and the parallel internal commentary helps to reveal a plethora of new insights. Like a rainbow, which is only visible when light exits a water droplet at an exact angle of 42 degrees from our line of sight, these insights are made (revealed) when the environment is conducive. Gurmat vichhar requires an active dedication to self-reflexivity, a relationship with sabad and curiosity for life. In addition, access to your tribe or sangat (congregation) helps to gain clarity, insight and understanding. The socially distant measures of lockdown have highlighted the privileges of having accessibility to such networks. To provide a (pre-lockdown) example, I share the following journal extract on my gurbani kirtan class. Gurbani kirtan is the musical and vocal performance primarily of the compositions found in the Gurū Granth Sahib. The class is a small gathering of about five students and teacher taking place in the home of one of the students.

*January 2020*

*In the class every person operates from an implicit position that exists because of subtle cultural and or hierarchical dynamics, these exist between the Ustad (teacher) and students, and between fellow classmates. The class typically involves a 2 to 3 h riyaz (music practice), playing set pieces at*

<sup>12</sup> ‘Bandhae khoj dhil har roj naa fir parsanee mahi’ (Bhagat Kabir, Tilang 1, GGS, p. 727).

*increasing complexity and tempo before ending with the practice of gurbani kirtan. Towards the end of class, I feel a change, a natural unravelling and softening to previous positions, a mist cloud envelopes all, blending the outline of each person into the mist until everything is more or less one cloud. Over a period of several classes, an ecosystem powered by and through a sacredness/respect/love for the people/environment/gurbani kirtan takes shape. Here a space is created where questions, experiences, feelings and observations are openly voiced and lived experiences, validation, stillness, or expounding of gurbani and ancestral history knowledge are readily shared/offered in response.*

Both discursive (conversation) and embodied (music) reflexivity are apparent and, in that instance, the conditions for a rainbow are met. Rainbow geometry also means that each rainbow is unique to the individual. A rainbow viewed by a person positioned on either side will arise from a different set of water droplets and, therefore, will be a different rainbow. Relational interpretation allows that different observers can give different accounts of the same series of events, depending on the information they have about the system. In this way, two observers of one event are likely to have different accounts of the event. Returning to the above reflection from my gurbani kirtan class, every person receives a *download* of information and understanding that is specific to them in a given moment because each person ‘stands’ in a different place, i.e., each person’s DNA, lived experience, and current mental state is unique, albeit sometimes similar. Looking at it from a musical perspective, raag (melody) creates an atmosphere by evoking through its very nature a vibration built upon the vaadi (the most prominent note in the raag) and samvadi (the second most prominent note in the raag). It is a co-creation of the musician’s self-expression within the boundary of the raag’s framework, as is the freedom in classical Indian raag. Yet, what is heard and experienced by the listener varies as a result of the unique filter of the person’s lived experience. A reflexive practice enables one to look beyond the superficial and draw out what cannot be seen on the outset to make sense of ourselves and our relationships, communities, and culture (Conquergood 1991).

### 3.3. Relational Responsibility

Autoethnography places the researcher’s subjectivity at the center rather than attempting to limit it and, thus, by its very design, challenges standard practices of conducting and approaching research (Reed-Danahay 1997; Holt 2003). The intention is to co-create a reciprocal relationship where research is “a socially—and relationally—conscious act”, which is accessible to multiple audiences, and reclaims lost and disregarded voices (Adams et al. 2015).

Relational responsibility is an awareness of the *process of relating*, which shifts from the individual as the central concern toward an emphasis on what we are creating in our relations with others (Reich et al. 2017). Positionality is an important factor that affects every stage of the research process. It is, therefore, crucial researchers understand their own beliefs and assumptions in order to explore the experiences of the *other* with fresh eyes (Ellis 2007; Wilson 2008, p. 54).

The early anthropological research perspective minimized individual differences to create an essentialist simplified and homogenized culture bound by observable features of custom, language, history, art, etc. (Chang 2016). Observing a culture while standing outside creates, at least theoretically, an impression of a boundary between the researcher and the researched that purports to impartiality and objectivity. However, failing to grasp basic fundamental beliefs and aspects of the community being studied or failing to acknowledge one’s own unconscious bias and judgement, especially where beliefs may be in direct contrast with one’s own, impacts the data collection and interpretation. This is often raised as an issue among minority communities who are studied and written about, without serious lived insights or an in-depth understanding of the cultural paradigm.

Complete objectivity is a challenge for all researchers. The dual insider/outsider expression exists in many social science disciplines. Outsiders have the advantage of working off a ‘clean slate’ but are prone to overlook critical nuances that impact any final submitted conclusions. While an insider may successfully navigate the social, political, and cultural landscape, they may need to be aware of any inherent biases that may impact the design, evaluation, and conclusion of the research.

As a researcher how you are perceived and thus admitted into the field being researched affects both researcher credibility and the degree of access to the field. Autoethnography views fieldwork relationships as those built upon seeking “*reciprocal responses from multiple audiences*” through mutual curiosity, responsibility, and care (Adams et al. 2015, p. 35). As co-participants in creating *reciprocal responses* the researcher’s subjectivity is embraced and simultaneously held responsible by making “ourselves more personally accountable for our perspective” (Ellis and Bochner 1996, p. 15). Researchers have a responsibility to the academic community, the communities being researched, and themselves to work with integrity and care. There is no universal protocol as to what that responsibility and care is but it involves consciously protecting the confidentiality and privacy of others implied or involved in the research, while developing a connection that is not one-sided or solely built for the purpose of a research output, for example, sharing written works with participants for their comments, switching off the recording device to offer participants a space to speak freely, or creating composite narratives to sustain privacy of participants. Upon embarking on this PhD journey, the most important care and responsibility has been to myself. This statement seems self-centered (even as I type it). However, to truly care for others requires a practice of care and responsibility to self, beginning with getting clear of my intentions and motivations. The thoughts that arose during that early period were recorded in my journal and are shown as an extract below.

*January 2018*

*Am I writing to be recognised, accepted and validated? If yes, by whom? my community, my academic peers or both? PAUSE. Neither, I write for me and by that simple intention I write for anyone else who is willing to be curious with me. What does that look like? A willingness to let go of everything, especially who I have told myself I am, and . . . to start listening—deep listening to the music of the spheres.*

The result of working with integrity and applying autoethnography diligently is a collaborative output that is more than the sum of its parts. Yes, an academic paper or article published in a reputable peer-reviewed journal is a measurable achievement. Yet, the deliberate act of, for example, creating space for another, seeking their permission to tell a story, being self-reflexive on who has privilege to or the right to tell that story, acknowledging that the relationship is not neutral, working consciously toward an outcome that is nonhierarchical, etc., the undocumented moments and spontaneous conversations have the ability to change hearts and experience the interconnectedness.

In the early 16th century Gurū Nānak accompanied by (Bhai) Mardana, a Muslim rabab player, met diverse members of the Hindu, Muslim, and Nath religions during their *udasis* (travels) (Singh 2019). He carried the message of oneness (Ik), embarking on a journey to uncover the similarities and differences of how Ik was understood and experienced in the lives of the common person, across religious boundaries without claims of exclusivity to religious truth. Comparably, the Gurū Granth Sahib contains the compositions of six Sikh Gurūs and non-Sikh bhagats (saint-poets), not to meet diversity quotas or gain popularity through superficial displays of solidarity, rather as a recognition of Ik as the Sikh Gurū’s experienced the expression of the *other* as a song echoing pluriversal values, resonating and voicing the “complexity of the truth as a heterogenous but coherent sonic form” (Bhagal 2019). Autoethnographers, through a variety of forms such as poetry, journals, short stories, and other styles of writing, attempt to inspire the reader to reflect on their own experiences and recontextualize their understanding of those experiences from an encounter with someone else’s shared narrative to discover coherence in the embodiment of realization.

### 3.4. Inclusivity

In sociological terms, accessibility can be at the micro, meso, and macro levels. The wider the scope for disseminating one’s research, the greater the benefits: sharing new knowledge, gaining feedback, establishing an academic reputation, increasing potential collaboration opportunities, etc. How we write (if writing is the chosen medium) influences who is able to connect and who is excluded.



The use of specialized, technical terminology exclusive to particular groups limits accessibility to those outside the circle, thereby restricting the impact of the work and its potential for bringing about change (Walter 2018). Over time, this imbalance risks perpetuating a narrative of them and us, or the learned and unlearned.

The Gurū Granth Sahib is written using multiple languages and dialects, with multiple contributors from a variety of socio-religious backgrounds. This clear subversion worked by flouting the strict rules of exclusion commonly observed through restricting a religious text to a religious group. The raags (musical measures) like the languages and dialects used in the Gurū Granth Sahib also cross multiple social economic lines. The use of classical raag and the Sanskrit language commonly associated with people of high class and caste status is situated alongside folk tunes more popular in the villages, placing both on the same platform, demonstrating marginalized voices of equal value.

Increasing inclusivity by taking into consideration language, history, and culture improves accessibility. Autoethnographers make an intentional and conscious effort to make their work more accessible and available further afield from academic circles, utilizing the intellectual, analytical mind and the sensory, emotional aspects of experience to offer a relatable output.

In gurbani imagery, metaphors and similes are used to evoke a multisensory response to convey that which cannot be fully captured by words alone yet may give rise to a relational understanding. Metaphors act as a transformer of the raw energy patterns into forms that can be assimilated by consciousness (Woodman 1993, p. 54). For example, gurbani describes the life force Ik Oankar as the sustenance behind all of creation, like the unconditional love of a mother for her child<sup>13</sup>, or in (Bhai) Gurdas ji's var on the love between Sikh and Gurū, like the Chakvi's (Sheldrake, a bird belonging to the duck family) love for the sun, who feels elated in the presence of sunlight (Chakavee sooraj hayt hai mili honi soukhaalay, Var 2:17). These analogies are relatable because they include nature, well-known folk references and everyday experiences that were familiar to ordinary people of the time.

### 3.5. Crafting and Telling Sakhis (Stories)

July 2018

*Storytelling is about finding my own story by connecting all the complex and messy parts of my life and still managing to value the entirety of the journey so far. Are you ready to walk with me? I'm familiar with this question. On the surface of my soul boat where the waves crash and I am called upon to sit in the uncomfortableness—I hold on to the mast, for an unwavering knowing exists that this moment too will pass.*

Successful autoethnography recognizes the symbiotic relationship between culture and people. It draws out the interconnectivity between the self and the wider social and political issues, through personal stories and narratives (Chang 2016, p. 46; Ellis 2004, p. 19). The process is one of collaboration that works with, for, and through participants to uncover meaning from the individual and collective experiences.

Storytelling is an established medium, open to multiple audiences and a familiar tradition for Sikhs. Sakhis (stories) on the lives of the Gurūs and Sikhs during and after the Gurūship period are a popular form of engagement with Sikhi and Sikh history across all ages, in both the home (private) and gurduara (public) spaces, and more recently across continents through social media (Murphy 2012). A contemporary example is the translation of the precolonial text of the Suraj Prakash. Jvala Singh, a PhD student at the University of British Columbia, summarizes chapters of the text into English for his podcast, the Suraj Podcast. The original written text is in Braj Bhasha<sup>14</sup> with significant use of Sanskrit words in Gurmukhi script. The translation allows the key message of the Suraj Prakash

<sup>13</sup> 'Apunae Jeeā Janth Prathipaarae || Jio Baarik Maathaa Sanmaarae ||' (Gurū Arjan, M5, Mājh 36, GGS, p. 105).

<sup>14</sup> Language descended from Shauraseni Prakrit and commonly viewed as a western dialect of Hindi and usually written in the Devanagari script (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2009).

to be shared with a wider audience who may not be learned in Braj Bhasha and Sanskrit, as well as reclaiming the stories that make up the text (Singh 2020a).

The janam-sakhis (the birth stories of Gurū Nānak) viewed as “interpretive and didactic texts” provide the reader with a specific overarching take-home message as opposed to a historical narrative (Johnson 2013). The emphasis placed in retelling these stories varies through the publisher’s choice of design, color, imagery, and language and the voice and context placed by an orator. Crafting stories requires the skill to adapt writing style and good discernment as to the level of detail and depth, in particular when writing for a young audience or outsiders of the community (Khalsa 2018). In addition, when retelling popular works like the janam-sakhis it is important not to lose the spirit of the original author.

Designing autoethnographic research requires placing equal “importance on intellect/knowledge and aesthetics/artistic craft” (Adams et al. 2015, p. 25). The intention is for the key points to impact as wide an audience as possible and stimulate change. Therefore, choosing the most effective methodology and attaining proficiency in the chosen form of data collection is as important as acquiring and perfecting the skills to convey the findings in the chosen medium, e.g., writing, dance, performance, etc.

### 3.6. Transformative–Speaking Truth to Power

Information and knowledge from research are utilized in problem solving, decision making, and creating new understanding. The outcome and narrative of a publication are influenced by who defines and determines the focus of the research and their particular interests and problems. Autoethnography as a transformative research method acknowledges this embeddedness of self because it allows the researcher, in a tangible way, to understand and be aware of their role in creating and shaping knowledge. Transformation “requires vulnerability, fosters empathy, embodies creativity and innovation, eliminates boundaries, [and] honors subjectivity” (Custer 2014). The transformative potential in autoethnography originates from self-reflection and self-analysis on the part of the researcher, participant, and reader (Chang 2016; Chase 2018). It is not a research method for the fainthearted. It requires courage to deep dive into old, unclaimed emotions and seek clarity on the cultural and familial patterns that are the blueprint to how we see ourselves.

The Sikh model of sovereignty grows from a union between the institutions of sabad Gurū, the Gurū in the form of musical word as found in the GGS, and a doctrine of combined temporal (miri) and spiritual (piri) authority. Transformation is through the contemplation-exegesis of the lived experience through a lens of gurbani. For example, Asa Ki Var<sup>15</sup> (Ballad of Hope), one of 22 vars recorded in the Gurū Granth Sahib, is sung every morning in gurduaras and homes of Sikhs around the world. This is a bani, a fixed prayer, that strongly challenges the “religious hypocrisy, hegemonic structures and stereotypes prevailing in the human consciousness and the society at large” (Sikh Research Institute 2014). The bani subverts and critiques everyday common “socio-cultural ills, ritualism, and customs” facilitating reflexivity in the reader to their own beliefs and practices (The Guru Granth Sahib Project 2020).

For Sikhs, a spiritual faith practice and social political involvement are not mutually exclusive. Speaking truth to power and allying with the powerless is a cornerstone of Sikhi. Examples commonly conveyed between generations through the medium of storytelling include the ninth Sikh Gurū’s stance against the state’s policy of denying Kashmiri brahmins their right to practice their religion and (Bhai) Kanhaiya serving water indiscriminately to the wounded soldiers from both sides in the battle of Anandpur Sahib in 1704.

More recently, following migration and settlement to diverse conditions outside Punjab, Sikhs have sustained and adapted their faith within new environments, meeting the challenges of assimilation by advocating and raising awareness of Sikh issues and rights in the wider society. Examples include

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<sup>15</sup> Also referred to as Asa Di Var.

removing restrictions on wearing the turban in the work environment and exemption from wearing protective headgear while riding motorbikes or bicycles (Spennemann 2020).

Yet to sustain such a noble endeavor requires constant wakefulness and dedication. A practice of reflexivity to account for our own influence, privilege, and relationship to power relative to the *other* is as important as critiquing the wider cultural norms, experiences, and practices, both as a researcher and as a Sikh. Issues include gender preference as witnessed in the practice of sex-selective abortions, colorism, casteism when seeking a partner, or blinkeredness when it comes to standing with and alongside survivors of sexual abuse and communities that suffer from structural racism.

#### 4. Final Thoughts

Professor Puran Singh, a poet, philosopher, and scientist, writes that for Sikhs, “Our history is of the soul, all its events are of the soul. All truth for us is personal. We have not to prove it, we have to stand witness to it in our soul” (Fischer 2012, p. 128). With a sizable debate around authentic and traditional ways of practicing and interpreting faith, an autoethnographic approach offers insight from a lived experience on what is authentic, i.e., “a direct and immediate expression of [a person’s] essence” (Lindholm 2007, p. 2). Gurmat vichhar and autoethnography both use the lived experience in the sense-making process, yet do not solely rely upon it in understanding the world at large.

To write by foregrounding personal experience without accusations of ‘narcissism’ requires a process of getting to know all the facets of self (Coffey 1999; Roth 2009). In Sikhi this includes reflexivity through the lens of Gurbani. In autoethnography this involves reflexivity on place and privilege in society. Reflexivity is critical. Most often the questions we ask, and the narratives we create in telling the complicated stories of others, reveal more about ourselves as authors. Consciously or unconsciously we choose our positions (hero vs. victim), numb out our triggers, and work with what fits best and does not make us too uncomfortable. World history has repeatedly shown this is especially true when mainstream voices speak for minority voices.

In contrast, autoethnography attempts to walk in ‘the shoes of the other’ while simultaneously acknowledging that it is still ‘my feet in their shoes’. The writing of stories in autoethnography is a weaving of both lived experience and theory (Ellis 2004; Spry 2001). Stories provide a richer text to counter essentialist simplified and homogenized representation of cultures that too often find their way into essential reading lists.

In the Sikh tradition “the stories of one’s ancestors makes their descendants good children”<sup>16</sup> and, like indigenous culture, are used to pass on experiential knowledge and history. Autoethnography, with its many places of synergy with Sikhi, also believes in the power of storytelling. Despite the time and effort placed to convey legitimacy and validity among mainstream methods, the works speak for themselves. For someone who is navigating to be unapologetically herself in all spaces, using autoethnography bridges my study of gurbani kirtan in a way that does not separate out my ancestral form of sense making.

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<sup>16</sup> Babaaneaaa kehaaneaaa puth saputh karaen. (Gurū Amar Dās, Rāmkalī 10, GGS, p. 951)

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