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Foreword: A Role for Lived Experience, Embodiment, and *Rehat* in Sikh Studies

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Within contemporary research across the disciplines, the concept of ‘lived experience’ is common for contextualizing long-pursued inquiries in their contemporary implications. While disciplinary conventions and orientations to the concept can and do differ, when it comes to studies of colonialism, imperialism, patriarchy, or racism, lived experience becomes a critical intervention for reorienting theories of violence and justice. Lived experience offers a way to understand power from the perspective of those who have been historically and continuously disempowered (Behl, 2014; Collins, 2012; Haraway, 1988; Kaur Singh, 2017; Kaur-Bring, 2020; Pandey, 2022). Scholars have convincingly made this case in trying to show the importance of lived experience and standpoint (Mahmood, 1996), as it bridges the gap between the reality of social life and aspirational political claims. For instance, as Mohammed El-Kurd, a Palestinian writer and poet from Jerusalem, noted in relation to Zionist settler colonialism, “As a Palestinian, I am a direct subject of Zionism. I’m an expert on it in fact because it is practiced on my body” (محمد الكرد (@mohammedelkurd), 2024). These political claims can range from more widely recognized movements such as decolonization, anti-imperialism, democracy, socialism, communism, equality, equity, inclusion, and authoritarianism (to name a few), to the political claims of faith traditions. For the *Sikh Research Journal*, lived experience serves as a critical lens through which to understand how the mundane, extravagant, and intergenerational contours of Sikh communities’ and sangats’ social lives intersect with the political claims of Sikhi and the political claims made by Sikhs.

Within Sikhi itself, lived experience may more directly parallel ideas of *rehat*: a daily or regularized practice of embodying one’s faith. While the *rehat* that different communities of Sikhs would use has evolved over time – moving even from oral traditions to written traditions to organizational traditions (Kalra, 2005; Murphy, 2005; Purewal, 2011; Townsend, 2013) – it is commonly spoken of and treated within community spaces as an immutable doctrine. When approached as doctrine, scholars and Sikhs can treat *rehat* as a “thing” to be delineated, outlined, defined, and regulated (K. Kaur, 2016). Instead, if *rehat* were to be approached within Sikh Studies as a way to understand Sikhs’ ways of life and the various embodiments of Sikhi throughout history, then studying Sikhs’ *rehat*(s) can reveal networks of power and the meaning systems Sikhs use to navigate social, spiritual, and material life. *Rehat* then becomes an entryway into deeper understanding for what Sikhs experience for both harm and healing; how they find meaning in faith-based principles, practices, and artifacts; and how Sikhi is (re)interpreted and (re)made. For example, if scholars investigated what people believed constituted a *rehat* and what types of principles provided internal coherence to a person’s, a sangat’s, or a qaum’s *rehat*, then the question is not, “Who is a Sikh?” or “Do Sikhs follow a single *rehat*?”, but “How do Sikhs manifest their Sikhi and their subjectivities as Sikhs?” A focus

on rehat or lived experience, therefore, can be an epistemological shift, moving research from colonial interrogation, definition of boundaries, and territories of subjecthood towards illuminating sovereign political mobilization. In particular, Sikh rehat also functions as a network of translation for how each Sikh and collective of Sikhs embodies the immaterial through their material realities, making Sikhi and the Guru real (to themselves) through their own particular standpoint.

The debate around the shortcomings in rehat and Sikh praxis has continued to grow, particularly in scholarship that takes up a gendered analysis of Sikhi and Sikh Studies. Scholars have highlighted how trans/misogyny, sexism, and cisheterosexism continue to permeate Sikh communities while leaders of said communities continue to claim aspirational political manifestations (Behl, 2010; H. Kaur, 2020; Sian & Dhamoon, 2020) – in fact, this issue’s contributions make similar contributions. By sitting with the intersection of lived experiences and embodiment in Sikh Studies, our aim is to further locate how Maya prevents us from manifesting Gurmat in each time and place due to the particulars of our current political and social limitations. Sikh praxis guides us to not only confront such limitations but also honor them through rehat *maryada* – the discipline of regular Naam-imbued praxis. This issue’s contributions inspire such reflections around Gurmat praxis aspirations and limitations, as well as the potential role of Sikh Studies in advancing these critical conversations.

In this issue, we offer three approaches to rethinking and reconceptualizing the role of lived experience, embodiment, and praxis in Sikh Studies. The first article, “Caste, Sikhi, and Undelivered Promises: Sikh Research Journal’s Interview of the Poetic Justice Foundation,” features a roundtable interview with four anti-caste and caste abolition organizers and academics. The conversation sheds light on how caste shows up in social life – particularly in its mundane ways – for Punjabi and Sikh communities in Canada. These individuals, while primarily driven by the goal of caste abolition, also emphasize the role of Sikhi as a guiding political force in their work. Through Sikhi, they found both a need for continuing to commit towards abolition even when it became difficult because choosing to not do so would violate the political principles of equality and justice advocated through Sikhi. This critical roundtable goes beyond treating ‘lived experience’ as a mere liberal, universalized concept for knowledge generation divorced from networks of domination. Instead, it explores ‘lived experience’ as a critical dimension for understanding how Sikhi manifests politically, spiritually, and practically in the world today – it signifies a form of Sikh rehat.

In “‘Loki Ki Kehen Ge?’: Gurbani, Liberation, and Subverting Cyclicalities”, Dr. Tavleen Kaur provides a reflective reinterpretation of social norms around “loki ki kehen ge?” (“what will people say?”), through the lens of Gurbani. This reflective reinterpretation would be akin to a “meditation” in other disciplines, or an “extended rehao” when informed by Gurbani. In her

contribution, which includes a poem, reflection, and images of related sculptural art (metalwork), Dr. Kaur offers a “love letter to wanting more out of life.” (p. 24). Contrasting the social understanding and Gurbani-informed translations of *nazar* (glance, perspective, sight, or vision) and *nadar* (“Divine perspective”), Dr. Kaur reveals how Sikhs’ lived experiences reveal dynamics around patriarchy, sexual violence, gender inclusion beyond the binary, and the pursuit of freedom from fear. The article exemplifies a translational praxis that aims to retain the depth of Gurbani, offering commentary on social life through a lens of Divine freedom. Embracing the creative aspects of Sikh life (poetry, art), this piece seeks to open new epistemological avenues in Sikh Studies, encouraging exploration and provocation.

The final article in our issue is a transcript of an interview between two Sikh academics, titled ‘‘The Home Beyond Home’: Dr. Balbinder S. Bhogal in conversation with Dr. Sunny Dhillon’. In the piece, Drs. Dhillon and Bhogal trace the changing relationships that Sikhs have with Sikhi throughout their lives. Guided by their broad research interests and the organic nature of conversation, they discuss the untranslatable aspects of religion, language, and Sikhi as it relates to finding “homes,” whether of the spiritual, bodily, linguistic, or intellectual nature. This interview is part of the ‘Sikh Panjabi Scholars in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences’ project based in the United Kingdom (UK). Dr. Dhillon shares this transcript as part of a larger digital, [open access project](#) that interviews Sikh academics about their lived experiences as Sikh, academics, and/or Punjabis. Notably, while the article highlights the demographic underrepresentation of Sikhs in the UK academia in relation to the UK’s diasporic populations, it does not argue for greater “inclusion” into the academy. Rather, akin to the other works in this issue that focus on lived experience, the Project shows how understanding Sikhs’ lives in academia and society can expose the dynamics of power within academic and social settings.

This issue concludes with two book reviews of recent publications in Sikh Studies. Dr. Keshav Singh reviews *Sikh Philosophy: Exploring gurmat Concepts in a Decolonizing World* (2022) by Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair, while Dr. Simrita Dhir provides insights on *Chasing Dignity* (2023) by Rachhpal Sahota. Collectively, these articles and reviews cover a range of ongoing research topics in Sikh Studies – such as casteism, colonialism, patriarchy, gender domination, and the decolonial sovereignty of *gurmat* – that free the field from the confines of generating knowledge solely for the Euro-American academy.

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