

# The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies<sup>1</sup>: Reflections on the current State of Play in an Emergent Discipline

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Edited by two leading academics in the field Sikh Studies, this compendium is undoubtedly a landmark, no less in the field of Sikh studies than of Punjab studies. But just how do the two disciplines relate to one another? That they intertwine is plain to see, since the former is intrinsically a component of latter. But if that is so, just how is that intertwinement best understood? Is it the case that Sikh studies is so unique that it deserves to be filleted out into a singular disciplinary strand in its own right, running in parallel to, but independent of, strands labelled (Punjabi) Hindu studies, (Punjabi) Muslim studies and so forth? Moreover is it the case that each of those strands can be boiled down to an orthodox essence? Or are they all just as extensively internally multi-stranded themselves? But if so, just how and why have clashes between these perspectives arisen? Are they of ancient origin, or is it the case that the current search for religious purity is a thoroughly *modern* phenomenon – namely an egregious outcome of ideological and political disputes which emerged in the colonial era, and which have become even more vigorous in post-colonial times, thereby undermining the integrity of Punjab's long-established condition of religious and socio-cultural plurality?

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As an academic discipline Sikh Studies has a relatively short history behind it. Given that four of its founding *ustads* have recently passed away, it has now left its infancy well behind – with the result that the greater part of the fifty-odd contributions to this handbook have been prepared by their *mureeds*. In that sense Sikh Studies is flourishing, especially in North America. But whilst the new discipline has consequently begun to expand in a multiplicity of directions, I am by no means certain that it has yet reached adulthood: in my view this recently published encyclopaedia of a handbook serves to demonstrate that Sikh Studies is currently in the midst of a process of intensely creative adolescence, firing off in a multiplicity of directions at the same time, such that this volume is riddled with all manner of intriguing contradictions.

Reflecting on the challenges which they encountered in putting this volume together, its editors observe

Little were we thus prepared for the great diversity and multiple Sikh narratives that confronted us as we engaged the many, many Sikhs across the world who practiced and lived this tradition ... demonstrating vibrancy, a stunning vitality not often

recognized by textbooks, and rarely seen by those non-Sikhs (and Sikhs themselves) who merely lumped together as one the entire Sikh community, a public whose members collectively... refer to themselves as the *panth*... Indeed, judging solely by both textbooks, the authors of which constructed knowledge about religions upon written texts deemed scriptural..., and by outside and some inside observers whose knowledge of everyday Sikh life overall was meagre, a large number of Sikhs were to be best understood as Sikhs who miserably failed at being Sikh! The power and pervasiveness of that remarkable image and its narrative was such... that Sikhs and others simply ignored the very evidence of their eyes and ears, suspicious of all the plurality exhibited and exercised in the lives of their many fellow Sikhs and the multiple alternative Sikh narratives that informed their understanding of... the Sikh community. It was a pity that few people took to heart some of the most beautiful examples of the Sikh tradition's commitment to plurality and diversity as found within the sacred Sikh scriptures...

Guru Ram Das asserts...

The vast ocean is filled with treasuries containing jewels and pearls. This is attainable by such [people] as are devoted to *gurbani* (p. 2)

The metaphor here is well understood: the Ocean in question is nothing less than the created Universe, of which we are all integral components, regardless of our interests and orientations. As they go on to observe

Those individuals who dive deeply into that ocean through reflection and meditation find within themselves, and see within others, a treasure trove of gems and realize the true spiritual status of both themselves and additional people. Others who remain on the surface level of that ocean may be dealing only with the literal sense of the sacred utterance, without having any deeper understanding of its meaning. Bhai Gurdas... echoes a similar understanding...

In the same way [that the ocean is filled with riches], all treasures are contained *in gurbani*. Whatever one seeks from it, the same will one attain. (p.3)

The same observation can also be made with equal force on the contents of this Handbook – even though – as its editors rightly observe – the portion of the ocean which its contributors set out to explore is much more chaotic, and their approaches to its significance a great deal less coherent, indeed often alarmingly myopic, in comparison with broad-minded premises of *gurbani*.

### **Conflicts and Contradictions**

No less than newly emergent communities, one of the first tasks which newly emergent academic disciplines have to do is to stake out distinctive territories of their own. At least at the outset, the need to construct clear cut boundaries becomes steadily more pressing. No less

than in any other nascent community, they need to reinforce their bargaining power vis-à-vis their social, political and economic neighbours and rivals, and so to stake out a distinctive, and hence intellectually defensible, patch of their own within the academy. Moreover, the two perspectives regularly reinforce one another. The deal is quite straightforward: as communities begin to mobilise, and as their leading members become sufficiently affluent to support academic initiatives, they regularly turn to scholarly academics in the expectation that they will buttress the legitimacy, and above all the authenticity of their efforts to publicise their community's intrinsic distinctiveness.

However this places cash-starved academics in a cleft stick. In the absence of external beneficence they are unlikely to be able to access funds which would enable them to get their research off the ground: but if their findings fail to support their sponsors' highly motivated expectations, all hell can all too easily break loose if their conclusions fail to produce the sought-after results. Whilst in no sense an explicitly articulated theme of this volume, the consequences of these contradictions nevertheless resonate through virtually every contribution. There are several reasons why this is so. In the first place the Sikh tradition – no less than all other religious traditions – has had an exceedingly chequered history, as this volume demonstrates to the full, much to the alarm of those seeking to assert the unity, the distinctiveness and the integrity of Sikhi. Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, the volume does its best to skirt around an exceptionally large elephant: namely the Indian Army's assault on the Akal Takht, in pursuit of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his well-armed acolytes, which was followed up by anti-Sikh pogroms in Delhi in the aftermath of the tit-for-tat execution of Indira Gandhi.

### **The emergence of Sikh Studies in North America**

That this was yet another traumatic incident in the development of the Sikh tradition is plain to see, and its reverberations are still with us to this day – particularly, although by no means exclusively, in the Sikh diaspora. One consequence has undoubtedly been the growth of Sikh studies, especially in North America, where the great a majority of the contributors to this volume currently hold academic posts. Whilst there are several reasons why this has occurred, one of the most significant can be traced back to operation Blue Star, since a large number of angry and perplexed Sikh students at India's IIT sought refuge in North America in the aftermath of the Delhi pogroms, as a result of which they had become strong Sikh

nationalists. But whilst their arrival reinforced efforts to put Sikh studies on the agenda in their new home, their largely politically driven agenda clashed even more comprehensively with the agenda of many, although by no means all, of the scholars, leading to all manner of still unresolved contradictions whose presence is felt – although rarely explicitly addressed – throughout this volume.

Nevertheless such deeply-rooted contradictions can never be resolved overnight, as the editors are well aware: hence they have clearly taken the view that their best option has been to allow half a hundred flowers bloom as they choose, even if the resultant garden is full of unresolved and undisciplined contradictions. Hence, as Pashaura Singh indicates in the closing paragraph of his concluding overview,

No single group can afford to monopolize the debate on any single issue. Surfing through different Sikh websites and discussion groups one can easily realize that there is a need to look at Sikhism from a global perspective. There are multiple ways to approach Sikh topics in various academic disciplines. We must explore new ways of knowing the past and complement historical data with ethnographic study that can illuminate the lived experience of the Sikh community (p. 642)

From this perspective it is clear that Sikh Studies is as yet nowhere near maturity: rather it is still at sixes and sevens, so much so that this handbook is only held together within its covers by avoiding any serious effort to resolve its internal contradictions. But even if that is indeed the case, the very breadth of this volume serves to provide an excellent opportunity for readers to engage in an exercise in religious oceanography, just as Pashaura Singh suggests.

No less in academic than in political contexts, those involved in establishing the legitimacy of a novel socio-cultural enterprise invariably find themselves driven to identify their objectives by filleting out the specific subject whose existence they are seeking to highlight from the contexts within which it had hitherto been hidden – especially if they are doing so within the conceptual framework of protestant theology which emerged in the course of Europe's Enlightenment. With that framework proper religions are expected to have had a founder who set the ball rolling in the first place, together with clearly spelt out spiritual and moral agenda – a set of scriptures, in other words – which were revealed to the founder on a unique basis. With this in mind it could readily be argued that, in sharp contrast to other more allegedly superstitious Asiatic traditions, the Sikh tradition stood out from all its counterparts on the ground that it had no less than ten successive founders (all of whom identified themselves as Nanak) who could be said to have collectively articulated a strongly

egalitarian and strictly monotheistic scriptural source – *gurbani* – which was precisely congruent with fundamental characteristics of a genuine religious -ism.

From this perspective the origins of Sikh Studies can best be traced back to the incorporation of the Punjab into British Raj, in the aftermath of which Trumpp (a Christian missionary) and Macauliffe (an evangelical member of the ICS) set about translating and analysing the contents of the Sikh scriptures. However the whole enterprise only really took off in religio-political terms with the emergence of the Lahore Singh Sabha, and above all with the publication of Kahn Singh Nabha's pamphlet *Ham Hindu Nahi* in 1898. Since then virtually mainline Sikh religio-political movements, the most significant of which – the SGPC – has long been the most influential, have sought to promote that Sikh tradition as a unique, internally homogenous, superstition-free, internally egalitarian and free-standing religious institution. This construct consequently deserved to be recognised as a clearly bounded religious entity in its own right as a fully-fledged –ism. In keeping with that vision, politically driven Sikh nationalism has thrived during the course of the past century, and in doing so has pressed forward what can best be described as a neo-fundamentalist – and hence strongly anti-pluralistic – interpretation of an autonomous, free-standing vision of Sikh-ism.

### **The historical origins and subsequent development of the Sikh tradition**

Yet just how far does this vision of autonomy stand up the careful scrutiny, no less from historical than from empirical perspectives? With such considerations in mind Pashaura Singh rightly argues that far more attention should be paid to ethnographic studies which illuminate the lived experience of Sikh communities – examples of which show up strongly in most of the chapters prepared by UK-based contributors. His co-editor Lou Fenech goes to the heart of the matter in his chapter entitled 'The Evolution of the Sikh community' in which he cautiously observes that

[T]he search for beginnings in evolutions is, as is now well known, often the search for illusions. The same, obviously, is the case for the Sikh tradition. With regard to this phenomenon it seems clear on the one hand that the tradition begins with Guru Nanak, who was born in the Punjab in April 1469 CE, which suggests an origin found in his life and teachings. Yet on the other hand this life and these teachings accord well with certain lives and teachings we also discover in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century northern India, beings and ideas we may loosely describe as Hindu and Muslim; Sant, Bhakti, Nath, Sufi, and so on. Technically this would place the Sikh community's origins at a much further remove than 1469, perhaps to the dawning of the Sant movement, which possesses clear affinities to Guru Nanak's thought (an

emphasis upon the formless and ineffable nature of the divine, for example, and the total disregard for caste status in the pursuit of enlightenment or *sahaj*), sometime in the tenth century. The predominant ideology of the Sant *parampara* in turn corresponds in many respects to the much wider devotional Bhakti tradition of northern India... [which] intersected with notions we discover within the *bhakti marg* ('Way of Devotion') explicated by Lord Krishna... within the Bhagavad Gita and the Mahabharata, much of which predates the beginning of the Common Era. Few Sikhs today would mention these Indic texts and ideologies in the same breath as the Sikh tradition, let alone trace elements of their tradition to this chronological and ideological point, despite the fact that the Indic mythology that sustains so many of these early Indic texts permeates the Sikh sacred canon... How far must one ultimately go in order to find this beginning? This question in many ways makes the search both profoundly problematic and quixotic. (pp.35-6)

But are these questions really so challenging as he suggests? To be sure, Guru Nanak established a Panth with a distinctive flavour, as did all of his contemporary Pirs, Naths and Sants. But in so doing in no way did he dismiss the metaphysical conceptual order within which they operated. For Nanak and his counterparts *Nam*, *Haqq* and *Ek Onkar* were synonyms, since they were all both immanent and intrinsically *nirgun*; likewise they were all seeking to achieve the experience of *sahaj* – and for those still in the existent world, the subsequent bitter-sweet experience of *viraha*; moreover like all other followers of the ancient tradition of *sahajiyya*, they were vigorously hostile to all forms of elaborate ritual and of scholarly nit-picking: rather they expressed themselves and their experiences in vernacular poetry, music, song and dance. Hence, as Nanak put it,

*Shabad* is my Guru, my mind attuned to it is it *mureed*  
I stay detached [in *sahaj*] through the *anahad shabad*.(AG 943)

However in no way was Nanak unique in expressing his ecstatic metaphysical experience in this way. Nevertheless if one takes Arvind-Pal Mandair's analysis of 'Sikh Philosophy' – in which a different rendering of this very *slok*, is cited (p. 311) – at face value, an innocent reader would remain wholly unaware that the metaphysics of *gurbani* runs in close parallel to that of the Punjab's indigenous *sufi* and *bhakti* traditions, and that this continues to be the case to this very day. In other words sleight of hand in this chapter, as in many others, serves to set the Sikh tradition in a self-contained – and hence orthodox – silo of which the SGPC would undoubtedly approve. Moreover this silo-effect is in no way restricted to the issue of origins: it also extends even more egregiously with respect to developments over time, most especially with respect to the emergence of a wide range of (heretical?) sectarian variations within the ever broadening Nanak Panth. Nowhere have the apparent contradictions been more salient, or the resultant conflicts been more serious, than those arising from the creation

of what amounted to a sectarian praetorian guard of *sant-sipahis* – in other words a Khalsa<sup>2</sup> – by Guru Gobind Singh. Quite apart from the fact that Guru Gobind Singh's account of himself and his status in the Dasam Granth differs radically from that of Nanak's account of metaphysical experiences, not least because it is strongly *saguna* in character, the institutional significance of the Khalsa has been the focus of constant arguments over the past three centuries.

### **The emergence of the Tat Khalsa and SPCG**

If Guru Gobind Singh's creation of praetorian guard in the form of the Khalsa gave rise to a novel militaristically oriented elite within the Sikh Panth, and if Maharajah Ranjit Singh called on the concept once again in identifying his court as a Khalsa Diwan, the concept was reinterpreted yet again as the British began to establish their Raj in Punjab. As that occurred it did not take long before opposition to their colonial enterprise began to emerge – which in this case was initially focused on efforts to counter the evangelism of Christian missionaries, who controlled the upper regions of Punjab's English language educational system, and hence the prospect of actively engaging with the institutions of the Raj. Once nationalistic opposition to the Raj began to be articulated on religious grounds, primarily by articulated by Dayananda Saraswati's followers in the Arya Samaj, it did not take long before leading members of the Panth became fearful of the hegemonic expectations of Arya Samajis, who expected all true Aryas to abandon their sectarian and hence pluralistic deviance, and to regroup on in more powerful terms under a singular umbrella, the better to challenge the alien Raj. Hence the Sikhs were not alone in feeling that efforts were being made to remove the grass from beneath their feet: in other words they became almost as hostile to the premises of the Samajis as they were to the premises of the missionaries, which led, amongst other things, to a rejuvenation of the institution of the Khalsa. As Fenech puts it:

The elite Sikhs who formed the Singh Sabha in the 1870s were well aware of the pluralistic and rather fluid nature of both their contemporary Sikh Panth and the Sikh Khalsa. Profoundly influenced by the contemporary European understanding of religion and modernity... with its stress on stable and unique identities and their own versions of a single, genuine Sikh history and religion, these intellectuals came to view the Panth's diversity with much suspicion, and ultimately sought to reduce this multiplicity to a single solitary identity with the Khalsa at its very centre, and to collapse its history, both diachronic and synchronic, to a sole trajectory. In this the Khalsa was supreme and understood to be the ultimate fulfilment of the Sikh Gurus' collective vision of and for the Sikh Panth. And to this end, its most vocal members

began to refer to themselves and their organization in a way which assumed that theirs was the commanding, authoritative voice in matters Sikh and Khalsa.

No longer were they merely Singh Sabha; they were now Tat Khalsa, playing upon the title believed adopted by the earliest Khalsa of the post-Guru Gobind Singh period.... Past khalsas such as that of Banda, the new 'orthodox' Tat Khalsa implied, was not a part of the Khalsa but rather malicious aberrations or inadvertent corruptions of the tenth Guru's genuine intent. ... In constructing this narrative and streamlining contemporary understandings of the Khalsa itself in the process, Tat Khalsa Sikhs appropriated the same exegetical tools which they brought to bear upon the many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rahit-namas... in order to establish Sikh religious boundaries firmly and coherently, certainly useful within the colonial environment in which the Tat Khalsa operated and in which community numbers mattered politically.

With these tools the Sabha expunged material from the eighteenth-century rahit-namas which they deemed both non-Sikh and offensive; and in the process of so doing ultimately provided a single standard text which all Sikhs could follow, a text which would bring together the more ethical principles of the early rahit-namas which were in consonance with the teachings of the Guru Granth Sahib, features of these early texts which Singh Sabha intellectuals retained... It was inevitable that such a 'modern' text would strongly imply the existence of one dominant Sikh identity, that of the Khalsa, whilst allocating all other ways of expressing Sikh-ness to the margins of the Sikh world.

But Tat Khalsa leaders were not only idealists, they were pragmatic as well. The simple reality of late nineteenth-century Punjab was that few Sikhs had taken the initiatory *amrit* which was, in their opinion, the first step towards Khalsa admission. To accommodate other ways of being Sikh, therefore, the Tat Khalsa had to develop a narrative which allowed for the existence of what were to them, crudely, unfulfilled Sikh identities. .... These non-Khalsa Sikhs were thus subsumed under the identifying heading of *sehaj-dhari* or 'slow adopters' or if they adopted parts of the Khalsa form (but not the full discipline), *kesh-dharis* or 'hair-bearing' Sikhs. Sikhs they were, but Sikhs who had yet to complete their Sikh journey towards full realization. The result was the Sikh *Rahit Maryada* which was formally recognized as authoritative in 1950 and continues to be used and debated today, underscoring the dynamic nature of Sikh identity. (p.244-5)

In the light of all this, what Fenech identifies as 'the dynamic nature of Sikh identity' can only be described as radical. It was not just that Nanak's goal of *sahaj* had by this stage been utilised to identify so-called 'slow-adopters' who had failed to commit themselves to behavioural premises of the Khalsa; in so doing the occult and mystical dimensions of the Nanak Panth had been similarly marginalised, all manner of novel rituals had become *de rigeur*, whilst any kind of serious conversations with Muslims and Hindus had been ruled out of order.



## **Ideological rejection of the empirical existence of plurality within the Panth**

Moreover, as Harjot Singh Oberoi learned to his cost, his assertion that there were substantial overlaps between the premises and practices of members of Punjab's Hindu, Sikh and Muslim communities in the immediate aftermath of the arrival of the British Raj in the nineteenth century, and that the ideologically grounded processes of boundary construction as between them which subsequently developed was a reaction to – and hence a product of – colonial and post-colonial experience, and his arguments and analyses were promptly regarded as traitorous by the defenders of neo-orthodoxy. Indeed the oppositional ruckus which arose in the aftermath of the publication of *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*<sup>3</sup> became so severe that he had no alternative but to abandon his chair in Sikh studies, much to the loss of the still adolescent discipline.

As careful inspection of this volume reveals, Oberoi's conclusions were in no way mistaken. Indeed, as I discovered in the course of ethnographic fieldwork, the (Indian) Punjabi countryside is full of well-kept Muslim shrines, even though the local Muslim population had fled to Pakistan half a century beforehand. Nevertheless they all came to life on *jumme raat*, when crowds of Sikh women appeared, most of whom turned out either to be suffering from fertility problems, or returning to give thanks to the buried Pir for deploying his occult powers in such a way as to assist in resolving their difficulties. Moreover, such activities have been reproduced in the Diaspora. As Tatla accurately observes

[S]ome diaspora Sikhs pay obeisance to popular deities by donating or maintaining their shrines in Punjab, while others employ *babas* – generally Punjabi Muslims known as *pirs* and *hakims* – who practise sorcery, herbal therapy, magic, and occultism, and usually offer their services through advertisements in Punjabi media. (p. 501)

Nevertheless in keeping with the line taken by most of the other contributors to this volume, Tatla carefully overlooks the fact that such services are largely provided by Muslim Pirs: no less in Punjab than in the diaspora, women and men who find themselves in severe distress turn to living Pirs and Babas – and even more so to the shrines of their deceased predecessors – in search of occult assistance in resolving their problem – regardless of the condemnation of these practices articulated in the current version of the SPGC's Rehat Maryada.

Caste is also an equally tricky issue. Hence whilst many contributors confidently support the orthodox view that caste has no place in the Sikh tradition, a small minority take the opposite view. As Tatla puts it:

Overseas the caste hierarchy has been reproduced, often taking the form of religious expression. In effect, diaspora space has offered each social group among Sikhs space to project their identity through separate gurdwaras. There are for example both Ramgarhia and Ravidasi gurdwaras – the former are among artisans while the latter among Dalits.

Life in the diaspora has also helped reverse the Punjab occupational pattern; Jat Sikhs, who form over two-thirds of the community, have adapted to all kinds of manual labour. Similarly Chamars (landless labourers in Punjab) have shed their low status by utilizing their new-found prosperity to construct exclusive Ravidasi gurdwaras – these are now increasingly called Ravidass Bhawans, assertions of a separate religious identity. Overseas Chamars, indeed, deserve special consideration as diasporan space has offered them a wider choice and it seems they are in the process of marking out a separate religious identity for its members. Using the memory of past hostility between the Jats and Chamars in Punjab, Chamars have even contemplated leaving the Sikh fold in attempts to assert a distinctive Ravidasi identity (Juergensmeyer 1988, Takhar 2005).

Namdharis, Nirankaris, and Radhasoamis are well established in the diaspora although their combined strength is probably less than 5% of the community. All three see regular visits from their respective heads. (p501).

In my view Tatla's estimation of the scale of sectarian minorities in the diaspora is almost certainly an under-estimate; and if so his estimate is certainly in keeping with the neo-fundamentalist assumption that diversity in terms of caste and sect has no legitimate place within the modern Sikh Panth, so much so that presence of such phenomena can readily be dismissed as marginal – most especially in the case of members of the 'unclean' Chamar and Chhura castes (leather-workers, sweepers, and more generally landless labourers) who have recently turned their backs on Jat orthodoxy, and instead re-identify themselves as Ravidassias and Valmikis.

By contrast, in their ethnographically grounded contributions, Opinderjit Thakar, Eleanor Nesbitt and Paramjit Judge take a very different view of these issues. From their perspective differences of sect and caste have long been an integral feature of the Sikh Panth – if only because they are an integral feature of the Punjabi social order of which the Panth is a product. As Nesbitt puts it

Sants and their *deras* continue to be significant players in a period of unprecedentedly rapid social and religious change. In many cases subverting the dominant discourse of a cohesive Sikh Panth, that exemplifies and promotes the Tat Khalsa ideals of a distinct religion, *sants* ensure that diversity flourishes and cause official representations of the faith to be contested. Informed discussion of Sikh 'orthodoxy', and of boundaries between Sikh and Hindu tradition, cannot ignore the vitality of minority interpretations of the Khalsa *rahit* and the proliferation of *deras*. Moreover, their popularity ensures recognition in the strategic advances of politicians in Punjab.

In the absence of an institutionalized priesthood, and in a predominantly oral tradition, Sikh identity and revivalism have long been inspired by itinerant *sants* in both Punjab and in the global diaspora. During recent decades, often characterized as secular and consumerist, *sants* have continued to draw successive generations of Sikhs into lives of religious commitment, spiritual vitality, and community service. (p 369).

Moreover, as Takhar goes on to observe

There has been much debate as to whether the Radha Soami followers of the Beas Sants should be regarded as Sikhs at all in terms of their religious identity. Nevertheless, the importance of the Radha Soami Sants amongst Sikhs is evident through the fact that both Sehajdharis and Kesdharis are prominent members of the *satsang* of the Beas Radha Soami Sants.

In summary, the practices and beliefs of the organized followings of individual leaders which do not fit into the Tat Khalsa and Sikh Rahit Maryada definition of Sikhi have come to be referred to as sects or groups within the Panth. It is perhaps more reasonable to think in terms of the existence of a variety of expressions of Sikhi; that is, to acknowledge a colourful diversity within the Panth. The many sects found within the Panth further challenges [sic] the issue of Sikh identity and thus accentuates further the ‘problem’ of providing one overall definition which successfully encompasses all Sikhs... The Khalsa paradigm was exonerated as the Sikh way of life and the Mona Sikh was looked on with despair as a ‘slow adopter’. This makes it very clear as to why the term ‘sect’ is viewed pejoratively by the Sikhs. Any organized practice or belief that did not fit in with the ideals of the Rahit Maryada thus became regarded as a sect or group within the Panth (p 359).

It is against that background that Pashaura Singh’s urgent call for ethnographic studies which will serve to illuminate the lived experience of the Sikh community is of such significance. As is clear from my observations above it is certainly not the case that no such studies exist: indeed a substantial proportion of the contributions to this handbook deal with the everyday aspects of behaviour within the Sikh community at large, including music, poetry, art, martial art and so forth, as well as the impact of issues of caste, sect and gender, most aspects of which are either ignored or disallowed in the authoritarian premises of the *Rehat Maryada*. This can only be regarded as welcome. Nevertheless there is still considerable substance to Pashaura’s plea, for even those contributors who are explicitly critical of neo-fundamentalist orthodoxy, of whom Louis Fenech is perhaps the most articulate, still have a strong tendency to pull their punches. One such example can be found in the closing sentence of his excellent chapter exploring ‘The Evolution of the Sikh Community’, which reads as follows:

Indeed, even today after the reforms of the Singh Sabha and Tat Khalsa, modern Sikh reform movements profoundly influenced by ideas and understandings of religion and community modified by the European Enlightenment, there are still attempts to

define Sikh and Khalsa, a fact which tells us that the Sikh community continues to adapt, to change, and to continue its evolution. (p. 47)

That the Sikh tradition has evolved, and in doing so has diversified over time, goes without saying. But if it is indeed the case, as Fenech insists, that ‘modern Sikh reform movements profoundly influenced by ideas and understandings of religion and community modified by the European Enlightenment’, the subtext of his observation has far-reaching consequences. Far from acknowledging the inevitability of adaptation and change, the end result of the process of ‘enlightened’ revisionism which was set in train by the Tat Khalsa a century ago, and which subsequently morphed into the even more modernistic but by now deeply institution of SGPC – which, in yet another paradox was initially brought into existence with assistance of the British Raj – has become even more determined to suppress diversity, as well as to halt any further intellectual and spiritual evolution, than its predecessor ever envisioned. As a result what in my view can best be described as a *Qaumic* manifestation of Sikh nationalism has emerged as major trip-wire in the midst of the current phase of Sikh studies, such that raw politics now threatens to overwhelm the conceptual and metaphysical foundations of the Panth. Nowhere is this prospect more clearly apparent than in Arvind-Pal Mandair’s chapter on what he describes as Sikh Philosophy.

On the face of things Mandair is vigorously critical of the politically oriented hierarchs of the Tat Khalsa, and their successors in the SGPC:

[I]n the late nineteenth and early twentieth century... the Singh Sabha attempt[ed] to erect definitive boundaries between an emergent and politically active Hinduism and the Sikh tradition, by constituting Sikhi(sm) as an entity that corresponded to the Western definition of proper religion. They did this by reformulating the idea of direct inner experience that is so central to the teaching of Sikh scriptures, in terms of a revelation from a personal God. No doubt there are secondary sources such as the *Puratan Janam-sakhi* which present Guru Nanak’s attainment of spiritual perfection in terms of the revelation model. The Singh Sabha scholars Christianized the *Janam-sakhi* version of the Sultanpur experience by formulating extensive written commentaries on Sikh scripture in the form of proofs for the existence of God. The purpose of these commentaries was to ideologically separate what they considered as Sikh ‘revelation’ from the impersonal Vedic revelation based on an eternal cosmic sound. (p. 298)

I could not agree more. Nevertheless as one reads on through the Chapter from a Punjabi – as opposed to a myopically Sikh perspective to which the Singh Sabha and all its successors have been equally committed – it rapidly becomes apparent that despite the apparent sophistication of Mandair’s scholarly analysis, he also falls into a similarly essentialised conceptual trap, albeit at the other end of the spectrum. Hence whilst he rightly rejects efforts

to cram non-European conceptual systems into the determinist, and nominally rational, premises of the European enlightenment, he makes no effort to place what he identifies as ‘Sikh Philosophy’ within the context of wider Indic, let alone a Punjabi conceptual framework: instead he strains every sinew to demonstrate that conceptual foundations of *gurbani* are entirely unique, and hence owe nothing to the wider conceptual context within which the Sikh Gurus’ teaching emerged. In my view this is not only nonsense, but also an insult to *gurbani* itself.

With this in mind it is worth citing the editors’ observations with respect to the conceptualisation of the divine in Sikh thought:

As Guru Gobind Singh so incisively tells us in Brajhasha, in his Akal Ustati (‘In Praise of the Timeless One’)...

In some cases (*kahun*) [You are] Arabic, Turki, and Persian; in others [You are] Pahlavi, Pashto, and Sanskrit; sometimes human in speech; sometimes divine (116). (DG: 22)

Note that the tenth Guru is not simply here claiming that the divine is described or praised in Arabic, Persian, and by other languages (although that implication is most definitely present), but most significantly that the divine is these languages, both beyond all language and at the same time within and actualized by all languages. Such words as those in Akal Ustati not only sanctify the use of any and all languages, genres, and styles in singing, speaking, or reflecting upon the praise of the divine but, all together, underscore the divine’s unmitigated omnipresence (*sarab viapak*) and immanence (*jah jah dekha tah tum hai* ‘Wherever I look, there You are’ according to Guru Nanak (GGS: 25)) throughout all creation and within and throughout all sound and languages, the spoken forms of which are collections of specific sounds: the divine is thus *nad* the ‘primal sound [of all language]’ (GGS: 2), as well as the articulated *bani* or ‘utterance’ (GGS: 32), and the *anhad-bani* ‘the mystical unsaid’, the ‘un-struck melody’ one ‘hears’ at the height of the spiritual discipline when one achieves the ‘balance’ (*sahaj*) that is tantamount to the liberated state (*mokhu*); and the divine is all of these simultaneously (GGS: 21), both *sagun* and *nirgun*: ‘qualified’ and ‘quality-less’ (GGS: 287) respectively in the Sikh imaginary. There is, too, the implication in the *Akal Ustati* passage above that the divine is both beyond time and space, and that time and space are effectively collapsed within and by the divine as the repetition of the adverb *kahun* – which may mean both ‘some time’ and ‘some place’ – suggests (p. 5).

Moreover the editors are well aware that this vision of the cosmos is no sense unique to the Sikh tradition, since they go on to observe that in their ‘adoption and appreciation of languages and genres that are not traditional, moreover, Sikh authors are, once again, not unique: one is, for example, reminded of the beautiful Sufi romances in classical Hindi (Hindavi) and Brajhasha which expressed general Muslim and more specifically Sufi ideas

through the lens of Hindu yogic traditions, a facet excavated in the intriguingly charming works and translations of Aditya Behl (p. 5).

But having raised a vital query with respect to religious sensibilities in the Punjab, Pashaura Singh promptly pulls his punches by downplaying the significance of the region's immensely popular epic poetic sagas such as Hir Ranjha, Sassi Pannu, and Laila Majnu, Madhu Lal Hussain, let alone Radha Krishna, which he dismisses as 'intriguingly charming Sufi romances'. In so doing Pashaura Singh is either wholly ignorant of popular religion in Punjab – or much more likely, he has kept his head well below the parapet in the face of hegemonic power of politically driven neo-orthodoxy. It is certainly not the case that alternative perspectives on the significance of these matchless sagas are unavailable. In a chapter published in 2000 entitled '*Panth, Kismet, Dharm te Qaum*'<sup>4</sup> I argued that

In no way would I suggest that each of Punjab's many *panths* constitutes a separate religion. Rather they are much better viewed as variations on a theme. Thus even though the Punjabi religious scene includes a large number of spiritual masters who have gained a *panthic* following, and although each such master teaches in his own distinctive way, virtually all nevertheless share a similar goal: to find some means of penetrating the self-produced veils of ignorance and insensitivity which obstruct our awareness of the ultimate congruence between our individual microcosmic selves and the universal macrocosm. And to the extent that this is so, it follows that the spiritual dimensions of Punjabi religion can usefully be regarded as the contemporary manifestation of a multi-stranded *panthic* tradition which has its roots in the Sahajayana Buddhist tradition which flourished in Punjab over a thousand years ago.

Since then further variations have been added to the theme. In particular Sufi Islam has been a major source of further inspiration, but set within a very similar cosmological vision. If so it not only follows that Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's *qawwalis* can be regarded as a vivid contemporary representation of the original way in which Baba Nanak originally taught, but that both are also the heirs of a tradition which stretches back to the *dohas* of Kabir and *sahajiya* poets such as Jalandari-pa (Das Gupta, 1969).

However outrageous such a suggestion may seem to those committed to contemporary essentialist understandings, it is nevertheless wholly in keeping with the sensibilities of Punjab's *panthic* tradition. After all if Nanak were still with us to comment on current developments, it is far from unreasonable to suggest that he would wish to add the phrase *koi na Sikh* to his celebrated epigram *koi na Hindu, koi na Musulman*. This is not, of course, to suggest that there are no significant differences between the Islamic, Sikh and Hindu traditions, or that Punjab's innumerable Babas, Gurus, Sants, Mahants, Pirs and Yogis all preach exactly the same message. Of course not. Each spiritual master develops his own preferred theological synthesis, his own preferred perspective on the human condition, his own

preferred method for achieving the ultimate condition of gnostic *sahaj*. That is what *inter-panthic* differences are all about.

But whilst these differences are of considerable significance at the level of philosophical debate, Nanak is in excellent company when he suggests that these are little more than the inevitable consequence of *maya*. Hence the more comprehensively one penetrates its illusory veils, and the more richly one appreciates the Truth which it conceals, the more insignificant such differences become. From this perspective all Punjab's many *panths* emerge as little more than variations on a theme, offering alternative routes to the same ineffable goal. Devotees of the Truth can therefore quite legitimately express themselves in either Muslim, or in Sikh, or in Hindu terms (or in a synthesis of all three) without feeling any sense of contradiction. (Ballard 2000: 16-17)

In my considered view, such a stance in no way undermines the status of *gurbani*. On the contrary I take the view that locating Nanak within the wider tradition of which he is an integral component, and to which he made a hugely significant contribution, promotes, rather than belittles, the significance of *gurbani*; indeed it is for precisely this reason that I found the contents of Arvind-Pal Mandair's chapter so disappointing, not so much for its inaccuracy, but rather for his determined efforts to demonstrate what he describes as Sikh Philosophy is a unique feature of the Qaum. That *gurbani* is distinctive goes without saying, since it is a product of Nanak's *panthic* perspective. However the conceptual premises which he highlights in his chapter are far from unique: terms such as *hukam*, *nam*, *shabad*, *guru*, and *anahad-nad*, of *nirguna* and *saguna*, and above all of the key concepts of *sahaj* and *viraha* have long provided the foundations of north Indian spiritual discourse, no less in Sufi and Bhakti than in Tantric contexts.

Taking up that theme, in a volume ironically entitled *Obscure Religious Cults*<sup>5</sup> published way back in 1946, Shashibhushan Das Gupta took the opportunity to trace the antinomian roots of the Sahajiyya tradition traced back to the Upanishads, and forward into contemporary Sufi and *nirguna bhakti* traditions. But although it was reprinted three times in Calcutta, it has attracted remarkably little attention elsewhere, even though it is nothing less than a goldmine when it comes to understanding the dynamics of the *sahajiyya* tradition, which would in due course spread far beyond the boundaries of the subcontinent. Hence his key observations and analyses are worth citing in some detail:

The Sahajiyas were averse to the elaborate formalities of religion, and concentrated their whole attention on the attainment of the blissful ultimate nature as the highest truth, for which they took help of the natural propensities of man. Deepest was their hatred towards those recondite scholars who would try to know the truth through

discursive reason. Tillo-pada says that the truth which can fully be realised only by the self, can never be known by the scholars, for, what comes within the scope of our mind, can never be the absolute truth. Kanha-pada also says that the scholars who generally depend on their reason and scholarship, are indifferent to (or rather ignorant of) the true path of religion. As Saraha says, 'Those who go on reciting and explaining, cannot know the truth, it is not only unknown, but also unknowable to them. Those who do not drink eagerly (to their heart's content) the nectar of the instructions of the Guru, die of thirst like fools deceived by the mirage of the desert.'

Scholars explain the scriptures, but do not know of the Buddha who is residing in their own body; by such scholarship they can never escape the cycle of coming and going. Yet those shameless creatures think themselves to be Pundits. People pride themselves that the secret of the great truth has long been in their keeping, but Kanha says that even out of crores of people rarely does one become absorbed in perfectly pure truth. They read the Agamas, the Vedas and the Puranas and are always proud of their knowledge, but they are like bees hovering round the ripe marmelos fruits. As the bees outside go on humming at the mere smell of the marmelos fruit but can never break into the hard kernel and have the taste of the fruits, so also is the case with all the scholars who boast of their knowledge of the truth; they can have only a very faint smell of the truth from outside, but can never break into it and have a direct realisation of it. Sahaja is something supreme, declares Kanha to all, but the Pundits read and hear the scriptures and the Agamas, and know absolutely nothing.

The formal rules and regulations of religion were also severely criticised by the Sahajiyas, The most penetrating and scathing criticism was made by Saraha-pada. His first revolt is against the orthodox system of the fourfold division *chaturvarna*, placing the Brahmins at the top. Saraha says that the Brahmins as a caste cannot reasonably be recognised to be the highest of men, for the saying that they dropped from the mouth of Brahma is a myth invented by a section of clever and cunning people; if, on the other hand, a man becomes Brahmin by *samskara*, then even the lowest of men may be a Brahmin. If a man becomes a Brahmin by reciting the Vedas, let the people of the lower classes also recite the Vedas and they will also become Brahmins

The Brahmins take earth, water, *kusa* grass and recite *mantras* and perform fire-sacrifices in their houses, and in vain do they offer *ghee* to the fire, for thereby their eyes will only be affected with intense smoke. They become holders of sacred threads, but this is of no avail unless Truth is realized. Deceived is the whole world by false illusion, none does know the all-excelling truth where both religion and non-religion become one. The devotees of the Iswara, anoint the whole body with ashes, wear matted hair on the head, sit within the house and light lamps and ring bells seated in a corner ; they take an *asana* with their eyes fixed; they whisper *mantras* into the ears of credulous people and deceive them thereby. By all these they merely lead themselves astray and never attain perfection (Das Gupta 1969: 53-6).

In their conception of the 'Man of the heart' of the Bauls we find a happy mixture of the conception of the *Paramatman* of the Upanisads, the Sahaja of the Sahajiyas and the Sufi conception of the Beloved. The love, of which we hear so much in the songs of the Bauls, is the love between our human personality and the Divine Personality residing in the human as the true self. The Beloved as the Divine Personality residing



in us is our Sahaja-nature, and the lover is the human personality, falsely viewed as separate from this Divine Personality. Love here really implies self-love, the gradual passing away of the human into the Divine.

The creed of the Bauls is thus fundamentally based on the question of self-realisation. From the days of Upanisadic mysticism this question of self-realisation has been the pivot round which the religious thoughts of India have mainly revolved. The minor religious sects like the different branches of the Sahajiyas are saturated through and through with this Upanisadic spirit of self-realisation.

In this spirit, however, Sufi-ism is intimately related to Upanisadic mysticism, although the element of love which is conspicuous in Sufi-ism is not stressed in the Upanisads. It is because of this striking similarity in spirit that scholars have often postulated influence of Indian thought on the evolution of Sufism itself. From this perspective the religious contents of Sufi-ism were in no way foreign to the mass-mind of India. But whenever we should also discuss the influence of Sufism [on] Santa poets of Upper and Northern India, we should never lose sight of the Indian background prepared by Upanisadic mysticism and the devotional movements mainly in the Vaisnavite line. (Das Gupta, 1969: 173-80)

With this in mind it is quite clear that Kabir, Dadu, Nanak, Farid, Ravi Das, Bulleh Shah, Waris Shah, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and many more besides, all sang from the same cosmically grounded hymn sheet.

Mandair is clearly familiar with the conceptual framework shared by all these poets. But just how far does he tap into a *sahajiyya* perspective? With the greatest of respect to his intellectual capacities, it looks to me as if he stands on a very different, but by no means necessarily erroneous, plane, as I suspect may well be the case for many of the other more cautious contributors to this volume. With this in mind his intensely personal remarks in the closing paragraph of his chapter on Sikh philosophy are most illuminating:

*Simaran* is first of all remembrance of one's own mortality, of the ego's death, remembering which one awakens to the Name. *Nam-simaran* is therefore the condition of experience of finitude. Alternatively, the experience of finitude is the condition for the experience of *nam*. Because *nam-simaran* is not a metaphysical concept but a concrete sacrificial practice for transforming memory, as that function of mind which weaves time into the structures that manipulate our existence and thinking, it can also be viewed as a way of transforming worldly time and existence.

It provides a means for the individual to participate and make changes in the world. *Nam-simaran* is as inherently political as it is spiritual. As a result such conceptual dualities as those between religion and politics, mysticism and violence become superfluous. This is evident in the lives of the Sikh Gurus for whom there was no contradiction between mystical experience and the life of a soldier, householder, or political leader. (pp. 313-4).

No less than the post-colonial Singh Sabha reformers, Mandair appears to be much more of a devotee of Gobind Singh than of Nanak, such that he is able to construct his vision (and

doubtless his practice) of the Sikh tradition to suit his own cause. There is nothing wrong in principle with engaging in that activity on a personal basis, if only because religious concepts – no less than linguistic concepts – are continually being re-interpreted by their users. Hence, for example, Nanak was a classical exponent of *nirguna bhakti*, whose metaphysical objective was consequently not so much to ‘reach the other side’ in a physical sense, but rather in the midst of experience of *sahaj*, such that all dualities (including that between existent world and its transcendental Source) fade into insignificance;<sup>6</sup> by contrast Gobind Singh’s conceptual outlook, at least in the sense of his Khalsa, stood firmly entrenched in the *saguna* end of the Indic conceptual spectrum, with the result – as Mandair accurately observes – that the tenth Master saw no contradiction between mystical experience and the life of a soldier, householder, or political leader.

### **A structural analysis of the conceptual logic of the five symbols of Khalsa membership**

In his illuminating structural analysis of the symbolic logic of the Five Symbols of Sikhism,<sup>7</sup> Uberoi suggests that Gobind Singh’s vision of the Khalsa was one which is best described as *saguna* in the extreme, since it enabled members of the Sikh Khalsa simultaneously to differentiate themselves from both Hindus and Muslims, by reuniting the three distinctive *guna* of Hindu cosmology – *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* – in their external, and hence their physical appearance, thereby placing themselves at the opposite end of the spectrum from Nanak’s vision of *sahaj*, in which all distinctions between this and that are comprehensively eliminated in a condition of *nirguna*. In doing so Uberoi begins by observing that

the Sikh initiation rite 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. The meaning of being unshorn, in particular, is thus constituted in this analysis by the ‘negation of the negation’: it signifies the permanent renunciation of renunciation as a principle. (Uberoi, 1996: 11)

Based on that insight, he goes on to argue that the principle of ‘negation of negation’ provides a key to the symbolic logic of the five Ks of the Khalsa.

Wherever long hair is worn [by *sannyasis*], it is matted (*jata*), frequently dressed in ashes. According to Sikh custom, on the other hand, unshorn hair is invariably associated with the *kanga*, which performs the function of constraining the hair and imparting an orderly arrangement to it. This meaning and effect are made even clearer by the custom of the Sikh turban, worn enclosing both the *kes* and the *kanga*. The *kes* and the *kanga* thus form a unitary pair of symbols, each evoking the meaning of the

other, and their mutual association explains their mutual meaning of *kes* as distinct from *jata*. The *jata*, like the shaven head and pierced ears, symbolizes the renunciation of civil society or citizenship; the *kes* and *kanga* together symbolize its orderly assumption. (Uberoi, 1996: 12)

Before proceeding further, it is worth picking up the significance Uberoi's reference to *sannyasis* with pierced ears, the *kanphut yogis*, inspired by the teachings of the ancient, well-known, and probably mythological figure of Gorakh Nath, who is widely regarded as an *avtar* of Shiva.<sup>8</sup> Moreover the figure of Gorakh Nath, an antinomian ascetic, should not be unfamiliar to readers of *gurbani*, since Nanak goes out of his way to insist that his Sikhs, whether they are Hindus, Muslims, or Naths should not so much abandon their showy external ritual practices, but instead they should internalise the significance of these external symbols within their own personal bodily behaviour. But if so, just who were these mysterious Naths? In his account of Armed Religious Ascetics in Northern India,<sup>9</sup> Orr sets out their characteristics as follows:

Of the well-known Hindu ascetic orders, the first to have resort to arms were the *Yogis*, or *Naths*. disciples of Gorakhnath, popularly known as *kanphata* (split-eared) on account of the heavy pendants of stone or metal worn in the ears. Both in theory and in practice the Yogi was less hampered by the characteristic Hindu doctrine of *ahimsa* (harmlessness) than members of other religious orders. From very early times the cult was associated with dark and fearsome rites in which the sacrificial sword played an important part, and human sacrifice was not uncommon. The Yogis were also great practisers of magic, and were widely credited with the possession of occult powers as the result of their austerities: a reputation which enabled them to play with peculiar effect on the hopes and fears of those who aspired to temporal power. (Orr, 2001: 187)

Whilst antinomian ascetics of various stripes can still be found throughout the sub-continent, it is worth noting that whilst Nanak refers repeatedly – and critically – to the practices of the Naths, he was nevertheless much less critical of the underlying premises on which they have constructed their practices: in other words Nanak is arguing that the Naths, the leading group of ascetics in the area, have severely mis-interpreted the cosmological vision which they both shared. But if Nanak, in keeping with the long-standing tradition of the Sants, argued that it was not so much through body-bending austerities of the *sannyasis*, but rather by the quiet assimilation of one's very being into the transcendent presence of Nam, he, too, was engaging in the strategy of negating negation in the construction of his Panth. But if that is the case, and if Uberoi's analysis is sound, in creating his Khalsa Gobind took Nanak's *ulti* strategy a great deal further, and in a different direction. To proceed with Uberoi's analysis:

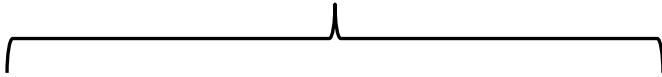
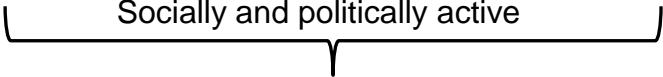
The *kirpan* and the *kara* similarly constitute another pair of symbols, neither of which can be properly understood in isolation. Without going into the evidence, I merely state that in my view the bracelet imparts the same orderly control over the sword that the comb does over the hair. The medieval ascetic order of the Kara Lingas indeed wore on a chain a similar ring over the naked penis. The *kirpan*, in its conjoint meaning with the *kara* is a sword ritually constrained and thus made into the mark of every citizen's honour, not only of the soldier's vocation. Finally, the *kachh*, a tailored loin and thigh garment, the last of the five Ks is also to be understood as an agent of constraint, like the comb and the bracelet, though the subject of its control is not overtly stated. This unstated term, I think, can only be the uncircumcised male member. The *kachh* consequently constitutes a unitary pair of meanings, signifying human reserve in commitment to the procreative world, as against renouncing it altogether (Uberoi, 1996:12-13)

If we take Uberoi's analysis aboard, and combine it with Das Gupta's analysis of the development of *sahajiyya* tradition I have outlined above, it becomes quite clear that despite the marked differences in which they chose to engage with the cosmic order, the conceptual stances promulgated by both Nanak and Gobind Singh had deep roots in the Indic, and indeed in the Sufi, tradition. In both cases they stood apart from the renunciators (or in other words the path of the Sannyasis) by 'negating negation' as Uberoi puts it, and hence remained firmly ensconced in *varnashramadharm*a, rather than seeking to step beyond it. But the basis on which each Guru sought to live within its frame differed radically. Hence, Nanak assisted his Sikhs by illuminating the peaceful route which would enable them to transcend all forms of differentiation as a means of experiencing *sahaj* – in sharp contrast to the ascetically orientated Nath Yogis who sought to reach the same goal by engaging in all manner of exhibitionistic forms of austerity. By contrast Gobind Singh twisted his kaleidoscope in the opposite direction: he, too rejected renunciation, but in his case urged members of his Khalsa (himself included) to become supermen by including all the three *guna* within themselves, the better to restore the integrity of the *dharmic* order.

If so, it follows that these developments are in no sense novel in structural terms: if the roots of the *saguna* perspective can be traced back to the premises of the Vedas, and hence to the immense scope of the written commentary which they gave rise, those of the *nirguna* tradition can be traced back to the premises of the Upanishads, which were much more poetic and mystical in character – in much the same way as the legalistic premises of the Shari'a

complement the much more mystical, and ultimately strongly antinomian premises of the Sufi Tariqa – which in many ways mirror the premises and practices of the Nath Yogis.<sup>10</sup>

With such considerations in mind Uberoi’s structural insights can readily be expanded much further, thereby highlighting the sharp differences between Baba Nanak’s *panth* on the one hand, and Gobind Singh’s *khalsa* on the other, even though both are operating within the same conceptual vision of the cosmic order – albeit interpreted on a radically different basis in each case.

<b>Goal</b>	<p><b>Nirguna</b></p>  <p>Transcendent <i>sahaj</i></p>		
<b>Guna</b>	<i>sattva</i>	<i>rajas</i>	<i>tamas</i>
<b>Deity</b>	<i>Brahma</i>	<i>Vishnu</i>	<i>Shiva</i>
<b>Characteristic</b>	Insight	Order	Creation/ destruction
<b>Varna/caste</b>	<i>Brahmin</i>	<i>Kshatriya/ Vaishya</i>	<i>Sudra/ Sannyasi</i>
<b>Conceptual domain</b>	<i>karma</i>	<i>dharma/ artha</i>	<i>kama/ sexuality</i>
<b>Restraint</b>	<i>kanga</i>	<i>kara</i>	<i>kachh</i>
<b>Power</b>	<i>kes</i>	<i>kirpan</i>	uncircumcised
<b>Goal</b>	 <p>Socially and politically active</p> <p><b>Saguna</b></p>		

If I am right in so thinking, Nanak’s pursuit of the transcendent condition of *sahaj* did not lead him to suggest that his Sikhs should not attempt to significantly restructure the character of the existent cosmos, including the social order of *varnashramadharmā*, nor seek to transcend it by yogic austerities: rather in keeping with the *sahajiyya* tradition they should ‘chill out’, appreciate the wonders of the created world around them, not only to reach a

position in which of all the differences let loose within the created order precipitated by the actions of the forces of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* fall into a condition of insignificance, but so too the distinction between creation and its transcendent source – named for convenience in this case as Ek Onkar. However, by bringing his Khalsa into existence, Gobind Singh was operating at the opposite end of the spectrum. Whilst his vision of the structure of cosmic order is manifestly entirely congruent with Nanak's, his well-armed *sant sipahis* were anything but quietistic. Rather the uniforms which he required his Singhs to adopt loudly proclaimed that they were active participants in *varnashramadharma*, in the sense that they actively combined, but simultaneously constrained – and hence socialised – the powers of the three *guna* within themselves; as such they presenting themselves as supermen – as *sawa-lakh*, no less. But despite their potentially fearful appearance as warriors, the Singh's uniform served to remind the wearers – as well as all those whom they encountered – that all the powers which they had thereby incorporated within themselves were strictly constrained – in dramatic contrast to the violently antinomian *sannyasi*-based military Khalsas whose members roamed their way across northern India during this period, and who readily hired themselves out as mercenary warriors on behalf of anyone prepared to pay them.

### **The Khalsa in the contemporary era**

The Sikh Khalsa has undergone a multiplicity of transformations since it came into existence as Guru Gobind Singh's Praetorian Guard in 1699. It is unclear just what happened to the Khalsa after Gobind Singh was murdered in the Deccan, after which the ascetic Banda Bahadur took over in Punjab: what we do know, however, is that a number of armed and highly competitive *misl*, all which appear to have been made up of Khalsa Sikhs, carved out at least twelve separate jurisdictions for themselves covering the greater part of Punjab in the wake of plundering Afghan and Persian armies retreating to their homelands with the spoils. A further transformation occurred when Ranjit Singh took control of Lahore in 1800, from where he built up a jurisdiction which eventually reached all the way from Peshawar to the Sutlej, ruled in his name from his Khalsa Durbar in Lahore. Nevertheless only a small minority of his subjects appear to have been true Khalsa Sikhs: moreover of these the great majority appear to have been recruited once again as Praetorian Guards – on a much larger scale than was achieved in Gobind Singh's era. Hence whilst the Khalsa Sikhs fought on valiantly as the British set out to conquer the Punjab in the aftermath of Ranjit Singh's death, once they were overcome in battle, the Khalsa in an ordered military sense evaporated.

However the concept of the Khalsa did not disappear: rather it fragmented. Some of its members relocated into Akharas and Deras, in which – as Paramjit Singh Judge and Kamalroop Singh describe in their illuminating chapters – the premises and practices of martial arts of the Khalsa warriors have been preserved to this day, no less in the UK than in Punjab. Others became wandering *Udasis*, and when the British set about replacing the *sepoys* in the Bengal Army in the aftermath of the uprising in 1857 mutiny, many were recruited into the Sikh regiments which the British set up in their place. More recently still Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale's Khalistan rebellion in 1984 was manifestly an attempt to revive a military Khalsa – albeit with little success. However the most radical long-standing development came about with the emergence of the Tat Khalsa movement at the turn of the nineteenth/ twentieth century, further reinforced by the subsequent establishment of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee in 1925. In yet another paradox, this time round it was deliberately unarmed Sikh *jathas* who marched out to remove the *Udasi Mahants* who had for long had control of the major Sikh Gurdwaras. Here they found themselves confronted by *Udasi* warriors, whereupon they were arrested by the thousand by the British authorities who were seeking to protect the *Udasis'* property rights. In due course the British decided that they had no alternative but to give way, and in sharp contradiction to established colonial practice found themselves forced to provide Sikhs a substantial degree of organised autonomy, not just vis-à-vis their Hindu opponents, but also vis-à-vis the Raj itself.

As is evident from the essays in this handbook, one of the prime concerns in these initiatives was to modernise the Sikh tradition, above all to render it more coherent, more uniform, and above all more conceptually autonomous, most especially since in popular contexts all too many members of the Panth had slipped into incorporating all manner of premises and practices drawn from other religions grounded in Punjab into their everyday practice, thereby muddying the pure stream of Sikhi. As a result both the Tat Khalsa and the SPCG not only began to promote a vision of ever greater conformity in the articulation of Panth's metaphysical, moral and ritual terms, but began to claim administrative, and hence *political* authority over all those who claimed to be Sikhs. In historical terms this was entirely unprecedented. Moreover in my view this radical change of course has firmly colonial roots, in the sense of being an effort to reconstruct what Evangelical missionaries routinely described as a typically superstitious, and hence chaotic Asiatic religious tradition into one which could stand tall in the arena of World Religions. In that respect the SPCG and its

offspring have reached their goal with great success, at least in the sense of impressing Euro-American ‘World Region’ specialists: hence amongst other things, this volume. But at what cost?

So far as I can see, the efforts of the authoritarian centralisers have failed: in the contemporary world the behaviour, beliefs and practices of members of the Nanak Panth, as well as their spatial distribution, are a great deal more diverse than they were a century ago. No less than any other religious tradition, the Panth is constantly being reconstructed – and hence diversified – by its users. But if the efforts of politically driven – as opposed to the spiritually inspired – reformers to trim and reorder the Panth force it willy-nilly into the procrustean conceptual framework of evangelical Christianity, they have in due course led to intellectual and academic chaos. It is time to start over.

### **A concluding overview**

Although the *Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies* carefully avoids using the terms ‘Sikhism’ and ‘religion’ in its title, all its contents refer back either to *gurbani*, or to the activities of those who have been inspired in one way or another by the teachings of the ten gurus, or both. However, whilst the editors of this volume have sensibly avoided using either of these terms in the title of this volume, anyone who reads this book from cover to cover is likely to become much better informed about the multifaceted dimensions of the tradition to which the teaching of the ten Gurus has given rise. Nevertheless, if readers consult this handbook in an effort to identify what Sikhism ‘is’ in essentialist terms, as well as just where it stands as a ‘World Religion’, they will almost certainly find themselves even more bewildered than they were when they began.

This is in no way to belittle, let alone dismiss either the existence or the significance of the Sikh tradition: indeed it continues to thrive, now on a global scale. Indeed Sikhs often describe themselves as being akin to potatoes, on the grounds that there is no part of the world which lacks their presence. But even if the *panth* is ultimately held together by common respect for *gurbani*, efforts to nail it down as a religion in a singular sense turn out to be exceedingly problematic. However in the light of its roots, that is far from unexpected: the *sahajiya* tradition has always been atheistic (in the sense of *nirguna*, *sunya* and *fana*), anti-institutional, and anti-intellectual nit picking. In other words the roots of the *panth* were



gnostic and self-reflective, and its premises were articulated in the form of poetry and song, as opposed to determinative Brahminical scripture. As a result nothing was fixed and static: *panthic* traditions operated, and continue to operate on a pragmatically do-it-yourself basis, such that it was continually being interpreted by its devotees. From an anthropological perspective such culturally constructed cosmologies have conditioned human behaviour ever since we became conceptually active, such that we gained a capacity to generate conceptual premises by means of which to underpin our everyday lives with a wide-reaching sense of metaphysically grounded meaning and purpose, as is the case with respect to the material outlined above.

But how far are the varied premises of the Sikh tradition, together with the many other traditions in which it is rooted (and from which it has constantly borrowed over the centuries) ‘a religion’ in the strict sense of the term? Or is it the case that the very concept of religion – at least as it is construed within the perspective of the contemporary post-colonial (but nevertheless deeply Christocentric) discipline of Religious Studies – is now well past its sell-by date? If this is the case – and there are good reasons to conclude that the majority of contributors to this volume would strongly agree with that observation at one level or another – by what should it be replaced?

All I would observe at this stage, despite the highly sophisticated criticism of current scholarly orthodoxy which Arvind-Pal Mandair’s has set out in his recent analysis in *Religion and the Spectre of the West* (2009), is that his utilisation of the premises of Continental Philosophy has in my opinion in no way provided him with means of circumventing the limitations precipitated by the procrustean limitations deriving from the conceptual foundations of the European enlightenment. Hence in his sophisticated analysis of ‘Sikh Philosophy’ in this volume he takes it for granted that the Sikh tradition can readily be understood as an autonomous, and hence a free-standing World Religion; worse still the magic of *sahaj* stands way outside the conceptual universe which he himself has chosen to occupy.

Others have made more radical efforts to step outside the box. Twenty years ago Harjot Oberoi observed that:

It is all very well for historians to think, speak and write about Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism, but they rarely pause to consider if such clear-cut categories actually found

expression in the consciousness, actions and cultural performances of the actors they describe ... (with respect to historical material from) nineteenth century Punjab I was constantly struck by the brittleness of our textbook classifications. There simply wasn't any one-to-one correspondence between the categories which were supposed to govern religious behaviour on the one hand, and the way in which people actually experienced their everyday lives on the other. (Oberoi,1994: 1-2)

I took up the same argument myself in '*Panth, Kismet, Dharm te Qaum*', in which I observed that

The entrenchment of an impoverished and deeply Euro-centric understanding of just what it is that religion might entail has almost wholly obscured the fact that religious experience can include a number of quite different dimensions, each of which exert differential levels of interest and attraction amongst differing groups of devotees. Euro-centric assumptions have promoted a much more unitary vision of what religion is all about. Grounded in the spirit of the Protestant reformation, it seeks to reduce all manifestations of religion to essentialised -isms. Within this framework texts are routinely prioritised over tradition, aspirations to moral and behavioural conformity over spiritual experience, and formal belief over ritual practice. Moreover it is also assumed that only the first half of each of these oppositions is properly 'religious'. Hence the second is either overlooked, or dismissed as nothing but irrational superstition.

The intellectual hegemony of these philosophical assumptions has become thoroughly pernicious. Besides being a major obstacle to the acquisition of a more insightful and illuminating understanding of the role of religion in contemporary Europe, this alien outlook causes even greater confusion in extra-European contexts. If so, it follows that the best way of circumventing the crippling impact of these assumptions is to look elsewhere for theoretical inspiration. Hence I have sought to throw off those blinkers, in favour of a more open-minded approach, a deliberate effort to step beyond the analytical log-jams which are invariably precipitated when Eurocentric conceptual schemas are uncritically applied in a Punjabi context. (Ballard 2000: 9-10)

I also went on to develop my thesis in a number of further publications, the most recent of which is entitled '*Changing Interpretations of Shari'a, 'Urf and Qanun*', which contains a yet more detailed tabular outline of my thinking in this field, and which I have taken the opportunity to set out below

<b>Sphere of Activity</b>	<b>Significance</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Euro-Domain</b>	<b>Hindu/ Islamic Domain</b>
<i>Panthic</i>	Spiritual/ Gnostic inspiration	The ideas and practices deployed by those in search of spiritual and mystical inspiration, invariably under the guidance of a Spiritual Master (e.g. <i>Pir, Yogi, Sant, Swami or Guru</i> )	Spiritual/ Occult	Panth/ Tariqa
<i>Kismet</i>	Occult/ Making sense of the world	The ideas used to explain the otherwise inexplicable, and the occult practices deployed to turn such adversity in its tracks; both are usually deployed with the assistance of a Spiritual Master.		
Dharmic	Morality/ Social order	The moral ideology in terms of which all aspects of the established social and behavioural order is conceptualised and legitimated.	Social	Dharma/ Shari'a
Sanskritic	Rites of passage/ social reconstruction	The set of ritual practices – and most especially those associated with birth, initiation, marriage and death – which celebrate and legitimate each individual's progress through the social and domestic order.		
<i>Qaumic</i>	Political/ Ethnic mobilisation	The use – and more often than not the reinterpretation – of religious ideology as a vehicle for collective social and political mobilisation. The typical outcome of this process is that an increasingly clearly defined body of people begin to close ranks on a morally sanctioned basis the better to pursue shared social and economic objectives	Political	Artha/ Siyasat

**Table 1: Five (potentially universal) dimensions religious activity as observed in Punjab**

Besides the capacity of this model to illuminate of the major structural dimensions of both the Hindu and Islamic traditions as they manifest themselves in the Punjab, it also serves as an equally illuminating insight into the historical development of the Sikh tradition, as well as its equally intrinsic condition of conceptual plurality, which has become steadily more salient over the centuries. From this perspective Nanak's teaching was clearly located in the *Panthic* sphere, which has also always been closely associated with those of the *Kismet* sphere, with little specific to say about any of the other dimensions, other than to suggest that his devotees should stay put in the existent world, even if they seek to transcend its differences in search of the experience of *sahaj*. By contrast Gobind added a powerful *Qaumic* dimension to the edifice, a development which found an exceptional degree of further traction in the colonial and post-colonial era.

One of the most striking consequences of all this has been a further reinforcement of the *Qaumic* dimension of the tradition, now articulated much more in terms of politics rather than in warfare, together with a radical overhaul of the *Dharmic* and *Sanskritic* domains by the SGPC, articulated from on high in successive revisions of the *Rehat Maryada*. Close inspection of its directives promptly reveals that one of its key objectives is to ‘cleanse’ the *Panth* of long standing customs and ritual practices of the kind which Oberoi highlighted in his exploration of the construction of religious boundaries. Although rarely specifically identified as being either of Hindu and Islamic provenance, they are nevertheless contemptuously dismissed as wholly alien to the Sikh tradition – even though many of these practices can be witnessed to this day. Moreover the commitment to poetry and song outlined by Das Gupta is still firmly in place in the *Panth* at large, and routinely articulated in every Gurdwara around the globe; by contrast *Qaumic* oriented instructions about the way in which their everyday behaviour should be organised emanating from the SGPC are routinely ignored.

To my mind this condition of plurality is not an indication of weakness, but rather of strength and resilience. Nanak’s *Panth* is thriving, now on a global basis; likewise the flow of pilgrims to Hari Mandir Sahib continues to expand exponentially. All six of the dimensions identified above remain vigorously active – regardless of all manner of contradictions between them. If nothing else, the volume under review serves to demonstrate that the Sikh version of the *sahajiyya* tradition remains as creative and as vigorous as ever, and that its diversity still remains a source of moral and spiritual meaning and purpose for those who explore the tradition’s multiplex dimensions in search of inspiration.

Last but not least, it is time to return to the issues I raised in the headline to this article: just how is the relationship between Sikh Studies and Punjab studies best to be understood? In my view the structure of a rope provides by far the best analogy, most especially because it gains its strength, its flexibility as well as its on-going length from its intrinsic condition of multi-strandedness.



From this perspective it is quite clear that the Punjabi socio-cultural order is in no sense unique. All the immensely varied conceptual premises on which we humans have relied as we have constructed and reconstructed dynamic socio-cultural orders around ourselves are best understood as being akin to the shortest strands in the rope. As such they constantly evolve, sometimes branching out in response to new opportunities, and at others petering out as further strands takes their place. Hence, whilst all these micro-processes are undoubtedly worth investigating in their own right, if they are solely considered on this basis they can in no way provide a sufficient foundation by means of which to grasp the qualities, the pluralities and above all the dynamics of the rope itself. As Guru Ram Das put it, wholly in keeping with the *sahajiyya* tradition:

The vast ocean is filled with treasuries of jewels and pearls. This is attainable by those who are devoted to Gurbani. (GGS: 442)

By contrast the premises of Christianity – and above all of the European enlightenment – are in my view far less resilient in character, as a result of their essentialist, teleological and above all their anti-pluralistic outlook. Hence in common with all other parts of the globe which found themselves subject to European hegemony, in the aftermath of the fall of Ranjit Singh’s radically pluralistic kingdom the Punjabi elites were rapidly infected by the premises of the enlightenment – if only to throw out the invaders. But by the time they succeeded in doing so a century later, a large part of the baby had by then been dissolved by bathwater, with disastrous consequences, no less politically than ideologically. Punjab was cut in two, and was cut in two again when east Punjab was set apart from Haryana; likewise in a similarly essentialist manner, even more violent politico-religious confrontations are now emerging across the border in Pakistan. These developments cannot be dismissed as a recrudescence of ancient hatreds: rather they are the outcome of the hugely destructive impact of essentialist premises of the enlightenment let loose during the colonial period – and of which the current premises of the SGPC and its offshoots are a classic example.

Nevertheless the conceptual premises which underpin the *sahajiyya* tradition, and most especially the concept of *viraha*, continue to thrive and to inspire those who still have ears to hear, despite all the clarion cries of disenchanting modernity which currently surround them. Hence when Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan was still with us, Punjabi audiences of all kinds regularly cheered with ecstasy when he proclaimed:

Muslims find You in their Masjids  
Hindus find You in their Mandirs

Sikhs find you in the Gurdwaras  
They are all mistaken! Mistaken!  
Tu hi Tu, Tu hi Tu, Tu hi Tu, Tu, Tu  
There is only You, only You, only You, You, You  
Everything else is mere gossip!

The Sahajiyya tradition remains alive and well, and as ever articulated in a multitude of differing guises. Moreover the key to the whole edifice is clearly grounded in a cosmological vision which is far distant from the premises Christian and Judaic traditions, let alone the premises of the enlightenment. As Das Gupta observes in his discussion of the Bauls' theological perspective

We have seen that the Sahajiyas recognised the human body as the microcosm of the universe and that, according to them, Sahaja as the ultimate reality resides within this human form as our true self or the ultimate nature. This is exactly the view that has been contended by the Sufi mystics. The Bauls also cherished the same doctrine. The human body has always been described as the temple of the Dear One. In vain, they say, are people mad after going on pilgrimage, in vain are they searching the Beloved in temples and mosques and in other places. Thus it is said,

'The Man of the house is dwelling in the house, in vain have you become mad by searching Him outside. It is for your own fault that you are roaming about for ever. You have been to Gaya, Benares, and Brindavan, and have travelled through many rivers and forests and other places of pilgrimage; but say, have you seen in all these anything of Him of Whom you have heard? Through false illusion you have lost all your power of understanding, with [a] jewel tied in your own skirt, you have been swimming in search of it. With care you might have easily got the gem, but you are losing everything carelessly. The jewel shines so near to your eyes, but alas! You are keeping your eyes shut – and you do not see.' Again it is said, 'Search, oh brother, for the Lord, who is the kind sympathiser of the poor, in the company of enlightenment as thy preceptor. The heart deceiving blurs the eye, and a single hair hides the mountain of truth! The Lord in His lone seat looks. What humour enjoys my Lord at the folly and laughs! Carefully proceed in your spiritual effort may be, you will find wealth very near; says Lalan, search your own house, truth is not far away!' (Das Gupta: 173-4)

With this in mind, Nanak's teaching with respect to the attainment of *sahaj* is clearly in no way unprecedented. Rather it is self-evident that his position lies in the midst of a long stream of thought which runs from early Buddhism through *Gita Govinda* and the *Bhagavad Purana*, and on through Kabir, Farid, Dadu, Waris Shah, Bulleh Shah, and most recently on the inspirational Qawwals of the late lamented Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan.

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- <sup>1</sup> Singh, Pashaura and Fenech, Louis (eds) (2014) *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- <sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that Gobind Singh's construction of a military Khalsa was far from unique. In his article 'Warrior Ascetics in Indian history' in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* Vol. 98, No. 1 (Jan. - Mar., 1978), p. 61-75 Lorenzen provides a detailed account of the long history of Hindu *sannyasi* and Muslim *ghazi* warriors throughout northern India. He also shows that as the power of the Mughals declined during the course of seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, *akaras* Vaishnava and Shaiva ascetics, most of whom had hitherto been involved in defending themselves from each other, expanded their activities by becoming readily available as mercenaries. Although members of Gobind's Khalsa (a title also utilized by members of some other *akaras*) were in principle only carefully constrained ascetics, they fulfilled much the same defensive role as did their fully ascetic counterparts.
- <sup>3</sup> Oberoi, Harjot (1944) *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- <sup>4</sup> Ballard, Roger (2000) 'Panth, Kismet, Dharm te Qaum: Four dimensions in Punjabi Religion' in Singh, Pritam and Thandi, Shinder (eds) *Punjabi Identity in a Global Context* Delhi, Oxford University Press, 7-37
- <sup>5</sup> Das Gupta, Shashibhushan (1946) *Obscure Religious Cults* Calcutta: Mukhopadhyay.
- <sup>6</sup> The Sufis utilise the term *fana* to identify precisely the same experience.
- <sup>7</sup> Uberoi, J. P. S. (1996) *Religion, Civil Society and the State: A Study of Sikhism* Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- <sup>8</sup> In Punjab the most prominent group of renouncers are the followers of Gorakh Nath with whom Nanak is said to have had extensive debates. Commonly identified as *khanphat yogis*, they place large rings in their ears, and wear their hair matted and full of ashes (see Briggs, G.W. (1938) *Gorakhnath and the Kanphut Yogis*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsi Das). For a detailed exposition of the premises and practices of the Nath tradition, see Das Gupta (Part III), as well as White, David (1998) *The Body Alchemical: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India*: Chicago University Press.
- <sup>9</sup> Orr, W.G. (2001) 'Armed Religious Ascetics in Northern India' in Gommans, Jos and Kolf, Dirk, (eds) *Warfare and Weaponry in South Asia 1000- 1800* Delhi: Oxford University Press.