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Table of Contents

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

Harleen Kaur and prabhdeep singh kehal..... 1

Caste, Sikhi, and Undelivered Promises: Sikh Research Journal’s Interview of the Poetic

Justice Foundation 5

“Loki Ki Kehen Ge?”: Gurbani, Liberation, and Subverting Cyclicalities

Tavleen Kaur 24

‘The Home Beyond Home’: Dr. Balbinder S. Bhogal in Converation with Dr. Sunny

Dhillon

Dr. Sunny Dhillon 30

Book Review: “Sikh Philosophy: Exploring *gurmat* Concepts in a Decolonizing World”

Keshav Singh 56

Book Review: “Chasing Dignity”

Simrita Dhir 61

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

Harleen Kaur and prabhdeep singh kehal

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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Caste, Sikhi, and Undelivered Promises: Sikh Research Journal's Interview of the Poetic Justice Foundation

Abstract

This is the edited transcription of an interview with Anita Lal, Meena Hira, Dr. Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra, and manmit singh by Drs. Harleen Kaur and prabhdeep singh kehal (Co-Lead Editors of SRJ) that took place on September 20, 2023. In this conversation, they reflect on caste and caste violence in Punjabi and Sikh spaces by exploring their collective journey towards advocating for caste abolition within the framework of Sikhi. The panelists map out the current movements against caste violence in the diaspora and offer insights based on their current and ongoing organizing efforts to confront the silence of caste in Sikh spaces. The panelists discuss how this issue is crucial because it addresses the persistent yet frequently unacknowledged problem of caste and caste violence within Punjabi and Sikh communities. The panelists believe it is vital to actively challenge and advocate for the abolition of caste discrimination, aligning with the principles of equality and justice in Sikhi. They emphasize the urgency of this discussion in the current context, recognizing a growing awareness and movement against caste violence, particularly in the diaspora. This moment offers a pivotal opportunity to confront these deep-rooted issues and foster a more inclusive and equitable community. The full recording of the interview is accessible through the following [link](#).

Keywords: *caste, oppression, discrimination, diaspora, equality, brahmanism, Dalit, Jatt, Chamar*

Interview

prabhdeep singh kehal: Thank you for joining us today and I'm very excited to have this conversation. For the sake of everyone's time and energy here, I'm going to go ahead and get started. As you think about casteism or try to explain it to people who do not have the language to name it, how do you understand it within the specific context of Sikhi?

Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra: When we talk about caste system, we do have to understand first and foremost that it's a centuries old system of hierarchy based off of oppression and violence that comes out of the Hindu Brahminical system. I say brahminical because within the labor stratified categories that fall within the caste system, Brahmins are seen as being at the top of the system. The reason why is because they have the privilege to be educated and are seen as the holders of intelligence. They have access to and control the Hindu religion. And how it connects back to Sikhi is when Baba Nanak fortified the founding of what would become Sikhi, he came out of this system that was centuries old. At that time, there were Hindus engaging with Muslims, engaging with who would later become Sikhs, in this fluid conversation taking place during the time of Baba Nanak. He was born into a system of casteism, and his family was a part of a system of caste. However, he realized that this system is perhaps one of the most harmful and

violent in shaping what is taking place around him. His vision of what would become Sikhi, and what Sikhi should believe in, was the exact opposite of caste-based oppression and harm. So, when we think about Sikhi being against casteism and caste-based discrimination, he made it very clear from the beginning upon witnessing its violence. With the *jot* [divine light] within him, he witnessed the oppression of caste and its harm, and witnessed the violence of the privileges that Brahmins carried. He witnessed the sheer terror that they adhered to other caste oppressed bodies and he said “No!” At its heart, and at the foundation of Sikhi, what Baba Nanak envisioned was everything opposite of that caste-based system. And I think this is really important. When we talk about Sikhi, there's so many layers, so many histories, and so many Gurus who each mobilized different strategies, but at the heart of it, Baba Nanak saw something that had existed around him for centuries and refused. When we talk about even the foundation of *langar* [“communal meal”], for example, it was fortified and became systemized and structured by Guru Angad and Guru Amardas, but he is one of the first to create this idea of food for all. And if we talk about food, it subverts those lines of pollution. Casteism based on caste privileged people's perceptions of who was polluted, who was not polluted. If you think about that in the 15th century, Baba Nanak said, “we are going to eat together,” he did something so radical and so inconsistent with something that had existed for centuries. So, when I talk about Sikhi and relationship to caste, I begin with Baba Nanak. And then we can, of course, talk about many other different stories that intersect with Sikhi and casteism. But for me, that’s where I begin.

manmit singh: Thank you so much, Sharn, for that. I appreciate you bringing us back to the foundations. I'm just sitting with some of those stories—with one of the earliest examples being Guru Nanak Sahib at the age of 11 rejecting the *janeu* [“sacred thread”]. I’m sitting with how so much of their politicization was happening through rejecting brahminical patriarchy—in terms of thinking about how caste and gender was impacting them and their sister—Bebe Nanaki.¹ So I’m just sitting with the violence of brahminical patriarchy and the questions against it that they were asking, and by doing so, cementing the principle that one can’t understand Sikhi without engaging with both the political and the spiritual together.

But in terms of thinking about *miri-piri*, it was revealed and institutionalized in a formal capacity by the Sixth Sovereign but in reality, the foundation was there by Guru Nanak Sahib in those moments from the very beginning.² And there is a need to position it as such in the very beginning as Guru Nanak Sahib is protesting caste, gender, and brahmanism. They’re raising questions to these ideas of purity and pollution, and flipping them on their heads, whether that is

¹ Sophia Kaur, "Femme-inist Futures: Examples from Sikh Praxis," *Begumpura Collective Zine*, <https://www.qtsikharchive.org/begumpura-collective-zine>.

² Harleen Kaur and prabhdeep singh kehal, "Sikhs as Implicated Subjects in the United States: A Reflective Essay on Gurnat-Based Interventions in the Movement for Black Lives," *Sikh Research Journal* 5, no. 2 (2020).

through starting—as Sharanjit brought up—langar. Or whether that is—with Guru Nanak Sahib’s jot continuing on through the Gurus—we have the institutionalization of the *Sarovar* [“sacred pool”], as that is also challenging these ideas of purity and pollution. Or the Khalsa itself, as committing to the Guru and pledging allegiance to the Guru meant also leaving behind your allegiance to your caste. So, with these various institutions set up by the Guru, the Guru Sahibs aren’t just challenging caste through merely critique, but actually thinking creatively about institutions, and how do we build our capacity to challenge and build towards a world beyond caste oppression. We have these models across Sikhi, whether that is through Kartarpur or through Halemi Raaj, Khalsa Raaj, or whether that is through Begumpura, but all these visions that Guru Sahib gifts to us that are pushing us to think about worlds beyond brahmanism, beyond caste oppression.

Another point I wanted to uplift—there is a foundational role that caste oppressed folks have played in shaping Sikhi and bringing Sikhi to where we are at. A lot of these histories are sidelined though. For example, in the dominant Sikh narratives, we celebrate and romanticize Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the Sikh Empire, but much of the foundations of even building towards that was through the labor of Dalit and caste oppressed folks. One of the really powerful *misl*s was led by and consisted of Mazhabi Sikhs. And to even think about the tradition of Mazhabi Sikhs and the various stories that are sidelined or erased. Here, I’m thinking about the stories of Bhai or Sahibzaada Jiwan Singh, known also as Bhai Jaita.³ When Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib was beheaded in Delhi, with their head left on display as a spectacle to further fear, under the watch of guards. Under the instruction of Bhai Jaita’s father, who said his own face as a Gurmukh resembled the head of Guru Sahib, Bhai Jaita beheaded his own father to replace with the Guru’s head. Because of this huge sacrifice—the literal beheading of their own father—they were able to take back the *sheesh* [head] of Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib back to Guru Govind Sahib. And with that, Guru Sahib adopting them through their famously saying “Rangreta Guru ka Beta,” because of which we have the tradition of Mazhabi Sikhs who converted afterwards. And Bhai Jaita was renamed Jiwan Singh too, with this standing of Guru Sahib’s own son.

So, I’m just sitting with these sacrifices, and the immense work that has gone into building and bringing our *panth* to where we’re at, with so much of that attributed to Dalit and caste oppressed folks. And I’ll just finish with the *hukam* that Guru Nanak Sahib gives us of identifying and struggling alongside the most oppressed, work that the Guru Sahib themselves modeled and continuously upheld. We have their *bani* [“sacred text within the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji”] that reveals:

³ Raj Kumar Hans, "Making Sense of Dalit Sikh History," in *Dalit Studies*, ed. Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana, Durham: Duke University Press (2016).

*Neechaa Andhar Neech Jaath Neechee Hoo Ath Neech || Naanak Thin Kai Sang Saathh
Vaddiaa Sio Kiaa Rees || Jithhai Neech Samaaleean Thithhai Nadhar Thaeree Bakhasees
||4||3||*

Nanak seeks the company of those considered the lowest of the low, the most oppressed of the oppressed. It is with them where Nanak resides, as why emulate and compete with those considered high? It is in that place where those considered lowly are cared for where the Blessings of the Divine Glance of Grace resides. (Raag Siree Raag, Ang 15)

Guru Sahib made it clear that Waheguru’s grace is where the most oppressed of the oppressed are taken care of, because *vaddiaa sio kiaa rees*—why mimic and compete with those deemed high. That competition is never ending, and the levels to each deeming oneself higher keeps going, which is parallel with the type of violence that caste upholds as a system of graded inequality itself where there are thousands of castes stratified and each slightly above the others. How far can you get under this graded system of inequality, as each claims a status of being above each other? Instead, Guru Sahib is turning us towards a different orientation, that isn’t seeking to engage in this hopeless competition but instead thinking about what we achieve when we think about “lowering” ourselves. I say that as someone from an oppressor caste positionality too. As I end, this just made me think about another example, where we often talk about how Sikhi is anti-caste because our bani includes the bani of the *bhagats* [“devotee, saint, holy person”] and various caste oppressed figures. And we like to say that the Guru Sahibs were trying to uplift caste oppressed peoples by including their bani, but a beautiful reorientation I really appreciated from Naindeep Singh, Executive Director of Jakara Movement—was when he shared that the inclusion of the bani of Dalit and caste oppressed folks is not necessarily Guru Sahib “uplifting” them, but Guru Sahib “lowering” us, similar to how we don’t read Black and Indigenous literature to “uplift” Black and Indigenous folks, but the need for us to “lower” ourselves, to fully understand our own, and each other’s experiences.⁴ And this reorientation is consistent with Guru Sahib’s own re-envisioning of how we build from and work towards caste abolition, which comes through orienting to the most oppressed.

prabhdeep singh kehal: Thank you both for sharing such deep, thoughtful responses. I think having a shared grammar is very helpful when having these types of conversations because so many people's experiences with casteism and with Sikhi are what help them understand what Sikhi and casteism are. So, by giving us a little bit of insight into how the two of you have come to understand these things and how it shapes your work is very helpful. And this is a follow up to what you all were saying around the necessary humility required to do abolition-oriented, anti-

⁴ Dr. Naindeep Singh, Building Begumpura Conference, Davis, California, April 2023.

caste, caste abolition work: Given these understandings, how did each of you, or those of you who are willing to share, commit yourself to anti-caste work in Sikh spaces specifically?

Anita Lal: Thanks for that. For me, my background is that I'm Dalit. I grew up in a household that identified as Sikh, went to the Gurdwara, and all that. But I think a lot of it was very much as a kid growing up in the Gurdwara, in the diaspora, where we went to the Gurdwara, *matha tek* [prostrate], getting yelled at for making noise. But we weren't taught a lot of the bani or about the stories or anything like that. But I know one thing that my grandma always taught, which was that under Sikhi, everybody is equal.

There're a couple things. For one, in Sikhi, there is very much a social justice lens that she instilled in me, and the whole concept of *sewa* ["selfless service"]. My Biji would, even in her late eighties, go to the gurdwara every day to do her *sewa*, even if it was just peeling onions, there was the whole sense of serving the community for her. And as I came into doing more social justice work, and as I started to understand where my drive came from, it really did come from those early years, from seeing my grandma and her concept of what she taught me when it came down to equality, social justice, *sewa*, and that everybody is equal. Those principles were what she told me Sikhi is about and showed me what it looks like in practice. For me, doing this social justice work today in our community is *sewa*. That's where the drive for this anti-caste work comes from for me.

Meena Hira: Thank you. And for me, I also grew up in the same family as Anita, but I grew up on the island in Victoria, BC. I'm from a Sikh family, but half my family is Radha Soami. I didn't really understand either belief very well, but I did always feel like an equal when I went to the gurdwara and connected with the Punjabi community. We have a small Punjabi community in Victoria, and I never felt like I was any different from anybody else, until I realized the community does see me as the "Other" – but I will talk more about that when I tell my personal stories. But at that point, my shift of Sikhi and the Punjabi community—the community I thought I was a part of—completely changed. That's when I started having conversations with my parents about equality, caste, and some of the issues that are still very prevalent that fueled me to want to learn more about Sikhi and learn more about what it means to be Sikh. Through a lot of my own research, and then getting involved with the Poetic Justice Foundation via Anita, and some of the work she is doing, has now led me here. Now, I'm studying to become a counselor, I also plan on putting in my profile that I'm anti-caste, and I work with caste trauma. I'm starting that and providing that space for people because that's something I've never seen on any Punjabi counselors' profile. I want to provide a space for people to talk about caste issues and discrimination.

Harleen Kaur: Thank you so much. We can transition to a related but different conversation. Meena, I think even in your comment talking about your orientation towards caste-based trauma,

you highlight this importance to think about lived experience and one's orientation towards lived experience. And I think Sharn and manmit set us up beautifully with thinking about intellectually, or theoretically, how does Sikhi orient us towards anti-casteism work? But I think another important part is that Guru Sahib introduced this concept of *Sangat* because the embodied, the lived experience, and the collective experience is also such a crucial element to Sikhi, and to living *Gurmat* ["teachings of the Gurus"] in our everyday life. For those of you who are willing to share, perhaps we can start by laying the groundwork a little bit for those who are engaging in this conversation for the first time or it's something new to them. Sharing some examples around how casteism has showed up in your life in different ways, both perhaps expected and unexpected. And here again, to the extent comfortable, it'd be important to talk about our different identities in relation to caste and how that's also colored that experience within the *Sangat* and with casteism.

Meena Hira: For me, I grew up in Victoria with a small Punjabi community. Caste wasn't something we really talked about growing up. I'm sure I heard the word "*Chamar*" here and there in my family, but I didn't really know what that was. The first time I faced any type of discrimination was when I was a child and I was about 11 or 12. Another child who was actually a couple of years younger than me approached me and said, "Haha, you're a *Chamar*" and then laughed in my face. I didn't know what this was and why I was being made fun of. So, I asked my parents and they were very, very upset and explained to me that we're actually all equal, but other people who are in Sikhi actually follow the system called caste and they discriminate against other people and think you're lower because we did jobs back in India, like cleaning and leatherwork—jobs that were considered low jobs. So that's what was explained to me. And from then on, there were so many instances where I did hear people talking down to *Chamars*. For example, if I'm at a family's home and they're a *Jatt* family and I hear their parents make comments, I started hearing it more and more. I was hearing of more issues with people trying to be in relationships and they couldn't because they're of different castes. I also heard people talking about my family and making comments such as, "Your family drives a red van, that's *Chamar* colors" and making fun of that. Apparently, there were colors associated with being *Chamar*. There were jobs associated with being *Chamar*. There were all these things, even facial features. I heard comments like "*Chamars* have huge jaws," or "*Chamars* have large, certain body parts" that were sexualizing. There were a lot of things that I heard. And I started to get really, really angry, and just really confused why my community thinks like this. But the worst of it was when I started dating somebody who was *Jatt*, and he grew up in Victoria too. His dad was born and raised in Victoria. His grandpa was even born and raised in Victoria, so it was multiple generations of them living here, educated. But the big issue was that I was *Chamar* and his family didn't actually know my family very well. They never actually met me, and I never had a conversation with anybody in his family, but there was a lot of backlash and pushback that we can't be together. We can't even date, we can't even think about it, we can't even consider this, because we're of different castes.

I even faced discrimination from peers that I went to school with from my generation, who started making comments about me being Chamar, making fun of my ex-partner because I'm Chamar, saying, "Oh, look, you're dating a Chamar." I also got comments about my body—my body also came into question as people commented, "Her body is a certain way because she's a Chamar," or that "this is bigger" and "this is smaller because she's a Chamar." So, it got pretty bad to the point where I actually left Victoria and I moved to Vancouver because I was like, this isn't my community. These aren't the people I want to be around. There's a lot that happened there, a lot that was said, and that's just a little touch of what I have faced. But there's a lot of issues there, even in my generation. Not just the older generation, even in my generation, or even in younger generations, I still see it.

Anita Lal: Thanks for sharing, Meena. With me, I grew up in a small town up north. Similar to Meena, I think a lot of families that come from caste oppressed backgrounds don't really teach their kids about the caste system. So, a lot of kids who are young that come from caste privilege, openly say and identify as Jatt. They are taught from a young age that they're Jatt and that there's some privilege there. That it is something to be proud of. Our families don't talk about it. But being raised by my grandma, and in the community I was raised in, I didn't directly experience the trauma of caste discrimination. But when I moved to Abbotsford, which is like hyper-Jatt, my experience changed. I started seeing people who would wear necklaces that said "*Jatti*" or would just be very pro-Jatt. That's when I started asking my grandma, and my grandma's response was, "you're Canadian, you're born in Canada, this doesn't affect you". So that was her and those were her tools—you just be good, you don't need to get into these conversations or care about that. Also, all my friends were Jatt, and I didn't feel any negative discrimination from them around caste. To me, Jatt and Punjabi just became very interchangeable. There was such a normalization of casteism. It was also a bit of, "Oh, well, you're not Jatt, but that's okay". Now that I think about it, I understand how problematic that is, but at a young age in a space like that, it didn't faze me as I was just feeling accepted.

But as I started doing more anti-racism work or started working within the Punjabi community and promoting Punjabi culture, and then having the younger generation like Meena and my nieces who were about 10 or 15 years younger than me, most of them growing up in predominantly white spaces, telling me their experiences around caste changed things for me. I'm in my mid-thirties, and I'm hearing from the younger twenty-year-olds that they, or other relatives of ours, are experiencing caste discrimination. And that upset me because then I was just like, "it's not okay". And I actually had a nephew who had a broken engagement a month before his wedding, and ended up getting into really bad depression, alcohol use, and ended up losing his life at the age of 38, due to the lost love because of his caste. At this point, I looked at the community and I thought, something needs to be done. And I think when it comes down to tying in my Sikhi with the work that I did, Sikhi is one of the biggest tools we have to fight casteism. What is stronger than your faith? What is stronger than your Gurus, and what Gurbani

says? So, we base so much on it. When I started looking in our community, I started seeing the lack of movements, especially in empowerment for the next generations. We see the younger people being empowered when it comes down to anti-racism work. There is this whole, “stop ‘othering’ me”, “I am not lesser than the next person”, “we're all settlers on this land”, and “we all come to this fight for equity”. I can tell you that my own family has been here since 1906, so it comes with a lot of privileges. And they still couldn't openly say the word, Chamar. My sisters wouldn't say it, my cousins wouldn't say it, and if it was said, there was a cringe. Other people who mention their caste don't cringe and I felt I needed to take that cringe out. I need to be able to say I'm Chamar. I need to be able to say my great grandfather was a Chamar and my kids are going to be either Chamar or half Chamar, or something. There should be no cringe. That's where I started getting involved in creating spaces for this discussion.

Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra: I can go next. I just want to pause and take a moment to take in Anita and Meena's stories because I come from a caste privileged space. So, the stories that Meena and Anita share come from a totally different kind of growing up, understanding, questioning, and moments in life. I come from a Jatt privileged family and have been my whole life. But there are these pocketed moments, I think we all have when we begin to question things around us. And for me, that was in high school. So, Anita and I grew up in the same city, went to the same high school, but graduated in different years. And it was a very hyper-Jatt community. My best friend in high school was not Jatt. Whenever my family would host parties, there would be the typical Jatt bravado music playing, and she was very uncomfortable. And she's actually the one who taught me about caste-based oppression. Through her, I realized what it's like to be on the receiving end of this language, of this bravado, and of this machismo that comes out of Jatt culture. Essentially, I learned so much from her and I'm grateful to her. That's why I started being more aware of that language.

Then soon after high school, my story is a positive love story, which is nice. I always try to boldly declare the word “love stories” when we talk about Sikhi because we can. We make it into such a taboo to talk about love or sexuality or gender or such related concepts. So, I like to proudly declare that my coming into understanding caste-based oppressive work and being like an anti-caste advocate is because I fell in love with somebody who wasn't Jatt. I just actually found out and discovered that my husband is Dalit. I had no idea because we create this spectrum. I'm going to go on a little bit of a tangent. It's interesting that we create the spectrum of just Dalits and Jatts. What we don't realize is that within the umbrella of this category that we call Dalits, there are so many different caste names that perhaps we colloquially hear in conversational spaces in our homes. So, my husband comes from a *Nai* family. The *Nai* caste is traditionally the barber caste in the Punjabi and Sikh context, and that falls within the larger category of Dalit. I just always have known him as being *Nai*. The typical story that many of us have heard in our circles again and again and again, is that I wanted to marry him, but I wasn't allowed to marry him. Then I ended up eloping and running away and marrying him. And we've

been married for 16 years, and we have two boys, who are 12 and 14. In hearing Anita's cousin's story, Anita's stories and others, it just breaks my heart to no end because it's such a sad reminder of the love stories and relationships that fail. They tragically fail when caste comes into that conversation when people hinge everything on caste-based perceptions. I was able to subvert that and run away and marry and that's my story. And since that moment onwards, every perspective I carry with me going forward, including how I teach my children, is to be specifically anti-caste. They go about in their schools having friends who use Jatt names in their gaming videos or whatever they're doing, asking each other questions about Jattism. My son will proudly say, "Do you know that's problematic?" Do you know that this is not—he won't say "problematic". He's 12. He's not going to say, "that's problematic", but he'll say, "do you know that's kind of messed up? Do you realize what Jatt means? I don't really care about stuff like that." To have a 12- and 14-year-old in this climate, in this society, and in this cultural context where Jattism is so powerful, and to push back against that to me is such a threshold of success. And it's not just me. There are other parents who are changing and teaching. So that's my story, but it doesn't end there. The story will continue, and it will continue again through my nieces and other relatives who will themselves do things differently. It's an everyday lived conversation for sure.

Anita Lal: Sharn, you also wanted to share your experience that you had...

Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra: Thank you for reminding me of that! Another fascinating, tragic, horrible thing that I've noticed, and others in this room will acknowledge this, is that because the language of "Jatt" has become so prolific, it's actually entering other communities' conversations. For example, we had a plumber come to our house. He was a white guy—*gora*—so a white guy from our community, Abbotsford. He sees my husband, and because we own a small acreage, he starts talking about being Jatt. And he's like, "you must be Jatt." And my husband's just looking at him like, "you're literally a white guy asking me this question, I don't understand what's happening." Basically, he started saying problematic things about Jattism, and my husband just cut him off and said, "well, no, I'm not Jatt, and actually I don't follow the caste system in that way." But all of this is to say that we now carry that casteist language into other communities. There're rappers who call themselves *Kala-Jatt*. And we've seen this once Moose Wala passed away, we've seen rappers openly declare themselves as being *Kala-Jatt*. We really have to question how we even begin this conversation when anti-Blackness runs rampant in our community. These are the ways that we need to be aware of the way Jatt is being utilized and weaponized.

Harleen Kaur: Thank you all for everyone who shared so far. Just the intersection of experiences you've shared shows how deeply casteism is embedded at interpersonal, communal, societal, structural levels. It's unfortunate that we have to bear this trauma, but hopefully, those who are reading and listening honor these experiences as they are going on their own learning journeys.

manmit, if I can ask, please do share whatever you would like to generally about what we were discussing. But I know you have similar experiences to Sharn of coming from a caste oppressor background and how you came into the work. Perhaps if you can also start to speak to the dynamics around that and navigating that—if folks are listening in or reading and wondering, “if I grew up with maybe the experience in a family that's very violently casteist, is there anything that I can do or how can I be part of this work?”

manmit singh: Thank you for the question. For me, reflecting on my relationship to caste as also someone who is from a dominating caste background, I'm sitting with what Anita was referring to, in thinking about Jatt culture and Punjabi culture being almost synonymous because of how much Jatt supremacy and hegemony runs through Punjabi spaces. As someone who is queer, trans non-binary, I've really struggled with feeling safe and in community in Punjabi spaces. Whether it was in high school or all these different spaces onwards, for a large part of my life, I've avoided Punjabi spaces particularly because those spaces that would uphold a casteist Jatt supremacy would also be the ones that would be extremely queerphobic, extremely transphobic, extremely misogynistic. So for me, I think I was able to find the language to be able to understand a lot of my experiences through finding the language of caste where caste helped explain so much of the queerphobia and the transphobia, which is so consistent with so many folks who've talked about, for example, understanding, queerphobia and transphobia as forms of brahmanism and brahminical violence.⁵ This is not to discount, though, my own caste privilege and the ways that even being queer and trans, that doesn't take away from benefiting from caste privilege, but more so moving towards the need to understand caste abolition as linked with queer and trans liberation. So, for me, that then also informs the work that I do, where I strive to think of those together and accordingly have been supporting with different spaces that are holding together the interconnection of caste, gender, and sexuality, whether that be through having worked with Equality Labs and supporting with the anti-caste movement there. Currently, the work is ongoing as well through working with Poetic Justice Foundation, as Poetic Justice Foundation is working to further caste protection, while also extending the conversation beyond caste protections. We're thinking about what caste abolition looks like, through these different spaces, whether in Poetic Justice Foundation, or the UC Collective for Caste Abolition, that has been really thinking about what a thorough infrastructure focused on caste abolition can be beyond just a demand for a policy change—which is powerful as well, but also thinking so much about what kind of institutions and infrastructures we design. There is also the Sikh LGBTQIA+ Oral History Project that prabh is leading, or whether that is through the Begumpura Collective Zine that we've been working on as well. So many of these different resources, so many of these different spaces that are being built out are holding together the need to understand Dalit liberation, caste abolition, queer trans liberation as interconnected, while also tending to the complexities, complicities, and layers that are, while holding together the struggle against

⁵ Gee Imaan Semmalar, "Transphobia as a form of Brahmanism: A conversation between Gee Imaan Semmalar and Living Smile Vidya in Gender, Caste, and the Imagination of Equality," 2019.

brahmanism and towards a world beyond these systems of oppression. That was also to briefly touch into the different types of work that is happening.

Anita Lal: The great thing, as we look at it, is how we've all come to this work and how we all come from different backgrounds. I think under Sikhi, it also gives us a platform to do this work together, because with anti-caste work, you can enter from any different space when you're from the Sikhi platform, because it's about social justice. It's about equality. It's about living the principles that our Gurus teach and left for us to follow. That's the beauty of it. This anti-caste work—when we look at Dalit liberation or Dalit work, that was also something when I started doing my work, I was very like, “am I a Dalit activist or am I an anti-caste activist?” And the reason anti-caste work resonated more strongly with me is because I think it was more based on my Sikh principles. Where my movement comes from, and the core of it wasn't from my Dalit identity. And so that's why I think that anti-caste work is a space where all of us can come together and work and it's not one person's narrative that pushes it forward. That's also with our collective, the Poetic Justice Foundation. As we do this work, we honor all those different identities and all the different intersectionalities that bring everybody to this work, because at the end of the day, it's about human rights, social justice, and really giving everybody the right to live an equal and free life.

Harleen Kaur: Absolutely. Before we move on to thinking more about the work that Poetic Justice Foundation has done, I just wanted to see if anyone wanted to add any more context or histories around anything that hasn't been mentioned about different intersections or ways folks can think about histories of casteism or different ways to participate in this movement that have yet to be mentioned.

Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra: One thing I would mention as a historian of BC Sikh history in particular is that every aspect of Sikh Canadian history or British Columbia Sikh history has an element of caste within it. We tend to tell these stories as Jatt dominant narratives, so it was all Jatts who came, or it was all Jatts who worked in the sawmills, and look at these amazing stories, nostalgic stories—we hyper-nostalgize these stories. Not to minimize the fact that, yes, of course, they faced racism, there was a lot of trauma, but within those stories, there are subsets of caste-based oppression. One prominent example, and I want to thank Anita for actually bringing this historical story to light, is the story of Paldi. Paldi's story is a powerful heritage minute—it's a Canadian Heritage Minute that you can find online talks about this mill town named after the village in Punjab. Mayo Singh and Kapoor Singh founded this, and it was a multi-religious multicultural community with Japanese, Chinese, Punjabi Sikh, and white workers, and Indigenous workers living there and in harmony. In retrospect, given the time, it was pretty harmonious. But what we don't know is that there was caste-based discrimination. There were, I believe, Dalit mill workers who wanted to cook food or be a part of the bunkhouses, but Jatt men didn't want food cooked by them, or Jatt men didn't want to sit with them and eat. So, again,

there are moments where we need to intersect these stories rather than just making it a monolith. My only interjection in terms of BC Sikh History is to please open our eyes a little bit more to these fascinating, multifaceted histories that bring us back to caste.

prabhdeep singh kehal: Thank you everyone who has shared. Something that's coming across really clearly of the stories you've shared and the experiences you've shared is that the casteism shows up in so many different ways, in so many different areas of our lives, because it's pervasive, and because it's historic, and because it's been institutionalized through our culture in very different ways, whether it's through marriage practices, through our cultural and media consumption, whether it's how we take up space, share space together with others, or how we take up space to exclude others. I just wanted to also recognize that and also thank you all for sharing your stories because I know it takes a lot of work and energy to actually bring those stories up. I have my own stories around different kinds of things that I've told so many times that they have scarred over, but I just want to recognize that telling the story of a scar can still be painful because we all have the somatic memory within the body. So, I just wanted to honor that for the stories that you've shared as we move into this next conversation, which is that so many of you here are united together and bring your work together around the Poetic Justice Foundation, but also under other umbrellas, other institutions, organizations, initiatives that many of you have mentioned. Giving people who are reading this and listening to this a sense of how they can enter as well, what kinds of work do you know of that are going on to tackle these issues? If those of you who are more focused or in working more closely with Poetic Justice Foundation, if you would tell us a little bit about that as well and what led you there.

Anita Lal: It's really nice to see that there are movements that are happening, especially in the last year. We have different organizations looking to create change at the policy level in BC. They're trying to bring caste into the BC Human Rights Tribunal, with caste as a protected category. Universities and labor unions within, throughout BC are looking to bring caste and learn more about caste, so we are actually getting a lot of interest and a lot of people. Unfortunately, I still feel that organizations do work in silo. And I think once again, it's not a homogenous space. You have different generations who have different experiences and who do their work differently. But just yesterday, I was at the University of the Fraser Valley at the South Asian Studies Institute, which has dedicated anti-caste work as one of their goals. They're working on caste-related issues and creating more space for conversations. They have book groups, they have educational spaces, and yesterday, they had a photo of Dr. Ambedkar dedicated to them that they put in the library. And this is creating space, this is taking up space.

With the Poetic Justice Foundation, which is an organization I co-founded three years ago, one of the reasons we created this organization was, so we had a place to do anti-caste work. There were organizations that were doing it, but we felt that there weren't any that were actually working from a diasporic lens of the kids or generations that were born out here, who were from

the Punjabi background. And we needed some space to build on. We do anti-caste, and we do anti-racism work because really, it's all interconnected. Once again, from our understanding of Sikhi or Sikh foundations, you have to fight for the right for everybody. That's what social justice is. It's not just about Sikh rights. It's not just about anti-caste, or Dalit rights. It's actually anybody who is oppressed, anybody, you fight for justice across the board. And that's the Poetic Justice lens. We are really trying to work in community, across movements and break out of the silos. So, we don't have to be 100 percent on board with everything that somebody else is doing or the organization. But when it comes to a mutual goal and working together to attain it, supporting other organizations—and once again, we can't fight everybody's fight, but we can stand beside you or be there and try to create space for education. So, a lot of our work is really based on Dr. Ambedkar's “educate, agitate, organize.” The first step is to educate. We have conversations a lot of the time where we're very frustrated with people we meet, whether they're casteist, racist, homophobic, etc., and they don't realize it even half the time, because they're just ignorant. We take a moment to breathe and then, start doing that heavy lifting. We've stepped into this place to do some of that heavy lifting, and we have such a great team. If one person is too affected by this, we have somebody else who can step in and be like, “here, let me take this for you.” But it is to educate and once you're educating people and creating an understanding, agitation should naturally happen. So, when they hear somebody say “*Chooria Chamar*” in a negative way as a derogatory term, they should be able to step in and say, “well, that's not right.” The same way that we have now—for example, I grew up using the N word because we thought it was cool, we grew up to 90s hip hop and rap. But now we know, that's not cool at all. So that agitation was created, and we don't use that word and definitely speak up against it, when it is used. And for us the next step of organizing is building community and mobilizing together.

Meena Hira: I just wanted to touch on what Anita said with educating. I'm teaching workshops to Punjabi youth at the Royal Academy of Punjab. They go there for Bhangra, and I go there once a month and I do workshops with them on wellness and mental health, and Anita asked me if I was comfortable talking about caste when we talk about things like identity and discrimination. I was like, “yes, of course”, and I've talked to these youth about caste. We've talked about, “is this a part of your identity? Is this something that your parents have taught you as a part of who you are?” And some of them have said yes. They wrote it in a worksheet, “I'm Jatt”, and a lot of them didn't. So, there's been some shifts there with younger generations, but just starting with talking about it, opening up the conversation, talking about what caste discrimination is with kids, and having them question it, telling them to question what the beliefs are, if you're Sikh, what actually is Sikhi, and if you believe in caste, what does that actually mean? What are your parents telling you? What is actually right? What is actually wrong? That's started with Anita, and I've been incorporating that in the workshops and then I will continue to incorporate that into my work as a counselor as well.

Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra: So, I'll be very brief because I feel like I've spoken a lot, but one thing that I'm really proud of is that I get to work with manmit, Meena, and Anita as part of the Poetic Justice Foundation to co-curate an exhibit looking at caste in the Punjabi diaspora here in British Columbia. It's been a fascinating experience getting to interview different Dalit community members, Chamar community members with Anita, most of which are her family and Meena's family. But as far as my understanding, it's an exhibit, first of its kind, funded federally. So, what we're seeing here is a federal Canadian government recognition that this conversation is really important, first and foremost. Second, we are intercepting cultural spaces. We're intercepting museum spaces, public museum spaces that are visited by everybody. We are intercepting academic spaces, hopefully traveling to different parts of the lower mainland—Alberta, all the way to eastern Canada. This is huge. This is a first-time exhibit of its kind where we are collecting stories of Dalit Chamar community members, but also looking at the Guru Ravidas Gurdwara, which we never got a chance to talk about today, but we will definitely provide footnotes and context for the viewers and the readers. Why does the Guru Ravidas Gurdwara matter? What does it mean in terms of Gurbani? What did Guru Ravidas say? We're going to talk about the love stories. We're going to talk about Gurbani, we're going to create a space for people to walk in and reflect a mirror to themselves as Sikhs to say, “what is it that we are actually doing in our own Sangat, in our own communities, and what can we do to do better?” I know that this exhibit is going to rile people up. I know that there will be people who will resist and will be angry, but I loved Anita's words about agitate, agitate, agitate. And yikes, is this going to agitate. And I'm so pumped for this exhibit to agitate, so I just wanted to throw that in there. Please look out for the exhibit and if your listeners and readers want to bring it to you, holler at us. We'll create a timeline and hopefully bring it to your institutions and spaces, including in the US.

Harleen Kaur: This has been really inspiring. And just to wrap up, the four of you in your conversation have taken us through a beautiful journey of your own entry into this work through both lived and intellectual experience, and how that's merged into this organization. And also, now this incredible exhibit you're doing. It would be great to wrap up through thinking about when folks are coming from these different experiences and different approaches, when it comes to anti-casteism work, what can they do? What can be done? So first, we can take a current state of affairs. How much anti-casteism mobilization is actually happening in Sikh spaces right now? Poetic Justice Foundation obviously comes from a sort of Sikh identifying lens, but when we think about the gurdwara or more traditional Sikh spaces, what kind of mobilization is happening there, if any? What can folks think about doing in those spaces?

Anita Lal: I can speak a bit to this. I know recently, when we've done some anti-casteism work, and had a caste dialogue, we've had Sikh organizations support the work. Gurdwara spaces are hard to engage, but I feel they're hard to engage in general. We don't always have the capacity to go and actually mobilize. But I know there's organizations in the States that have been doing

great work, especially Jakara. Even in California, with the work that was happening with the anti-caste bill, our Sikh community was leading that fight alongside Dalit activists, and they were mobilizing, and they were educating so much of the Sangat in how important it is to create policy that could protect. Organizations like SALDEF, Jakara Movement, Sikh Coalition—I'm on the newsletter emailing list and I'm friends with some of them— I see them activating. I know they've always thought that these were important conversations. And now that the time is here to put your power behind these movements, they are working on educating and it's a slow beast, because as a community, especially in the last three, four years, we've really been dealing with a lot.

Anti-caste movement is very important, and we see that organizations doing this work through a Sikh organization may not be reaching out into mainstream Punjabi spaces, which means a lot of youth are not being educated or engaging in it. That's where then we need to go into the community. And as Meena had said, Poetic Justice Foundation is doing anti-discrimination and social justice workshops within the community through partners such as Royal Academy of Punjab, a Punjabi arts school. We've created these workshops where it's anti-racism and anti-casteism. So, it's through creating these programs and taking them into these community spaces and saying, “look, we don't believe in caste, but we actually need to teach these kids what that means, and what they need to do when they see casteist behaviors.” There's these structures of oppression that you need to challenge and disrupt. It's not just enough to be like, “we don't believe in caste,” yet 90 percent of the music our kids listen to has Jatt in it. Or that their older cousin has “Jatt” tattooed on their shoulder and the car says “Jatt” on the license plate and their social media handle is Jatt4U or something. So when that's what they're being infiltrated with, we need to do more than just the words “we don't believe in caste”. As a community, there are some people who are in these spaces who are creating these opportunities to educate. Sharn had talked about our exhibit. We really are focusing on youth. A lot of the time, you create these projects, but nobody engages. That's where that community engagement part comes in and mobilizing. You need to engage these arts organizations, the sports organizations, the schools, the gurdwaras that work with youth and families. And a lot of them will sit there and talk about their Sikh principles and that “we're teaching our kids their heritage and their religion,” but in that, we also need to teach them how to be anti-caste, and here's one another way you can do that.

So, there are movements that are happening, and the connection needs to be made and there needs to be more on-the-ground-work where we're actually delivering something to the community instead of just doing a tweet. There has to be some actionable stuff, and this is where we can also get involved. Also, I think a big thing, like Sharn has talked about with her kids, and my family has done it too, “we don't believe in caste”. That's like that white person saying, “I don't see color”. And it's like, hold on, you're just erasing everything. This isn't just about what you see. These are power structures. This is something that is beyond just “we love everybody”.

You will need to teach your kids how to be anti-caste so that they go out there and when they see it, they will question it and they will stop it. There's always different levels to engage in.

Harleen Kaur: To bring it full circle, as Sharn and manmit especially shared so much at the beginning that as Sikhs and Sikhi, we have this foundation for anti-casteism work. I know a lot of folks who have grown up Hindu as well, and I think for them, it's an uphill battle because they're coming from a tradition that is rooted in these ideologies whereas Guru Sahib so beautifully rooted us in working against them. So, if we really get back to the root, get back to the core of what Sikhi was meant to do, it is a tradition, and a way of life about caste abolition. That is its foundation, you all have really made that point clear. As we close up today, the question I have is, why now? What's the urgency? This is something that's been going on for centuries, some might say that a lot of work has been done. What is the importance of doing it now? And if I can also add, doing it in Sikh specific spaces?

Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra: The answer to both questions is the same answer, and that is we are living in the most fast-paced, information-filled world that we have ever seen ever. I mean social media, essentially, and on the one side, we have social media feeding misinformation, feeding harm, feeding violence, feeding trauma. And then on the other side, we have social media also challenging harm, challenging violence, creating space. So social media is this fascinating moment we are living in where caste in particular is being seen. Meena showed us clips on Instagram—I think it was a TikTok video or Instagram—where all these people are either challenging the casteist language in the video or post, but also on the other hand, feeding the casteist language in the TikTok video in the post. And it's going back to the youth question as they are utilizing this platform. The urgency of the work is, this is what we are infiltrated with on a daily basis, no matter how much we try to avoid it. So, the urgency of the work is to be anti-casteist means to understand what anti-Blackness means, it means to understand what gender-based discrimination is or gender-based violence. It is to understand what transphobia is and homophobia and brahmanical-based perceptions of masculinity are. All of these things and so much more are tied together. So, to be anti-caste intersects with all of this and the urgency for me is absolutely there.

And then we have my Sikh identity being harmed in that process because Sikhi is being utilized as a weapon to almost propagate. I was watching a video of a speaker, and he said something really hard to hear but kind of truthful and he said, “Jatts are the brahmins of Sikhi.” It was actually Suraj Yengde who said that. I was watching a video of Suraj's and I was just like, “oh, that hurts to hear that.” Jatts are the Brahmins of Sikhi. And we have to understand what he means when he says that and what it means to disaggregate ourselves from that perception and the way we live and the way we continue to perpetuate these hierarchical structures within our gurdwara spaces. Look at the committees, look at the power structures. The urgency is in all our

voices for sure, but that is to say we can still utilize social media and all those tools to continue to challenge it and do the good work as well.

Anita Lal: If there's anybody who's questioning the urgency or who says, "be patient" or "a lot of change has come", these are people who come from a point of privilege. Because there's nobody who comes from an oppressed background, whose child, once you're born and raised here in Canada, whose child goes to a playground and is called a Chooria Chamar having their caste weaponized against them, who's discriminated against by their peers, who loses a loved one - saying those words. There is no parent who's going to sit there and be like, "Oh, yeah, lots has happened, that's okay, my next generations can continue to be discriminated against and can face this violence". So, the urgency is because I don't want my nieces and my nephews to ever face any sort of situation where they are made to feel lesser than based on their caste. That's not fair. The same way as anybody else's child who has the right to have this free, loving, safe childhood and grow up and be equal, our children have the same right. So, my urgency actually comes from my nieces and nephews. Within our community, we have to start making change. Because this just can't keep going. That's where my urgency comes from.

manmit singh: For me, something I was sitting with was a couple of things that I'll go through really fast. For one, I'm thinking about how interconnected caste is with so many issues within our *kaum* ["community"] that are threatening Sikhi, because of how radical Sikhi is and the world that it envisions and it's moving us towards. There's these constant attempts at trying to erase Sikhi. So much of these threats are based in trying to erase and co-opt its radical anti-caste history, so the need to bring us back to that in order to preserve our Sikhi. There's all these ongoing attempts that we're also feeding into as well, that are to erase that and to erase what Sikhi is and what it was. Also, for me personally, the pain of so many folks who are in the panth with so many hopes and are also leaving the panth. At least someone who has stepped away from the panth for a long period of time, there's that pain and it's really isolating. It's a pain that no one should have to experience and it's a pain that we need to really sit with and tend to. Hence, I feel that urgency. I was just reading one of the transcripts yesterday from the Sikh LGBTQIA+ Oral History Project—prabh's transcript actually, their interview—and there was something really beautiful at the end about thinking about this vision that everybody has a home that was shared in the transcript.⁶ This vision that everybody should have a home and in our *Ardaas*, we literally ask for the *gurdwara jo ki panth toh vichore gayne* [the gurdwaras that have become separated from the panth]. What does it mean to think about all the people, and the pain of each and every single person, especially because the panth is supposed to be the Guru. The pain of literally the Guru. How do we understand that pain? That when folks are—whether that is caste oppressed folks, queer trans folks, Black folks, disabled folks, femmes, so many folks in our panth who are,

⁶ "Interview of prabhdeep singh kehal," *Sikh LGBTQIA+ Oral History Project*, <https://www.qtsikharchive.org/archive>.

because of these systems of brahmanism, literally leaving our panth, and the pain of that when it comes when we understand the panth as the Guru. Lastly, I'm also just sitting with the place of hope, at least because it was echoed through so much of these other oral history interviews I was sitting in. The one interview I was sitting in that Anita and Sharn were facilitating for the purposes of building towards our exhibit, where folks were literally sharing their painful stories of caste discrimination and still ending with, "But things are getting better" or "Oh no, not everyone's casteist". And I was just sitting with awed, in terms of the hope still that folks continue to have that, "no, we can do it". And I think that is ties in with what Sikhi is. In the midst of ongoing disappointments and despair, and yet Guru Sahib still had hope. I just come back to something that Jasleen Kaur from the Sikh Research Institute said, which is that the *Asa Di Vaar* is full of so many political critiques, talking about caste, gender, purity, ritualism, and yet at the end of the day, it's still called "Asa di Vaar"—the "Ballad of Hope". To sit with the Gurus that still had hope, and we still continue to say, "*RaaJ Karega Khalsa*" ["The Khalsa shall rule"]. As Dr. Naindeep Singh has said, there is this forward-thrust. We continue to have hope in the face of disappointment and despair. And I think that's literally what Sikhi is. We have to hold on to the hope. I'll pass it over to Meena.

Meena Hira: Everyone else has already mentioned what I was going to share. But all I'm going to say is that with this type of work, this isn't something that's new. I feel this is just something that needed to be continued that was just ignored by Sikhi, and by the Sikh people. And now this is work that we're doing that we're like, "Hey, let's pick up where we left off, and maybe we should talk about caste discrimination because it's still happening with second and third generation immigrant born people outside of India, it's very much in India." Why is it something that I went through, which I shouldn't have gone through? So, it's just that reminder that this isn't something new. This is just something that we're continuing, and that was put on the back burner.

prabhdeep singh kehal: With everything everyone has been sharing so far, we have urgency coming up because of the generation that's already here, the generations to come, the source of our Sikhi and the ongoing harm that people are experiencing that they should not be experiencing, and the already occurred harm that has occurred that should not have occurred. These are all just a few of the things that you've all mentioned that lead to your urgency around this work, and I can only hope that folks who are listening, reading, watching this are taken to heart, spirit, and mind what it is that has been shared. Thank you again for taking the time today to talk with all of us in this space, taking the energy in your busy schedules and sharing from the very important and hard work that you're doing in your individual personal and professional lives. If there's anything that you would like to add as a final short one, feel free to.

Anita Lal: I just want to say, thank you, prabh and Harleen, for reaching out, for giving us this platform to really bring the lens of Sikhi to the work that we're doing, and to be part of the work that we are doing. Thank you.

prabhdeep singh kehal: Thank you so much, everyone. That's a good place to end it.

Panelists

Dr. Sharanjit Kaur Sandhra (Sharn) is a Historian, exhibit curator, storyteller, and founder of Belonging Matters Consulting. She is a passionate activist, building bridges between community and academia through museum work and has been featured in the Knowledge Network series "B.C: An Untold History," as well as been featured on local, and international podcasts and media.

Meena Hira is a fourth-generation settler in Canada, she was born and raised in Victoria, B.C. Meena is a future Clinical Counsellor upon completing her Master's in Counselling Psychology at Adler University. Meena has many years of experience working as a social worker, mental health support worker, and a mental health advocate. Meena is passionate about mental health, social justice, and healing generational trauma.

manmit singh (they/them) is a student in the Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Social Justice PhD program at the University of British Columbia. As a Sikh, their investments are in their Guru Sahib's directive to be a sant sipahi, translating to "saint-soldier" or "sage-warrior," and are also a community organizer committed to both spiritual and political liberation.

Anita Lal is a fourth-generation settler, born and raised in British Columbia. She is the co-founder of Poetic Justice Foundation, a social justice organization, where she creates impactful and transformative programming to inspire and engage the South Asian community in change-making. Her approach is always inclusive, intersectional and critical; she draws attention to biases, inequalities and oppressive systems of casteism, racism and discrimination.

“Loki Ki Kehen Ge?”: Gurbani, Liberation, and Subverting Cyclicalities

Tavleen Kaur

Abstract

This short piece, comprising of a poem, reflection, and sculptural art, is a love letter to wanting more out of life. While “loki ki kehen ge?” (“what will people say?”) is a fear felt by all who have ever been encumbered by this violent sentiment—either as the oppressor or the oppressed, this piece offers a peek into all that is possible beyond fear. Inspired and informed by Gurbani, the wordplay poem, personal reflection, and metalwork sculpture collectively demonstrate how perspectival shifts in our perception make the difference between surviving and thriving, and between fearing “what will people say?” to imagining “what could people say?”.

Keywords: *domestic violence, Gurbani, healing, liberation, sculpture, Sikh, intergenerational trauma*

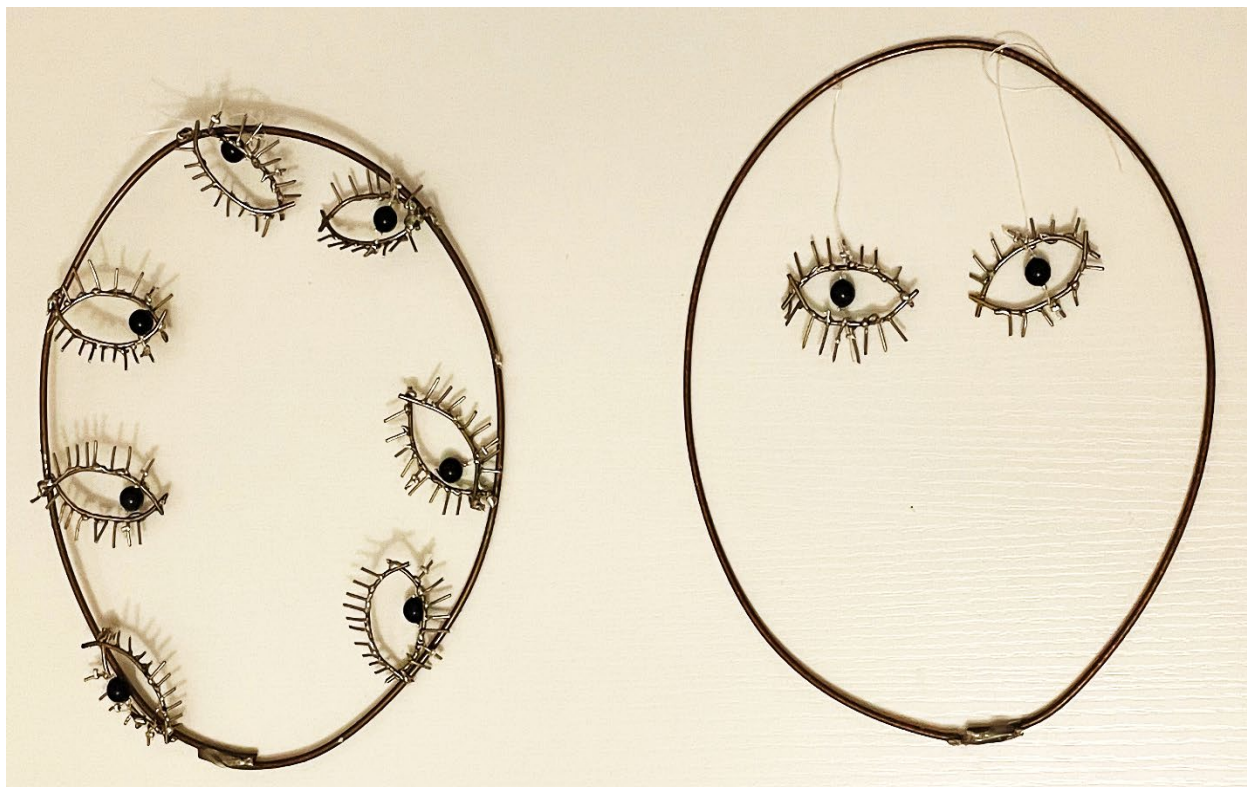


Figure 1

Nazar (Above left): Approx. 12” in height. Steel, soldering wire (tin and lead), blue sandstone beads, and epoxy.

Nadar (Above right): Approx. 12” in height. Steel, soldering wire (tin and lead), blue sandstone beads, and epoxy.

<i>Love letters to...</i>	<i>Nazar</i> (glance, perspective, sight, or vision)	<i>Nadar</i> ("Divine perspective")
All of us conditioned to compromise our own well-being because of the fear of what others will say:	What will people say? These four words. In this order. Distress.	What could people say? This foreword. In disorder. De-stress.
All of us finding ourselves repeating patterns we detest in others:	What will people say? Endless words. Toxic traits. Intergenerational.	What could people say? Ends of worlds. Talks it straight. In-turned rationale.
All of us witnessing, experiencing, and perpetuating pain and hurt:	What will people say? I suffered. And so shall you. This just is.	What could people say? Eyes offered. End social rue. This justice.
All of us used to harsh and relentless self-critique:	What will people say? Careless. Mistake. Humiliate.	What could people say? Care less. Mystic. Humility.
All of us learning to question social constructs like race and gender and learning to embrace fluidity:	What will people say? She, he, they. Pronouns? Worried sick.	What could people say? <i>Shaheedi</i> . Pronounce. Varied Sikhs.
All of us witnessing and experiencing the violence of imperialism and empire:	What will people say? Mind full. Depressed. Wit's end.	What could people say? Mindful. Deep rest. Witness.
All of us reckoning with intergenerational traumas that manifest in the body and the mind:	What will people say? My hurt. Risks you. Lives discontented.	What could people say? My heart. Rescues. Life's this intended.
All of us learning how minuscule our perspective and understanding of the expansive world is:	What will people say? How come? Fear. Sure, but...	What could people say? <i>Hukam</i> . Freer. <i>Sarbat</i> .

This love letter above is dedicated to all of us who have been, currently are, or will be encumbered by the violence of *loki ki kehen ge?* (“What will people say?”). This little yet weighty phrase has claimed lives and dreams. *Nazar*, the collection of stanzas in the middle column, is inspired by first- and second-hand experiences, real events, and social formations that have widely known devastating effects on the minds and bodies of both the perpetrators and the targets of this violence. *Nadar*, the collection of stanzas in the last column, is a Gurbani-inspired reimagination of the perceptions that cause deep harm and damage. In their reimagined form, the words in these stanzas are reclamation stakes. Purposely meant to be a poetic phoenix rising from the ashes, these reimagined words reconceptualize the fear and shame-based insinuations of *loki ki kehen ge?* to love and liberation-based subversions instead. *Loki* (people) will speak regardless; may our speaking be radically liberatory, especially when the more convenient choice is to perpetuate or endure cycles of harm.

The two-part art piece (Figure 1) accompanying this poem is a tangible and visual representation of the idea of *loki ki kehen ge?*.⁷ The first art piece, *Nazar*, correlates with the middle column, and the second art piece, *Nadar*, correlates with the last column of the love letter. Though in Punjabi *nazar* and *nadar* have the same meaning (glance, perspective, sight, or vision), with colloquial and Gurbani contexts, however, their meanings change. *Nazar* is also used colloquially to mean “evil eye,” or the belief that one’s successes or accomplishments can be negatively affected by the perceived envy or jealousy of others. In Gurbani, though *nadar* is often translated as “Divine grace,” my interpretation of it is “Divine perspective,” that is, liberatory and transformational ways of seeing and perceiving the world.

My intention of naming the art pieces *Nazar* and *Nadar* is rooted in these additional colloquial and Gurbani contexts of each word. In the *Nazar* art piece, the eyes looking in different directions symbolize the human tendency to look externally for validation, safeguarding from the “evil eye” by being hypervigilant of “what will people say?” On the other hand, the *Nadar* art piece, with centrally placed eyes having focused vision, symbolizes Divine perspective that is introspective and carefree of the looking around from *loki ki kehen ge?*.

The connection between the poem and the art pieces is deeply intertwined. The *Nazar* stanzas represent violent encounters with heteropatriarchy, classism, casteism, and imperialism that I have experienced firsthand and have borne witness to. The *Nadar* stanzas represent a reworking of their counterpart stanzas, claiming agency over what was meant to be hurtful to what can be overcome. In this manner, each stanza of the poem represents the power ensuing from flipping and subverting the narrative from pain to liberation, from *nazar* to *nadar*, from *loki ki kehen ge?* (“what will people say?”) to *loki ki keh sakde hai?* (“what could people say?”). Simply by

⁷ Materials used for the art pieces: steel, soldering wire (tin and lead), blue sandstone beads, and epoxy. My thanks to Inderpal Singh for his support and guidance in bringing this art concept to life.

renarrativizing and transforming perception, the debilitating waves of thought of *bhau* (fear) of the time to come and *vair* (enmity) of the time that has passed are transformed into rehabilitating waves of *bhao* (love) instead.⁸ This poetic and intellectual shift exemplifies Divine perspective.

I arrive at poem and art pieces through first- and second-hand experiences with both “what will people say?” and “what could people say?” I write with two particular anecdotes in mind, one comes from a collection of memories from my own life, and the other comes from a fellow Punjabi Sikh Brown woman’s death. The anecdotes from my own life come from being around abusive older male relatives whose frequent verbally and physically abusive outbursts (exacerbated by their alcohol addiction) affected everyone in the family. Though I had spoken up when I had felt it was safe to do so, many times, I had stayed silent. It is reflecting on my silence that initially led me to this poem. Over time, I have learned to subvert the phrase of *loki ki kehen ge?*, thus depleting it of any social power it is structured to have over the mind. As counterintuitive as it sounds, I have even considered that *loki ki kehen ge?* can be *generative* but only when I can subvert it. *The subversive power comes not from worrying what others will say about my words or actions but from considering what they will say about my silence instead. What will people say when they learn that Tavleen Kaur stayed silent in the face of experiencing and witnessing abuse of any kind?* I wholeheartedly recognize that even my subversion of *loki ki kehen ge?* is deeply self-indulgent and seeped in *haumai* (self-affirming ego); nonetheless, I hope readers will find it even infinitesimally relatable.

While I have this privilege and platform to safely breathe words into memories I have not shared publicly before, Mandeep Kaur (1992-2022) of Richmond Hill, New York City did not. On August 3, 2022, Mandeep Kaur died by suicide after facing eight years of violent abuse from her husband. Mandeep Kaur breathed life into her words (and worlds) in the form of a testimonial video that went viral when community support and activist organizations learned of it.⁹ In the video Mandeep Kaur recounts the agony of her husband beating her, also mentioning that he had extramarital affairs.¹⁰ However, by the time the world saw Mandeep Kaur’s testimonial video, as well as other photos and videos that surfaced afterward, each of which showed her bruised skin

⁸ My thanks to the Gurmat Therapy team in the U.K. for sharing their interpretation of *Nirbhau* and *Nirvair* from the Mool Mantar in these radical terms.

⁹ Since this reflection piece is geared toward a broad audience (as opposed to only an academic audience), I have purposely held off on using external references. Further, due to not feeling ethically comfortable in further broadcasting such a painful video as “evidence,” I am choosing not to share a link to Mandeep Kaur’s heartbreaking video and am thus avoiding perpetuating “trauma porn.” For those wishing to learn more may do so via this article, published on August 9, 2022 by Sakhi, an organization centered on South Asian women’s rights and services available for them: <https://sakhi.org/mourning-the-loss-of-mandeep-kaur/>

¹⁰ An additional video released publicly by The Kaur Movement shows Mandeep Kaur’s husband hitting her while their two daughters are visible in the background, crying. The video was made public by The Kaur Movement, an independent, social media-led initiative (primarily via Instagram) that shares stories submitted by Sikhs who have faced or are currently facing sexual and domestic abuse.

and even blood streaming down her face, it was too late. In addition to two daughters, now aged seven and five years old, Mandeep Kaur leaves behind an ethnoreligious community founded on the promise of the well-being of others—*sarbat da bhala*—but a community that often struggles to deliver on this promise, largely because of the fears of *loki ki kehen ge?*

Roughly two months after Mandeep Kaur's passing, I had a chance to go to New York for research. When I was at one of the Richmond Hill gurdwaras in New York City, I happened to meet Kamal (pseudonym), a middle-aged Sikh woman who runs a local business. Kamal knew Mandeep Kaur personally. Kamal shared that she had seen Mandeep Kaur several times around the gurdwara area and that she (Kamal) had no idea Mandeep Kaur was facing such violence.

The full conversation with Kamal taught me that, for those who have suffered and witnessed patriarchal violence, even the idea of speaking freely and unabashedly is a challenging one to fully embrace. In the conversation, the points Kamal shared with me seemed to oscillate on a metaphoric see-saw, demanding vigilance over every word she uttered. Kamal mentioned that she has taught her own children—a son and a daughter, both in their early-to-mid 20s—to stand up and speak for themselves, lest they face the kind of violence Mandeep Kaur did, or, worse, perpetrate it. Hearing these words felt comforting, as they reflected an active and ongoing commitment to justice, especially in memory of the victims and survivors of domestic violence. However, when Kamal happened to mention her own life experiences, including experiencing and surviving domestic abuse, she phrased it as something that just happens, like aging or grass browning after intense heat. Perhaps rationalizing her experiences in this way has been a survival strategy for Kamal. I refrained from asking further questions, as our chance encounter was coming to an end and because asking Kamal to share details of her life with a stranger felt wrong. We bid one another farewell and went our separate but not disconnected ways.

How might we re-envision our place in the world if we become the *loki* (people) who listen empathically and speak purposefully? How can we cultivate *nadar*—Divine perspective—such that we transform from the loathed *nazar* of *loki* who speak ill of others to the *loki* who encourage the breaking of silence, and in doing so, expand our own worldviews? The poem I present is a play on words; the subversive exercise it presents is a play on worlds. In keeping with this play, I close with a parting reflection on the name of the woman whose life was not as well-known as her death: Mandeep, whose name translates to “enlightened mind,” leaves us with a call to action to enlighten our minds by shifting our gaze from *nazar* to *nadar*.

Author

Tavleen Kaur is an Assistant Professor of Asian American Studies at California State University, Fullerton. She holds a Ph.D. in Visual Studies from the University of California, Irvine. She researches contemporary hate violence that is exhibited onto the bodies and buildings of racialized communities of color. In addition to teaching in Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies, she researches contemporary Asian, Pacific Islander, and Desi American (APIDA) architecture and urbanism, community theater, desi ecologies, pan-ethnic solidarity, and migration.

‘The Home Beyond Home’: Dr. Balbinder S. Bhogal in conversation with Dr. Sunny Dhillon

Abstract

This piece is a lightly edited transcript of an interview with Dr. Bhogal conducted by Sunny in late 2022 in Nottingham, UK. Key themes that emerge concern the untranslatable aspects of ‘religion’ (Derrida, 2002), finding a spiritual home, negotiating the dialectic between bodily wisdom and linguistic expression, as well as how to possibly lead a life of integrity in the face of myriad challenges.

Keywords: *Decolonization; Embodied Cognition; Middle Way; Pluriversal; Translation*

Introduction

In the summer of 2022, while conducting a literature search on 'Spinoza and Sikhi,' I (Sunny) discovered the work of Dr. Balbinder Singh Bhogal at Hofstra University, New York. His integration of Continental Philosophy with Sikhi-related issues resonated with ideas that had been simmering in my consciousness, but for which I previously lacked the knowledge and vocabulary to articulate. I was hooked. I listened to an interview between Dr. Bhogal and PJ Wehry, a Christian podcaster who explores contemporary philosophical and theological issues. It was entitled ‘An Introduction to Sikhi’, but it was Dr. Bhogal’s candid discussion of his personal journey into academia that stirred up many emotions in me. I wanted to hear more narratives about fellow members of the Sikh-Punjabi diaspora who had entered into academia in novel ways.

This desire led to a research project from September 2022 to February 2023, titled ‘Sikh Panjabi Scholars in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences’. Literature searches revealed a significant gap in research regarding the experiences of this demographic in Higher Education (HE) across English speaking countries. As a ‘model minority’, Sikhs are often professionally invisible. There has been substantial research into the lived experiences of other Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) groups in these regions, such as Muslims within different sectors (Tariq & Syed, 2017). However, the specific experiences of the Sikh-Punjabi community were not available beyond anecdotal accounts.

Whilst the Punjab region spans India and Pakistan, encompassing many different religious traditions, most Sikhs identify as Punjabi.¹¹ Bhopal (2004) qualifies ethnicity as an individual’s self-identification with a group. The ‘Punjabi’ identity is distinguished by unique cultural and linguistic traditions, which often overlap and intersect with a ‘Sikh’ sense of self. According to the British Sikh report (2020), 40% of respondents reported identifying *primarily* as Punjabi. Despite their economic prosperity in the UK, the Sikh-Punjabi demographic remains a

¹¹ For example, I identify as Punjabi more than Sikh, and do not practice any religion.

minority within a minority in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. As such, I deemed their/our stories worthy of exploration.

I secured research assistance through the Lincolnshire Open Research and Innovation Centre (LORIC), where a colleague conducted data analysis to help contextualize my project's findings from a UK perspective. A key finding is that as of 2020, there were approximately 440,000 academics working in the UK, of which only 1,220, or 0.3%, identified as Sikh. This percentage is the lowest of any religious group, approximately 30 less than the next lowest group (academics who identify as Jewish). In summary, my colleague found that British Sikhs are underrepresented in higher education, both as staff and students, specifically in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. In contrast, they have a far greater level of representation in fields like Business, Engineering and Medicine. Overall, Sikhs are among the lowest participating religious groups in UK higher education and are the least represented in postgraduate research, with over 50% fewer participants than the next lowest group (355 Sikhs compared to 780 who identify as Jewish). A comparison of similar data with the US, Canada and Australia would be particularly valuable.

Interviews for the project were conducted online from September 2022 to February 2023. The primary methodology employed was narrative inquiry (Todd, 2018) through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), with the aim of having free flowing discussions to explore how a shared heritage, influenced by a cultural fund of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005), affected the participants' professional choices and identity formations. The sole exception to the online interviews was the interview (below) with Dr. Balbinder S. Bhogal. As mentioned earlier, his interview with PJ Wehry was a core inspiration for the research. Although Dr. Bhogal resides in New York, and I am in Lincolnshire, UK, as fate would have it, he was the only participant I met in person. As such, the interview is lengthier than the others, with a tone and depth of inquiry that reflects its unique nature.

This project marked my first formal foray into empirical research as my education and prior research had all been in theoretical inquiry. Venturing outside my comfort zone, I acknowledge my limitations as an interviewer, which may be evident to readers. Nonetheless, I hope that the conversation makes for fascinating reading and encourages readers to consult more interviews from the research project.¹²

¹² The project is open access and can be read at the following: <https://bit.ly/sikh-panjabi-scholars>. If there are any issues concerning access, please contact me at sunny.dhillon@bishopg.ac.uk.

The Interview

Sunny Dhillon (SD): Who is Balbinder Singh Bhogal?

Balbinder Singh Bhogal (BSB): It's interesting because I introduce myself in a classroom by saying, "My name is 'Balbinder Singh Bhogal', or 'Balvinder Singh Phogal'" and I ask the students if they notice a difference. They often squirm and think, "why's he being awkward? Why can't he just introduce himself like anybody else?" Then I have to repeat it, because it's a strange question to them; that I am Balbinder or Balvinder. "Does anybody hear a difference?" I get them to finally say "it sounds different, it's phonetic." Then I ask, "what does it signify?" They respond, "well, maybe your culture, your origin," and eventually they get it; that Balvinder is not of this context. What is *this* context? American English or British English. Then I say that Balbinder is a translation of Balvinder, and that I have to exist in a different format. And so, with every translation there's loss, but there's also gain. So, what does that mean then, for knowledge? And so, I invite students to join me on the journey of trying to answer the question: who is Balvinder Singh Phogal. Does it matter? Can I leave one? Can I translate one into a whole different context? Can I reinvent myself from the beginning? I've been trying to answer that question from the start. Maybe I can? I tried! I tried to be white. Growing up in England I tried to be white, and to fit in. I wanted nothing to do with my own background. I'd lost my father at an early age, of three. That meant I had to find a home beyond my parental home. Saying 'parental home,' and interpreting that from an adult perspective, is a misunderstanding, because you have to see it from the perspective of a three-year-old. For a three-year-old, losing your home is becoming homeless. And losing your father figure is losing the support system that allows you to become a psychologically healthy being, which is like saying losing 'God', or an ultimate meaning, or structure, which leads to pathological coping mechanisms. That's the clue of what was hidden inside me as an internal, conversational conflict that I couldn't touch consciously. I didn't know it was there until much, much later in life.

That trauma of losing my father, and temporarily losing my mother, who was in a new country having moved from Africa into England, and went temporarily 'insane' and was put into an institution... So, at the age of three and wondering what the hell was happening, but not having the vocabulary, the maturity, the understanding of what life is, to be able to comprehend what was going on. I could only unconsciously make coping strategies. And the coping strategies were only for immediate purposes. But I don't know any of this, right? I just think "I'm a normal kid, everybody has ups and downs". I don't even know what 'normal' is! We're being normalized, being socialized, but not in Africa anymore. Not even in the Punjab where my parents came from. So, there are themes of immigration, migration, exile and loss as what underpinned this journey. So, when you ask who is 'Balbinder Singh Bhogal' or 'Balvinder Singh Phogal', I already have multiple answers. I've realized that that's an advantage, not a disadvantage. Earlier I thought it was a disadvantage. I thought I had to choose between one and another.

It was in this context that I chose to be British rather than Sikh. So, my Sikhi was being led by a Britishness, because I thought that you had to choose, and that you have to be part of your context. In other words, I fell for what I now consider to be the illusion that you can find a home in bricks and mortar, in language, in race, in gender, in religion, in culture, whatever we want to call it; that there's some kind of linguistic, racial, home that you can find. I thought, "fine, I just have to choose one." So, I unconsciously chose to be 'white', cut my hair, took my turban off, and I rebelled. So back then, I had seen the idea of being multiple within as a disadvantage, that it was a state of confusion and tension that is always negative, only to realize later that there isn't a true home, in language, in race, in culture, in land, in territory. Once I'd realized that, then I realized that home is being settled within. And you can be settled within in Africa, in India, in America, in Britain, wherever you are, it doesn't matter. So not knowing how to exactly name myself, and to discover that who I am was a project that started when I was three... I didn't realize until much, much later, why it was that I left engineering and shifted to religion and philosophy. But the reason was because there was an inner question about "who is Balbinder Singh Bhogal?"

SD: In terms of that home being about feeling settled within, regardless of the geographical and wider socio-political context, that's *nice* [BSB laughs], but material conditions *do* matter, right?

BSB: Yes, material conditions seriously matter.

SD: And so, in terms of that dialectic, that relationship you have with your conditions in juxtaposition with the ideal you articulated, how do you manage that? Or does that dialectic manage you?

BSB: It's a very difficult question, and one that I'm still struggling with. Maybe we need to explore a bit more what 'beyond home' actually means. I've talked before about two streams of data. There's a data flow, the sensory data flow, we're in the world, we have sensors, and we mediate the world through our senses. That provides constantly changing data. Our bodies are updating according to our sensory environment, what we eat and so on. That's one stream of data. Let's just call that the affective; we're constantly affected by outside influences in our environment. But then, we're human beings that have memory and language, and an *invented* world through language. So, the affective is pre-lingual. Then you have the cognitive, or if we use Kristeva's language, you have the semiotic, then you also have the symbolic; in effect, language through which we can interpret that data, that constant flow of sensory stimulation.¹³ We can interpret that, and we *have* to, and we're taught how to: read this

¹³ See Bhogal (2011, pp. 61–63; 2012, pp. 4–18; 2021, pp. 192–195) where I elaborate the semiotic register as the sensorium of animal instincts, as well as the intuitions of the saintly or mystic

as a cultural norm, this as what your job means, this as what you should be, this as what a son is, this as a daughter, and so on. So, we're actually conditioned as though norms are truths, while hiding the fact that they're just interpretations (led by familial and cultural forces).

So, my interpretations started to creek, because of the migrations, because my sensory data was now largely English. My public world was about British culture. Sikhi was totally sidelined to the domestic and private realm. It would only become visible in the public realm through racism; it was never positive in the public sphere. It was only vaguely positive within the private sphere, even though there were problems there as well. I started to question the interpretive dimensions that were normalized. It's hard to become aware of one's own conditioning. The dialectic between finding a home beyond that conditioned home, not another conditioned home, not "oh now I'm American," or "now I'm British," but finding the home beyond here... It doesn't have to be a religious home. It can be that, but not in a markedly 'religious' sense. I think we've got a completely distorted notion of what religion is, in effect, the Enlightenment secular notion of religion. I'm talking about 'religion' in a sense that *aids* critical thinking, rather than one that displaces it, ultimately with the notion of faith, although that *is* part of it.¹⁴

So, the project of finding a home, not the home beyond home, finding just the material home was the project of survival; how to survive just to make ends meet, be practical, learn English, which evaded me, as I couldn't get into university because I'd failed English four times. I had to get it for a job at Rolls Royce. They required Maths and English O Levels,¹⁵ and I kept failing English. That was my transition from Punjabi into English. The English eventually displaced my Punjabi to such an extent that – and a three-year-old's Punjabi isn't that deep – English took over because I had to survive. So, my mother tongue Punjabi becomes alien; the while alien English is internalized as my mother tongue. That's really important, because your mother tongue is largely cognitive and semantic; it's interpretive, but the body holds the resonances of the affective realm. Once I would hear *kirtan* (chanting), it could be a trigger back to the 'original' mother tongue, or a notion of her before her. So more about that later, because I think that's an important point that needs to be developed, but the mother, the notion of the dialectic and the tension, to find a home that can be named, is quite easy, relatively speaking, you just learn the language (eventually!) and you settle down and normalize. You know, when in Rome. You learn how the culture behaves, and you can become part of it; it's visible, it's tangible, and you can grab hold of it. There are some idioms, some things that are strange, but they can become familiar, because they can be named, measured, seen, understood. That's a very toolbox, clunky notion of language. I

consciousness. Both of which are suppressed by the conversion to modern human-egoic language of reason alone — the symbolic register.

¹⁴ See Bhogal (2010, pp. 140–145) where religion is delineated as the specter of the secular West as well as a temporal marker of development that invents history (Hegel).

¹⁵ Qualifications necessary to graduate from high school in the UK.

know language is much deeper than that. But because it can be named, we can convince ourselves that we've arrived in a home that we've invented.

Why does the dialectic continue from my understanding? The tension continues because we have to exist in both; the home beyond home can only exist through a language, in a place, in a geography, in a time. It has to exist. But we can never partake of it to such an extent that it loses its sense of homelessness or namelessness. That's the key point that becomes the religious narrative. So, I often start my class talking about this question of 'who is Balbinder Singh Bhogal?', or 'what's the difference between Balbinder and Balvinder?', that the difference is never resolved. If it were to be resolved, then you get a simplification, you get idol worship, you start to worship a particular language, a particular ethnicity, a particular culture, religion, place. I didn't realize that before. I thought you could make a shift. I thought home was familiar; that home should feel homely and comfortable. Not realizing that, actually, home as such an invention never exists. Every home that you have has its own problems, turbulence and strife, even when it's familiar. The notion of becoming familiar is largely manufactured, and we still have the necessity to find the home beyond home. The project isn't to leave the world into some kind of homelessness, literally, or even metaphorically. Let's say the project is to find homelessness *in* home. Like finding death-in-life (*jivan-mukta*) which is true living, where false living is in opposition and fear of death.

The theme of exile might be able to explain this a little better, which is also to do with migration and loss. Let's just take the biblical narrative, the Garden of Eden. They are expelled because they eat of the forbidden fruit of knowledge; the tree of good and evil, that's very symbolic. That's like a shift into language, from body into mind, of knowledge, judgment, right and wrong, good and evil, which is an exile from your body. Because now you're going to order your body to do 'this'. That theme of exile, of paradise being lost is about a paradise that's located in your body, and it's still there. It is an *affective* mode of communication, but we've stopped listening to it because we're being socialized by a particular need to survive. Once you have become settled, and you're beyond survival, and you can make choices, then certain things start to rise, like "Why would I do this? Why would I choose that? I don't need to do it, because there's no necessity, because I've got all the things that make my life comfortable. I'm beyond survival." I think midlife crises suddenly ask: "Where's your true home? Who are you really? What is your journey about?" I was set on exile right from the beginning, at three, exiled from a familiar home because my father was gone. And then I had to find my father. So, my coping strategy was to simply be a good boy. Because that's why dad's gone. He's angry. I had to be neat, tidy and successful, right? Then dad, God, will come back, right?

I became successful in the world, you could say. I managed to get a PhD and get a job. But at what cost? At the cost of my family, not seeing them as much as I perhaps would have liked, as much as they would have liked, certainly. Because I was always at work. I was always trying to

get my dad back — the being that was All to me. I was always trying to find God, the Father. So, the shift to the later awareness of exile, that I was actually *in* exile, that I was running, running away, trying to find him running... I didn't know that until much later in life, in my 30s. But there's no illusion, from my perspective now, to think "oh, I've got to leave America and go back to England because that's my home, or I've got to leave England, go back to Africa because that's where I was born. That's my real home." Or go back to the Punjab. I have no illusion that I could find a place in the world where I would not be at home. Because I've travelled so much. I've emigrated so much: Africa, England, Punjab, America, Canada. Having no place that is my one fixed home doesn't mean I'm perpetually lost; it means that I'm becoming more attuned in my interpretation of what life is really about: the impermanent, inadvertent, fortuitous, and tragic stitched into the gift of life. I have to make whatever home I have filled reflect the wisdom that comes from being homeless. Now, I don't want to sound trite and superficial. When I use the word 'homeless', I don't mean that as literal; I want to talk about the homelessness of the mind, and how the mind gets settled in a home too easily, too comfortably and gets addicted to certain neural pathways, and how being a stranger to that is a positive. I'm not saying everybody should become homeless, literally. I'm talking about not being fooled by linguistic, racial or geographical agendas.

I think this is not a religious or a philosophical question. It's an existential question we all have to face. Ludwig Wittgenstein says, 'Philosophy is a hammer against the bewitchment of my intelligence by means of language'. Philosophy is a tool to undo the bewitchment that language traps us in, that which language forces us to miss. It helps us to see things, but because of its labelling, it also starts to fix [reify] things. There's a misperception that if something hasn't been labelled, that we have to label it. This is answering your question about the tension, the dialectic. But we mustn't be fooled and make an idol of our language, of our labels. We have to be open to the unfamiliar, to strangers. And I think that's the earth speaking. How the earth, the body, keeps shattering our mental interpretations of what's going on. It keeps shattering us.¹⁶ So whilst we have to listen to the external voice of culture, society, family, friends, peers, scholars, and educators, we don't have to listen singularly to those. I think there's a big mistake in just assuming that our language is sufficient.

There's *another* language, and that's the language of the body. That's our second task. We have to listen to that. Otherwise, I would have never have changed from engineering to philosophy, religion, if I didn't listen to that inner voice. My body kept the memory of my pain alive. And that pain forced me to address itself: "You're in pain. You're causing a lot of pain because of that, and they don't want to be hurt anymore, and you shouldn't be hurting yourself anymore." There's some kind of task that is necessary for you to do to heal yourself so that you're not

¹⁶ See Bhogal, B. S. (2017). *What Mind does my Body Yearn?* https://www.academia.edu/35495428/What_Mind_does_your_Body_Yearn

abusing others and abusing yourself anymore'. That inner task, I think, doesn't get serious until much later in life for many people. And the task of hearing that inner voice is not easy, because the inner voice can be so easily colonized by language.

I constantly go back to the point about going to the *gurdwara*. This one point, I think, is important about discipline and religion, and just the rigmarole of it, which I was heavily critical of. That's why I left the turban thinking 'nobody knows what it means', and 'you're just going through the motions', 'it's empty ritual'. Guru Nanak criticizes empty rituals, with all the *janamsakhis* (biographies of Guru Nanak) and the verses in the Guru Granth Sahib itself. Once I started to learn them in my PhD, I was so critical against Sikhs, super critical. There was so much to criticize. One thing I totally missed, even with empty ritual, even with the 'mindless' repetition of the *kirtan*, the hymns, the *paath* (scripture), the prayers and the liturgy, is that there's an *affective* force of at play. The only thing that reminded me of the importance of that is once I'd been in exile, I cut my hair, I left, and I wouldn't feel at home in the deep sense. Sometimes I'd go to the *gurdwara*, and as soon as I'd enter, the *kirtan* would be playing, and I'd be in tears. What the hell is that about? It's not because I understood what they were saying. It was simply the musicality of it. The rhythm of the music; it spoke to me *very* deeply. That said to me "wait a minute, my critique of the Sikhs is too extreme." It needed to be adjusted to account for what I didn't have the language for at the time. But there was the vocabulary, the vocabulary of *affect*, and how that was something of a home. I felt like I was coming home when I'd go to the *gurdwara*, which is something I didn't expect. I wanted the intellectual, philosophical, home. But I never felt it there. Nobody, when they talked about Sikhi ever made me feel "oh, that's great." I just thought "this is Protestant Christianity. It's a mimesis of Protestant Christianity: monotheism, morality, modernity, rationalism, scientific dogma" (Bhogal 2010; 2014; 2015).

When I did the research, I found that's not what Sikhi says. So, I never felt at home with the philosophical exegesis and explanation. But without anybody saying anything, just going to the *gurdwara*, having the *langar* [free kitchen], and hearing the music in particular, my body would respond. You know, how you hear an old song and suddenly it takes you back to the environment and the memories? That's what was happening. There was an affective recollection of that which became alive when I returned to the *gurdwara*. Then I started to realize that there's a resonance that I needed to listen to. What is it about that feeling of coming home? Initially I thought "oh, it means to become a Sikh, take *amritshakh* (nectar)." But that wasn't what it meant. Coming home didn't mean coming home to a religion, coming home to Sikhi, at least for me. Coming home meant inner healing. I had to heal inner conflict and tension. It just so happens that if I was born in another tradition that had that musicality, I would have felt that that was the home. So that's not the real home. At the end of the day, culture is actually arbitrary, which is quite a disturbing reflection. But I think there's a level of maturity there. We still have to pitch our tent on the earth. Heidegger makes that distinction between world and earth, and how we have to keep trying to locate our thinking in our own bodies and *live* it, not just think it. We still have to do that. But we cannot make an idol of the language, the land, the culture.

SD: Going back to the distinction of how language can be used, at one end, like the logical positivists, naming things or trying to understand the world as it 'is', then post-structuralism at the other, that nothing is fixed, where does Sikhi, as a hermeneutical, sense making exercise, fit along that spectrum? There's *shabad guru*, where the word is deified, and the hermeneutical practice is different, right? At this stage of your journey, does Sikhi satisfy you as a hermeneutical exercise?

BSB: It's a great question. Because we have a similar understanding of the world and how to make sense of it, with critical theory, the Frankfurt School and Continental Philosophy, I find a brilliant vocabulary to be able to understand *gurbani*. You've hit the nail on the head there in terms of the point I was trying to make, and you're allowing me to now refine it. So, how is Sikhi sufficient enough to get me to the depot, to the 'real' home, given my critique of religion, and critique of the philosophical interpretive move that we have to make. Let me be clear I am critical of the process of religionization that created Sikh-ism, not *Gur-Sikh* Dharma (Bhogal, 2010; 2018).

I would say that, out of all the traditions, if I had to choose, Sikhi would be the one. It's not just because I was born a Sikh. That's really important because of the affective dimension, and my body carries the memory of the rhythms, the music, and so I have a sense of coming home there. But the home that we're talking about, I've already stated, is beyond language, beyond religion, beyond tradition, it's existential. And it's existential beyond survival. It's something that's to do with what in the Sikh tradition is the transition from *manmukh* (ego-centric) to *gurmukh* (liberated from ego), or in the Christian tradition 'to be born again'. There's a death that has to happen before you physically die. One needs to undergo a mental death and there has to be a decentering of the ego. So, in terms of that transition, whatever the preparatory ground is, is arbitrary. The important thing is to make the second transition. If we simplify and say there are two transitions in subjectivity: the first transition in subjectivity is from the affective body into the cognitive mind of culture, from nature to culture, from the semiotic to the symbolic, that's the first transition that everybody makes. That's very common. Everybody transitions into language, and then they make their home in their minds, in their language, but that's not the true home. According to religion, there's a second transition that needs to occur. But that transition is only achieved by a few. That's quite rare. Because that goes against culture, mind, tradition, the norm, family and so on. Sikhi is interesting because... I think we forget this about religions; religions are *ultra* radical. They're not just radical, they're ultra radical because they ask for the supreme sacrifice, and that's the sacrifice of the world, the mind; the world that is projected by the mind, the world that is projected by culture, the world that is projected and couched in language. Sikhi is asking for *shabad guru*. So *shabad guru*, the word as guru shows that language is like a sea, it has depth. If we look at the surface of language, at its most objective form, naming objects, classification, that's one side of language; the most gross side of language.

But then language has layers to it. Until you reach musicality, or poetry, or nonsense poetry of the gaggling of a baby, the rhythm of the heartbeat, and how just a single sound can speak to you. My brother learned the guitar and said, “I just played one note for about an hour and a half one day, because that note spoke me *so* much.” You can’t explain that. ‘Language’ as word can also exist at that level. So, there’s a depth to language that goes from an object that is named, to something that doesn’t exist in our naming. Chairs and tables exist in different languages, where they’re named differently. But then you go deeper until you get to the musicality of language. And then somehow, at some undetermined point, you get to *basically* the nondual nameless – which actually lies beyond the dualities of the mind, like gross and subtle, surface and depth – as language is the whole sea from surface to depth. You can use whichever tradition you like; you can use a non-religious tradition. You can use sports. Whatever it is, *this* is the structure of the universe. This is the structure of the existential conditions of life. We didn’t invent this; this is how it is. We realize whether through a religious tradition or not, any activity, if you follow it deeply enough, you get to the deeper layers of the musicality of language — its poetic affective pull on us until we get to the nameless, and that moment can reveal to you your true home. But that moment has to be expressed. Experience has to be expressed. And so, the dialectic continues. (‘Depth’ and ‘deeper layers’ might be misleading – the Word is the whole sea, what I really mean is depth of engagement, a deeper dwelling in the Heideggerian sense).

I think Sikhi is the most conscious tradition because it’s late, on the cusp of modernity, Martin Luther is Guru Nanak’s contemporary. In some sense, the Protestant Reformation is akin to what’s happening with Sikhi. It’s so conscious that ‘religion’ becomes an arbitrary vocabulary. We forget this. We’ve theologized it. It’s (Sikhi) not a ‘theology’. It’s not a monotheism. And we’ve used an outdated mode, a basically Christian mode of religious nomenclature to interpret it. In doing that, we’ve done an untold violence to the immense subtlety and complexity of *gurbani*, which has a secular and *atheistic* vocabulary in it. It uses *nibhaan* (liberation). I teach Buddhism at university and say, ‘the Buddha says, “there are loads of gods, countless gods, 31 dimensions of existence, countless gods, but there isn’t *one* god”’, which is wonderful, right? For me, this is wonderful. It’s not wonderful for the Abrahamic traditions, which want to make a claim that the Absolute Truth is that there is one God, and the Sikhs fell into this in the colonial conversion to modernity (see Bhogal 2015). But we have a much more subtle and refined point, which doesn’t reject this, but it puts it into the context of those Buddhists who say, there is no *one* God. So now you’ve got two traditions, let’s say, you’ve got the family of religious traditions that say, ‘there is one God and this is the Absolute Truth’. Then you’ve got the Buddhist and allied traditions that say, “there is no one God, but there are gods.” So now you’ve got a clear contradiction. How do you handle that? *This* is the starting point of Sikhi. Sikhi starts with aporia in the fact that everybody was opposed, because of idolization through language, whether scientific or religious, and mainly because at the time there were religious vocabularies that emerged from a field of opposed traditions, whether Buddhist or Hindu, ascetic or householder, religious or political. If it were today, Guru Nanak might see our use of science in

terms of idol worship. He'd be saying "look what you're doing! Your science should sing of the Nameless majesty of the universe, and not be reduced into named worlds of limited control. There is no mastery over life here. Be like Einstein, like how it was for those scientists for whom it was wondrous, and opened the universe up as something that was nameless". Darwin talked about an infinite intelligence in operation. He was astounded by that inherent intelligence in nature, that outstripped our thinking manyfold.

So, Sikhi isn't a religion, I argue, in the way that we think religion operates — (Sikhism is a noun tied to theory, whereas *GurSikhi* is a verb tied to praxis). Nor is it a science in the way that we think science operates. I would go so far as saying it is a true scientific religion. Not in a crass way like some say: "There's science in Islam. There's science in the Vedas. There's science in Sikhi." As though it were through naming and objectification that leads to Truth. Sikhi was the opposite move. It was the expression of the complexity of what we have, and that we can never get the full picture because language, or the Truth, has to go from the named to the nameless. That's where I find a great resonance with *gurbani*. If it was a 2,000 years old tradition, I would have come to some kind of limitation. But even if you look at those traditions that are millennia old, they balance themselves out. They realize that they've missed some things out. In the commentarial traditions, you've got Sufism, you've got Kabbala, you've got mystical dimensions that start to address the overreach; that which I like to call the idealization born of naming, and how language can calcify polarized positions or atrophy into cancerous mutations through language. Meister Eckhart says, "take me to the God beyond God." That's exactly the point. And so, Sikhi, I would say, is just returning to what we've actually always known, but through a pluriversal lens that emerges from the unresolved tensions and judgments *across* polarized traditions. We can't name the complexity of what we experience, of what we see outside or internally. And Sikhi is constantly returning to that, making humility foundational. It's got as much food for thought for the atheist as it has for the religious person, and that was a surprise to me. I thought, "oh, this is wonderful!" I didn't want to approach it as a monotheistic religion where you just bow down. I wanted to pursue it as an astute, apposite perspective on a complex and conflicted world that can be for anybody and everybody. It just so happens that Sikhi worked out that way for me, and doubly, that it was starting to resonate as the home beyond home.

SD: Fantastic. Going back to the importance of socio-political context, Punjab was fertile soil (pun intended) for the emergent Sikh tradition. Geographically, it's obviously at the intersection of South Asia, the Middle East, and all these different traditions you've mentioned: Sufism, Buddhism, especially in its migration towards China and further on. What importance do you place in Punjab in terms of Sikhi? And what connotations does Punjab have for you today?

BSB: It's a profound, difficult and deep question, and I'm still thinking about it. I think my understanding now (in 2022) is different to earlier understandings. When I first went to India – I

wasn't born there; I was born in Tanzania, Mwanza, but I was raised and grew up in England – it was a foreign place to me, and I was perceived as a foreigner. So, I thought Punjab *was* my home until I traveled there. I was fed up of being constricted by British racism and I wanted to find my true home. That's when I tried to think that you could name a true home, you could go to a true home, and then you could feel at home. But that's a really profound question: where is it that you feel at home? Not in a superficial sense, because even at home, people can be very alienated. Where do you feel is your true home? Initially, Punjab was that; it was my true home. As soon as I got there, everybody pointed out to me that I was a stranger, I was a foreigner, and who I took as my kith and kin, weren't so. I went visiting *mandhirs* and *gurdwaras*. At one place I'd left my shoes outside and entered this holy place with reverence. You know, "I'm home!" So, I'm doing all this bowing, wanting to feel home and become Indian, right? I then come outside of the temple and my slippers had been stolen! This is the nitty gritty, the imminent, the phenomenal existence, not the noumenal existence I was after. The phenomenal existence is quirky and strange. Even in the most sacred places there can be sin committed. I had the orientalist images of India as exotic, mystical, spiritual. I had to learn that Punjab is like any other place, and worse, because it *shouldn't* be like that, because it's 'mine'.

I realized that Punjab can be romanticized in a form of indigeneity that I actually started to grow a critical lens on. To reduce *gursikhi*, or Sikh *dharam* (religion), to Punjabiness, *Punjabiyyat*, is a mistake. But, to assume *Punjabiyyat* isn't a part of Sikhi is also a mistake – it's one of the many important strands within it. *Punjabiyyat*, the importance of the geography, as you mentioned, as the entry point into India, the intersection of many confluences of beautiful ideas and cultures first occurred in Punjab. The Buddhist universities are there in Taxila. That richness that enters the soil births Sikhi. I don't think it's an accident that Sikhi grew there. I think it's got the material conditions of history, of invasions and cultural exchange that allowed for this flowering to happen, perhaps *only* in Punjab, I don't know. But I want to take the importance of the material, give it its true weight. But to misunderstand Punjab as only sacred is also a mistake. You can't reduce Sikhi to that, because the gurus traveled constantly beyond Punjab. And the reason why they traveled beyond was *precisely* because people made the indigenous context their notion of *true* home. We all need homes, but in the deep sense that we're talking about, it's not often the case. You could still be alienated, you can still be exiled, we're all in exile. It's not just that Adam and Eve were exiled from paradise. That's the starting point of humanity, the human condition, all human beings begin in exile. They leave the mothership, they're born, and they're exiled from the mother's body. That's a metaphor for the earth, for land, for language, for culture, and then they have to learn anew. They can be nurtured into a particular language, but the true home of where they came from doesn't have a name. It doesn't have a geography and it doesn't have a particular language: *gurshabad*, the Word, is within all languages but is also beyond them all (as *anhad-shabad*). It's beyond space and time. We have to find it *in* space and time without making the mistake of assuming that once we find it, that we've found *it*, and tell other people about a *particular* place, a *particular* language. *Shabad* cannot be reduced to any

one language. That's why there's no conversion in Sikhi. That's why I like it. It's actually way ahead. I don't mean to say this in a self-applauding way, but it's just the context and time in which it occurred – it has the benefit of hindsight.

There's a beautiful *jamamsakhi* where Guru Nanak's traveling towards Sultanpur, Multan (in present day Pakistan, a stronghold of Sufis), and he comes to a village, and the 'saints' or *pirs* get earshot about his arrival. When Guru Nanak arrives, he's met by a messenger who informs him the 'saints' of the village are coming, and as they approach, they've got a copper bowl filled to the brim with milk, which they present to him. Guru Nanak immediately understands what this is about: the copper bowl is symbolic of the village, milk is symbolic of the purity that the saints manifest, the purity that others should have. And so, the copper bowl filled to the brim with milk signifies that there's no room in the village for him or any additional 'saints'. How does Guru Nanak respond? He could have just spilled the milk and said, "You're hypocrites. You're only interested in money." He could have just knocked it down. Or he could have thanked them and said, "well, you know, I'm the pure one." He doesn't do any of these. What he does instead is he gets a jasmine flower, which is foreign to that place, and he places it afloat without spilling a drop of milk. In other words, there is always room for the truth. His and Sikhi's arrival do not displace traditions or saints but add the fragrance of truth that all can forget. The Sufis recognize their error and come to meet Guru Nanak. We think our language or tradition can completely and fully name the Truth. It is not just that we should always be open to the fragrance of Truth via our traditions and languages, but also learn to discern it beyond our traditions and languages, for the Truth is a livingness, a lovingness, perpetually singing like time in all places. Sikhi isn't *the* Truth; Sikhi is its fragrance. And the fragrance can occur in any space and time. And that's how the nameless, symbolically, and analogically, can exist in the named. By acts like that. The saints get it straight away, and immediately recognize their limitations if not hubris. They realize, 'OK, this one's a real saint. He's not just a charlatan like us', and they bow down to him. So that kind of skillful means, if we use Buddhist vocabulary, is how the nameless can enter the named. It's basically efficacious actions and deeds.

The Guru Granth Sahib is about actions and deeds like that. How do we treat the stranger, the alien, the ostracized, the neglected, those outside of our vocabulary, outside of our geographic home? How do we give them a home? It's not by giving them the truth in a linguistic form of a cosmography, or tradition. Unlike Vedic culture that has a cosmography and says, 'this is a truth', or unlike Buddhism that has its own cosmography, or Abrahamic traditions, the Sikhs had already tired of this and said... The gurus would never say this, but I say this: "You've idolized your own vocabulary, and not realized that there isn't one version. You can't have a true culture as opposed to a false culture. Cultures aren't that kind of thing. Languages aren't that kind of thing." Each language can express the beauty of the diversity of life. That's why Nanak says be a Muslim but be a true Muslim. He doesn't say "follow me." That would be the idealization of his notion. He says, "find the name in your tradition, find the truth, be a true person." We could

summarize that by the Guru Granth Sahib, page 62. It says: “What is higher than truth? Truth is high. But what is higher than truth is the question, and it’s truthful living.” And here we get that shift to process philosophy, immanence, constantly updating our viewpoint, because it’s livingness that’s important, not naming. Livingness requires naming, there’s a dialectical tension again, but it has to be done with humility. Guru Nanak says, “those who say they know the Truth, know them as the greatest fools.” Paradoxically, contemporary science hasn’t got that humility. Science, in principle, is humble because it’s open to the greatest critique. So, you could say that science has an advantage over religious institutions that don’t get the critique strong enough. But even science has its problems of idolatry, as though ‘this’ is the only way to know. So, Guru Nanak says all epistemologies are limited, and we only get to know that when they’re brought together.¹⁷ Nobody can fill a bowl full of milk and say ‘this is the Truth’. It’s not possible. The fragrance of truth can still arise. It’s so subtle. We can easily miss what’s really important because we’ve got all this wealth of treasures of tradition, of knowledge, of learning, of commentaries. But if we don’t listen to what the commentaries are *actually* saying... This is what Guru Nanak’s saying: “listen to your traditions, subtly, deep, and in your traditions, you will discover that you’ve already got the answers to many things; there’s a resource there.” But that can be easily missed. Sikhi never intended to set itself up as a rival tradition. It was so conscious about that, right from the very beginning, that it was inclusive of the other’s voice as part of its own at the very beginning. But it also realized that no one else is saying this, and its ‘thirdness’ beyond every duality, the middle way between polarized traditions, itself needed to become a tradition — the *tisar panth*, beyond the ‘competitive memories’ of Hindu and Muslim traditions, a tradition of traditions with a ‘multidirectional memory’ (Bhokal, 2013).

Just imagine, if you’re falling in love with somebody, the feeling of singing often displaces mere talk; we are dancing on the inside even when we walk and talk to them, as opposed to singing. The singing goes straight to the heart. That connected feeling is precious. In a way, when in love, we live musically, we are touched, moved. This peak of experience — where singing can bridge divides — is the core of Sikhi — (the Guru Granth Sahib is after all a scripture of more than 5000 hymns). Imagine then, calling the non-Sikh to sing those very hymns. What is most precious to Sikhs is that they allow the other to sing. This seems to suggest that what is most sacred to Sikhs is not the songs themselves but the resonance they bring across multiple peoples, places and grammars. Hence, the Sikhs allow a Muslim Rababi tradition to develop within and as an expression of an inclusive vision of their own tradition. It’s such a beautiful example of the teachings of the Gurus that it birthed and inspired this Muslim singing tradition. This was not an afterthought but originates from inception: we see by its musicality it would bring the song out of you. But then you get, say, a Muslim to sing, to aid you in that singing. It’s a really beautiful

¹⁷ See forthcoming papers: Bhokal, B.S., ‘The Forbidden Turn: Contacting the Ontological Flooding of The Word as World’ (edited by Brianne Donaldson), and Bhokal, B.S., ‘Gur-Sikhi Beyond Indigeneity and Liberal Pluralism: Aporia and the Pluriversal’ (edited by Brian Black and Laurie Patton).

move that you get the most subtle heart being expressed by the foreigner — the Rababis that were eventually lost because of partition — but right from the beginning, Guru Nanak would have his Muslim companion and musician Mardana singing together with others, which, I think is a touching and beautiful move. To get access to what's most meaningful is to live and act musically. These songs are then not owned, but collectively shared across communities. That, right at the beginning of Sikhi is a critique of language, culture, place, geography. In short, all forms of identity politics — *na ko hindu, na ko musalman* (there is no Hindu, no Muslim). And the way to get access to what's most meaningful is to sing. That gets to the heart for most people, right?

Sikhs allow a Rababi tradition to develop. It's such a beautiful example of the teachings of the gurus. So Sikhi is, in a very beautiful way, a redevelopment, an extension, a beautiful evolution of the Buddhist Middle Way refracted through Sufi, Sahajiya, Nath and Bhakti traditions. This is so beautiful, so non-Vedic. Not a dry syncretistic philosophy to be pitched against others, but a new collective harmonic to give voice to those unable to sing — to inspire and uplift a heterogeneous people into a new resonance, a true assembly (*sat-sangat*). You could argue that the Vedic culture lost this, if it had it in the first place, perhaps in select. The Vedic culture did have this in various Upanishads, but they lost it when Brahminism became a structure of power, hierarchy, naming, ordering and owning. So, it's not so much the theology that we Sikhs get from India, from Brahmanism, or Vaishnavism. It's the Buddhist dialectical critique of language itself away from divine languages (Sanskrit, Arabic) and embracing the vernaculars. The Buddhist Middle Way is reinvented by Guru Nanak by saying any metaphysics is fine if underpinned by humility, the mark of the Unnamable. We have a critique of metaphysics important to Post-structural and Continental Philosophy, but I think Guru Nanak reminds us earlier on that metaphysics is deeply problematic if you start to idolize. You can't just say *difference, difference*. You've got to be constructive. I know it's a bit of a crass critique of deconstruction to talk about construction. I don't mean this in a simplistic way. In a way Guru Nanak was open to multiple metaphysics, multiple cosmologies. That's a new idea. That's a cosmopolitanism where a multidirectional memory is forged. That's a new definition of the human that challenges Enlightenment, European man's competitive and exclusive memory. We've hitherto assumed that the highest bar of civilization and liberalism is the French Revolution, the American Revolution, European Enlightenment. We've underestimated Guru Nanak and that whole tradition immensely. We're doing it an immense disservice by preferring Western models, as somehow universal levels of achievement of civilization. It's that we [Sikhs] have a vision of the future of what it means to be a human being beyond yours, because yours [Western Europeans], finally, and ultimately, always rests on the division; the division between friend and enemy (as Carl Schmitt notes in the public and social space analysis). Whereas Guru Nanak says, "so long as you think that there is an enemy, and there is a friend, so long will your mind not come to rest."¹⁸ And so we're never at rest, we never can find our home — because we

¹⁸ "*Jabb dhaarai koyu bairee meet; tabb lagu nihachal naahee cheet*" (GGS, p. 278).

don't make That One our home. What Guru Nanak was saying is that there is a home that is beyond the realm of friend and enemy, it is the friend-friend (*sajan-miit*).¹⁹ If your home is always defined "well, here's the friend, this is our home, the enemy is beyond this," then that's not the true home. There is a home beyond friend and enemy. That's a new definition of human being, a redefinition of sovereignty along lines of a friend-friend model. There's so much there in terms of a new middle way. I think it's the vocabulary of the pluriversal that starts to speak to a new sovereignty, and what the Sikh tradition actually brings into play. That tradition got totally devastated by partition, by the 1980s and the fight for our rights and how we were treated as terrorists, and absolutely brutalized and traumatized for generations. The genocide that happened with the Delhi pogroms, and all of the operations that the Indian government undertook actually pushed some of us towards a critical reading of religion, as though religion is what we were. But that was a false coat, a false colonial-Christian straitjacket.

SD: So, Sikhi, in the manner you articulate, is a very modern socio-political response, that combines both the mystical and material, as a middle way to negotiate different tensions? So, for you as a contemporary professor at a neoliberal institution in the United States, having such a rich fund of epistemic, along with experiential, prelinguistic knowledge as well... you're paid a wage to work to develop these ideas, but at the same time are up against a lot of the tensions and the problems that will be antithetical to your ideals. How do you then negotiate this space, being who you are?

BSB: The short answer is through failure. It's almost impossible not to be complicit in systems of violence, oppression, exploitation. We live in a neoliberal capitalist state that basically rapes the 'Third World' to feed the 'First World' and create new markets. Neoliberal capitalism is ripe for critique in terms of the devastating increasing gap between rich and poor, and growing impoverishment everywhere. You've even got Americans experiencing conditions that used to only exist in the colonies. Capital has no truck with going anywhere it needs to in order to expand its profit. It's not that I'm necessarily against capital, though. It's just that to answer your question, I'm complicit in these various structures. If Sikhi isn't an otherworldly mysticism, as we both recognize, that it's more of a worldly mysticism, political mysticism, then we have to negotiate these conditions, and ensure that our deeds are not only attuned to self-awakening, but also attuned to liberating others from oppression.

I have a platform upon which I can set an agenda, in which the principles that Sikhi operates by can at least get some kind of voice. So how does that happen in practice? Well, meet the stranger. Face injustice with the stranger. Listen to the narrative that's opposing yours and engage with others. But then Sikhi in the academy is constructed as a 'religion.' So, for me to be

¹⁹ "*Ik sajan sabh sajanaa ik vairee sabhi vaadi*" (GGS, p. 957): "When I take the One as Friend, then I look upon all as my friends; but when I take the One as enemy, then conflicts with all ensue."

true to the principles of what I've now found out, I have to break disciplinary boundaries, and explore Sikhi from the lens of sociology, psychology, psychotherapy, anthropology, and realize that the theme of the pluriversal is important in terms of having an interdisciplinary, multiple vocabulary.

One of the things Guru Nanak realized was that you can't speak the Truth, yet you can't not try. So, like the Dao De Ching, "the name that can be named is not the name; the *dao* that can be followed is not the *dao*." The Guru Granth Sahib begins with that right from the *mool mantar* (essential teaching): "*soche soch na hoye je soche lakh vaar*;"²⁰ no matter how many times you try to gain ritual purity, or to think the Truth, you can't get clean, or it can't be thought – the *way* can't be thought. But then there are 1,430 pages that follow, there's a necessity to still try, but 'under erasure'; in effect, with all humility! But the way you try now is not naive. You can name the truth and own a cosmography, and then tell everybody else about it as though it is the only true one, but that sidesteps the complexity of diverse cosmographies. These 1,430 pages, in this context is of the pluriversal, is unlike the universal top down; the pluriversal is bottom up. And that means the pluralization of centers of authority. So, the Mexicans, the Japanese, they're centers of authority with their diverse narratives. They're naturally creative, they have their own cultural expressions, and they have perspectives that are rich and valuable. So, Guru Nanak began with a higher, more human, more sophisticated, more cosmopolitan, more modern decolonial notion of the pluriversal, as opposed to an outdated mode of the universal, which is always one language, one culture dominating others and getting them to convert to believe that.

Now you could say science is some kind of universal language. And that's a slightly separate debate we could get into. But his [Nanak's] beginning was awareness of *many*, and that being natural and good. In other words, a friend: friend — friend. That's a very different model from friend — enemy. If you're beginning with friend — enemy, then you say: 'well, we've got the truth, and they haven't'. And then there's conversion. But if your beginning is friend — friend, then you say, 'well, your vocabulary is as beautiful as ours'! In other words, you could that Sikhi isn't a vocabulary; Sikhi is the space in which vocabularies can actually live with each other. It's a vision of inter-relational harmony, cosmologically, philosophically, ethically. And that's why *langar* (free kitchen) is open, and the Harmandir Sahib has the four doors... it's inherently there from its inception, not as an afterthought like in Christianity, showing how you embrace other traditions. *From its inception*, it's aware of the other as necessary, as essential for my being. "I can only be because of you and your difference." This is what the baby forgets; the baby can only 'be' because of the mother. The other, the alien, the essential, which wasn't alien in the beginning, right, because in the mother's womb, that's symbolic of being united there with God, that's not alien. When we're born, only then the mother becomes alien, other.²¹ And then we think, "well, you know, religion is alien. How do we come back?" Because we're coming

²⁰ GGS, p. 1.

²¹ See GGS, pp. 74–75.

back to it as named, not as the nameless. That's the issue there. And so, that exile of coming back to the mother is an experience that is existential. This is why Sikhi is so close to Buddhism; Buddhism returns to an existential conditionality of old age, disease and death. Then there's Nirvana, and Nirvana is open to *all* beings. Because all beings are open to suffering in old age, disease and death. It's the same move that Guru Nanak makes. We're all beings that suffer, and there is this second transition in subjectivity from *manmukh* to *gurmukh*, from lay person to *arhat* to or *bodhisattva*. There's a transition that needs to happen. But that home doesn't have a vocabulary. And it doesn't exclude any vocabulary. That's a bit Guru Nanak adds; he adds a pluriversal awareness of *ek* –, *anekh*: one – and many. Literally: One – and *not* one. *Ek, anekh*; one – all.

In other words, that's why Sikhi isn't monotheistic; it's a living of oneness that is open to atheism. It can *use* monotheism, it *has* theism: Hari, Ram, Allah, Khudha. It has the theistic vocabulary, but it also has Sunn, Samadh, Shiv Shakti, Tantric, and Nibhaan, Buddhist, non-theistic vocabulary. So, Sikhi is the space in which a *true* cosmopolitanism — I hate that term, it should be something else — a true *pluriversalism*, can occur. It's the space in which the gurus demonstrate: “don't convert to what we say. Find the truth in your own traditions. You can become a Sikh if you want. The doors are open. But all the truth that you need to discover is in you. Don't convert to what we say.”

Whether you know about Sikhi or not, you can still discover that. It's about paying attention. So, there are no sophisticated and arcane or esoteric mantras or rituals. What do the Sikhs say? ‘*Suniaie, maniaie, man keetha bhao*’: listen, then if you hear the truth, and you think “OK, I should really do this,” then obey, accept, and then do ‘it’ through loving devotion. That's available to everybody. Compassion? Anybody can be kind. This is what it says constantly: “Let *mercy* be your mosque, *faith* your prayer-mat, and *honest living* your Koran.”²² “Make compassion and loving kindness your way.” It keeps going to values shared, the universals, in all the traditions. So, there's no point in having all the paraphernalia of a tradition if you forget the basics of the virtues — “without virtue there is no devotion.”²³ And it keeps returning to that. Sikhi is based on universal, pluriversal human ‘inter-species’ values, but they're not humanistic. Because humanism is defined as a critique of religion from a secular rationality, which is an exclusionary and hierarchical system. Sikhi pointed out trans-humanistic values beyond ownership by a particular epistemological formation or group, whether it's science or religion. The gurus are sort of saying: “You Brahmins or Yogis can't monopolize the truth – even an ant can teach you how to live; it's not only dependent upon your arcane, esoteric rituals – for it involves an unwritable order and intelligence (*hukam*) that all beings are subject to. It's open to the householder not just the ascetic, and all species live under this intelligence, attuned or not.”

²² “*mihar masiit sidak musalaa hak halaal kuraan*” (GGS, p. 140).

²³ “*vinu guna kite bhagati na hoi*” (GGS, p. 4).

But there *is* a second transition (for those not attuned), a need for transformation, and you need to enact some discipline to get there.

SD: The critique of certain ritualized traditions brings to mind Krishnamurti's idea that 'truth is a pathless land'. But there's a paradox, isn't there? Whilst the path isn't linear or clear in a toolbox manner, there are still inklings or traces when the 'truth' speaks to you? There are inclinations to be certain ways, but these are not because of ordained disciplines.

BSB: One thing that connects the two, the paradox, in my perspective, is on the one hand no religious tradition is without discipline; all of them have discipline, but none can claim complete ability to predict every part of the 'way', because truth is a pathless land. It takes a circuitous route, and it happens in moments you least expect etc. But what connects Krishnamurti's 'truth is the pathless land' to those who have a path is discipline. What I'm trying to say is that discipline shouldn't be simply reduced to a path. So how do I connect 'truth is a pathless land' to a path? I think Guru Nanak provides that. He says discipline has to be reinvented. You can't just say, "I know I have issues, but I'm never going to look at myself." You have to pay attention. You have to make an effort. But what is the effort? Discipline is being reinvented. Not in the old ways of "I'm part of a badge wearing club." Or saying now "I believe Jesus died on the cross for all human sins and now I've just got to go to church." No, it's not just a matter of a cognitive belief. It's a matter of embodied living, carrying the cross. Even then 'it's' not guaranteed. This is Krishnamurti's point: truth is a pathless land. Nobody can own that path that will tell you *the* way because you have to live, walk that path yourself — no one can do it for you. However, that path will never ever appear if you don't make an effort; each individual walks a unique path, saying no two paths are the same is another way to approach this pathless path, which has no fixed destination.

At some unexpected moment along your effort, it will burst through, but it will burst through violently. I say to my students, 'when you first take a drag of a cigarette, you cough. Your body basically says to you, "stop, this is poisonous. Do not do this, but you continue because you have a cognitive idea of being cool, or whatever, right? But your body is constantly speaking. Now you can ignore that body's voice only for so long, or to such an extent that you get addicted to the cigarettes, and then your body starts to yearn them, your body starts to tremble when you don't have them. Because you've forced your body to gain that habituation. It's only after rehab, some disciplined deconditioning, before the true voice of the body may begin to arise again.'" So, we've sullied even the body's voice by our mental fixations and delusions over time. That's a deep issue. I don't think you can fully extinguish the body's voice. It can always return. Like a plant that can be brought back to life, as dead as it may seem. It's the nature of existence itself. Nature wants to blossom. Your body wants to blossom into full awakening, but we keep stopping it. So, the discipline is listening to that blossoming, that attempt to blossom. Guru Nanak defines God as that: "*sahib mera nit naava sadha sadha daataro*: my master is forever fresh, ever new,

may I never forget him, the Giver forever and ever.”²⁴ So that ever freshness, ever newness, is not a metaphysics, but it can't ignore metaphysics in its expression. We have to say what's happening to us, however poorly.

So, the pathlessness, like my own journey, is just about moments of life. Meetings. And in those meetings, you suddenly get a shock, an insight. For example, I wouldn't have ended up in university if I hadn't met four particular men. These four really important men. Randomly, all of them. One of them was even a stranger that hardly knew me! I didn't know that I could make the transition from doing the equations of maths and engineering to writing essays. I hadn't done that before. I'd failed my English four times, and this guy says, “of course you can. You can do it.” Nobody had said that in such a nonchalant way. He was like, “why are you even doubting?” He was that confident in me, he could say it that flippantly. He didn't say “you can do it if you try hard and put your mind to it.” He simply said, “of course you can!” The way he said it suddenly lit a fire in me. What is that? That's not religion. What are those moments where just a simple sentence can speak to you so deeply? This is what Guru Nanak calls '*sunie*' [listen]. Your parents tell you to listen. That's the first lesson: 'you're not listening' they say repeatedly. That's the spiritual lesson. It's just listening, nothing more. It's not a sacred listening or mystical listening or esoteric listening, where you have to be in a lotus position, chant 'Om' and be so quiet that you hear the rhythm of the universe in your mind! It's nothing like that at all. It's existential and practical. For example, listening to your partner shouting at you, because you haven't heard what they've been saying for the past ten years! And then suddenly you get it and think “oh, OK – sorry for being so pig-headed about this!”

Truth is a pathless land because it's always there. It's always speaking, through your garbage collector, professor, enemy. It's always speaking to us. Nature is always speaking to us. Life is always speaking. That's *gur shabad*. *Sat guru*: the true guru is not a named person. It's not a particular language. It's life speaking back to us through all languages, deeds, and events. The fundamental root, like in Buddhism, is actions: being alive to life as it unfolds without reacting but responding. Your deeds set the tone of that voice. Garbage in, garbage out, right?

The way you're acting in the world is what conditions the tone of that voice. The voice will always speak, your body will always speak, and it's these spontaneous interactions that affect you profoundly. How do we explain this? It's the coming together of certain sensitivities. So, I think that's what connects the truth is a pathless land, to truth *is* a path.²⁵ Guru Nanak's was a middle way. The reinvention of the middle way was to be open to the truth in whatever form it comes. In fact, becoming open to the truth in every form. For example, Guru Arjan's being burned alive on a hot plate and saying, “how sweet is thy will.” This is why you can't pick and

²⁴ “sahib meraa niit navaa sadaa sadaa daataar” (GGS, p. 660)

²⁵ Another vocabulary that can be used to express this is the contrast between a 'silence of obedience' versus a 'silence of expectation' (Bhogal, 2007).

choose the voice that's going to resonate deeply within you: "I want it to occur through my loving partner or through a friend." No. It might be the person that challenges you the most.

It's not that it's all random, and merely a strange hotchpotch of events that make no sense, though. Many of us who have our basic needs met might still say, 'my life has been so painful, full of so much suffering. But I wouldn't change it'. Why they say they wouldn't change it is maybe because the lessons that they learned through the suffering were valuable — rather than the suffering itself — which would have not been learned any other way, in terms of a mature interpretation of what life is. I think there's something about the futility of short cuts. Somebody asked me: 'how can you have a theory of action, as well as the theory of grace'? It's a matter of direction. Because when we're acting, we think we're making all the choices. On the one hand, Guru Nanak says 'you reap what you sow'. Whereas on the other hand, he says 'the greatest delusion is to believe that you're making a difference', when in actuality it's all grace. You have this in Islam, Christianity, in the dialectic between grace and works. You have it in the Guru Granth Sahib. There is a really important reason why we have it in these multiple traditions, which is the resonance, the pluriversal that Guru Nanak returns to. The reason why we have both 'you reap what you sow' and then actually 'you don't do anything because God does everything' is a matter of direction, a matter of time. Because when you're looking forward: 'should I do this or that', you think it's your decisions, your actions that are so important, that make all the difference. You just have to look back ten years, in that direction, and you start to realize 'if I hadn't met this person, I wouldn't even have been able to think about how to choose this way or that way. And if I hadn't had this kind of experience...'. You start to see the broader, not just individual, context. You start to see family relations, feuds, flowers, lightning, summer, sunsets, chance meetings, terrible mistakes and forgiveness, an endless list of happenings, all these sorts of things come into view. *Forward*, it's the actions of the self. *Backwards*, it's the grace of the Other.

How do we ever make a decision, anyway? Making decisions is a sort of mercurial process. I think that one of the downsides of Kant's 'dare to think' (*sapere aude*) (Kant, 1996, p. 17), to become 'modern', and basically critical of religion, to consider it as somehow childish... One of the problems of moving religion away from the public sphere into the private sphere, and the rise of the individual, is precisely that it only looks forward, with the self as sole actor. It forgets the grace, the blessings of others. 'How did I even get here'? Once all of *those* kinds of thoughts start to come into play, then you realize that thinking is just the tip of the iceberg, of an affective process of relations and data flows.

SD: There is a thread running through that response which leads me nicely to my next provocation! Knowing that your actions, attunement, and values will inform your relationships, where do you think you're at in terms of your wider relationships with family? Do you feel like you've figured out how to negotiate these dances?

BSB: Whilst it might make a lot of sense to me, from the outside, my mother probably often thought ‘what the hell? You’re an idiot! Are you going to keep a turban or not? Which is it? Make a decision’! Often the perspective from family members was that I was confused. Their mode of assessing what Sikhi is, I would argue, was perhaps largely due to the Singh Sabha reform period and the creation of *Sikhism*, as a mimesis of Protestant Christianity. Therefore, religion is a certain kind of thing, that you have to make a decision about, and do this and that. That’s not entirely fair on them [family]. They have deeper perceptions, of course. Perhaps most of us are in a perpetual state of confusion and tension, out of place and trying to just live and get on. It’s not an easy thing to do. So, you could say that all this knowledge that I have, of Sikhi, the sophisticated nature of it, and all the relationships mean nothing if I’m not able to manifest it, live it and walk these truths. That’s a tall order for any of us to do. I’m like your average Joe Bloggs, in this regard! I have my family issues and misunderstandings.

But one thing I hope is that my family members do appreciate that I’m open to different expressions. I’m open to different ways of being. My sons are both clean shaven, and I never fixed a notion of religion on them. I left it on them to find and discover for themselves – that could be a grave error. You could say I’m living my principles there. Others might say I’m not because I’ve misunderstood what Sikhi is, that it’s structured and foundational, and that you have to build it, and later a sophistication may come, but without that initial discipline of struggle it’s going to be hard to enact that later. I have a certain amount of resonance and agreement with that as well. But it’s too late in the day to enforce those basics, because they’re adults now. So maybe I should have been more forceful and directive, but I have a marriage that is non-traditional. It wasn’t a Sikh marriage. My partner isn’t a Sikh, and so to simply impose my views, and ignore her religious and Christian Quaker context... that’s a difficult one.

I’ve tried to focus on the values, and the virtues, which are often modelled rather than named everywhere. As long as those are being cultivated, to be a good person, generally, I think that’s a solid foundation. I don’t think it’s sufficient for the second transition in subjectivity, though. Foundations are important, but there has to be a discipline to transmute, to do the work of systematically committed listening. That sounds ridiculous, I know. What I mean to say is paying more attention to life around you, how it happens and having the discipline to listen. So that’s why you don’t take intoxicants, for example. When you’re intoxicated, you can’t listen. So do those things that allow you to be present. It’s tough but work hard and sleep well. Making an honest living is very important. Have integrity in your life, it’s very important. Because nothing clouds the mind more than a lack of integrity and a guilty conscience.

How do you get free of a guilty conscience? By living a clean, hard-working life and listening to the structures of what is. What’s required to be able to just listen is already in the lifeworld. That’s what Guru Nanak was talking about. The disciplined life in which listening can occur and

listening to the divine in the other person. It's not a cliché. It's about how God, the divine, can be so different to you, because it's in a different being, a different form, and so that voice is different. Guru Nanak, Guru Angad, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das, Guru Arjan, Guru Tegh Bahadur, those six gurus are *so* different. They're different vehicles, different vocabularies. Guru Gobind Singh with his Dasam Granth and the liturgies are from a very different voice. When you say 'the God in others', we don't know what the God is in others. That's the fragrance, the unnamable, and the unnamable always appears in the world with *intense* creativity and radicalism. Jesus upsets Jews. He's a Jew and upsets them to such an extent that Christianity is born. But he's a Jew, reinventing Judaism. And this constantly happens. The Buddha is a Hindu. So, it's really radical. The second transition, awakening, the decentering of the ego such that a new language is spoken, or that language is experienced from a different perspective than the ego — ego no longer colonizes language — when that occurs, when language starts to enter when the ego isn't the center, that's called Revelation. *That's* what listening is.

Let me just start again. I say to my students "take the phrase 'I love you'. I think to be more accurate it should be: 'I can't love you'. That's a statement. 'I can't love you'". And I ask them, "why?" Because they mostly think that's what life's all about: a loving partner, 'I want to love somebody', 'I love you', and I'm saying, 'I can't love you'. In fact, I would say that *I* cannot love. The ego cannot love. The ego is self-listening, self-interested, self-centered. The ego is pleasure over pain if you like; it's always going to maximize that. That's a form of non-listening. *Listening* is when the ego disappears. A child has that. The way they are absorbed by something is not because they're ego driven, but because the ego is not there. They are fully absorbed, paying full attention, because their psychic structure hasn't formed that ego center yet. Adults find it hard to listen because they always listen from the (false) center of the ego.

Loving somebody is the greatest way to realize that the center of the ego is BS, full of BS. Just try and love somebody. Because love can only arise when the ego dissolves. A loving relation then arises. So '*I cannot love*' also means '*I cannot listen*'. This is the wisdom of the East, that listening can only arise when the 'I' subsides. *Chitta vritthi nirodha* [quieten the fluctuations of conscious thoughts] is how the Patanjali's Yoga Sutra begins, which is opposite to Descartes, who says 'I think therefore I am'., and grounds the European, egoic, sense of self; ego as the moment of greatest truth, even though he has God operating in the background. But with *Chitta vritthi nirodha*, true knowledge begins when thoughts subside, or when thoughts are no longer the center, but feeling is. Sikhs don't practice that kind of yogic meditation in the literal sense, but the tradition of meditation, *dhyaan*, is there. We need to recover *dhyaan*, *chang* in Chinese, *zen* in Japanese, *seon* in Korean, there's a whole South and East Asian tradition where subjectivity is recognized as the problem, and needs to be disciplined, transformed. Why reduce subjectivity to the I? Consciousness is greater than the I. And if you start to listen beyond that I, that's *real* listening. That's what *kirtan* is. Mainly it's an affective revolution. Again, it's about moving away from the mental structure to the feeling structure, which is much more vast. The

mental structure is semiotic language. Feeling is language+! It's the affective realm of musicality. So, when you ask, 'how do others perceive me?', hopefully they can see that I'm open to different expressions of being religious, or being a good person. But I think some of them are perhaps confused as I'm not a 'typical' Sikh, and, because these kinds of conversations don't happen generally – life's too busy and people have to make decisions! ... It's a very tall order to be a being of integrity, and I think most of us, most of the time, fail at that. I can't say that simply because I know these ideas that there's some kind of dramatic difference in my life, to the extent that I'm some sort of role model beyond all others. I might be a hypocrite for all I know, right?

SD: Thank you so much for your time, Balbinder.

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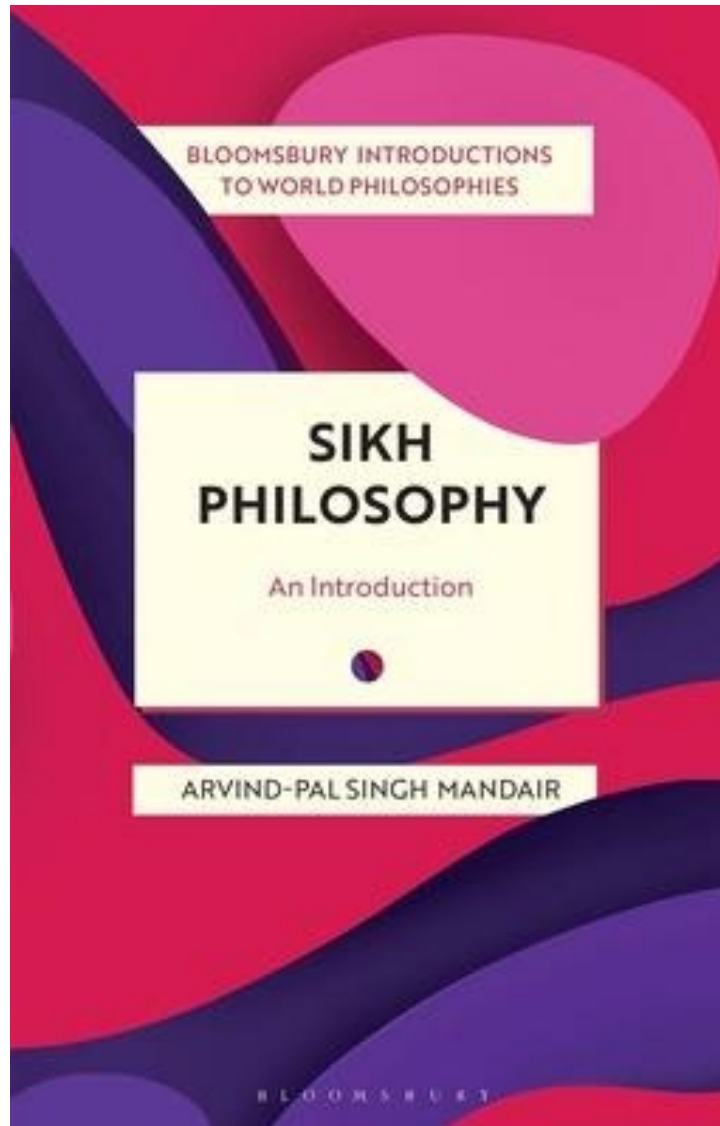
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Book Review: “Sikh Philosophy: Exploring gurmat Concepts in a Decolonizing World”

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Sikh Philosophy: Exploring gurmat Concepts in a Decolonizing World

Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair,

Bloomsbury Academic, 2022

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Though there has been significant study of Sikhism in contemporary Western academia, the prospects for engaging with Sikhism from a philosophical perspective have largely been ignored. The limited literature that is explicitly about Sikh philosophy has almost exclusively been written by scholars in Punjab, whose writing has largely been ignored by Western audiences even when written in English. Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair's "Sikh Philosophy: Exploring *gurmat* Concepts in a Decolonizing World" seeks to intervene by providing, as the book's description says, "the first rigorous engagement in the West with Sikh philosophy." In writing about Sikh philosophy for a Western audience, Mandair has undertaken an important and valuable project.

The book consists of seven main chapters plus an introduction and epilogue. Mandair begins in Chapter 1 with a historical analysis of what he sees as the development of Sikh philosophy through encounters between indigenous Sikh thought and Western modernity. The framework developed in Chapter 1 provides a lens through which Mandair explores the meaning of a variety of central concepts in the rest of the book. The remaining chapters apply Mandair's framework to the topics of experience (Chapter 2), epistemology (Chapter 3), consciousness (Chapter 4), death, rebirth, and transmigration (Chapter 5), self-realization (Chapter 6), and bioethics (Chapter 7).

In terms of distinctively philosophical content, Mandair's analysis throughout the book is largely piecemeal. But these various discussions are unified by the historical lens through which he interprets the development of Sikh philosophy. One of Mandair's primary accomplishments is the mounting of a critique of the highly Christianized interpretations of central *gurmat* concepts promulgated by Western scholars such as Ernest Trumpp and W. H. McLeod. As Mandair rightly notes, figures like Trumpp and McLeod significantly distorted *gurmat* concepts by superimposing thinly secularized versions of Christian conceptual schemes onto them. For example, one such distortion comes in the form of understanding the higher power in Sikh thought on the model of the Abrahamic God.

This critique serves one of Mandair's central goals in the book, which is to provide a decolonized analysis of the central concepts of Sikh philosophy, in contrast to prior work that he sees as suffused with Western modernist and Christian thought. Though he makes several new and important points in mounting his critique, it is worth noting that Mandair is not the first to critique Western scholars' Christianized interpretations of Sikhism. Related critiques have been propounded (for example, in the work of Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh) that Mandair does not acknowledge.

However, Mandair does synthesize in novel and valuable ways a large amount of secondary literature on *gurmat* that is largely unfamiliar to Western audiences. Indeed, Western audiences might be completely unaware that there was such a thriving literature of Sikh thought, including extensive commentary on *gurbāni* (the verses of Sikh scripture), during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. Mandair's explication of the various *prnālian* (systems of thought) within Sikh

philosophy during that time, is of great relevance to anyone interested in exploring the historical unfolding of Sikh thought between the codification of *gurbāni* and the present. Given his prior work on the subject, it is not surprising that Mandair's historical analysis of the emergence of Sikh philosophy in Chapter 1 is interesting and informative.

Though much of Mandair's historical analysis is illuminating, one of the central claims of Chapter 1 merits further scrutiny. Mandair claims that Sikh philosophy is an 'assemblage.' He borrows this term from the French postmodernists Deleuze and Guattari, "from whom it signifies processes that associate 'multiple and heterogenous elements' in ways that give rise to new experiences, new meanings, and new possibilities" (21). For Mandair, Sikh philosophy is an assemblage because it developed from its "pre-philosophical roots" into a "field in its own right" through encounters with Western modernity (21).

I do not dispute Mandair's claim that the emergence of Sikh philosophy as a distinct field of study recognizable to Western academia, during and after the colonial period, was strongly influenced by encounters with Western modernity. But I think his further claims that Sikh philosophy should be understood as an association of the heterogenous elements of indigenous Sikh thought and modern Western thought, and that *gurbāni* itself is merely "pre-philosophical," are problematic. Mandair's framing plays into the colonialist assumption that a truly philosophical mode of thought is somehow uniquely Western and that it was only through the influence of Western thought that Sikh thought became truly philosophical.

Given Mandair's emphasis on decolonization, it is safe to assume that Mandair does not intend to endorse or imply these colonialist assumptions. But then why suggest that *gurbāni* itself, which precedes any encounter with Western modernity, is merely pre-philosophical? As I see it, philosophy is a mode of investigation that uses non-empirical methods such as analysis and introspection to posit fundamental truths about the nature of things. Thus, *gurbāni* seems straightforwardly philosophical in its own right, not pre-philosophical. Consider for comparison, that if the central texts of other non-Western traditions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, or Confucianism, were referred to as merely pre-philosophical, this would strike us as a regression to Eurocentric and Orientalist conceptions of what counts as truly philosophical. I suggest, then, that it is a mistake to classify pre-Western Sikh thought, and thereby *gurbāni* itself, as pre-philosophical rather than philosophical.

The above critique ties into another problem with Mandair's attempt at a decolonized analysis of *gurmāt* concepts. Though his analysis does decolonize these concepts in one way, by scrubbing them of modernist and especially Christian influences, it seems to recolonize them in other ways. Throughout the book, Mandair's analysis is replete with terms of art from Continental philosophy, which is at least as Western an intellectual tradition as modernism. For example, one of Mandair's central claims is that *gurmāt* concepts should be understood as embodying a 'non-

oppositional logic' – roughly, a logic that is capable of countenancing and synthesizing contradictions. This notion, which has its roots in Hegel (though Mandair does not explain this), is now primarily employed within Western postmodernist thought. To give another example, Mandair frequently (and without explanation) relies on the distinction between immanence and transcendence, another piece of terminology deeply wedded to the conceptual schemes of Continental philosophy.

Looking at Mandair's discussion of non-oppositional logic on page 56 illustrates this point more concretely. He argues that *gurmat* concepts employ a non-oppositional logic to synthesize existence and non-existence. He further claims that this has not been appreciated because the law of non-contradiction, which holds that there cannot be true contradictions, is a construction of Western thought that was superimposed on Sikh thought through "Enlightenment Christian frameworks" (56). Strikingly, in posing this criticism of the law of non-contradiction and endorsing a framework of "non-oppositional synthesis," Mandair cites the secondary literature on Derrida, another prominent French postmodernist. It is unclear why we should think of the postmodernism of Derrida (or Deleuze and Guattari) as any more apt for a decolonized understanding of Sikh philosophy than any other Western system.

The point here is not to criticize the tools or conceptual schemes of Continental philosophy. Rather, it is to suggest that Mandair superimposes particular strands of Western thought onto Sikh philosophy much in the same way he criticizes Western scholars for having done with modernism. It is difficult to see how a decolonized analysis can succeed if it largely replaces the conceptual schemes of Western modernism with those of Western postmodernism. At the very least, it seems to me that Mandair owes the reader an explanation of why the Western conceptual schemes he uses to frame his analysis are not just as distorting as the ones he critiques.

Thus, there seems to be a deep tension between Mandair's critical genealogy of the influence of modern European thought on Sikh philosophy and his regular appeals to the conceptual schemes and authority figures of Continental philosophy, especially postmodernism. In fact, the book comes across at times as most focused on championing postmodernism over modernism, at the expense of the project of decolonizing Sikh philosophy. This tension, in my view, is the book's deepest flaw, for it threatens to undermine Mandair's overall approach to understanding *gurmat* concepts.

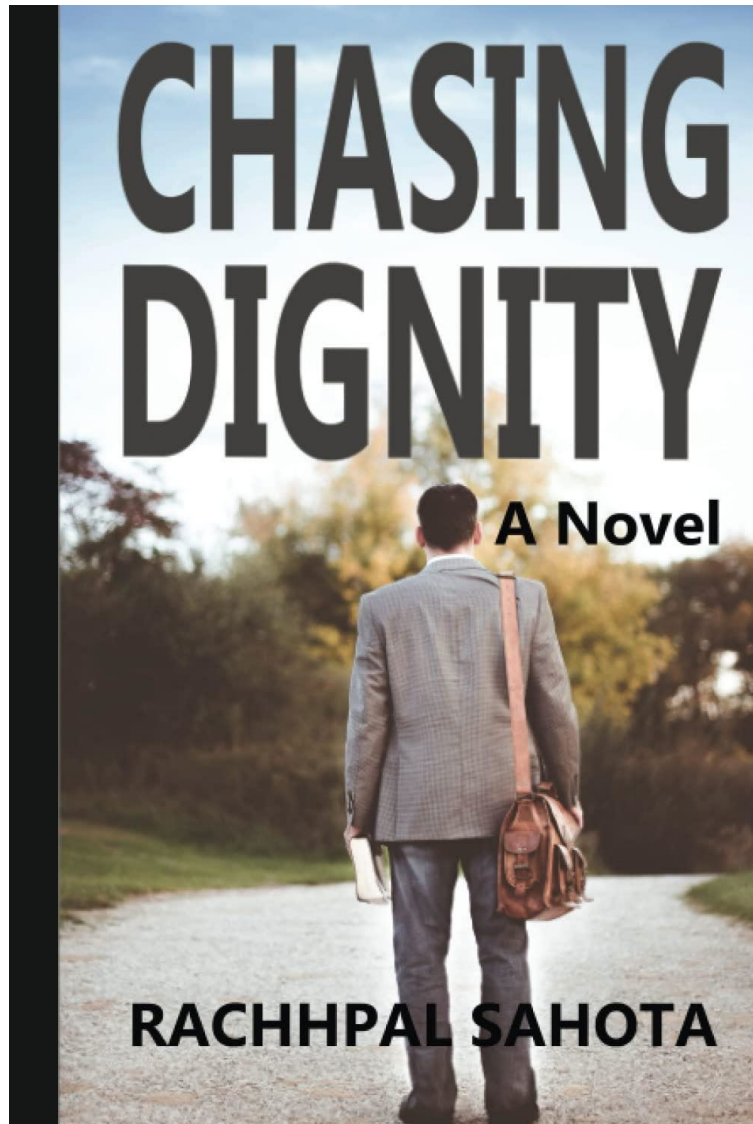
Of course, any work of interpretation and philosophical analysis must proceed using some kind of conceptual scheme, and some set of analytical tools, which will out of necessity be tied to the time and place in which they were developed. But Mandair's heavy use of shibboleths of insular and Eurocentric schools of thought, without explanation, strikes me as neither necessary nor warranted. Not only does it detract from the project of decolonization, but it also threatens to render much of his analysis inaccessible to any audience not deeply steeped in those traditions.

In sum, though Mandair's book does make some valuable contributions when it comes to presenting Sikh philosophy to a Western audience, there are two major points it fails to recognize, which renders its analysis fundamentally flawed. The first is that the authors of *gurbāni* were philosophers in their own right and developed an original philosophical system of *gurmat*. The fact that this philosophical system did not rely on Western thought, either modern or postmodern, does not render it pre-philosophical. The second is that, while Western conceptual schemes and analytical tools can ultimately be quite helpful in developing a rigorous reconstruction of Sikh philosophy, a truly decolonized analysis must not fall into the trap of subjugating *gurmat* concepts to *any* Western tradition, whether modernist or postmodernist.

Book Review: “Chasing Dignity”

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Chasing Dignity

Rachhpal Sahota,

Tirchhi Nazar Media, 2023

384 pp., \$19.95 (pb), ISBN 9788196192327

Rachhpal Sahota's novel *Chasing Dignity* is a compelling narrative, set in the 1980s and '90s in Punjab, India, tracing the many twists and turns in the life of a low caste boy, Jaggi. The Indian caste system is a social stratification system characterized by hereditary status and endogamy, enforcing crippling social barriers for those on the lower end of that spectrum. Bound by this rigid system of social hierarchy, Jaggi, a Keera, faces many hurdles as he sets out on his pursuit of a successful life. In the story, his mother Bindo, and his friends, Navi and Rani, serve as catalysts on this journey.

A very young Jaggi starts school with the eager anticipation of learning but is knocked down, time and again, due to his speech impediment, but more so, due to his low caste background. He picks himself up and edges forward with encouragement from well-wishers. When a distant uncle visits the USA, Jaggi learns that the new world holds boundless opportunities and the promise of egalitarianism, and that with hard work and dedication, he stands a chance to lead a life of dignity. He starts to harbour the dream of America. Acing elementary, middle, and high schools, Jaggi goes on to attend college in the nearby town, where he realizes that the deep-rooted caste-based prejudice has followed him from his village to town, leading him to grow distrustful of the world. Later, when he goes to the city to attend university for postgraduate studies, he meets Navi, an upper-caste girl, who restores his faith in humanity. Navi's high regard for him elevates Jaggi, encouraging him to become the finest version of himself—a fearless, pathbreaking young man out to defy the odds. The lovers begin dreaming of leading a life of togetherness in the USA. Life, however, has other designs for the two. Tragedy props up to rip their dreams. In Jaggi's darkest hour, his childhood friend Rani steps up to stand by his side. Like Navi, Rani, too, hails from the upper caste but boldly rejects the divisions of caste. With Navi by his side, Jaggi carves out a successful personal and professional life in the USA even though caste-based prejudice continues to hound him across oceans and borders to America.

In taking the readers through the many trials and tribulations in Jaggi's life, Rachhpal Sahota presents an authentic picture of rural and urban Punjab of the 1980s and '90s where caste continued to define people's lives decades after Indian Independence, impeding equity and inclusion. The narrative stays true to the time period and mentions the Mandal Commission Protests of 1990. It thereby brings to light the ongoing distressing ramifications of the Indian caste system.

Sahota's imagination and understanding are expansive enough that it gets the reader to compare and contrast caste with race in America by hinting at the prejudices that African Americans continue to face despite the abolition of slavery and the end of legal segregation. A slightly pronounced mention of the African-American question as well as the Native American and anti-semitism questions, would have given the novel a sharper edge, however. It would remind readers of the many injustices that are prevalent even in an advanced nation like the USA, and how imperative it is for humankind to transcend prejudices to achieve collective progress. Overall *Chasing Dignity* offers an enriching reading experience and scores on all fronts: plot,

characterization, and setting, the conflict at the heart of the narrative gaining urgency to achieve a prudent resolution.

Sahota should be commended for his painstaking research and for presenting an age-old facet of Indian society to a wider audience through his lucid writing which makes the novel easy to read and enjoy. Unlike his literary predecessor Jagseer, the low caste protagonist in Gurdial Singh's 1964 epochal Punjabi novel *Marhi Da Deeva*, who succumbs to the evils of the caste system, Jaggi slays the caste system through his pursuit of education and ultimately emerges as the hero to be reckoned with, inspiring fortitude and courage in the face of adversity and injustice.