

Page 74: Map shawl (detail) of Srinagar, c. 1830s–1840s. V&A.

Sikh Research Journal

ISSN: 2771-3520

Vol. 10 - No. 1 - 2025

Table of Contents

Foreword: A Foundation to Rest Upon	1
<i>Harleen Kaur¹ and prabhdeep singh kehal²</i>	
Amplifying Culturally Responsive Mental Health Support: Insights from a Sikh and Punjabi Community Helpline in the United Kingdom	3
<i>Melody Mann and Gobinderjit Kaur</i>	
Sikhi and Queerness: Summary by SHER Vancouver LGBTQ Friends Society	25
<i>Karn Singh Sahota and Puneet Kaur</i>	
Gender Abolition, Limits of Sikh Feminism, and Critique	43
<i>manmit singh</i>	
To Sikh or Not to Sikh: In Defense of the Sikh Shawl	59
<i>Frank Ames</i>	
Book review: Sikh Nationalism: From a Dominant Minority to an Ethno-Religious Diaspora by Gurharpal Singh & Giorgio Shani	85
<i>Review by: Dr. Sohini Saha</i>	

Foreword: A Foundation to Rest Upon

Harleen Kaur¹ and prabhdeep singh kehal²

¹The Sanford School, Arizona State University

² HEAL Project, University of Wisconsin-Madison

“Of the many foundations upon which humans rest, words are probably the most solid.”

- Nikki Giovanni, *Acolytes* (p. 26)

This issue celebrates the work being done to lay foundations while offering a resting place to sit and contemplate the horizons we can imagine next. As one paper in this issue argues, these two practices of foundation-laying and imagining are inseparable. At the end of our two-year tenure as co-editors, we are encouraged to see work that captures the nuanced and collective spaces for Sikh healing, community-building, and knowledge-production that are rapidly organizing and building upon foundations laid by generations prior. Through this intergenerational knowledge-building, scholars reflect on old foundations as partial explanations for productive growth and challenge these partialities to imagine otherwise.

What is more typical in the academic profession is the prioritization of the self as the sole knower and expert, where partiality is seen as an imperfection to target and defeat. The alternative approach, modeled by many authors published during our tenure, relies on a combination of trust, faith, compassion, and humility – values that ground academic and community work alike.

In the first article, “Culturally Responsive Mental Health Support: Insights from a Sikh and Punjabi Community Helpline in the United Kingdom,” Melody Mann and Gobinderjit Kaur share findings from their study of *Sikh Your Mind’s* mental health services. While limitations exist due to the nature of a primarily volunteer-run non-profit structure, the immense benefits of grounding mental health services and therapeutic conversations in Sikhi are evident across contexts. Their article demonstrates the need, both within and outside the community, to offer greater support to these burgeoning programs.

Next, “Sikhi and Queerness”, a summary of collected testimonials developed by Sher Vancouver LGBTQ Friends Society staff Karn Singh Sahota and Puneet Kaur, offers rich and unique insight into the intersectional experiences of queer and trans Sikhs. Through brief narrative encounters, readers are invited to think deeper about how Sikhi manifests in the lives of queer Sikhs, how they may experience comfort in Sikhi but alienation from Sikhs, and how intentional community care can bridge these gaps.

“Gender Abolition, Limits of Sikh Feminism and Critique” by manmit singh builds upon these narratives by interrogating the elusive horizon of gender equality in Sikh spaces. Singh critiques how the existing canon on Sikh feminisms remains caught in a framework of *dubidhaa* [doubt] regarding whether Gurmat’s [Guru’s guidance] so-called gender equality can be realized. Drawing on gender abolitionist thinking, they propose moving beyond gender as a “problem space” to be solved and instead toward developing a relationship with Guru Sahib that is not stuck in such a frame.

Finally, “To Sikh or not to Sikh: In Defense of the Sikh Shawl” by Frank Ames offers a historiography of Kashmiri shawl design transformations during and after the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Building on his previously published work, Ames argues for recognizing a distinct “Sikh shawl” tradition, highlighting the uniquely Sikh cultural tropes and motifs. This essay will be of particular interest to any scholars who explore the era of Ranjit Singh’s rule and its cultural impact, as well as those interested in the long-standing textile production of Punjab.

The issue also includes a book review by Sohini Saha of the important text *Sikh Nationalism: From a Dominant Minority to an Ethno-Religious Diaspora* by Gurharpal Singh and Giorgio Shani. Saha’s review highlights the important “contextual historical understanding of nationalism rather than an essentialist one” that the book provides, while also encouraging academic explorations of Sikh nationalisms that engage the critical role Sikh women have played in these movements. A recent publication by Baljinder Singh Kotbhara, *Kaurnama* (2024), offers such an intervention, underscoring once again how foundations and horizons are always unfolding together.

We are thrilled to pass on the stewardship of *Sikh Research Journal* to incoming Editor-in-Chief Rajbir Judge and extend our deepest gratitude to former Managing Editor Sonia Dhami, whose vision and care have shepherded this journal into a new era of open access publishing in Sikh and Panjabi studies.

Author Note

Dr. Harleen Kaur is an Assistant Teaching Professor at Arizona State University (harleenkaur@asu.edu) and Dr. prabhdeep singh kehal (kehal@wisc.edu) is a Postdoctoral Associate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. They are co-Lead Editors of the Sikh Research Journal (editors@sikhresearchjournal.org).

References

Kotbhara, Baljinder Singh. 2024. *Kaurnama: Kharkoo Sangharsh Dian Shaheed Bibian Dee Gatha [ਕੋਰਨਾਮਾ (ਖਾੜਕੂ ਸੰਘਰਸ਼ ਦੀਆਂ ਸ਼ਹੀਦ ਬੀਬੀਆਂ ਦੀ ਗਾਥਾ)]*. Anandpur Sahib, Panjab: Bibekgarh Publication.

Amplifying Culturally Responsive Mental Health Support: Insights from a Sikh and Punjabi Community Helpline in the United Kingdom

Melody Mann and Gobinderjit Kaur

Abstract

There is a growing need for cultural and linguistic adaptations within the United Kingdom's (UK) mental healthcare system, with a specific focus on faith-based inclusion for the South Asian communities, specifically Sikh and Punjabi populations. Current practices within the National Health Services (NHS) are not structured to deliver culturally competent care for diverse service users. Thus, this study aimed to examine how faith-based nonprofit organizations can support the Sikh and Punjabi community in navigating topics of mental healthcare and accessing supportive services, by collating feedback from callers of a telephone helpline. This helpline was staffed by seven trained volunteers providing support for users across the UK. Based on feedback gathered from seventy-five helpline users over a period of 3 years, researchers found that callers engaged more actively in personal help-seeking behaviors when they perceived providers as culturally competent. Findings suggest that statutory organizations could benefit significantly from offering culturally sensitive training to better serve diverse clientele.

Keywords: *South Asian, Punjabi, culturally responsive, faith-sensitive, mental healthcare.*

Introduction

The Punjabi community is collectivistic in nature, valuing the growth and wellness of all members through group unity, care, and nurturing (Ganeri, 2003; Chilana, 2005). Due to migration and immigration, the Punjabi community today has established itself globally, particularly in countries such as the United States of America (USA), the United Kingdom (UK), Canada, and Australia (Jakobsh, 2012; McCarthy, 2013; Singh, 2022). Making up more than half of the South Asian population in the UK, Punjabis follow diverse spiritual and religious practices. Within the UK's Punjabi community, 80% of members identify as Sikhs, while the remaining 20% follow Hinduism (including Hindu Punjabis and Hindu Dalits, who are primarily followers of Sant Ravidass and Valmik) and Christianity (Thandi, 2016; Virdee, 2022). There are 520,092 Sikhs in the UK, comprising 0.9% of the total UK population (Census, 2021).

Sikhs initially migrated to the UK in the mid-1800s as soldiers in the British Indian Army, and more Sikhs arrived in the 1980s from Uganda, East Africa (Striking Women, n.d.; Tatla, 2005). Sikhs also travelled to the UK as part of educational and diplomatic missions, with some remaining to form the first small Sikh communities. Following World War II, there was a significant increase in Sikh migration, as many Sikhs who played a role in the war remained in the UK to support the rebuilding of Britain (Tatla, 2005). Later, in the 1950s, an increased demand for labor attracted more Sikhs, particularly to the Midlands and other

industrial cities. In the 1960s, the Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962 enabled greater freedom of movement, prompting further Sikh migration (Hepple, 1968; Thompson, 1970).

Arguably, given the collectivist nature of Punjabi and Sikh communities, individuals from these groups do not readily engage in personal help-seeking behaviors. They prioritize the wellness of their families and respective communities over themselves, while also perceiving mental health as a taboo subject (Chandra et al., 2016; Islam et al., 2017). During the COVID-19 global pandemic, racialised communities experienced increased mental health difficulties due to systemic disparities, higher mortality rates, financial difficulties, racism and discrimination, and a lack of access to previously available coping strategies and social support networks, such as faith communities and cultural spaces (Fish & Mittal, 2021). As a minority group, the Punjabi Sikh community was notably impacted during this unprecedented period, as help lines, psychological services, and related care organisations were not adequately positioned to meet the faith-based needs of the community (Agarwal, 2023; Karasz et al., 2019; Quraishi, 2023). Kaur and Basra (2022) investigated the impact of COVID-19 on the Sikh community in the UK through online focus groups. They found that Sikhs were able to form meaningful connections through their faith by engaging in *seva* [selfless service], *sangat* [community fellowship], *chardikala* spirit [an optimistic outlook], and drawing inspiration from spiritual narratives of their *Shaheeds* [martyrs] to sustain themselves during the pandemic.

To address the availability of culturally responsive mental health support in the UK, Sikh Your Mind (SYM), a Sikh-run and Sikhi-orientated grassroots charity, was founded in 2015. It was one of the first mental health organisations in the UK to support people of all faiths and backgrounds, primarily serving Sikh Punjabi populations. Although founded in 2015, SYM became an official charity in 2019 and, to the authors' knowledge, remains the only charity in the UK established by qualified mental health professionals within the Sikh community (Charity Commission, 2019). One of the co-authors (GK) is a trustee of the charity and has overseen the services and projects, including the mental health helpline available to the community. The SYM helpline, alongside other support services offered by the charity, is provided in both English and Punjabi. Punjabi is the third most spoken language in the UK (Census, 2021), with 63% of Punjabi speakers identifying as Sikh. The SYM mental health helpline is available to callers of all faith backgrounds, acknowledging that not all Punjabis identify as Sikh. However, for the purpose of this paper, we will be exploring this group specifically and in further detail, as Sikhs represent the majority of the UK Punjabi population.

Additionally, while other Sikh helplines do exist, the authors are not aware of any published data regarding outcomes or demographics relating to satisfaction with service provision by Sikh organisations to the Sikh community. Ongoing research is necessary to evaluate the impact of initiatives such as helplines, enabling continuous improvement to ensure support is effective, inclusive, and culturally appropriate.

Gap in the Findings

Research specifically focusing on satisfaction levels among Sikhs after using Sikh-specific mental health support services is limited. The British Sikh Report (2018) highlighted that 77% of Sikhs reported finding

their lives stressful, with 10% of women and 5% of men diagnosed with mental health difficulties. The British Sikh report was established by a British barrister in 2012, aiming to annually document and highlight the needs of the Sikh population in the UK. Given that the Sikh population in the UK is substantial, the report's inclusion of responses from over 2,000 Sikhs likely represents approximately 0.4% of the UK Sikh population. These statistics, therefore, must be interpreted cautiously given the limited sample size. However, this also highlights the overall lack of sufficient data on mental health difficulties Sikhs experience in the UK. Additionally, it is noteworthy that while the sample size may not adequately represent the broader Sikh population, the sampling strategy was not clearly identified in the report.

Furthermore, there remains a lack of data reflecting the use of mental health services when Sikh communities do seek support. Although more general data on South Asian and Punjabi mental health support satisfaction may be available (Prajapati & Liebling, 2021), there continues to be a gap in satisfaction data from Sikh populations specifically regarding their use of culturally sensitive support services. For example, studies on South Asian women's experiences with mental health services in England highlighted the importance of cultural sensitivity, noting that a lack thereof can negatively impact engagement with services (Phillips & Andriopoulou, 2022; Roberts et al., 2016).

In response to this gap, community organisations (i.e., Sikh charities including Sikh Helpline, Sikh Awareness Society, Taraki, The Heera Foundation, etc.) throughout the UK have begun working towards increasing dialogue and activism around mental healthcare accessibility for Sikhs. However, despite this growth in representation in the UK, there remains limited or no quantitative data on satisfaction rates within the Sikh community; rather, the feedback available tends to be more qualitative and relates more to general involvement. Thus, the lack of research into South Asian, Punjabi, and specifically Sikh satisfaction with generic mental health services persists, especially concerning satisfaction with Sikh-specific mental health support.

Theoretical Framework

The field of mental health typically views individuals from historically marginalized backgrounds through a Western lens, often omitting their heritage, culture, and ideologies within service delivery models. To accurately capture the nuanced experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse populations, specifically Punjabis and Sikhs in this study, it is essential to consider how immigration, acculturation, and adaptation have occurred in the UK. These processes further shape help-seeking behaviors and client perspectives within the UK context. In this regard, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) exemplifies the multifaceted nature of minorities' experiences in mental healthcare and communal spaces.

Intersectionality. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989) popularized the term 'intersectionality' to highlight the unique experiences of discrimination and oppression individuals face across their intersecting identities, particularly when navigating societal spaces and services, including mental health services. The concept of intersectionality draws from the foundational work from Black feminist thought (Gines, 2011), Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Khan, 2016), and the activism of women of color (Dill & Kohlman, 2012), who laid the groundwork for understanding the complexities of overlapping

systems of inequality (Carastathis, 2016). Crenshaw's contributions have been instrumental in applying intersectionality to various societal contexts, such as mental health provision. Intersectionality highlights that, when developing a holistic understanding of an individual within mental healthcare, providers must consider all facets that can marginalize a person, including social constructs of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, and more.

This qualitative review is grounded in the theory of intersectionality to integrate the duality of immigrant identities within culturally and racially diverse communities as they navigate social support systems. Intersectionality is significant because it addresses interwoven social categorizations (e.g., race, class, and gender) as they apply to a given individual or group. These categorizations actively create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage, evident in the outreach and hesitancy experienced when accessing mental healthcare services (Al-Faham et al., 2019; Hayanga et al., 2021; Runyan, 2018; Savaş et al., 2021).

Cultural Competency. Supplementary to intersectionality, cultural competency provides a framework for both understanding and interacting effectively with individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. This framework aims to deliver equitable and inclusive services, particularly within fields such as healthcare, education, and social services (Truong et al., 2014). Moreover, cultural competency emphasizes that mental healthcare providers must acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors necessary to work respectfully with minority populations (i.e., Sikhs) and effectively handle cross-cultural situations (Hernandez et al., 2009).

There is a growing need for cultural and linguistic adaptations within mental health care generally, particularly concerning faith-based inclusion (Ahluwalia & Alimchandani, 2013). Mental healthcare must be adapted to accurately reflect the daily lives of the communities it serves (Singh, 2007). Individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse communities often do not receive mental healthcare that is culturally competent (Knifton, 2012). Cultural competency is important in mental healthcare as it enhances a provider's ability to interact effectively with clients from diverse backgrounds by incorporating their unique beliefs, behaviors, and needs into diagnosis and treatment plans. A lack of cultural competence in mental healthcare can lead to long-term consequences, including misunderstandings, discrimination, underdiagnosis, and ineffective or inappropriate treatments (Fountain House, 2022). Mental healthcare services, therefore, need to understand the dynamics of specific communities, including the Punjabi and Sikh communities, to adequately converse with, serve, and support their clients (Cleland et al., 2016; Bahra et al., 2023).

Theoretical Application

Together, Intersectionality and Cultural Competency work to decolonize the lens historically used to evaluate spirituality and faith-based practices, research, and services within Western contexts. Traditionally, these areas have been analyzed through secular ideologies rooted in oppression or the dominant narratives (Bhogal, 2014; Omer, 2020). This paper emphasizes Eastern perspectives of

spirituality, interconnectedness, and community, aligning with decolonial approaches to mental health services (Long, 2024). By highlighting the strength of cultural and linguistic diversity within the cultural competency framework across clients and service providers, and respecting the multiplicity of identities articulated within intersectionality theory, this study seeks to address the existing gap in the literature regarding satisfaction data specific to the Sikh community.

Purpose and Rationale

In this study, we examined the satisfaction outcomes of a culturally sensitive mental health telephone helpline organized in the UK by the charity Sikh Your Mind (SYM). By focusing on the Punjabi and Sikh community, we aimed to amplify their voices and highlight their experiences following the use of the telephone helpline. We chose this focus because research on satisfaction surveys has indicated that the most effective methods of satisfaction data collection occur over a period of time, utilizing a combination of open-ended questions and guided short responses (Adler et al., 2020). However, research conducted with minority populations has typically not captured the nuances of cultural and linguistic diversity within satisfaction data (Adams et al., 2023; Hwen et al., 2020). Satisfaction data can assist providers in understanding context, experiences, and lived anecdotes that are not readily accessible within community-based settings (Ilioudi et al., 2013; Junewicz & Youngner, 2015).

Service-user satisfaction with care provided is a helpful measure for obtaining feedback, and evaluating service quality (Al-Abri & Al-Balushi, 2015). However, selection bias must also be considered regarding who is more likely to complete questionnaires compared to non-respondents (Compton, Glass & Fowler, 2019). High-quality data is essential for identifying the specific needs of minority groups and informing interventions required to address inequalities (Kings Fund, 2023). Lyratzapolous et al. (2012) noted that ethnic minority communities often report lower patient satisfaction compared to majority communities. Participants may not respond to satisfaction surveys due to various unforeseen barriers, including accessibility issues, language differences, and physical or mental limitations (Gayet-Ageron et al., 2011; Pinder et al., 2016). These barriers to participation further suggest that current satisfaction surveys are not adequately designed to meet the culturally sensitive needs of minority communities (SAMHSA, 2016).

Research Question

The purpose of this paper was to explore the experiences of Punjabi and Sikh users of a culturally sensitive telephone helpline following their use of the service. Through the use of satisfaction surveys to capture participant narratives, this reflexive thematic analysis study addressed the following question:

How does SYM (Sikh Your Mind) meet the needs of the Sikh and Punjabi community through its telephone helpline service?

Regarding Language on Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

In this manuscript, multiple phrases are used to refer to the Punjabi and Sikh communities. Firstly, in the literature reviewed, Punjabis were described as “people of color” (Fish & Mittal, 2021), emphasizing their belonging within culturally and linguistically diverse groups. Additionally, the term “minorities” (Agarwal, 2023; Karasz et al., 2019; Quraishi, 2023) was used to highlight how Punjabis and Sikhs fall racially and historically minoritized groups. We made the decision to retain all instances, descriptors, and terms utilized to describe Punjabis and Sikhs within the reviewed literature to highlight both the prevalence of the communities throughout the findings, as well as the range of the racial, ethnic, and faith perspectives presented. Collectively, this language captures how these communities, specifically Sikhs, experience racial discrimination and prejudice, particularly in contexts of systemic inequality and racism. This terminology serves as a foundation for understanding why culturally sensitive Sikh-specific support is essential, and how SYM intends to address the existing gap in the literature.

Methodology

Sikh Your Mind (SYM) established a volunteer-run telephone helpline in November 2020, which was available to the Punjabi and Sikh community every evening for two hours, Monday to Sunday, and continues to run to this day. The focus of this paper is the data collected over three years, from November 2020 to November 2023. SYM initially recruited seven volunteers located across the UK, from Bradford to Slough. Telephone call handlers worked remotely, each assigned to operate the helpline one evening per week. All volunteers completed an enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check to confirm their suitability for working with vulnerable populations. Volunteers held qualifications ranging from lived experiences ($n = 2$), cognitive behavioral therapy ($n = 1$), assistant psychology ($n = 2$), clinical psychology ($n = 1$), and mental health law ($n = 1$). Volunteer demographics included seven individuals from the Sikh faith, two males and five females, with ages ranging from 22 to 38 years. Demographic information of the volunteer staff was recorded to ensure representation, accessibility, and relatability for helpline users.

Prior to operating the telephone helpline, volunteers received training covering: a) the purpose and values of SYM, b) effective communication skills, c) risk and safety issues, and d) role-play scenarios. Training sessions also equipped volunteers with the resources necessary to navigate data collection procedures, and emphasized the importance of self-care and seeking support after calls. Additionally, the training clarified the process for distributing the satisfaction questionnaire to helpline callers via an online text messaging system.

SYM distributed a satisfaction survey to provide individuals with an opportunity to share their experiences after accessing services provided by the organization. Over the course of three years, 98 helpline users participated in this survey, from a total of 571 callers. Of these respondents, 75 (76.5%) specifically provided feedback about the helpline service, while the remaining 23 respondents commented on other SYM services, such as workshops facilitated by the team, due to the survey being distributed across multiple forums to collect outcome data. The satisfaction survey was distributed electronically via Google Forms,

and helpline users could access this form from anywhere in the world, provided they had a stable internet connection. All responses to the questionnaire were anonymous. The survey consisted of 24 questions in total: 13 open-ended and 11 closed-ended questions (see Table 1).

Table 1

SYM Satisfaction Survey Questionnaire

Questions
1. How did you hear about us? (Social media, poster, Gurdwara, University, School, Work, Other - please specify)
2. Do you follow us on social media?
3. If not, please explain why.
4. If you answered yes to Question 2, how helpful do you find the content on our social media platforms?
5. Please detail reasons for your response to question 4.
6. What contact did you have from SYM? (Attended a workshop/presentation facilitated by them, Telephone support, Face to face support, Live chat support, Social media support, Other - please specify)
7. What was the main purpose of your contact with SYM? Please share briefly.
8. How satisfied were you with the support you received from SYM? (1: Very Satisfied - 5: Very Dissatisfied)
9. Please detail reasons for your response to question 8.
10. How likely are you to recommend SYM to your friends, peers or family?
11. Please detail reasons for your response to question 10.
12. Prior to contacting SYM, have you been in contact with any other services regarding your mental health?
13. If yes, please provide details of the services you have been in contact with.
14. After your contact with SYM, have you been advised to contact any other services for support?

15. If yes, please provide details of the services you have been advised to contact.
 16. Is there any support or advice you did not receive from SYM but feel you would have benefited from?
 17. If yes, please provide details of the support or advice you feel you would have found helpful.
 18. SYM's core values include compassion, empowerment, equality, hope and togetherness. We strive to ensure that our approach and organization reflects these in all that we do. Please can you outline any of these values you think we have shown in our contact with you.
 19. Is there any other general feedback you have about SYM?
 20. If you answered yes to question 19, please provide further details below.
 21. How likely are you to access support from SYM again in the future?
 22. Please explain the reason for your answer to question 21.
-

Note. Questions represented in the table have been adapted from their original form to reflect the flow of information that users saw. There were 24 questions in total, 2 questions were merged into table items 1 and 6.

Survey questions were modeled after existing satisfaction surveys to include open-ended questions to allow helpline users to explain the reasoning behind their response. To ensure the satisfaction survey was culturally sustained, we did not directly adapt an existing survey, as research suggests that existing instruments do not adequately address the needs and accessibility considerations of minority communities (SAMHSA, 2016). SYM volunteers designed the satisfaction questionnaire based on their personal and professional experiences with the community. The survey questions aimed to step outside medical models of data collection, embracing more naturalistic, qualitative discourse (Palinkas, 2014; Thapar & Rutter, 2019; Verster et al., 2019).

Analysis

Researchers utilized reflexive thematic analysis to evaluate the responses from helpline users that participated in this study. Among qualitative methodologies, thematic analysis was selected because, in mental health and psychological research, it amplifies the voices of individuals from minority communities by representing their lived experiences from a strengths-based perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Lainsion et al., 2019). The researcher (MM) reviewed the descriptive anecdotes provided by the helpline users in the satisfaction survey, applying both inductive and constructionist approaches to theme formation. A constructionist approach was used to explore the lived realities disclosed within the data, while an inductive approach was employed to identify emerging themes within the responses (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

To generate themes, researchers implemented Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase guide systematically analyzing the data from the helpline users. The first step involved familiarization with the data (n = 75 respondents) and creating a response table to organize the nature of the concerns reported by users accessing the helpline service (see Table 2). The second step involved generating initial codes from the data using Table 1 as the foundation, which captured both social validity and cultural considerations among the helpline users. The third step involved searching for themes and constructing a thematic map (Braun & Clarke, 2006, from which five themes emerged: a) depression/anxiety, b) relationships and safety, c) mental health support and referrals, d) spiritual and religious connectivity, and e) general help and advice.

The fourth and fifth steps involved reviewing, conceptualizing, and naming the themes using Watson & Webster's (2002) concept matrix. During these steps, a constructionist approach was again applied to explore the lived realities disclosed within the anecdotal feedback, and an inductive approach was employed to further clarify emerging themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022; see Table 2). When creating the themes, findings were interpreted through the theoretical framework of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989).

To ensure the validity of the identified themes, the authors discussed each theme and its structure collaboratively through the six-step analytical process. This approach facilitated consensus regarding the presentation of the five themes alongside the satisfaction reports. Researchers acknowledged that though some themes may overlap, as responses may include multiple topics, issues of faith and safety were specifically emphasized by users. Themes were therefore formed based on the most prominent concerns disclosed by individuals using the telephone helpline.

Results

In total, responses from 98 satisfaction surveys were collected and included in this study, noting 571 callers accessed the helpline altogether. Helpline users accessed the SYM helpline for an average of 10 minutes to one hour per call with one of the trained SYM volunteers.

User Outreach. Helpline user outreach among minority communities is not always easy, given the barriers to accessibility that exist within mental health services. To address this area, SYM asked helpline users how they heard about the helpline and the organization at large. Responses included social media (n = 46), university (n = 2), gurdwara (n = 2), other (n = 22), and no response (n = 4). Furthermore, all helpline users who followed SYM on social media and virtual communications found the content to be helpful. Table 2 below reports the reasons helpline users reached out for support through the SYM helpline.

Table 2

Helpline Users' Reasons for Outreach

Theme	<i>n</i>	Participant Quote
Depression/Anxiety: Understanding the nature of mental health concerns	14	"I have depersonalization & depression & anxiety" "[I have] Anxiety and troubled mental health" "Feeling anxious and worried. I wanted to speak to a professional and gain a different perspective. I was hesitant to approach SYM at first as I had never done anything like this before but I'm glad I did as I found it very beneficial."
Relationships and Safety: Providing action steps and response for helpline users in need	18	"[I was the] Victim of hate crime" "[Seeking] Emotional support for my elderly, disabled depressed mother-in-law" "Crisis at home with one of my children"
Mental Health Support and Referrals: Bridging accessibility gaps through connection	29	"I wanted to find couples counselling therapists near me that would be able to understand my cultural background" "I just had a few things on my chest which I haven't been comfortable with telling friends and family. Speaking over the phone to a complete stranger helped me be as open as I can without being judge(d) and it lifted my spirits up and felt like it took so much weight of my shoulders." "I needed counselling support to help me deal with my emotions."
Spiritual and Religious Connectivity: Providing spaces for inclusion	7	"To hold a workshop in our local Gurudwara for the Sangat." "Create mental health wellbeing awareness, release taboos and encourage positive outlook by deriving inspiration from our Gurus and Gurbani [of Sikhi]" "Support and guidance for my mum- mental health vs religious beliefs"
General Help and Advice: Serving as an ally	21	"Someone to open up to" "Guidance/support on my current situation as I felt stuck." "To talk about my concerns and let it out"

Note. 13 helpline users did not provide a reason for contacting the helpline.

Table 2 highlights the themes observed from the qualitative responses that helpline users provided regarding their reasons for contacting the service. Helpline users disclosed that, as individuals living in the UK, they faced a variety of adverse life events and experiences that caused concern within their daily lives. These concerns included, but were not limited to, hate crimes, domestic violence, mental illnesses, mental health struggles, religious curiosity, spiritual connectivity desires, and the urge to advocate for and support their families. Table 2 highlights sample quotes from helpline users who expressed their concerns. Many helpline users fell under multiple categories, as they reached out for themselves, their families, and expressed concerns about safety.

Satisfaction Rates. In total, 92 users rated their experience with the helpline, while 6 users declined to disclose their ratings. When asked to justify their ratings, 50 users provided additional comments, and 42 chose not to expand further. Satisfaction with the helpline service was rated on a Likert scale from one to five, where one represented “very satisfied” and five represented “very dissatisfied.” Table 3 below shows the participant satisfaction ratings:

Table 3

SYM Helpline: User Satisfaction Ratings

Rating Level	Result (n)
Very Satisfied	56% (52)
Moderately Satisfied	17% (16)
Neutral Satisfaction	11% (11)
Moderately Dissatisfied	6% (6)
Very Dissatisfied	7% (7)

Table 3 indicates that the majority of SYM helpline users were satisfied with the support they received (73%, n = 68). In contrast, 11% of users (n = 11) reported neutral satisfaction, and 13% (n = 13) reported dissatisfaction with the services. Users who were satisfied indicated they appreciated the professionalism of the helpline, the kindness of call handlers, the rapport built during the calls, the advice provided, having a listening ear, practical and culturally responsive feedback, and the person-first approach offered by SYM, which offered a nonjudgemental space and acknowledged the systemic barriers in accessing support. Feedback also highlighted users benefited from the spiritual and religious awareness of the call handlers. Responses also captured the users' gratitude for receiving services tailored to their lives, which were not

readily available through traditional healthcare services within the UK. Telephone users expressed their satisfaction through responses to question 10 (see Table 1), with statements such as:

- *“Made it clear and made me aware it's actually not me, it's the society. It was probably the most help I've ever had when speaking to someone regarding my mental health and insecurities. [The helpline worker] was so helpful and she made me feel very comfortable which helped me share my problems with her and not bottle things inside of me helping me become more motivated.”*

Additionally, some callers discussed how they were able to navigate complex emotions with support from the SYM volunteer:

- *“My phone call with SYM was very beneficial as it allowed me to pause and really evaluate why I was feeling anxious and worried. I also liked how we incorporated my belief in faith and the importance of mental health and self-care into the conversation.”*

Helpline users reported feeling that they had a safe space to openly share information, encouraged by the rapport, kindness, and feeling of safety created by the volunteers.

On the other hand, helpline users who reported neutral or dissatisfied experiences mentioned that they did not receive answers, suggestions, or feedback in a timely manner, the service was not what they had expected, they wanted more follow-up after the call to validate their vulnerable disclosures, or they needed more in-person engagement and resources. Anecdotal responses captured the dissatisfaction when the service did not meet initial user expectations. Responses to question 10 (see Table 1) highlighted this dissatisfaction, with users stating:

- *“Not the support I was looking for myself.”*
- *“Too early to say as it was only one phone call conversation so far, but I would like to try more discussions. Not sure if this is the right direction for me or I may be wasting your efforts.”*

One user specifically expressed dissatisfaction with the outsourced support they received during their helpline interaction, stating:

- *“Maybe more human interaction rather than links to web sources.”*

Overall, helpline users ($n = 91$) were asked if they would recommend the helpline to their friends and family, using a multiple-choice response ranging from “very likely” to “very unlikely,” 94% of users indicated they would recommend the helpline, while 6% indicated they would not.

Mental Health Resource Accessibility. Support and services are important in addressing helpline users' needs. Further information from the satisfaction questionnaire indicated that 63% of users reported utilizing mental health resources prior to accessing the SYM helpline. Of these, the majority (66%) accessed support from generic mental health organizations (e.g. Samaritans and Child and Adolescent Mental Health

Services) as well as organizations specifically catering to the Punjabi community in the UK. Most telephone helpline users (69%) contacted SYM through social media platforms, primarily Instagram and Facebook. After accessing the helpline, 46% of survey respondents were signposted to other (often local) services for additional support. Users provided positive feedback on the follow-up from SYM volunteer staff, with one user noting:

- *“Getting back to me even if I had to wait due to being busy with other clients- great team.”*

SYM volunteers were able to create a safe space for callers as described by a helpline user who reported:

- *“[Helpline Staff] made me feel really comfortable about opening up, I felt part of something. It was really good.”*

However, not all helpline users were satisfied with their experience. Some expressed dissatisfaction and uncertainty about the helpline, as illustrated by one user’s feedback:

- *“I believe the organisation’s core value of hope really resonated for me as they offered to provide talking therapy for me; however, I am still waiting to be allocated with an advisor yet.”*

This anecdotal feedback captures the progress helplines are making toward addressing the needs of culturally diverse communities, particularly Sikhs, and also provides insights for improvements in future studies.

Discussion

This study focused on understanding the impact of a culturally sensitive telephone helpline in the UK, based on satisfaction survey results completed following service use. The narratives shared by individuals revealed a myriad of challenges and adversities encountered in their daily lives, including issues related to depression and anxiety, relationships and safety, mental health support and referrals, spiritual and religious connectivity, and general help and advice. These themes highlight the diverse experiences within the Punjabi and Sikh communities, examined through the lens of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). The multiple identities carried by immigrants in the UK illustrate the need for faith-based mental healthcare services that holistically integrate all aspects of a client’s identity. Segregating client identities in therapy risks perpetuating biases associated with diagnostic labels (Bansal et al., 2022). Thus, it is critical to account for all facets of client identities to ensure comprehensive support plans. This suggests an increased need for mental healthcare service providers to receive training to recognize the complexities involved in patient outreach, interaction, and interventions that address clients’ faith, cultures, languages, and heritage (Castillo et al., 2019; Cuthbertson, 2023).

Historically, the narrative of South Asian families looking after one another is widely accepted, promoting the belief that these communities are inherently self-sufficient. However, this assumption requires further consideration, as these communities also need external support despite their collectivist cultures (Karasz

et al., 2020). The data collected in this study illustrates varied concerns and motivations for seeking assistance outside the familial unit. A significant number of helpline users fell into multiple categories, reflecting their complex needs as they sought support for themselves, their families, and safety-related concerns. These findings underscore the need for culturally sensitive mental healthcare services tailored specifically for diverse communities, including Sikh and Punjabi populations.

When evaluating the reasons for using the helpline, most users required support related to their relationships (familial and romantic; see Table 2). This finding aligns with existing literature, suggesting that these communities experience various systemic and cultural barriers such as fear and mistrust, which hinder open discussions about relationship difficulties (Hulley et al, 2022).

The telephone-based helpline likely provided an environment of safety and reassurance that in-person services were not able to offer. While direct evidence comparing openness in telephone support versus in-person consultations is limited, factors such as anonymity, reduced stigma, increased emotional expression, and culturally sensitive interactions afforded by telephone helplines may make them a preferred method for accessing support among marginalized communities (Kitchingman et al., 2024).

Additionally, 69% of the helpline users learned about SYM through social media platforms (see Table 4). Social media usage among racially marginalized communities has been shown to promote social well-being, positive mental health, and increased positive ratings of self-rated health outcomes (Bekalu et al., 2019). Nonprofit organizations have successfully leveraged social media to raise awareness among minoritized communities, build comprehensive networks, and disseminate important information (Simon, 2024). However, social media engagement also has the potential to negatively impact the mental health of individuals within minoritized communities (Stanton et al., 2017). To mitigate these potential drawbacks, SYM worked to ensure anonymity, inclusivity, and open accessibility to resources, helpline services, and information for all users.

Another strength of the helpline was the integration of *Gurbani* [the holy Sikh scriptures] and Sikhi [spiritual and religious teachings of Sikhism] during telephone interactions. Users reported feeling connected, recognized, and included through the service delivery provided by SYM, an experience not easily available elsewhere due to the limited presence of culturally sensitive providers. Research suggests that utilizing Sikhi and Gurbani in therapeutic settings enhances the sense of belonging, serenity, and safety among Punjabi Sikh clients (Bhangu, 2021; Miller, 2005). The consideration of Sikhi in clinical settings for diverse clients aligned with the faith has led to increased success rates in healing, retention, and client satisfaction (Malhi et al., 2014).

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that just under one-third of the respondents had accessed other services prior to contacting the helpline. Existing research has shown that mental healthcare services that are sensitive to clients' cultural, faith, and spiritual identities produce more effective healthcare outcomes in the long term (Whitley, 2012). Although many helpline users had previously utilized local and nationwide services specific to the Punjabi community in the UK, these services may not have incorporated spiritual

perspectives, which have shown significant positive impacts (Schultz et al., 2014). Cultural support in mental healthcare services involves the integration of culturally relevant practices, beliefs, and values into treatment approaches, ensuring that services provided to clients are respectful, effective, and aligned with the unique needs of the community (Adamson et al., 2011; Kirmayer & Jarvis, 2019). In contrast, spiritual support in mental healthcare explicitly recognizes and incorporates the spiritual beliefs and practices of clients as essential components of their overall well-being and healing process (Forrester-Jones et al., 2018; Hefti, 2011). Given the intricacies involved in delivering services to racially minoritized communities, the findings underscore the importance of recognizing these differences.

SYM offers a unique service in that individuals from the community can directly access support from qualified mental health professionals. This is particularly relevant given existing difficulties, such as long waiting lists, associated with accessing psychological support through statutory services. To the authors' knowledge, most nonprofit organizations in the UK do not have psychological professionals on their teams while also including faith as a core organizational value. Current research comparing statutory programmes (e.g., the National Health Service) with voluntary organizations (such as SYM) suggests that nonprofit volunteer organizations effectively meet community-based needs at an applied level that is not always possible at the statutory level (Stanisch, 2019; Zamora et al., 2019). This evidence highlights that nonprofit volunteer organizations like SYM are well-positioned to address specific, grassroots-level community needs in a hands-on, flexible, and responsive manner. They often fill gaps that government programs or statutory services cannot effectively address. Unlike statutory organizations, which operate under legal and bureaucratic constraints, nonprofits can adapt to providing personalized support and directly engage with diverse populations (Zamora et al., 2019). In parallel, it is important to note that under half of the helpline users were also signposted to local statutory services following their calls. This finding underscores the limited awareness among individuals about available resources within the National Health Service. Further details on where individuals were signposted following their helpline use will be published in a separate paper.

Limitations

SYM is a volunteer-led charity predominantly relying on community donations, and there are several limitations to consider regarding the satisfaction data shared in this paper. The questionnaire was provided to helpline users in English, despite callers having the option to contact the helpline in either English or Punjabi. Additionally, the survey was only available in a written format requiring users to complete their responses online, presenting a barrier for many. When considering future research, it would be beneficial to collaborate directly with service users to develop user-friendly survey questions, translated materials, and offer multiple options for survey completion to increase accessibility.

Nature of nonprofits. Helpline data collection within charitable organizations is not always streamlined to meet all needs of clients due to inherent infrastructure limitations. Table 3 highlights the common concerns reported by helpline users, including issues around response timeliness, mismatched expectations, unexpected types of support, and inadequate follow-up. These challenges reflect the nature of nonprofit

organizations, which are typically understaffed and rely on volunteers who dedicate time from their own schedules to run the service (Cuthberston, 2023). Thus, the consistency of follow-up and feedback often depends on volunteer availability. Furthermore, users who sought more communal and in-person services were disappointed to be redirected to web-based resources or signposted to other services. It is also important to acknowledge that some responses to the satisfaction survey were brief, making it difficult at times to interpret the meaning of users' feedback.

Lack of Culturally Responsive Mental Health Care. Often, the support that helpline users were signposted to was not tailored to any one community. However, it was hoped that the referrals provided some relevant support to the individual calling. This limitation was evident in the findings of the helpline data as users expressed their distress to call handlers about not receiving culturally specific support. This reflects a broader systemic issue within the healthcare system, where services often fail to consider the unique cultural and religious backgrounds of individuals seeking support (Hodge, 2017; Hsu et al., 2014). Current mental health services often lack space for linguistic and cultural adaptations and seldom factor in religious or spiritual perspectives into existing service care models (Ali, 2018; Bansal et al., 2022). The absence of cultural and faith-responsive care not only hinders effective treatment outcomes but also perpetuates mental disparities among minority communities (Hatala & Roger, 2021).

Flaws in mental healthcare service delivery represent a systemic issue spanning service providers across the UK (Carbonell et al., 2020). The data derived from this research can inform future practice and survey design, as it captures first-hand accounts from clients utilizing the help hotline. These accounts highlighted the limitation that neither the satisfaction questionnaire nor the service delivery models were not adapted in real time based on user feedback. Going forward, researchers and service providers can use these insights to explore and implement live-time adaptations that reflect the perspectives, emotions, and experiences of clients accessing the hotline. Potential improvements may include offering in-person workshops, video call-based support, and informational webinars on topics of interest to helpline users.

Small Sample Size. Historically, satisfaction data has been difficult to collect and validate due to small sample sizes (Carr-Hill, 1992). These limitations often stem from a number of factors that include but are not limited to accessibility, participant interest, and length or format of the questionnaires themselves. In our study, a key limitation was that both the helpline and satisfaction survey were provided exclusively in English. Not all users were able to access these materials due to the need for translation and culturally appropriate adaptations that the team was not able to generate. Future studies would benefit from considering the nature of satisfaction data and addressing this disparity through the use of translation services, culturally adapted questionnaires, and multiple response formats for helpline users (i.e., video recordings, interviews).

Additionally, SYM relied on secondary data collected from its own organizational helpline rather than incorporating or comparing satisfaction outcomes from other helplines. This was due to various reasons, including differing objectives between services and the use of incompatible data collection methodologies, making it difficult to derive meaningful comparisons. Using SYM's internal data allowed for a more focused

approach when analyzing outcomes and implementing meaningful service changes based on findings. It is, however, important to note that response rate was 13.14%, which aligns with typical helpline response rates of approximately 5 - 15% (Brown et al., 2010).

Lack of Demographic Information. Given the nature of secondary data analysis, SYM did not have access to demographic data from helpline users, as this information was not collected in the satisfaction survey. SYM prioritized preserving the anonymity of the helpline users to ensure they felt safe and comfortable disclosing their perspectives in. While this approach supported confidentiality, it limited opportunities to analyze how different demographic factors may have influenced user experiences. Future studies would benefit from collecting demographic information of helpline users to forge a more nuanced understanding of helpline services and user satisfaction.

Future directions

Continuous engagement and support for Punjabi and Sikh communities in mental health within the United Kingdom is paramount for several reasons. Like many culturally and linguistically diverse populations, this community faces unique challenges that impact their mental well-being, including but not limited to cultural stigma surrounding mental health (Baral et al., 2022), language barriers (Prajapati & Liebling, 2021), and a lack of culturally competent mental health services (Prajapati & Liebling, 2021; Weich et al., 2004). By offering ongoing engagement and support tailored to the specific needs of this community, mental health outcomes can be significantly improved (Castillo et al., 2019).

SYM is actively fostering this conversation within mental health supports by collecting further qualitative data to support the development of culturally sensitive interventions and research initiatives, ultimately strengthening the representation and dissemination of best practices for this community.

Looking ahead, increased funding is essential to sustain and expand culturally sensitive mental health support, bridging pathways between nonprofit and statutory services. While nonprofit organizations like SYM are independently working to bridge gaps in mental health support, their efforts are often constrained by limited time, resources, and availability. Additional funding would provide structure, training, and ensure broader coverage. Currently, SYM has been involved in a number of initiatives, including the development of an informational leaflet on suicide prevention from a faith-based perspective for use by frontline professionals (Faith Action, n.d.), participation in public health initiatives in England focused on mental health topics (Good-Thinking, 2023), and contributing to doctoral training programs that address the role of faith and spirituality in therapeutic settings within higher education.

Finally, these research and practice implications highlight the need for continued education and training programs for clinicians, encouraging them to consider the needs of diverse populations and the importance of asking about spirituality, faith, and religion as areas often overlooked within Western models of support. Using these findings can propel a movement toward more inclusive mental health provisions and improved resource accessibility across the UK for both clients and providers.

References

- Adams, C., Schembri, A., Chauhan, A., Walpole, R., & Harrison, R. (2023). Differences in patient experiences among people from ethnic minority backgrounds: A comparative analysis of HCAHPS results. *Journal of Patient Experience*, 10. 10.1177/23743735231218867
- Adamson, J., Warfa, N., & Bhui, K. (2011). A case study of organisational cultural competence in mental healthcare. *BMC Health Services Research*, 11, 1-8.
- Adler, P., Otado, J., & Kwagyan, J. (2020). Satisfaction and perceptions of research participants in clinical and translational studies: An urban multi-institution with CTSA. *Journal of Clinical and Translational Science*, 4(4), 317-322.
- Ahluwalia, M. K., & Alimchandani, A. (2013). A call to integrate religious communities into practice: The case of Sikhs. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 41(6), 931-956.
- Ali, I. (2018). The influence of religion on the understanding of and attitudes to mental health and illness in Muslim patients in the UK. *The University of Manchester, United Kingdom*.
- Baral, S. P., Prasad, P., & Raghuvamshi, G. (2022). Mental health awareness and generation gap. *Indian J Psychiatry*. 64(3). doi: 10.4103/0019-5545.341859.
- Bansal, N., Karlsen, S., Sashidharan, S. P., Cohen, R., Chew-Graham, C. A., & Malpass, A. (2022). Understanding ethnic inequalities in mental healthcare in the UK: a meta-ethnography. *PLoS Medicine*, 19(12), e1004139.
- Bekalu, M. A., McCloud, R. F., & Viswanath, K. (2019). Association of social media use with social well-being, positive mental health, and self-rated health: Disentangling routine use from emotional connection to use. *Health Education & Behavior*, 46(2), 69S-80S.
- Bell, D. A. (1995). Who's afraid of Critical Race Theory? *University of Illinois Law Review*, 4(3), 823-846.
- Bhangu, J. K. (2021). *Sikh men in therapy* (Doctoral dissertation, London Metropolitan University).
- Bhogal, B. S. (2014). Postcolonial and Postmodern Perspectives on Sikhism. In *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies* (pp. 282-297). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bhutani, S., & Singh, K. (2023). Sikhism and Its Contribution to Well-Being. In *Religious and Spiritual Practices in India: A Positive Psychological Perspective* (pp. 223-250). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. Sage.
- Castillo, E. G., Ijadi-Maghsoodi, R., Shadravan, S., Moore, E., Mensah, M. O., Docherty, M., ... & Wells, K. B. (2019). Community interventions to promote mental health and social equity. *Current psychiatry reports*, 21, 1-14.
- Carbonell, A., Navarro-Pérez, J. J., & Mestre, M. V. (2020). Challenges and barriers in mental healthcare systems and their impact on the family: A systematic integrative review. *Health & social care in the community*, 28(5), 1366-1379.
- Carastathis, A. (2016). *Intersectionality: Origins, contestations, horizons*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Carr-Hill, R. A. (1992). The measurement of patient satisfaction. *Journal of public health*, 14(3), 236-249.
- Charity Commission for England and Wales. (n.d.). *Register of charities: Charity details (5131294)*. <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/en/charity-search/-/charity-details/5131294>

- Cuthbertson, S. (2023). *The Impact of Staffing Level on Patient Care in Behavioral Health Care Settings*. Walden University.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2023). *Critical Race Theory: An introduction* (Vol. 87). New York University Press.
- Dill, B. T., & Kohlman, M. H. (2012). Intersectionality: A transformative paradigm in feminist theory and social justice. *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis*, 2, 154-174.
- Fish, J. N., & Mittal, M. (2021). Mental health providers during COVID-19: essential to the US public health workforce and in need of support. *Public Health Reports*, 136(1), 14-17.
- Forrester-Jones, R., Dietzfelbinger, L., Stedman, D., & Richmond, P. (2018). Including the 'spiritual' within mental health care in the UK, from the experiences of people with mental health problems. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 57, 384-407.
- Ganeri, A. (2003). *The Guru Granth Sahib and Sikhism*. Evans Brothers.
- Gayet-Ageron, A., Agoritsas, T., Schiesari, L., Kolly, V., & Perneger, T. V. (2011). Barriers to participation in a patient satisfaction survey: who are we missing?. *PLoS One*, 6(10).
- Gines, K. T. (2011). Black feminism and intersectional analyses: A defense of intersectionality. *Philosophy Today*, 55, 275.
- Good-Thinking. (2023, October 3). *Sikhi*. Good Thinking. <https://www.good-thinking.uk/faith-and-belief-communities/sikhi>
- Hatala, A. R., & Roger, K. (Eds.). (2021). *Spiritual, religious, and faith-based practices in chronicity: an exploration of mental wellness in global context*. Routledge.
- Hayanga, B., Stafford, M., & Becares, L. (2021). Ethnic inequalities in healthcare use and care quality among people with multiple long-term health conditions living in the United Kingdom: a systematic review and narrative synthesis. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(23), 12599.
- Hefti, R. (2011). Integrating religion and spirituality into mental health care, psychiatry and psychotherapy. *Religions*, 2(4), 611-627.
- Hernandez, M., Nesman, T., Mowery, D., Acevedo-Polakovich, I. D., & Callejas, L. M. (2009). Cultural competence: A literature review and conceptual model for mental health services. *Psychiatric Services*, 60(8), 1046-1050.
- Hepple, B. A. (1968). Commonwealth immigrants act 1968. *The Modern Law Review*, 31(4), 424-428.
- Hodge, D. R. (2017). Spiritual competence: The key to effective practice with people from diverse religious backgrounds. In *The Routledge handbook of religion, spirituality and social work* (pp. 282-290). Routledge.
- Hsu, B., Hackett, C., & Hinkson, L. (2014). The importance of race and religion in social service providers. *Social Science Quarterly*, 95(2), 393-410.
- Hulley, J., Bailey, L., Kirkman, G., Gibbs, G., Gomersall, T., Latif, A., & Jones, A. (2022). Intimate Partner Violence and Barriers to Help-Seeking Among Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic and Immigrant Women: A Qualitative Metasynthesis of Global Research. *Trauma Violence Abuse*, 2, 1001 -1015.
- Improving cultural competence quick guide for clinicians*. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (2019). <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/sma16-4931.pdf>
- Khan, A. W. (2016). Critical Race Theory: The Intersectionality of Race, Gender and Social Justice. *Putaj Humanities & Social Sciences*, 23(1).

- Kitchingman, T., Caputi, P., Woodward, A., Wilson, I., & Wilson, C. (2024). The impact of their role on telephone crisis support workers' psychological wellbeing and functioning: Qualitative findings from a mixed methods investigation. *Death studies*, 1 - 14.
- Ilioudi, S., Lazakidou, A., & Tsironi, M. (2013). Importance of patient satisfaction measurement and electronic surveys: methodology and potential benefits. *International Journal of Health Research and Innovation*, 1(1), 67-87.
- Islam, F., Multani, A., Hynie, M., Shakya, Y., & Kwame, M. (2017). Mental health of South Asian youth in Peel region, Toronto, Canada: A qualitative study of determinants, coping strategies and service access. *British Medical Journal*, 7, 1-11.
- Jakobsh, D. (2012). 5. The Sikh Diaspora. In Sikhism (pp. 84-104). *Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press*. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780824860349-009>
- Junewicz, A., & Youngner, S. J. (2015). Patient-Satisfaction Surveys on a Scale of 0 to 10: Improving Health Care, or Leading It Astray?. *Hastings Center Report*, 45(3), 43-51.
- Karasz A, Gany F, Escobar J, Flores C, Prasad L, Inman A, Kalasapudi V, Kosi R, Murthy M, Leng J, Diwan S. (2019). Mental Health and Stress Among South Asians. *Journal of Immigrant Minority Health*. 1. 7-14. 10.1007/s10903-016-0501-4.
- Knifton, L. (2012). Understanding and addressing the stigma of mental illness with ethnic minority communities. *Health Sociology Review*, 21(3), 287-298. <https://doi.org/10.5172/hesr.2012.21.3.287>
- Kramer, S. (2021, September 21). Key findings about the religious composition of India. *Pew Research Center*.
- Lainson, K., Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Being both narrative practitioner and academic researcher: A reflection on what thematic analysis has to offer narratively informed research. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 4, 86-98.
- Long, J. D. (2024). An Appreciation of Arvind Mandair's Sikh Philosophy: Exploring Gurmat Concepts in a Decolonizing World. *Philosophy East and West*, 74(2), 353-363.
- Malhi, N. K., Sidhu, S. S., Singh, R., & Singh, M. K. (2024). Sikh Tenets and Experiences That Relate to Mental Health and Well-Being. In *Eastern Religions, Spirituality, and Psychiatry: An Expansive Perspective on Mental Health and Illness* (pp. 151-166). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.
- McCarthy, R. G. (2013). The Sikh diaspora in Australia: Migration, multiculturalism and the imagining of home. *University of Pittsburgh*.
- Miller, H. M. (2005). *The experiences of Sikh spirituality in relation to health and well-being* (Doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia).
- Omer, A. (2020). Decolonizing religion and the practice of peace: Two case studies from the postcolonial world. *Critical research on religion*, 8(3), 273-296.
- Palinkas, L. (2014). Qualitative and mixed methods in mental health services and implementation research. *Journal of Clinical Child Adolescence Psychology*. 43(6). 851-61. 10.1080/15374416.2014.910791.
- Phillips, L., & Andriopoulou, P. (2022). An exploratory study of South Asian women's experiences of mental health services in England: a thematic analysis of cultural sensitivity. *Mental Health Review Journal*, 27(4), 437-454.

- Pinder, R. J., Ferguson, J., & Møller, H. (2016). Minority ethnicity patient satisfaction and experience: results of the National Cancer Patient Experience Survey in England. *BMJ open*, 6(6).
- Post 1947 migration to the UK - from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka*. Striking Women. (n.d.). <https://www.striking-women.org/module/map-major-south-asian-migration-flows/post-1947-migration-uk-india-bangladesh-pakistan-and>
- Prajapati, R., & Liebling, H. (2021). Accessing mental health services: a systematic review and meta-ethnography of the experiences of South Asian Service users in the UK. *Journal of racial and ethnic health disparities*, 1-22.
- Quraishi, Z. (2023). Addressing mental health, misinformation, & religious tensions among South Asian students across California higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic: A qualitative research study. *Heliyon*, 9(6).
- Rajan, S. I., Varghese, V. J., & Nanda, A. K. (2016). Migration, mobility and multiple affiliations. *Cambridge University Press*.
- Roberts, L. R., Mann, S. K., & Montgomery, S. B. (2016). Mental health and sociocultural determinants in an Asian Indian community. *Family & community health*, 39(1), 31-39.
- Rohi, R. K. (2013). *Methods for the Understanding of Sri Guru Granth Sahib: A Hermeneutical Study* (Doctoral dissertation, Punjab University, Patiala).
- Schultz, M., Lulav-Grinwald, D., & Bar-Sela, G. (2014). Cultural differences in spiritual care: findings of an Israeli oncologic questionnaire examining patient interest in spiritual care. *BMC palliative care*, 13, 1-11.
- Stanton, A. G., Jerald, M. C., Ward, L. M., & Avery, L. R. (2017). Social media contributions to strong Black woman ideal endorsement and Black women's mental health. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 41(4), 465-478.
- Stanisch, J. L. (2019). *Promoting Volunteerism for a Private Non-Profit Charitable Organization that Provides Free Healthcare Services, Community Food Pantry, and Housing for Displaced Community Members* (Doctoral dissertation, Bradley University).
- Sudarsan, I., Hoare, K., Sheridan, N., & Roberts, J. (2022). South Asian immigrants' and their family carers' beliefs, practices and experiences of childhood long-term conditions: An integrative review. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 78(7), 1897-1908. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.15217>
- Singh, D. P. (2019). Sikhism in the Service of Humanity. *Abstracts of Sikh Studies*, 21, 105-114.
- Singh, K. (2008). The Sikh spiritual model of counselling. *Spirituality and Health International*, 9(1), 32-43. <https://doi.org/10.1002/shi.331>
- Singh, M. (2003). Power in Punjab. *Christianity Today*, 47(7), 24-25.
- Singh, R. (2022, March 9). *Origin of the world's largest migrant population, India seeks to leverage immigration*. Migration Policy. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/india-migration-country-profile>
- Tatla, D.S. (2005). Sikhs in the United Kingdom. In: Ember, M., Ember, C.R., Skoggard, I. (Eds.) *Encyclopedia of Diasporas*, (pp. 1083-1094). Springer, Boston, MA.
- Thandi, S. S. (2016). Punjabi Migration, settlement and experience in the UK. *Migration, Mobility and Multiple Affiliations*, 105.

- Thapar, A., & Rutter, M. (2019). Do natural experiments have an important future in the study of mental disorders?. *Psychological Medicine*, 49(7), 1079-1088.
- The British Sikh Report (2018). British Sikh Report: An insight into the British Sikh Community in the UK. <https://britishsikhreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/British-Sikh-Report-2018.pdf>
- Thompson, M. A. (1970). A study of generation differences in immigrant groups with particular reference to Sikhs. *University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies (United Kingdom)*.
- Truong, M., Paradies, Y., & Priest, N. (2014). Interventions to improve Cultural Competency in healthcare: A systematic review of reviews. *BMC Health Services Research*, 14, 1-17.
- Verster, J. C., Van de Loo, A. J., Adams, S., Stock, A. K., Benson, S., Scholey, A., ... & Bruce, G. (2019). Advantages and limitations of naturalistic study designs and their implementation in alcohol hangover research. *Journal of Clinical Medicine*, 8(12), 2160.
- Virdee, S.J. (2022). *Sikhs in Census 2021: Summary*. British Sikh Report. <https://britishsikhreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Sikhs-in-Census-2021-Summary.pdf>
- Weich, S., Nazroo, J., Sproston, K., McManus, S., Blanchard, M., Erens, B., Karlsen, S., King, M., Lloyd, K., Stansfeld, S., & Tyrer, P. (2004). Common mental disorders and ethnicity in England: The EMPIRIC study. *Psychol Med*. 34(8), 1543-51.
- Whitley, R. (2012). Religious competence as cultural competence. *Transcultural psychiatry*, 49(2), 245-260.
- Why is cultural competence important in mental health care?*. Fountain House. (2022, October 14). <https://www.fountainhouse.org/news/why-is-cultural-competence-important-in-mental-health-care#:~:text=Not%20knowing%2C%20or%20asking%2C%20about,treatment%2C%20particularly%20for%20Black%20Americans.>
- Willis, H. A., Gonzalez, J. C., Call, C. C., Quezada, D., Scholars for Elevating Equity and Diversity (SEED), & Galán, C. A. (2022). Culturally Responsive Telepsychology & mHealth Interventions for Racial-Ethnic Minoritized Youth: Research Gaps and Future Directions. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 51(6), 1053–1069. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15374416.2022.2124516>
- Zamora, B., Gurupira, M., Rodes Sanchez, M., Feng, Y., Hernandez-Villafuerte, K., Brown, J., & Shah, K. (2019). The value of international volunteers' experience to the NHS. *Globalization and Health*, 15, 1-12.

Sikhi and Queerness: Summary by SHER Vancouver LGBTQ Friends Society

Karn Singh Sahota and Puneet Kaur

Abstract

Sher Vancouver¹ remains dedicated to supporting queer Sikh voices by amplifying messages of love, acceptance, equality and respect. In this essay, we highlight queer voices and their relationship to their Sikhi. As a part of this piece, personal reflections have been voluntarily submitted by individuals willing to share their thoughts and experiences at the intersection of queerness and Sikh identity.

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, all personal information and identifying details have been redacted to preserve anonymity. While there is a large community that identifies as both Sikh and queer, a large majority of this population did not feel safe or comfortable coming forward to share their perspectives due to fears of retaliation and of being outed.

This collection of reflections is intended to prompt readers to look inward and consider their own positionality regarding queer identities and their intersections with the Sikh faith. Ultimately, we hope this essay encourages the Sikh community to re-examine Sikh teachings through the lived experiences of queer Sikhs, fostering a deeper understanding, compassion, and a greater sense of belonging for all.

Keywords: *Sikhi, Sikhism, Queer, South Asian, Canada*

Introduction

Sikhism is a widely practiced religion throughout the world. As the authors, who also identify as Sikh, we recognize that Sikhism's core teachings, as articulated by Guru Nanak Dev Ji and the succession of Gurus after him, emphasize equality, justice, and respect for all. In this light, Sikhi has always advocated compassion and acceptance.

In today's world, while discussions around queerness have become more common, there remains a lack of space and understanding when it comes to queer identities and the practice of Sikhi. Depending on cultural context and individual perspectives, a range of interpretations have emerged regarding queerness in relation to Sikhi. Some more conservative interpretations of Sikhism, particularly in communities that are heavily influenced by traditional or rigid cultural norms (such as the non-recognition of 2SLGBTQIA+² individuals), may not fully embrace queer identities (Peters, 2023). These perspectives are often due to long-held societal views shaped by cultural norms rather than spiritual teachings (Paul, 2020).

Despite this conservative narrative, there is an emerging and growing voice for inclusion, calling for greater acceptance of all people and advocating for the rights of those who have been historically marginalized by

¹ Sher Vancouver LGBTQ Friends Society is a Canadian charity supporting LGBTQ+ South Asians through advocacy, education, and peer support.

² 2SLGBTQIA+ (Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and other identities within the LGBTQ+ community)

the aforementioned cultural norms. Sikh advocates and community groups increasingly stand hand-in-hand with the queer community, asserting that a core tenet of Sikhi has always been to stand against discrimination (Burns, 2023). These individuals and groups argue that the Sikh faith has always centered on principles of equality, love and respect, principles not constrained by the rules or norms imposed by culture (Collie, 2019). This means that Sikh teachings are not intended solely for the so-called normative society; rather, they extend to people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. From the very beginning, Sikhi has emphasized creating a safe, welcoming space for everyone, spaces where no one should be persecuted or discriminated against.

This is not to say that individuals who identify as queer feel safe or comfortable openly practicing Sikhi in every country where the faith is observed (Bower, 2023). Much of the discourse supporting individuals to accept their queer identities remains rooted in the West, in countries like the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the USA (Poushter & Kent, 2020). In contrast, queer Sikhs living in Eastern countries, such as India, Pakistan and the UAE often struggle with the negative consequences of revealing their identities, including isolation and persecution (Poushter & Kent, 2020). This lack of safe, welcoming spaces in the East has led many to seek refuge in Western countries, where they can live more openly as themselves (Poushter & Kent, 2020).

Thus, the work and discourse led by 2SLGBTQ+ Sikhs in the West is imperative in leading the conversation around navigating both a queer identity and the acceptance of practicing their faith. These efforts can create a powerful ripple effect, fostering more visibility, and in turn, greater acceptance for queer communities, especially in places where there are on-going efforts to create safe, welcoming spaces for all.

This growing dialogue around queerness within the Sikh community is opening up broader conversations about the intersection of Sikhism and LGBTQ+ rights. Even in the face of adversity, such as the recent Anti-SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) rallies across Canada, more individuals are courageously coming forward to share their experiences as both Sikh and queer (Burns, 2023). It is in these especially trying and challenging times that conversations around acceptance and shared community become even more critical. These personal narratives and stories of queer Sikhs affirm their continued identity within the faith and help amplify acceptance for those who may not have a platform, fostering unity among all voices, whether vocal or silent.

Ultimately, Sikhs today interpret Sikhism through the lens of religious texts as well as the socio-cultural frameworks created by those in leadership positions within the faith. Many of these religious leaders' regard concepts such as same-sex marriage with disapproval and often discourage their followers from engaging with or affirming queerness or queer identities (Paul, 2020). While there may be some voices calling for division, grounded in conservative values, there will always be voices advocating for equality and the acceptance of religion, faith, and one's identity. One such voice is Alex Sangha, the founder of Sher Vancouver. He has brought together many queer Sikh individuals and groups across Canada to lead a conversation about what it means to be Sikh and how that faith intersects with their identities within the Queer community.

Research Method and Demographics

This research on the intersection of Sikhism and queerness utilizes a qualitative approach, focusing on analysis of personal reflections. Sher Vancouver utilized social media platforms to send out a post requesting submissions from community members, inviting them to share their personal interpretations of Sikhism and its intersection with their queer identity. Individuals who were interested in participating and providing their perspective were given two options for submitting their reflections: through social media messaging systems (such as Instagram, Facebook, etc.) or via a general email or text to the outreach team. All submissions were received virtually.

In addition, we conducted general outreach by contacting community members directly and posting in various groups and forums to further promote our request for submissions. As these personal reflections touch on individuals lived experiences as Sikhs and members of the queer community, Sher Vancouver chose to take a cautious approach to ensure all participants' safety. All submissions were anonymized, with personal identifiers removed to preserve confidentiality and protect those who chose to share their stories.

As such, for the purposes of this essay, no demographic information or data was collected from those who chose to contribute to this article. This decision was made to ensure the safety and protection of all participants, particularly given the presence of conservative members within the larger Sikh community who may not be accepting of queer identities. Sher Vancouver is committed to ensuring that there are no negative consequences for the individuals who bravely came forward to share their stories.

A total of sixteen personal reflections were collected from members of the general public. These reflections are presented in the following section and are numbered for ease of reference only. The numbering does not indicate any particular order or ranking of importance.

As noted earlier, all personal information was redacted to protect anonymity. Submissions were lightly edited to ensure clarity and coherence. These reflections were submitted anonymously, and we cannot confirm the locations of those who contributed. The submissions were requested on a voluntary basis from anyone who wished to share their thoughts and experiences for inclusion in this essay. When we 'called-out' for personal reflections on individuals' experiences with Sikhi, we did so as members of a South Asian queer organization. As the authors of this essay, we would like to acknowledge our affiliation with Sher Vancouver and our close engagement with the queer South Asian community in British Columbia, Canada. We were in a unique position to draw on our community connections and utilize Sher Vancouver's global social media platform to promote the request for submissions.

An additional note we would like to express regarding this essay is the challenge involved in the collection of personal reflections. As mentioned above, society and culture can still be condemning toward individuals who choose to practice Sikhi while also identifying as queer. Although the topic received a lot of engagement and many individuals were pleased with this inquiry, several also expressed fear and anxiety about being 'outed' for their beliefs or views on their queer identity and Sikhi. A large majority that felt

uncomfortable coming forward for fears of retaliation. For this reason, we have made every effort to keep all entries and narratives fully anonymous.

In compiling and analyzing the narratives, we used a qualitative approach rooted in thematic analysis. This method allowed us to identify common patterns, struggles, and moments of empowerment that emerged from these stories. Through this approach, we explored how individuals in the queer community are navigating the balance between their faith and identity, as well as the cultural and religious challenges they encounter, and how they continue to show resilience. By centering the voices of those directly impacted, the essay aims to build a more nuanced understanding of the intersection of Sikhism and queerness in contemporary contexts.

Personal Reflections

The following are personal reflections submitted by individuals sharing their personal journeys in navigating their queer identities alongside their belief in and practice of Sikhism. Although personal identifiers have been redacted, these powerful, quoted-directly, narratives still offer a glimpse into the complexities of each individual's experience and the resilience they have developed through their relationship with Sikhism and the wider cultural context.

These reflections recount how individuals have navigated their journeys in reconciling with their identities as members of both the queer community and Sikh communities. Through these personal narratives, the readers are invited to glimpse into the deep self-reflection each person has undertaken in relation to their life and faith. These submissions highlight moments of both internal and external conflict but also reflect a core principle of Sikhi - harmony. The hope is that these narratives will encourage readers to reflect on their own thoughts and preconceived notions about queer identities and the intersection with the Sikh faith.

The reflections explore a range of topics and emotions that individuals experienced throughout their journeys. Some have struggled with tension and conflict within their families, societal expectations, and the cultural norms that surround them. Others have wrestled with their personal relationships to faith, the meaning of it, and how the cultural influences on religious teaching can make it difficult to embrace the concept of queerness. At the same time, these reflections reveal how each individual has grown through these struggles. They demonstrate how Sikh values—support, acceptance, unity, and equality—can guide individuals forward. These reflections invite the reader to consider how Sikh teachings can be reinterpreted in ways that foster belonging and togetherness within the community, when we stand together as one. Ultimately, these stories contribute to a deeper understanding of how Sikhism and queerness intersect in the lived experiences of individuals, underscoring the diverse ways faith, identity, and self-expression can coexist and flourish.

Narrative #1

Every day there was *paath* [Sikh prayer] in the house - whether it was *Japji Sahib* in the morning or *Rehras Sahib* in the evening. My parents were extremely religious. I was taught about Sikhi very early

on, and it was a large part of my identity growing up. I was always so proud when they were proud of me for being able to recite [prayers] by heart.

As I grew up, feeling different and wanting different things in relationships than my friends, I started to notice how my parents would say things like, "God made only two genders," or "it's not right," when referencing Pride events, they would see in videos or hear from others. It made me question if that was the truth of it. I couldn't challenge them, but I thought the main idea of Sikhi was that all people are born equal - regardless of sex, status, etc.

As I grew into my identity and understood why I felt different from the 'normal' I saw around me, I grew uncomfortable with my Sikhi and the *paath* I thought was inscribed into my soul. It's taken over a decade for me to feel comfortable that I can still be who I am, love who I want to love, and be able to believe in God and regain my faith.

I'm still not where I used to be - but like I said, the *Gurbani* is still ingrained in my soul. I'm a believer in the tenets of Equality and *Seva*. I will continue to give back to my community and practice my faith. Though my parents may never understand me, and this culture still turns its back on me, I continue to believe that the Sikhi in its purest form is accepting of all. Accepting of me.

Narrative #2

Growing up as both queer and Sikh, I often felt the weight of an intersectionality that seemed impossible to reconcile. In my youth, I struggled with the tension between the vibrant, loving traditions of my Sikh faith and the shame I felt for my queer identity, which was neither understood nor accepted in my community. This internal conflict led to feelings of isolation and self-doubt, as I navigated a world where my faith and identity were seen as incompatible.

For years, I battled with guilt, believing that to embrace one part of myself meant betraying the other. However, as I grew older and began to learn more about both my faith and myself, I realized that love, acceptance, and compassion are core tenets of Sikhism. Through this understanding, I was able to bridge the divide between my identity and my spirituality. Embracing both my queerness and my Sikh faith has been a transformative journey, allowing me to love myself fully and see the beauty in my own complexity. With time, I found peace in knowing that my faith doesn't ask me to hide who I am, but instead to live authentically, with love, humility, and compassion for myself and others.

Narrative #3

Being queer is part of my identity, just as being Sikh is. These are not conflicting parts of me, but rather are intrinsic to who I am and shape my understanding of love, faith, and selfhood. To me, being queer means connection to others, and being Sikh means connection to the Divine. In Sikhi, we believe that the Divine resides in all beings, that Waheguru's presence is within each of us, so how could loving others be wrong?

I am blessed to have grown up with Sikhi - learning *santhiya* [precise recitation and rhythm of Gurbani] and *tanti saaj kirtan* [traditional Sikh musical instrument], listening to *katha* [spiritual discourse],

absorbing the teachings of our Gurus, and being immersed in the warmth of *sangat* [community]. To me, Sikhi is not just a practice; it is the foundation of my values and has instilled in me a commitment to justice, equality, and love. While some religious traditions have been misused to justify discrimination, Sikhi does not contain scripture that condemns queerness. I take comfort knowing I'm loved and accepted by my Guru, who enlightened us with the eternal truth that love is love, and that the formless, genderless Waheguru's presence is not bound by human prejudice.

Every morning, I start my day grounding myself in the Divine *Shabad* [word/hymn] that has guided generations before me. No matter who stands at my side - regardless of their gender or identity - my Guru is always my guide. This brings me unshakable comfort. I don't need external validation to know that I am accepted and cherished by my Guru, who taught us the greatest truth: *Ik Onkar* - oneness, unity, and boundless love that transcends all barriers.

There's a lot that the *Panth* [Sikh collective] needs to work on. Colonialism, cultural shifts, and patriarchal influences have shaped our institutions in ways that do not always reflect the radical equality envisioned by Guru Nanak Dev Ji. Online spaces and comment sections can often be hostile, filled with negativity, and I have yet to see mainstream *prachaar* [preaching/propagation] embracing queerness and same-sex relationships as part of Sikhi's message of love and equality.

But change is possible, and Gurbani teaches us that transformation begins from within, urging us to challenge injustice and uphold truth even in adversity. The Sikh spirit is one of resilience: standing up for the marginalized, rejecting oppression, and embracing the infinite love of the Divine. The queer experience echoes this same resilience - choosing to exist authentically in a world that often resists us.

While there is still much work to be done, I see hope in so many queer Sikhs choosing to live in their truth and reclaiming the core values of our faith - *seva*, justice, love, and oneness. I see it in those who, like me, refuse to choose between being Sikh and being queer because we know these identities are not at odds. We do not need to reconcile them; they are already whole, already intertwined.

My journey as a queer Sikh is to embody the limitless love our Gurus taught. It is to celebrate the beauty of diversity while recognising that, at our core, we are all reflections of the same Divine Light. And that is a truth no one can take from me.

Narrative #4

Growing up in the Sikh community is not easy, there are so many restrictions and so many norms that you're told to follow in the name "God," but it's mostly just people making these norms up and imposing them on others.

Being Queer in the Sikh community is not easy. Being Queer is not accepted openly even today. Growing up, I was taught there are two genders and that there is nothing in the middle. I knew from a young age I was different, but I was always scared to talk about it or tell anyone because I feared I may be isolated or abandoned.

When I decided to go on this path, I knew I would lose many relationships, but in the end what mattered to me was what makes me happy, and not society. One thing that makes me happy is my faith in God. I get to choose every day to believe that Sikhi values truth above all else. That we are all equal, made equal, should be seen as equal and are equal. Period.

We learn that in Sikhi that it is important to stand up and fight for your and others' rights, and that everyone deserves to be true to themselves. In my heart, in my Sikhi, I choose to believe that I can be who I want to be and still be able to go to a Gurdwara without shame or guilt. I feel it is *you* who gets to choose what matters to you and who you want to be - not society, not culture.

Sikhi believes in everyone equally. It's hurtful to see people constantly make comments or say things regarding queer people. It always feels like they forgot what it means to be Sikh. I believe there is acceptance in Sikhism and people need to change their mentality and allow people to be who they want to be.

Don't spread hate. Let people be who they were meant to be. Sikhi does not judge.

Narrative #5

Being Sikh and queer has often felt like standing at the crossroads of two identities that struggle to coexist in the eyes of the community. I was born into a Sikh family on both my mother's and father's sides, but my connection to Sikh heritage was fractured early on when my parent's divorce placed us on the outskirts of the community. The stigma surrounding divorce was enough to push us away, reinforcing how rigid cultural perceptions can be.

Even as we built a life outside of those expectations, queerness became another unspoken tension. My family, though accepting in private, feared what others—especially the few Sikh people still in our lives—would say. Their concerns weren't just about me but about the weight of judgment they had already endured. This fear highlights a larger reality within the Sikh community: the stigma around queerness doesn't just make coming out difficult; it makes it feel like another form of exile.

Yet, despite these challenges, I refuse to believe that my identities are in conflict. Sikhism is built on values of love, justice, and equality, yet cultural expectations have created barriers to fully embracing queer Sikhs. My journey has shown me that acceptance isn't just about personal support but about shifting deeply ingrained narratives within the community.

For many of us who exist at this intersection, belonging is not something we are readily given—we have to carve out space for ourselves. But in doing so, we prove that queer Sikhs have always been here, and we always will be.

Narrative #6

I am a proud gay non-binary individual and a devoted Sikh. People like me often refer to themselves as "Queer Sikh" or "Queer and Sikh," signifying the coexistence of queerness and religious belief, in my

case, Sikhism. Terminology merely serves to express the intersectionality of identity, where one can be both queer and religious.

I did not choose to be queer. How could I, when prevailing Sikh authorities and leaders vehemently oppose queerness? The Sikh Gurus taught us to be humble, to embrace our natural selves, to treat everyone as equals regardless of caste, gender, religion, social standing, or wealth, and above all, to love and respect all.

I first encountered the word "gay" at the age of 20. Prior to that, I had only been exposed to heterosexuality, as queerness was criminalized in my home country [India] at the time. I never experienced attraction toward women, while my peers often objectified them as mere sexual objects. Initially, I attributed my lack of attraction to women to my deep religiosity.

As time passed, I began to recognize my distinct sexual orientation, which left me feeling isolated and distant from my faith. Although I remained somewhat religious, my devotion had waned compared to my childhood years. Upon completing my internship, I learned that homosexuality was legal in Western countries. This realization ignited a desire to leave behind everything I knew and seek a life of authenticity abroad. I immigrated to Canada with the hope of liberating myself from societal and familial expectations. My ultimate aspiration was to find love, marry, and have a family of my own.

However, in distancing myself from Sikhism, I felt a void in my soul—a lifeless existence, like a withered tree standing tall but devoid of vitality. To fill this emptiness, I immersed myself in work and social isolation, which led to depression. The only thing that kept me going was the love I had for my mother. I resolved that once she was gone, I would have no reason to live. In this darkness, I found temporary solace in material indulgence, spending money in an attempt to derive fleeting happiness from shopping.

The first time I saw an Indian individual not only featured in a queer film but central to its narrative, I was overwhelmed with surprise and curiosity. I discovered the existence of a South Asian queer community, including Punjabi queer individuals. I cautiously made my way to where the community was meeting up, anxiously looking over my shoulder to ensure that no one familiar saw me entering a queer space. It felt as though a lifeline had been extended to my soul, pulling me back from the abyss of despair.

With the unconditional love and acceptance of the community, I gained the confidence to seek mental health treatment, come out to my family, embrace my queerness with pride, and ultimately reconnect with Sikhism.

Initially, my femininity drew scrutiny, anger, and resentment from religious individuals. Their hatred and judgment often made me avert my gaze and suppress my confidence. I became the target of death threats and online abuse, particularly from closeted Sikhs who struggled with their own queerness and Sikh identity, choosing instead to live in denial. Despite this hostility, I persisted in practicing Sikhism, albeit with trepidation.

Through extensive research, I discovered that homosexuality is a natural occurrence observed in over 25,000 species. Moreover, queerness has existed throughout history, in every culture and civilization. If something is so omnipresent and inherent to nature, how can it be against God? If God is the creator of all things, then queerness, too, is part of the divine plan. As I embraced my authentic self, my devotion to Sikhism deepened.

Today, I visit Gurdwaras and pay my respects without fear. The eyes that once held hatred and contempt now reflect curiosity and, in some cases, respect. However, I still encounter stares and laughter from individuals recently arrived from other countries, who are unfamiliar with my existence. Sikhism, at its core, is a faith of acceptance, inclusivity, freedom, resistance against injustice, and support for the marginalized. We uphold the principle of *Sarbat da Bhala*, meaning the welfare of all without discrimination.

At what point did Sikhs begin to dictate how others should exist, worship, and live with dignity? Who would willingly choose to be queer in a queerphobic society? Perhaps queers are born into Sikh families as a divine reminder of the faith's fundamental values. The Sikh community's rejection and the fear of being harmed by one's own family for the sake of preserving honor have left me shattered. Yet, I am in the process of rebuilding myself. Each piece I reclaim shines with the brilliance of a diamond.

Ultimately, existence should not be a struggle. If family and community acceptance can empower individuals to thrive and contribute meaningfully to society, what is the harm? Queer individuals have existed since the dawn of time, in every culture, faith, and civilization. Whether we are called "Queer Sikh" or "Queer and Sikh" is irrelevant—we will always be here. The only question that remains is whether others will choose to accept this truth or remain consumed by hatred.

Narrative #7

I feel like since there has been no mention, or not that I have heard, of any queerness in Sikhi, that definitely sets the precedent that Sikhi does not accept me. But on the other hand, I also think, I'm not sure, but in Sikhi, during the *Anand Karaj* [wedding ceremony], I think it states the joining of two souls and does not emphasize too much on gender.

As a queer person and an immigrant in Canada, my relationship [with Sikhi] definitely has changed a lot. Back in the country where I was born and raised, I used to go to the Gurudwara with my parents a lot and did not overthink anything. It could also be because I wasn't aware of myself.

But since I moved to this country, there is way more aggression and strong feelings [from] folks from the Sikh faith, as shown by countless protests, they are part of anti-LGBTQ+. That makes me feel unsafe to be in those places, especially when there is an intersecting identity [for] Sikhs in North America without deeply understanding the potential consequences.

I know this may be off topic, but it makes me feel scared that if there are topics discussed [without compassion or awareness] about my identity as queer, I may be perceived in a way that people wouldn't want to deal with. Hence, by virtue of life situations, I moved away from Sikhi, but I practice my faith in

my own ways. Recently, I've started going to a small Gurdwara because there are fewer people and less perception.

Narrative #8

I identify as a bisexual Sikh woman, who has been a part of the community for quite some time now. Growing up wasn't easy because I wasn't allowed to be as comfortable [in my identity] as I am now. Going to the Gurudwara every day, I was constantly being told how wrong it was to like any other sex except male.

It has been a struggle seeing all my family having children and the women living the typical lifestyle this culture places us in, where the wife stays home, takes care of the kids, cooks and the husband goes out and "takes care of the family." This is what I was told was the traditional Sikh family. When I was younger, I discovered I didn't like that. I didn't want that to be my future, but I had to trick my mind, because I knew that being Sikh, and the faith being so influenced by the culture, I had to be "normal" or else I would get disowned.

Growing up, I have felt less ashamed of showing my true self because I don't want to have to hide anymore. I've started to study more, learn more about what Sikhism actually is, rather than what the culture says it is. I've learned to be more accepting of myself, as I know that Sikhism values equality, love, and truth. This religion has never had an issue with me, and I love being able to rediscover my faith and my Sikhi.

Narrative #9

Personally, I never viewed myself as different from any Sikh out there. And the closer you get to Sikhi, the less you're worried about if you're being viewed any differently. I believe when Guru Maharaj Ji said, "*Manas ki jaat sabhe eke pehchanbo*" [recognise the whole human race as one], it automatically put an end to every intellectual conflict – whether it was race, religion, caste, sex, or sexuality.

Sikhi for me had been the tool to connect with the Divine form of *Akal Purakh* [God] through the achievement of *Anand*, a state where you are beyond physical reality, and you are mere consciousness.

But unfortunately, due to racism, stereotyping and ignorance, Sikhi is always misunderstood in terms of queerness.

I believe if you're a queer Sikh, whether religious or non-religious, you should never misinterpret Sikhi for your defense. Listening to the many opinions from both hetero and homosexual Sikhs, a lot of people state how there is misinterpretation of Sikhi by queer Sikhs, and that can cause a lot of disrespect to Sikhi. It is causing so much hate for the whole queer Sikh community.

There's so much homophobia against queer Sikhs. Remember, Sikhi gave us respect and equal space in society, and we should pay it back with respect.

Narrative #10

Sikhi has been a major part of my life. While I was in my home country [India], I was enrolled in a school where religion played a big role in many of the activities that took place. Naturally, I would take part in those. My devotion was getting stronger and stronger.

I used to do *Sehaj Paath*, go to the Gurudwara and do *Rehraas Sahib* and *Chaur Sahib Sewa*.

On the other hand, I was bullied in high school for acting like a girl and was called gay (as a slur). But that has always been separate from my religious side. After truly finding out that I was gay, I had come to an acceptance of God making me the way I am.

When I came to Canada, I started using gay dating apps. For some time, I was really comfortable with having uncut hair, my beard being long. After some time, I felt insecure as I [didn't feel] attractive enough with my beard. I also felt people were being racist towards me and making funny jokes where they would bring up my religion.

I was literally so young at this point.

I felt discriminated [against] by gay men, and also [felt] not attractive. To fit in, I chopped my beard. I felt that I was betraying my parents because they are really deep into religion, and I had fear of them questioning me about that. But they accepted me and did not have any issues.

Also, I used to go to the Gurudwara nearby daily and after chopping my beard I felt really uncomfortable going there. All the *sewadaars* [volunteers at the Gurdwara] were commenting about that. Some comments were like, "You have betrayed the Guru," or "You have stained Sikhi with this".

That hurt me for a bit, but honestly, I wasn't sure if this was the right decision. Nobody said in the Gurudwara that I might come around and grow my beard again. Everybody there was just making negative and shaming comments. That was disappointing.

Then after some time, I had to move to another city, which was a hub for the Queer community. I explored myself by going to different queer events. Nobody there was judgmental.

I have done some things like drinking, smoking and recreational drugs (like marijuana). I used to think these were bad activities to do because it's against Sikh *rehat maryaada* [Sikh code of conduct]. But then, [I thought] I'm not doing all of these and harming anybody or anything. I started thinking I'm doing it for my personal fulfillment. I don't get over drunk or get really high on weed—just on special occasions I would have them.

It has become a regular part of my life, to the point where I don't see anything wrong with it. I feel [these things] are totally different from my religious side. I had so many questions about these things in the past.

Then again, I remembered my past, when I first accepted being gay, and said to myself that God made me this way.

After many thoughts, it came to me that my God will accept me the way that I am. I don't really care about other views.

I do my *Paath* in the morning, do *Ardaas* after that, and pray for everyone's well-being and other personal stuff.

I started envisioning God as a loving being [one] which will love me in any way. I have learnt I'm on my own Sikhi journey.

I would say my inner self has stayed the same regardless of how I look from the outside now. I pray to *Parmatma* [God]. I ask for forgiveness, for blessings, for well-being, and for protection.

Narrative #11

Sat Shri Akal,

I am a trans man who recently settled in Canada. This community has been incredibly supportive, providing me with acceptance and a sense of community. I deeply appreciate Canada and wish to visit Gurdwaras regularly.

However, I face significant challenges when using washrooms at Gurdwaras. If I enter the women's washroom, I receive uncomfortable stares, as if I am doing something wrong. If I attempt to use the men's washroom, I am often told to go to the women's facility instead. Due to these experiences, I feel anxious about visiting Gurdwaras, fearing potential verbal harassment or even physical harm.

I hope to find a solution that allows me to practice my faith without fear.

Narrative #12

As [a] Queer Brown Sikh individual, I've often felt torn between parts of my identity, believing that they couldn't coexist. However, as I've grown, I've come to understand that nothing is outside of God's Will (*Hukam*), including my soul and identity.

Therefore, I embarked on a journey of self-acceptance, choosing to let go of others' expectations and discomfort. Though the path is not easy and there is much resistance, I have faith in God —that they will guide me through it.

Narrative #13

It is really hard to be Sikh and an openly proud queer person. I tried to balance my pride for my religion and my queerness for a while, but time and time again, the so-called protectors of the religion kept bringing me down. I am [a person] a male assigned at birth, and being a male Sikh, I used to tie a turban. But I also used to go out wearing high heels just [because] I liked how empowered I used to feel, as I carried both my religious belief and my queer identity together with pride.

But one day someone recorded me walking down [by] a traffic light and posted it online. The video got almost a million views on TikTok and Instagram combined. Though there were a lot of positive

comments on the video, there was a lot of hate as well, mainly [focused] on the fact that I was disrespectful towards the turban and Sikhi.

As far as my knowledge of the Sikh religion, there is no mention of God not accepting of queer people or even any mention of how a man should or shouldn't style his turban with the rest of the outfit. All that Sikhi says is that one shouldn't cut [their] hair and [should] maintain a Sikhi *suroop* [external identity] with the 5 *Kakars* [articles of faith]. But people were just talking about my heels being disrespectful. I even saw those people commenting, who got all their hair cut, and were commenting on how I should carry myself as a Sikh, as if their version of Sikhi is acceptable. They can go to Gurdwaras with those chopped hair, but I cannot even walk a street in my heels.

It all happened in Canada, where I thought I could be myself openly without having to come out to my parents, [because] I wasn't ready yet. But after that video went viral, it scared me a lot. I feared my parents discovering the video online, which luckily never happened. But I stopped wearing my heels with my turban together after that incident. Slowly, I just started going out with heels and a bun on my head or a ponytail [because] it wasn't safe for me to be a Sikh while being queer.

Sikhi just teaches acceptance and equality

"Aval alah noor upaia, kudrat ke sabh bande.

Ek noor te sabh jag upjia, kaun bhale kaun mande."

First, Allah created the Light; then, by his creative power, He made all mortal beings.

From the One Light, the entire universe welled up. So, who is good, and who is bad?

I wish people actually understood what it meant and didn't hate us based on something we can't control.

Narrative #14

I'm Sikh and LGBTQ+, by the way. Regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, I believe it is critical that people understand that Sikhism is a faith that promotes equality and justice for everyone. All humans are equal in God's eyes, according to Sikh doctrine, therefore compassion and love are fundamental virtues. Sikh texts include no explicit reference to homosexuality, and many Sikhs consider it to be a private matter that should be treated with dignity.

Narrative #15

Being queer and Sikh comes with a lot of challenges, especially when you have grown up in the "traditional" land [India], which is undergoing a gradual but yet very far-from-inclusive approach. Since my childhood, I've always kept my gay identity hidden because of the stigma I saw around me. I always kept the door around my sexuality shut close, until recently, when I came to Canada, where the environment is much more inclusive than India. I've learnt, and still learn, to love myself more each day.

If I have to talk about my queerness and how I feel cohesive with my queer and Sikh identity, this is how I would put my journey: In my home country, I always felt different. Although I'm a very social

person, there was a deep inkling of being not like the others. I felt my values being incongruous to my surroundings and values of my country's folks, which to me felt quite constricted and narrow-minded. I later realized it was the never the religion, but the culture which harbored outdated, rigid beliefs.

Sikh belief is one of the purest, and the philosophy of "*Nirbhau Nirvair*" (without fear, without hate) is etched into the heart of Sikhism. Why should we be afraid to express how God chose us to be? That's our highest truth. God wants us to live in truth without any fear. Why would there be hate around queer folks when God unconditionally showers His blessings on everyone?

Furthermore, marriage is seen as a union of two souls in Sikhism, which is a revered bond and a spiritual milestone to merge with the One. Since the inception of Sikhi, it was never mentioned the union of man and woman. Furthermore, Sikh *Anand Karaj* clauses, which say marriage is between men and women and should only be solemnized between two Sikhs, were changed in 1940s and 1950s by older, so-called "cultural" Sikh men. Times during those [decades] ran with structured and rigid customs of cultures.

However, the pure philosophy of Sikhi is beyond the duality of this world, and the message they give us clearly translates to that. It understands the nuances of gender and orientation, which are also reflective in other Indian religions.

I, as a queer Sikh gay man, feel so proud of my religion, which is inclusive and tells us to spread love. At the same time, I feel disappointment at the narrow binary mindset of this culture. The culture itself is rigged, possesses bigotry, is toxic and ignorant. Our Gurus asked for *Sarbat da bhala* —the upliftment of all.

My message to my fellow queer brethren is to always believe in yourself and your higher power. They [others] let us never see that, but it's [within] us, when we turn inward, that we realize how much potential we hold for growth, for love, and for healing.

To others, I want to say that gay people have persevered here since the dawn of humanity. They are, and will always be, here. Let this message reverberate in every nook and corner so people, especially non-queer Punjabi and Sikh people and youth, know that we exist, we existed, and will continue to exist. We have the right to thrive and love whoever we want, without judgement, just like they have.

Narrative #16

Growing up in a rural Sikh household, I never really heard anything about homosexuality or what it meant to be gay. The closest I got to hearing about anything related to the LGBTQIA+ community were references to "eunuchs" or "hermaphrodites," who were often called *Khusra* or *Khawaja Sira* [terms commonly used in South Asia to refer to transgender or third-gender individuals]. There was no hate toward them, but it was more out of ignorance and lack of understanding—our community simply didn't talk about it.

As a child, I was a bit effeminate, which led to bullying. But what I didn't realize at the time was that it wasn't because being gay was openly hated—it was because it was a taboo subject, and no one knew how to talk about it. I never heard about homosexuality, and so, there was no space for it in my world.

When I moved to Canada and started living with my extended family, that's when I first began to understand what it meant to be gay. It was in this new environment that I began to see gay characters and movies. But it was also the first time I heard homophobic language in my extended family, things like "fg**t" and "Gn*u," words used to express disgust. My uncle, cousins—people I looked up to—spoke about it with such hate, and in those moments, I felt the sting of their words deep inside. It brought me to tears, not because I feared being bullied, but because it felt like a rejection of something that was part of who I was.

That's when I began to distance myself from Sikhi. I thought of my culture and religion as being homophobic. At that time, my worldview was largely shaped by the narratives I saw online, which mostly focused on larger religions and their views on homosexuality. What I didn't realize was that, in focusing so much on the larger, more mainstream religions, I was losing sight of the wisdom and understanding that exists within my own Sikh faith.

As I started to explore Sikhism more deeply, I realized that Sikhism doesn't oppose homosexuality. In fact, I found so many lines in the *Bani* [hymns/teachings] that can be interpreted as supportive of love in all its forms. I remember reading the *Twa Prasad Swavey* and particularly the last line of the final stanza: "*jin prem kiyo, tin hi prab payeo*" which roughly translates to "Those who love will attain God." Guru Gobind Singh Ji himself questioned the value of rituals, pilgrimages, and external acts, asking why we think these things bring us closer to God. The true connection with the divine, he reminds us, is through love. So why should two people who love each other be judged or rejected?

This realization was life-changing for me. I could be gay and still be Sikh. The two could coexist. So much of the hate I witnessed, both in my family and in society, was rooted in misunderstanding. People often confuse culture with religion. While parts of our culture may reflect homophobia, Sikhism—at its core—does not.

My family was reading the *Bani*, but they weren't truly understanding it. If they had, they wouldn't have said the things they did. Sikhism teaches us that love transcends all boundaries, and that's what I found when I reconnected with my faith.

To anyone who might be going through a similar journey, feeling lost or torn between their sexuality and their faith, I encourage you to read and understand *Bani* for yourself. It will provide clarity and peace. Sikhism doesn't ask us to change who we love—it asks us to love deeply, and to love all. That love is the true path to God.

You don't need to be ashamed of who you love. Embrace your love and embrace your faith. You are worthy of both.

Reflections on Community, Identity and Challenges

In reviewing the reflections submitted by individuals who identify as queer and Sikh, one cannot overlook the courage it must have taken to share these deeply personal experiences. These reflections reveal the intricate path that many queer Sikhs navigate as they reconcile their faith with their sexual and gender identities. In reading and analyzing their stories, one can gather that many individuals faced similar challenges and experienced similar emotions. These included feelings of incompatibility between their faith and identity, feeling 'othered' by the community, and of experiencing isolation and guilt for embracing their authentic self. For many, early childhood memories of faith-based activities, cemented in pride and joy, later on became marked by angst and confusion, deepening the emotional toll of becoming disconnected from their faith.

However, as many of the individuals have in this essay have pointed out, Sikhism is interpreted not only through religious texts but also through the socio-cultural context in which it is practiced. In this case, the cultural norms have had a large influence on the practice of Sikhism and how queer identities are perceived within the community. These individuals speak to their personal experiences, highlighting how historical factors, such as patriarchal societal systems, have contributed to feelings of discrimination and non-acceptance. Much of this stems from the societal and cultural interpretation of Sikhism as being non-inclusive or discriminatory toward anyone outside of the normative identities. As previously indicated, and several personal reflections have alluded to, older male figures as leaders in positions of religious leadership have had significant influence over how Sikhi is practiced and regulated within the community.

Despite these hurdles, these individuals find peace in their faith and have reclaimed what Sikhi means to them. They identify strongly with several of the core tenets of Sikhi: love, equality, humility, oneness and *seva* (selfless service). These values are reinforced through their everyday practices, whether it is going to the Gurudwara or immersing themselves with Sikh teachings among other practices. Their reflections highlight the importance of remaining present within the community and being an ally to those who may identify as Sikh and queer but are not yet able to come out. Above all, these individuals remind the reader that they are embodying their faith by honoring the right to equality and creating safe spaces for themselves and for others.

One of the main themes that we noted is the feeling and experience of self-acceptance and healing. Each individual has critically reflected on their relationship with God and their Sikhi. Many have found a space where they can be unapologetically themselves and practice their faith without feelings of shame or guilt. In fact, they express peace in their relationship with God and hold hope that the future for all queer Sikhs will be similar. While many recognize that there are still challenges to overcome, not only within society but also within culture, they hold the hope that interpretations of the Sikh religion will continue to evolve in a more inclusive direction. Further, there is hope that one day, all Sikhs, regardless of gender or orientation, will feel a true sense of belonging in both the community and the culture.

Overall, Sikhi and queer identities have always existed, but only now are these voices and the stories beginning to be shared and acknowledged. There are still many societal and cultural challenges that impede

the belonging of all Sikhs. Nonetheless, there remains a strong hope that one day we will see true inclusion, just as Sikhi teaches.

Author Note

Karn Singh Sahota is an Outreach Manager for Sher Vancouver LGBTQ Friends Society. He has completed a Social Services Diploma from the University of the Fraser Valley, a Bachelors of Social Work Degree from Douglas College, and is working towards a Post-Degree Diploma in Applied Planning at Langara College. He continues to remain an active community member with involvement on committees such as Whitecaps FC Pride Advisory Committee and The Rainbow Hub Community Centre Steering Committee. Karn is passionate about working alongside communities, with a focus on bridging the gaps that currently exist amongst the Queer community by addressing the importance of intersectionality and oneness.

Puneet Kaur is currently a Grants Advisor and Community Outreach Worker with Sher Vancouver. Puneet has previously completed a Bachelors of Arts degree in Psychology and Counselling as well as is working towards completing a Bachelors of Social Work from Dalhousie University. Puneet is motivated in understanding and dismantling systemic structures that perpetuate inequalities, particularly those affecting marginalized populations. She remains interested in policies and practices that promote equitable access to resources and support systems for all individuals, fostering a more inclusive society.

References

- Bower, A. (2023, April 24). Pyar Is Pyar: Surrey support group embraces South Asian LGBTQ+ community. *City News*. <https://vancouver.citynews.ca/2023/04/24/pyar-is-pyar-surrey-support-group-lgbtq/>
- Burns, A. (2023, September 20). Opposing sides clash at Surrey anti-SOGI rally. *Surrey Leader*. <https://www.surreynowleader.com/local-news/opposing-sides-clash-at-surrey-anti-sogi-rally-4419647>.
- Collie, M (2019, June 4). Bisexual Sikh man ties colourful rainbow turban to celebrate Pride. *Global News*. <https://globalnews.ca/news/5351384/sikh-pride-turban/>
- Paul, Gs. (2020, October 20). Same-sex marriage in presence of Guru Granth Sahib invites Akal Takht's ire. *The Tribune*. <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/same-sex-marriage-in-presence-of-guru-granth-sahib-invites-akal-takhts-ire-158096/>
- Peters, J. (2019, March 22). Abbotsford anti-SOGI protests sharing misinformation, inciting hate: Educators. *Abbotsford News*. <https://www.abbynews.com/local-news/abbotsford-anti-sogi-protests-sharing-misinformation-inciting-hate-educators-5934633>
- Poushter & Kent. (2020, June 25). *Pew Research Centre*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/06/25/global-divide-on-homosexuality-persists/>

Gender Abolition, Limits of Sikh Feminism, and Critique

manmit singh

Abstract

This paper reflects on Sikh feminist critique and its mobilization of egalitarianism as a horizon. In doing so, I explore how Sikh onto-epistemologies unsettle liberal conceptions of equality, critique, and justice. By problematizing the very system and construct of gender, I orient gender abolition as a horizon to ask the question, what can Sikhi teach us about gender abolition? In analyzing the life around this question, I think through ethics of academic production in its engagement with Sikhi.

Keywords: *queerness, transness, secularism, gender abolition, Sikh feminism*

Introduction

A few years ago, I created a Twitter (now X) account, and one of my first tweets stated that the Guru Sahibs were queer. Looking back, I was naive not to anticipate the huge response and backlash it would generate. Within a day, it became the subject of widespread conversation on Sikh Twitter, as a digital war erupted—as it often does—around such a speculation.

That was also when I first encountered the word “blasphemy,” which, as I came to find out, is Sikh Twitter’s favorite accusation. Blasphemy is commonly defined as showing contempt or a lack of reverence for the sacred or Divine. Yet my speculation, that Guru Sahibs were queer, or later, gender-benders, did not come from a place of contempt, but from reverence and love for the Divine. The purpose of this paper is not to justify my tweet. Rather, I open with this moment to illustrate how an unverifiable speculation, something some might even regard as fictional, attempts to rewrite history in service of imagining a particular understanding of gender, sexuality, and Sikhi.

The question of gender in Sikhi is a widely debated topic in academia. Sikh feminist interventions continue to push us to think critically about the place of gender in Sikhi. Such interventions are crucial in Sikh Studies, a field largely dominated, shaped, and interpreted by men, in pushing us, the *panth* (literally translating to “path” to refer to the Sikh collectivity), to interrogate the persistence of gender inequality. The question “what about women?”—now rephrased as “what about gender?”—has oriented many toward the horizon of gender equality, inviting us to examine our distance from it and offering tools to navigate toward it. As gender inequality continues to stand in contradiction to (and as some argue, within) the egalitarian teachings of Sikhi, gender equality often becomes the horizon against which the liberatory potential, or failings, of Sikhi and Sikh communities is measured.

But horizons are, by nature, fleeting, impossible to grasp, and illusionary. Still, the way we understand, position, define, and capture the horizon also shapes and constrains us (Muñoz, 2009). The terms we use to define (and limit) the horizon determine our future orientations, how we travel and struggle toward it (and against other horizons). The grammars of the temporal present that project a horizon of futurity also

shape our understandings of the past and present, becoming the means through which histories are produced, interpreted, understood, and judged; through which understandings of justice are formed; and through which identities and ideas of selfhood are cohered and mobilized. Our horizons, then, reveal much about who we are, where we come from, and where we are trying to go. In other words, as much as we articulate our horizons, our horizons also articulate us. Simultaneously, the limits that capture us today also shape our horizons—reminding us again about the (im)possibilities of horizons.

This meditation results from my own question: what horizons am I invested in and desiring movement toward? As a trans non-binary Sikh who finds a home in neither “man” nor “woman,” I walk the spaces in-between and beyond—navigating complex and extensive cartographies of passing and clocking, exclusion and inclusion, privilege and marginalization, locations and dislocations, lined with performances of complicity and deviance, embodiments and unbodiments, and toll bridges that fissure and divide the inner and outer self which never seem to fully align, the very category and system of gender is a manifestation of *dubidhaa* [duality] (kehal, 2025; kehal, forthcoming; singh, 2024). For me, gender is a site of violence and frustration, and not a site upon which I can conceptualize equality and liberation. Gender equality, then, is a horizon that I have struggled to invest in—as it still presupposes the existence of gender as a system, with essentialized categories, even if mediated through the language of parity.

I want to begin this paper then, by naming two assumptions: first, the very system and construct of gender—as opposed to, though separate from, exclusion or marginalization—is my “problem”, and second, that I orient gender abolition as my horizon. This paper is an attempt to ask: What can Sikhi teach us about gender abolition? Through this inquiry, I reflect on the limitations of critique and academic production in engaging with Sikhi from within and against the frameworks that structure both.

Interrogating Questions

As I’ve argued, what and how we articulate and capture where we are trying to go—particularly the questions we pose to guide us—reveals our ontological and epistemological presumptions. Before tending to the question itself, I want to first reflect on how the question “what can Sikhi teach about gender abolition” even emerged. I am indebted here to dr. prabhdeep singh kehal for offering a methodological (re)orientation that invited a moment of pause and reflection [*rahaa*], which helped me reframe the question and expand the limits of the horizon I had previously been captured by.

Since the digital wars of Sikh Twitter, I had wanted to write this paper as a formal claim that gender abolition is a foundational principle in Sikhi, or, put differently, that Sikhi is gender abolitionist. I envisioned a paper supported by evidence drawn from *gurbani* [the Guru’s Wisdom] and *sakhis* [stories]. Yet a hesitation kept me from writing it. I began to question how generative such a paper would truly be in its life after publication. Such a paper, I feared, would simply recreate dualities. I imagined offering my perspective as an “alternative” that some members of the community would embrace while others would consider blasphemy. And in that back and forth, my writing, intended to affirm the place of queer and trans Sikhs, might unintentionally end up being more harmful than generative by further entrenching, reifying, or reenacting divisions in the panth.

I thought about the different groups who might resist such a claim and the basis of their resistance. Some responses, I anticipated, would be motivated by misogyny, queerphobia, or transphobia: pairing gender abolition and Sikhi in the same sentence might be perceived as a threat to power—especially by some cis het men. Others might accuse me of projecting my “modern” or “colonized” lens onto Sikhi, of appropriating (and polluting) Sikhi for my own purposes—a critique I imagined from those labeled “orthodox” or “traditional” Sikhs. Still others, particularly some Sikh feminists, might point to the historical and ongoing presence of gender inequality and gender violence as evidence of Sikhi’s failings and limitations for liberatory possibilities. Each of these claims, and the imagined groups, overlap and are not mutually exclusive nor limited by fixed identities.

The imagined counterclaims by different stakeholders were only a part of the problem. The more significant issue lay in the very framing of *my* question. My articulated questions “Is Sikhi gender abolitionist?” or “Can Sikhi be a source for gender abolition?” were framed in dualism, inviting a yes or no response and setting the stage for endless arguments and debate. These questions took on an evaluative posture, positioning Sikhi as the object (rather than the source) of critique, judged for its relationship to gender. This framing establishes a terrain where each of us could affirm, reaffirm, and accumulate *haumai* [ego]. In the back-and-forth process of “what do I think, what do you think,” we each articulate ourselves through moral, ethical, and affective grammars rooted in personal experiences, epistemologies, allegiances, and points of injury and pain, all while Sikhi becomes the battlefield and decontextualized *tukks* [lines of Gurbani] become weaponry hurled to critique and contest one another.

My initial question also operated within essentializing logics. In seeking to distill Sikhi into what it *is* or *is not*, I risked inviting responses that, while divergent in perspective and stakes, would also reproduce similar essentialisms. Resistance motivated by investments in cisheteropatriarchy would reveal an investment in sex and gender essentialisms. At the same time, resistance grounded in critique of gender inequality and violence in Sikh communities would also reduce and dismiss Sikhi as a monolithic tradition, concluding that Sikhi is patriarchal and thus limited in its liberatory potential.

To be clear: the stakes of each differ. The first is committed to preserving violence and power, while the second comes from a place of love and struggle against power and violence—longing for Sangat outside the grammar of violence. However, both approaches, despite their divergent motivations, risk flattening and capturing the dynamic, ever-becoming nature of Sikhi. They inadvertently entrench the very *haumai* that each seeks to overcome.³

This self-interrogation, of my own ethics and commitments, in the context of ever proliferating and polarizing divisions and distances, has led me to think more critically about how I engage with Sikhi, especially when furthering academic production. The dissonance between the divisive potential of critique and Sikhi’s commitment to destabilize and transcend *dubidhaa* [duality] invites a necessary pause. It has forced me to sit with the limitations of critique itself.

³ Judge writes that “we must remember what we have *learned* in the Sikh tradition to rethink the trappings of the ego that reinscribe the very contours we wish to erase—the separations that we consider divine gifts” (*Prophetic Maharaja*, 184).

This paper, then, seeks to foreground the ethics of *learning* from Sikhi, not positioning Sikhi as the subject or object of critique or defense. By discarding my initial question (which attempted to defend Sikhi against different critiques), I challenge the assumption that Sikhi requires defense from an “Other”—a stance that would only reaffirm another dualism (Judge, 2022). Instead, approaching Sikhi with *nimrata* [humility] necessitates an openness to transformation of the Self, and a willingness to evaluate and relinquish any attachments I may hold in how I approach Sikhi.

Although this paper is centered around conversations on Sikh feminism by asking what Sikhi might teach us about gender abolition, it is not seeking to critique Sikh feminisms, nor defend Sikhi against feminist critiques. Instead, I use Sikh feminism as a case to illustrate a broader concern about the limitations of critique itself. In this way, paper is not just an inquiry into critique, but a critique of critique. And perhaps, it asks: how can we learn critique from Sikhi?

Situating Terms

Before tending to the question of what we can learn from Sikhi about gender abolition, there are a few terms I need to situate. There is a risk here, as to define it is already to capture and set limits. This section then delineates which risks I am mobilizing and amassing—and how.

Sikhi

I understand Sikhi as the learnings from, of, for, and toward the Guru— a continual struggle (to learn?) that begins and ends with the Guru. The Sikh tradition occupies the ever-unfolding and nonlinear space in-between. Talal Asad (2003) and Rajbir Singh Judge (2024) offer that tradition is not a static essence marked by authenticity and contained within the grammar of historicity, but a never-ending site of contestation, struggle, and disputes towards an impossible coherence. In other words, the Sikh tradition is always in formation, unfixed, and ever-becoming. Such an understanding of tradition, and in this case, the Sikh tradition, is an intervention against secularism’s demand to construct, cohere, capture, and discipline the space of religion around essentialized sites like texts, belief, and practice. Instead of situating Sikhi as a repository of texts, beliefs, and practices, this understanding frames Sikhi as an onto-epistemological center with its own authority, on its own terms, one that includes, but also exceeds, “us.”

Gender and Feminism

Defining gender or feminism is not easy, as both evoke traditions full of contestation, with multiple, competing, and ever-shifting genealogies. Recounting these contestations is beyond the scope of this paper, but I want to point to a few important threads that help clarify how I am mobilizing each of these terms.

The category of gender is a relatively recent one, gaining prominence in the twentieth century through debates around the differences between sex, sexuality, and gender—debates shaped by the medical and psychiatric industries and later appropriated and mobilized across feminist, queer, and trans studies (Gill-Peterson, 2021). Theories of gender range from arguments for and against biological determinism, to views

of gender as socially constructed and performative, to recontextualization of gender itself as a technology constitutive of racial and colonial violence and governance. For purposes of this paper, I situate gender as both a construction and a system of power to classify, organize, discipline, and govern. Gender, in this framing, is not just a category, but an institution that stratifies and regulates value and violence.

Similarly, feminism comes with its own set of contentions that have informed its expansions and contractions, making it difficult to reduce it to a single definition. Perhaps, it is easier to define feminism by what it is oriented toward. Feminism aims to address and undo the stratifications of value and violence, seeking an end to sexism and patriarchy—and, with the interventions of Black, Indigenous, and women of color feminists, the end of all systems of oppression. In many ways, feminism is a project oriented toward its own obsolescence: towards the day the very project of feminism becomes unnecessary. But like all political projects, it remains in constant struggle with the horizons it imagines, and the horizons that shape and constrain it. This paper speaks to one such horizon: that of gender equality.

Sikh Feminism

Sikh feminism is also heterogeneous, one can argue it is a tradition in its own right, situated at the intersection of both the Sikh and feminist traditions, though the classification of traditions is not my primary concern here. Its scope ranges from recovering, highlighting, and learning from feminist hermeneutics and the feminine voice in Gurbani (Bal and Sarkar-Daman, 2021; Kaur Singh 2005); to exposing the erasure of and recuperating Sikh women's identities and histories (Jakobsh, 2000; Dhavan, 2010; Kaur Singh, 2000); to interrogating and reinterpreting Sikh rituals and practices through a feminist lens (Bains, 2020; Kaur Singh, 2000); and to critically examining the construction of Sikh masculinities at the intersection of martial formations (Dhavan, 2010; Gill, 2022; Sabherwal, 2024; Kohli, 2016a; Kohli, 2016b).

While I do not claim to offer an exhaustive or comprehensive account of the diversity of Sikh feminism, it may be more generative to define it through its orientation. What is shared across much of Sikh feminist scholarship is the horizon of gender equality. The articulation of this horizon pays homage to both the Sikh and feminist traditions from which Sikh feminism emerges: Sikhi is often articulated as an egalitarian tradition, and (gender) equality continues to be a central focus across many strands of feminist thought. Therefore, the dominance of gender equality as a guiding horizon reflects the confluence of these two traditions that Sikh feminism builds on.

Much of Sikh feminist critique and intervention, then, has worked to foreground the persistence of gender inequality in order to uncover and fill the gap between principle and practice, a gap that marks the distance from the horizon of gender equality. Across the heterogeneity of Sikh feminist thought, even where there is agreement that Sikhi is oriented toward gender equality in principle, lived practice often becomes the (archival) evidence to assess and expose the failings and limitations of Sikhi. In this way, while Sikh feminism seeks to critique and transcend the *dubidhaa* [duality] that exists across Sikh communities in the form of gender inequality, misogyny, and patriarchal violence, its interventions can themselves remain captured by and reliant on reproducing *dubidhaa* through oppositions like practice/principle or feminist/non-feminist. With the understanding that this entrapment in *dubidhaa* limits the liberatory potential of Sikh feminism, this paper is not written to critique Sikh feminists. Rather, it is indebted to both Sikh and feminist thought,

invested in finding a way through the trappings of *dubidhaa* in order to invite an expansion of Sikh feminism (re)oriented towards its own end.

Much of this *dubidhaa* coheres around defending and contesting the claim that Sikhi is egalitarian—a claim that cements the horizon of gender equality. Here, I want to interrogate that very claim: what are the limitations of translating Sikhi as egalitarian in the first place? The reduction of Sikhi to an egalitarian framework, as inherited by Sikh feminists, is shaped by the demands of secularism and liberalism, the forces that have long dominated the construction and understandings of both the Sikh and the feminist traditions. Scholars such as Talal Asad (2003), Wendy Brown (1995), and Saba Mahmood (2012) have traced how secularism and liberalism work together to frame and value equality and autonomy as inherently virtuous. Following their work, we can see how the claim that Sikhi is egalitarian and oriented towards equality universalizes, essentializes, and assigns a permanence to categories like gender and caste—terms through which parity can be conceptualized.

Sikh onto-epistemologies, however, are antagonistic to liberal conceptions of equality. They teach the impermanence of the temporal, and this includes all temporal categories including that of caste and gender. This impermanence is critiqued as falsehood (*ਕੁਰੂ*: *kūru*) which stands in contrast to Truth (*ਸਤਿ*), which, as the Gurus teach, characterizes only the Divine. Accordingly, the Guru emphasize Naam, or Identification with the Divine, as opposed to that which is transient, is the path to liberation (Sikh Research Institute, 2022; Sikh Research Institute, 2023). The body, in its impermanence, serves as a material iteration of *dubidhaa*, both a site for entrapment and an instrument to traverse that very duality (singh, 2024). The body can be mobilized as a vehicle towards, but does not serve as the source for, liberation. This perspective differs significantly from many strands of feminist thought—including those that inform a lot of Sikh feminist critique—which often (over)emphasize the body as the primary site of constitutive performance, subject formation, knowledge production, and the accrual (or denial) of freedom and rights.

Gender Abolition

An orientation towards gender abolition, I argue, offers a way through the *dubidhaa* that the framework of gender equality remains trapped in. The project of gender abolition, indebted to Black trans feminist thought, begins with the question “what if gender is a kind of prison?” to argue for the end of gender (and sexuality) altogether as we know it (Bey and Goldberg, 2022).

Gender abolition seeks to dismantle the foundations upon which the (carceral) system of gender rests—in other words, to disrupt the very ontology and the epistemology of gender. It calls for an “unfix[ation of] gender from essentialist moorings” (Bey, 2022, p. 3). This orientation also challenges the centrality of the body as a source of liberation. If the body is the primary site upon which oppressive forces construct our subjectivities, then gender abolition necessitates “finding liberation in the aspects that are not confined to the body” and in the “aspects of subjectivity that exceed and ooze out of the body” (Bey, 2022, p. 4).

In this process, gender abolition asks for the “dissolution of the things we may have come to regard as quite dear—namely, our given, and even reclaimed, identities.” This letting go is a part of detaching from the

categories that capture us, and also from the very landscapes in which the captures are mediated. It is a call toward the “eradication of every and all violent holdovers” (Bey, 2022). Gender abolition puts into question a lot of the assumptions that undergird (Sikh) feminist strands of thought, including that of biological determinism (Oyěwùmí, 1997); cisnormativity, which assigns a permanence to categories of “Man” and “Woman”; and the emphasis on corporeality to conceptualize and assess justice through representation, through demanding the destabilization of gender altogether.

Learning Gender Abolition from Sikhi

In seeking to learn gender abolition from Sikhi, I turn first to *Bani*, or the Wisdom of the Guru, to draw out a few insights. In this paper, I dwell on several *tukks* [lines] from *Ramkali ki Vaar*, revealed by Bhai Satta and Bhai Balwand. This *vaar* describes and praises the anointment of various Gurus to Guruship and was historically recited during the succession ceremonies of Guru Sahibs. In *Raag Ramkali* on *Ang* 967, they reveal:

*balvand khivī nek jan jisū bahutī chāu patrālī.
laṅgari daūlati vandīai rasu ammritu khīri ghiālī.
gursikhā ke mukh ujale manmukh thīe parālī.
pae kabūlu khasamm nālī jāṁ ghāl mardī ghālī.
mātā khivī sahu soi jini goi uṭhālī.*³

Balvand (signature): Khivi is a virtuous being whose shade is very leafy.

In the langar, wealth is distributed (along with) the essence of *amrit* (and) *khir* (enriched) with ghee.

The faces of the Guru’s Sikhs are radiant; the self-centered have become (dull like) paddy straw.

(Bhai Lahina) became accepted by (his) master, when (he) performed a manly deed.

The husband of Mata Khivi is that who has uplifted the universe.^{3, 4}

Although this *pauri* [verse] specifically praises Guru Angad Sahib, that praise is made possible through the celebration of Mata Khivi. Within brahminical landscapes, where notions of purity and pollution segregate castes, Guru Nanak Sahib’s institution of *langar* [community kitchen and collective eating] served two crucial purposes:

- 1) foreground care and care work, sustenance, and material redistribution as a spiritual practice, and
- 2) challenge caste, gender, and class-based hierarchies and separations in setting up the practice of sitting and eating together (*pangat*) as a prerequisite for spiritual congregation (*sangat*) (Kaur, 2023).

Mata Khivi, the wife of Guru Angad Sahib, was foundational in expanding and formalizing langar to the extent that langar came to popularly be known as “*Khivi da Langar*” (“Langar of Khivi”). These *tukks* offer valuable insights into what Sikhi can teach us about gender and gender abolition.

⁴ Translations from The Guru Granth Sahib Project by the Sikh Research Institute.

For one, ideas of manhood are explicitly evoked, as Guru Angad Sahib is praised by Satta and Balvand for gaining approval of Guruship through a “manly deed” that secures an acceptance from the Master. In other words, *submission* to the Master—to the Divine, to the Guru—is described as “manly.” By invoking the scripts of masculinity and manhood, these scripts are also simultaneously redefined: the performance of a masculine manhood is for the purpose of, in service to, and recognized in the first place as a “manhood” worthy of celebration if it leads to acceptance by the Husband Divine.⁵

The fact that the praise of Guru Angad Sahib is made possible through the praise of Mata Khivi is also insightful. The identification of Guru Angad Sahib as the husband of Mata Khivi, as opposed to the other way around, is a significant intervention that contests and flips the brahminical normative order, which defines a woman’s identity and value through the man. However, this contestation does not seek to secure the coherence of an autonomous (gendered) identity for Mata Khivi. For that matter, even the coherence of an autonomous identity for Guru Angad Sahib is challenged under Sikh onto-epistemologies, where Guru Angad Sahib is not viewed as an independent successor to Guru Nanak Sahib, but rather as an extension of the Guru. As Guru Nanak Sahib’s *ang* (limb), Guru Angad emerges at the very site where Bhai Lehna, the Sikh, dies through submergence into the Guru, thereby becoming the second Nanak.

Sikh onto-epistemologies orient away from procuring and securing a liberal, autonomous Self, which only further entrenches *dubidhaa*, marking separation from the Divine, and instead, they orient towards an un-becoming that seeks the death of the Sikh. In this process, Identification with the Divine (i.e. Naam, Guru) transes (i.e., transgenders, transitions, transfigures, transmutes, transforms) the Sikh into the Guru. The Guru becomes the vehicle through which the ontology of the Self is dissolved.

Thus, the contestation against the normative order that derives a woman’s value and identity through the man also seeks to destabilize and challenge the category and value of “man” and “manhood,” including the division, attribution, and stratification of labor and value enabled by gender in the first place. Care, sustenance, and nurturance are unfixed from constructions and attributions of femininity, and instead democratized as virtues that all must foster to move towards the Divine. Guru Angad Sahib’s praise as the sustainer and emancipator of the world is credited to Mata Khivi’s labor and leadership in the institution of *langar*, collapsing the separation not only between Guru Angad Sahib and Mata Khivi, but more broadly, between Guru Angad Sahib and Guru Nanak Sahib.

This is important to understand because asking why women are only recognized through their roles as mothers or wives, or why Mata Khivi is being collapsed with Guru Angad Sahib, reflects a desire to recuperate an autonomous identity for women. Within that framework, the very signifier of Mata Khivi as Mata, or “mother,” would be seen as evidence of an anti-feminist failing. However, following Saba Mahmood’s (2004) work on the agency of religious Muslim women, which complicates secular-liberal feminist criteria of freedom and equality that equate submission with oppression, the forms of submission

⁵ Here, I am referring to the very common metaphor across Gurbani that situates us all as human-brides separated from and longing for the Husband-Divine.

and collapsing presented here are examples of Identification with the Divine. They aim to subtract and dissolve, instead of accumulating and securing, a Selfhood.

Furthermore, Guru Angad Sahib's praise as the sustainer and emancipator of the world is credited to Mata Khivi's labor and leadership in the institution of langar. Although a critique could be made that associating Mata Khivi, and women today, with langar simply reinforces their relegation (yet again) to the kitchen, such a critique is limited if it misses the centrality of the kitchen to the sangat. In the Sikh tradition, the sovereignty of the kitchen precedes the sovereignty of the *darbar* [here, main hall of the Gurdwara]. In many ways, the sovereignty of the darbar rests upon the kitchen. This becomes more explicit through the *sakhi* where Emperor Akbar is asked by the third Nanak, Guru Amardas Sahib, to first eat langar—to sit on the same level and to eat the same food as everyone else—before visiting the Guru in their darbar, exemplifying the tradition of “pangat before sangat.”

The juxtaposition of Sikh onto-epistemologies and those mobilized by liberal feminists reveals a difference in moral frameworks: Guru Sahib was seeking to institute a very different moral order in which submission and the failure of the Self, rather than the securing of an autonomous subjecthood, is prioritized. In the house of Guru Nanak Sahib, it is not the “highest of the high” but the “lowest of the low” who emerge as truly victorious in gaining acceptance from the Sovereign Divine. Under a moral framework that prioritizes autonomy, the centrality of the institution of langar becomes unintelligible. However, the institution and principle of langar emerges as a foundation for Sangat itself, not only because of its political orientation toward serving the most marginalized, but also because of its capacity to foster humility and the lowering of one's Self to occupy the place of the “lowest of the low.”

By highlighting these few tukks, I do not intend to follow the practice of appropriating and decontextualizing isolated lines in service of personal agendas. Instead, these few tukks exemplify the pedagogical approach widely employed by the Guru, whereby temporal scripts (including those of gender and caste) are evoked, challenged, destabilized, and redefined. All temporal significations are evaluated, requalified, and redirected through the criterion of whether they lead one toward, or away from, the One Divine. Temporal categories like gender become a means through which one practices a form of *subtraction*—the subtraction of the Self and the attachments that define it. This understanding of gender as subtraction, rather than accumulation, orients one toward submission instead of autonomy, toward transcending (or transing) rather than seeking parity or coherence within existing temporal significations.

Sikhi's ontological (and epistemological) orientation toward subtraction and un-becoming reveals the limitations of critique in its capacity to move us toward Truth. Michel Foucault (1996), in his lecture “What is Critique?” and Judith Butler's (2004) response to it, both characterize critique as a “practice of freedom” that emerges from, interrogates, and is therefore limited by the onto-epistemological conditions and terms of the present. Critique, as they argue, poses a risk: in being bound to historicity, it can further cement the very parameters and categories it seeks to escape. The question of “what about women?” that seeks to locate and evaluate the subject of woman marked by sexed difference, risks reifying an essentialized rigidity rooted in biological determinism. While such critique is generative in inspiring movement and in tending to the important gap between principles and practices—a gap it seeks to expose and bridge,—it also risks: (1)

reproducing the very dualities that (Sikh) feminism projects are committed to transcending; and (2) reducing the always/never/un-becoming of Sikhi into a static repository to mine for answers or evaluate for perceived failures.

The limitations of critique reflect tensions between “competing moral frameworks,” as critique, arising from within a particular moral framework, often falls short in its translatability to another moral framework (Butler, 2013, p. 97). Here, I sit with Judith Butler’s (2013) question: “what would judgment look like that took place not ‘within’ one framework or another, but which emerged at the very site of conflict, clash, divergence, overlapping?” (p. 98). In closing, I want to return to the speculation of Guru Sahibs being queer, which not only provides insight into how gender and sexuality are understood in Sikhi, but also offers a glimpse into this very question of critique.

Beyond Critique

The speculation of Guru Sahibs as queer is not about searching for queer and trans people in the Sikh tradition through a question like “what about queers?” Instead, by destabilizing the attachments that define queerness and transness, or in other words, queering queerness and transing transness, this speculation becomes an insistence on seeing queer and trans people everywhere in Sikhi. In becoming unstuck from the heuristic of loss and scarcity in which critique often operates, and following Anjali Arondekar’s (2023) work, this unverifiable speculation becomes a practice of the heuristic of abundance, or, articulated through Sikh modes, a practice of *chardi kala* [Rising Power].⁶ Such speculations about Guru Sahibs as queer and trans are not only mobilized by queer and trans Sikhs to affirm themselves or seek inclusion; they also lay claim to the dynamic contingencies that shape and unshape the Sikh tradition itself. In their interview with the Sikh LGBTQIA+ Oral History Archive, Jaspreet Sangha (2023) speaks of meeting Sikhs “who don’t know that they’re Sikhs, who don’t have the vocabulary to explain that they’re Sikh” mobilizing the instability inherent to Sikhi to insist on seeing the Sikh (and by extension, the Guru) outside of any fixed biological, gendered, caste, cultural, religious, or national categories. Thus, the speculation of queer and trans Sikhs and Gurus refuses to refract queerness and transness through the prism of embodiment, representation, or, more broadly, temporality and historicity, categories that would further subjectify, subjugate, and delimit the queer, the trans, and the Sikh.

Speculations, then, can signify a mode of engagement that exposes and dwells with and against the carceral grasp of historicity. Saidiya Hartman (2008) offers “critical fabulation” as a method of working within and against the limitations of historicity and representation, which in the case of the transatlantic slave trade, is overdetermined by and impossible to represent outside of the grammar of violence and loss. Hartman demonstrates how such a speculative method challenges the insatiable, impossible desire for historical recuperation or restoration by necessitating a “refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure” (p. 12). Such gaps, that evade historical enclosure, expose and challenge the coherent integrity of the Self and hold the potential to reconfigure the self, subjectivity, and relationality.

⁶ Translation of *chardi kala* from the Sikh Research Institute.

Donna Haraway (2016), in her argument for feminist speculative fabulations, describes speculations as a method of sympoiesis--a "making-with" that "enlarges and displaces autopoiesis and all other self-forming and self-sustaining system fantasies" (p. 125). In this way, the speculation of Guru Sahibs as queer and trans becomes a sympoietic move, whereby queer and trans Sikhs insist on and materialize a central relation to the Guru and the Sangat. This relation reconfigures their queerness and transness as a practice of Sikhi, and their Sikhi as a practice of queerness and transness. Such a speculation operationalizes gender and sexuality outside of dominant Eurocentric, cisheteronormative scripts, enacting a gender and sexuality whose function is to cultivate a relationship to Guru Sahib, or in other words, to cultivate Guruship. Rather than serving reproduction and brahminical white cis/heteropatriarchy, gender and sexuality are transformed into sites and means through which queer and trans Sikhs to learn, claim, and embody *patshahi* [divine sovereignty]. In this process, dominant notions of gender and sexuality as properties, claimed by and constitutive of, the bounded self are destabilized and rerouted toward understandings of them as relational practices— means of "making-with" and "becoming-with" the Sikh tradition.

Such a move aligns with the strategies employed by Guru Sahibs that evoked, proliferated, destabilized, and rerouted the very categories and scripts like that of gender and caste. Sikhi is pointing toward a mode of critique that seeks to question and destabilize the very intelligibility and coherence of the moral frameworks from which critique and its terms emerge. By proliferating each moral framework and interrogating its stability, the very grounds upon which the separation and categorization of "competing moral frameworks" coheres are put into question through such an insistence.

What possibilities emerge from the insistence that the Sikh is everywhere, that queerness and transness is everywhere in Sikhi, and that women, too, are everywhere in Sikhi? What possibilities emerge from mapping womanhood onto Guru Sahib themselves? Here, I am wary of what Biddy Martin (1994) has described as "antifoundationalist celebrations of queerness [that] rely on their own projections of fixity, constraint, or subjection onto a fixed ground, often onto feminism or the female body, in relation to which queer sexualities become figural, performative, play," through which "operations of misogyny disappear from view" (p, 104). Martin cautions against the valorization of mobility and transversal of boundaries that ends up obscuring the particularity and materiality of patriarchal violence. Hence, the speculative turn I am suggesting must remain responsible and accountable to, as opposed to dismissive of, particularity. In other words, speculative feminism and situated feminism must exist in a productive tension and entanglement (Truman, 2019), both keenly attuned to the violences of misogyny and patriarchy that govern the structures of gender and sexuality, *and* alert to the configurations of gender and sexuality that are illegible to and exceed the normative frameworks within which the critique is often contained. Such a mode of engagement can give way to undoing the overdetermined grasp of gender on us and in developing Sikh onto-epistemologies of gender that differ from Eurocentric and universalized notions of gender (Martin, 1994; Barker, 2017). This approach could reorient the project of Sikh feminism by prompting the development of moral and ethical frameworks than those currently being deployed, more specifically, by drawing on and building from frameworks grounded in Sikh onto-epistemologies that demand a fundamentally different conceptualization of gender.

An engagement that presumes and builds from the authority of Sikh onto-epistemologies would necessitate an interrogation of secularism in structuring our analytical horizons. As Joan Wallach Scott reminds us, the very idea of gender inequality as rooted in religion is an innovation of secularism, which functions to: 1) naturalize and justify gender difference and inequality through the logics of reason and science; 2) obscure the centrality of gender inequality in articulating and maintaining the dualistic binaries between public/private, man/woman, universal/particular, and religious/secular; 3) construct and discipline the very category of religion by divorcing it from spheres of political economy; and 4) displace the violence of gender inequality in secular societies in order to secure secularism's claim as the sphere in which equality and emancipation are imaginable (Scott, 2018; Scott, 2013; Asad, 2018). Secular logic also demands coherence, visibility, and representation as preconditions for autonomy and liberation, and constitute the very grid of intelligibility that frames and enables the articulation and circulation of discourses on injury and blasphemy (Asad, 2013; Mahmood, 2013). Stated more directly, Sikh feminist critiques that center gender inequality as evidence of Sikhi's failings, and position Sikhi as the primary source of women's subjugation, risk reifying the very gendered logics of secularism that frame and obscure how Sikhi, gender, and gender (in)equality are understood.

These gendered logics of secularism are not so different from those that frame and facilitate the charge of blasphemy against the speculation of Guru Sahibs as queer and trans. If blasphemy signifies a transgression of limits, then the charge of blasphemy reveals the operation of those very limits, and the normative onto-epistemological frameworks that establish and allow for the contestation of those limits (Mahmood, 2013). Such a charge presumes a certain definition of the sacred, along with delimitations of what constitutes the appropriate and authoritative terms of reverence. Each of these presumptions is entangled with, and secured through, gendered logics that govern not only the coherence and recognition of religious subjectivity, but also who may access the Divine, and how. The charges of blasphemy circulating on the secular landscapes of Twitter point less to theological dispute and more to the significance of secularism in shaping the terms through which Sikhi is debated, delimited, and defended. These responses echo secularism's demand for a distinct and bounded "religion," governed by specific and gendered norms of principle and practice. Many of the responses to the speculation of Guru Sahib as queer or trans did not objection to the existence of queer and trans Sikhs— so long as queerness and transness were framed as privatized identities or individualized "choices." What was deemed blasphemous, rather, was the act of "projecting" them onto the Guru Sahibs. In other words, the objection was not to queer and trans Sikhs themselves, but to the relationality they enacted with Guru Sahib, one that refused liberal individualism and insisted on intimacy and identification with Guru Sahib. This distinction reveals secularism emphasis on individual choice, which renders unintelligible forms of engagement and attachment that exceed liberal scripts (Mahmood, 2013). The living relationship queer and trans Sikhs enact with Guru Sahib and Guruship through such speculation exemplifies an excess that secularism marks as blasphemous.

If the analysis that gender serves as the means through which relationality to the Divine is disciplined, policed, and rendered intelligible or illegible, within both religious and secular registers, is already predetermined by, and overdetermined with, secular onto-epistemologies, then what other meanings of gender can we think with, learn from, build on, and mobilize? What are alternative meanings and functions

of gender when it is not in service of reproduction and to white and brahminical cis/heteropatriarchy?⁷ What is gender when it is oriented towards the Divine, towards the Guru? A project of Sikh feminism that takes up these questions would reposition the space between principles and practices not as a “problem space,” but as a space of our making and unmaking, within which the carceral limits that both construct and capture us can be traversed and undone.⁸

⁷ This question is inspired by Jack Halberstam who writes “The transbiological element here has to do with the alternative meanings of gender when biology is not in the service of reproduction and patriarchy.” See Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁸ Provocation inspired by Rajbir Singh Judge who writes, “We must remember what we have *learned* in the Sikh tradition to rethink the trappings of the ego that reinscribe the very contours we wish to erase—the separations that we consider divine gifts.” See Judge, *Prophetic Maharaja*.

References

- Arondekar, Anjali. *Abundance: Sexuality's History*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023.
- Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Asad, Talal. "Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism." In *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, edited by Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, 20–63. Berkeley, CA: Townsend Center for the Humanities, 2013.
- Asad, Talal. *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.
- Bains, Satwinder Kaur. "Interrogating Gender in Sikh Tradition and Practice." *Religions* 11, no. 1 (2020): 34. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11010034>.
- Bal, Jaspreet, and Santbir Singh Sarkar-Daman. "Reintegrating the Feminine Voice Inherent in Sikh Scripture." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 37, no. 2 (2021): 65–82. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.37.2.05>.
- Barker, Joanne. "Introduction: Critically Sovereign." In *Critically Sovereign: Indigenous Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies*, edited by Joanne Barker, 1–30. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017.
- Bey, Marquis, and Jesse A. Goldberg. "Queer as in Abolition Now!" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 28, no. 2 (April 2022): 159–163. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-9608091>.
- Bey, Marquis. *Black Trans Feminism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022.
- Brown, Wendy. *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995.
- Butler, Judith. "The Sensibility of Critique: Response to Asad and Mahmood." In *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, edited by Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, 97. Berkeley, CA: Townsend Center for the Humanities, 2013.
- Butler, Judith. "What Is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue." In *The Judith Butler Reader*, edited by Sarah Salih, 302–22. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004.
- Dhavan, Purnima. "Tracing Gender in the Texts and Practices of the Early Khalsa." In *Sikhism and Women: History, Texts, and Experience*, edited by Doris R. Jakobsh, 45–67. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Foucault, Michel. "What Is Critique?" In *What Is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, edited by James Schmidt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.
- Gill, Harjant Singh. "Transnational Hair (and Turban): Sikh Masculinity, Embodied Practices, and Politics of Representation in an Era of Global Travel." *Ethnography* 23, no. 2 (2022): 226–248. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138120923712>.
- Gill-Peterson, Jules. "30. Gender." In *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies*, edited by The Keywords Feminist Editorial Collective, 96–101. New York: New York University Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479808168.003.0034>.
- Halberstam, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.

- Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14.
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/241115>.
- Jakobsh, Doris R. "Relocating Gender in Sikh History: Transformation, Meaning and Identity." Retrospective Theses and Dissertations, 1919–2007. Thesis, University of British Columbia, 2000.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0089814>.
- Judge, Rajbir Singh. *Prophetic Maharaja: Loss, Sovereignty, and the Sikh Tradition in Colonial South Asia*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024.
- Judge, Rajbir Singh. "The Construction of Dangerous Boundaries." *Sikh Research Journal* 7, no. 2 (2022): 27–44. <https://doi.org/10.62307/srj.v7i2.35>.
- Kaur, Sophia. "Femme-inist Futures: Examples from Sikh Praxis." In *Begumpura Collective Zine*, edited by manmit singh and prabhdeep singh kehal, 2023. <https://qtsikharchive.org/begumpura-collective-zine/>.
- kehal, prabhdeep singh. "Negotiating Utopia: An Affective, Autoethnographic Framework for Reflexivity." *Sociological Perspectives* (2025).
- kehal, prabhdeep singh. "Utopian Methods and Reflexivity: Theorizing Researcher Subjectivity Formation Through Relationality." In *Upending the Colorline*, edited by Hammer R., Itzigsohn J., Rodríguez-Muñiz M. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming.
- Kohli, Aarti. "Constructing the Ideal Sikh: Historiographies of Sikh Martial Traditions." *Intellectual Resonance* 4, no. 2 (2016): 45–60.
- Kohli, Aarti. "Militarization of Sikh Masculinity." *Graduate Journal of Social Sciences* 12, no. 3 (2016): 75–96.
- Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012.
- Mahmood, Saba. "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?" In *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, edited by Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, 64–100. Berkeley, CA: Townsend Center for the Humanities, 2013.
- Martin, Biddy. "Sexualities Without Genders and Other Queer Utopias." *diacritics* 24, nos. 2–3 (1994).
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.
- Oyěwùmí, Oyèrónkẹ. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- Sabherwal, Sasha. "The Elasticity of Caste in the Sikh Diaspora: Jat Cool and Caste Masculinities in the Pacific Northwest." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 27, no. 1 (2024): 91–114.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2024.a926985>.
- Sangha, Jaspreet. Interview by manmit singh. July 18, 2023. *Sikh LGBTQIA+ Oral History Archive*.
<https://qtsikharchive.org/directory/>.
- Scott, Joan Wallach. *Sex and Secularism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018.
- Scott, Joan Wallach. "Secularism and Gender Equality." In *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*, edited by Linell Cady and Tracy Fessenden, 25–44. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.
- Sikh Research Institute. *The Sikh Cast*. "Nam: Divine Identification: The Fragrance of Bhai Vir Singh." Featuring Inni Kaur and Kiranjot Kaur. December 30, 2022. Spotify.

<https://creators.spotify.com/pod/show/the-sikh-cast-sikhri/episodes/Nam-Divine-Identification--The-Fragrance-of-Bhai-Vir-Singh-e1stbj6/a-a9454ck>.

Sikh Research Institute. *The Sikh Cast*. "What Is Nam Simran?" Featuring Harinder Singh. October 10, 2023. Spotify. <https://creators.spotify.com/pod/show/the-sikh-cast-sikhri/episodes/What-is-Nam-Simran---Ask-SikhRI-e2acr7a/a-aaf75k7>.

singh, manmit. "Reading Sikhi and Transness Together: Theorizing a Politics of Death and Unbodiment." *Sikh Formations*, February 2024, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448727.2024.2318873>.

Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur. *The Birth of the Khalsa: A Feminist Re-Memory of Sikh Identity*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005.

Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur. "Why Did I Not Light the Fire? The Refeminization of Ritual in Sikhism." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 16, no. 1 (2000): 63–85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25002376>.

Truman, Sarah. "SF! Haraway's Situated Feminisms and Speculative Fabulations in English Class." *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 38 (2019): 31–42. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-018-9632-5>

To Sikh or Not to Sikh: In Defense of the Sikh Shawl

Frank Ames

Abstract

This essay challenges the long-held claim that European, particularly French, design influenced the Kashmir shawl during the early 19th century. Instead, it argues that the transformation in shawl motifs, marked by architectural, geometric, and Khalsa-inspired imagery, originated within the Sikh cultural and political milieu of Punjab under Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Drawing on French archival records, rare *kani* shawls, and regional history, the study affirms the Kashmir shawl's indigenous evolution and rejects the notion of European artistic precedence.

Keywords: *Sikh shawls, Kashmiri shawls, kani shawls, colonial art history, Khalsa symbolism in textiles*

Introduction

Following Maharaja Ranjit Singh's annexation of Kashmir in 1819, the design of the Kashmir shawl underwent a significant transformation. Traditional floral paisley patterns, or *butas*, that typically adorned the ends of long shawls were replaced with geometric, architectural, and symbolic motifs inspired by the Khalsa culture of Punjab.

Under Ranjit Singh's peaceful reign, Punjab witnessed a surge in extensive construction projects, including forts, the renovations of monuments, and the Harmandir Sahib. This surge in architectural activity, and the detailed blueprints required for these endeavors, likely influenced the evolving artistry of the Kashmir shawl designs. Sikh warriors and the *Akalis*⁹ contributed motifs derived from their weapons, such as bows, arrows, and quoits, which hold metaphorical significance in the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* [central religious scripture of Sikhism].

Some Western scholars have suggested that this design shift was influenced by Europe's emerging imitation shawl industry or have dismissed these creations as mere "export shawls"—a term that undermines India's rightful ownership of this textile art form.¹⁰ Such claims wrongly imply that Europe, rather than India, deserves credit for this unique artistic tradition.

This essay argues the opposite. It explores the geo-political, artistic, and cultural environment of early 19th-century Punjab, particularly the Khalsa ethos, wartime symbolism, and architectural innovations, that inspired the Kashmir shawl's design shift. It also demonstrates that the European imitation shawl industry,

⁹ Akalis, also known as *nihangs* (crocodiles), were extremely courageous warriors, some of whom formed a part of the Sikh army.

¹⁰ In *Kashmir Shawls* (TAPI Collection, 2010), Jeff Spurr dismisses the idea of a Sikh-period shawl without providing proof (p. 53). Professor Louis Fenech also expressed skepticism, both in his article (*Sikh Formations*, 2012) and in his review of *Woven Masterpieces of Sikh Heritage* (2015). I reached out to Fenech after his review, but no substantive reply was received. In private correspondence (2010), Dr. Steven Cohen likewise stated he would remain unconvinced without definitive evidence of a Sikh shawl tradition.

especially in France, had no influence on the authentic Kashmir shawls woven during Ranjit Singh's era. A detailed chronology of events in France—the then leading country in imitation shawl production—highlights the extent to which French manufacturers relied on India's unparalleled design creativity to satisfy the fashion demands of their noble clientele.

It was only after 1851, following the Crystal Palace Exhibition in Hyde Park, London, that French shawl agents arrived in Srinagar, with the latest fashion in shawl patterns. This is when the so-called “export shawl” was created (fig. 7).

To situate the present argument, I briefly trace the path my research has taken over the past four decades. My inquiry, first touched on in *The Kashmir Shawl and its Indo-French Influence* (1986), where I explored the shawl's design evolution under four successive regimes: Mughal, Afghan, Sikh, and Dogra. At that time, I mentioned the Sikh influence only briefly, considering it a plausible but unverified hypothesis. Little did I realize that I had uncovered an artistic legacy overlooked by both Indian and Western scholars. This early recognition deepened with my second book, *Woven Masterpieces of Sikh Heritage* (WMSH2010), which explored the potential Western influences, including the role of foreign mercenaries in early Sikh shawl development. Although constrained by the scarcity of surviving shawl examples, the book's strength lay in the rare and exceptional *kani* [woven twill tapestry] shawls I was able to gather. These pieces offered a compelling visual narrative, connecting Punjab's cultural environment with the intricate, evolving iconography of the shawls.

Since the publication of WMSH, no textile scholar has presented a credible counterargument supporting the European influence theory. Despite the absence of formal counterarguments in the literature, some scholars have expressed skepticism—both in published work and private correspondence. This ongoing silence may stem from limited knowledge about the history of the shawl in France, a country that held a leading role in European textile design and production. Understanding that context is essential if we are to have a meaningful debate.

With my forthcoming book, *Pashmina Jewels* (due out July 2025), I am now able to assert with greater confidence that the design transformation of the Kashmir shawl's was rooted not in Europe, but in the symbolic ideas, architectural motifs, and contemporary events of Sikh culture and Punjab.¹¹ Drawing on extensive, largely ignored French archival records, I present clear evidence that dispels any lingering doubts about France's influence on these designs in the 1820s and 1830s. Rather than inspiring Kashmir, France relied heavily on the innovative shawl patterns arriving from India year after year.

¹¹ *Pashmina Jewels: The Khanuja Family Collection of Kashmir shawls, with Introduction by Professor Jean-Marie Lafont*. Now in final stages of publication by Roli Books, New Delhi.

Note (Figs. 1–6): A rapid historical glimpse of the Kashmir shawl’s pattern development during the Mughal (1586–1753), Afghan (1753–1820), Sikh (1819–1846), and Dogra (1846–) periods. Shown here are boteh (also known as butas or paisley) motifs repeated along the extremities of long shawls.



Fig. 1: This collage of Mughal shawl details illustrates the open spacing between botehs, a trait that diminished under Afghan rule in Kashmir.



Fig. 2: Boteh details from the latter half of the 18th century.



Fig. 3: Boteh details, circa 1775–1810.

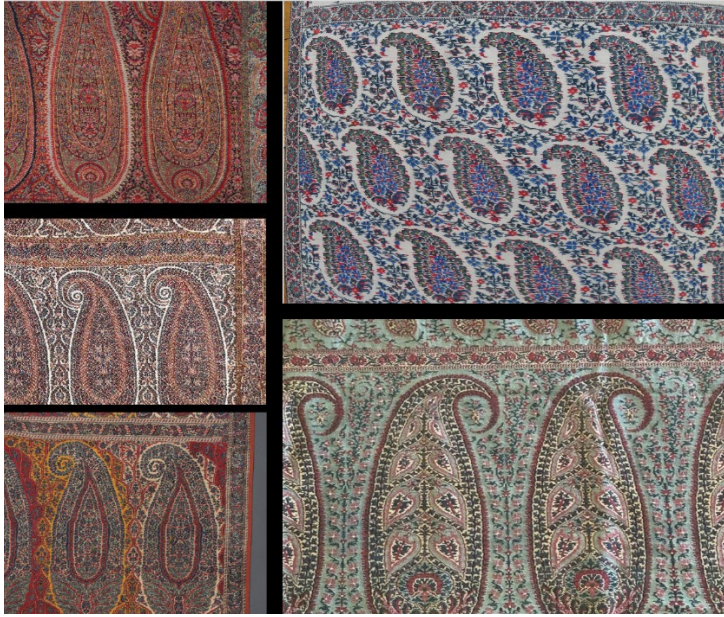


Fig. 4: These patterns (left side and bottom right) resemble sketches made by William Moorcroft and dispatched to England in 1822.



Fig. 5: Alongside traditional shawl products, there were essentially two types of long shawls during the Sikh period: the "Moorcroft" type (as seen in Fig. 4), and those represented here, showcasing a new design sensibility—the Sikh school—defined by geometric, architectonic, and symbolic ideas that emerged during Maharaja Ranjit Singh's reign.



Fig. 6: French influence profoundly impacted Kashmir shawl design following the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851. This selection of five images clearly illustrates that stylistic shift.

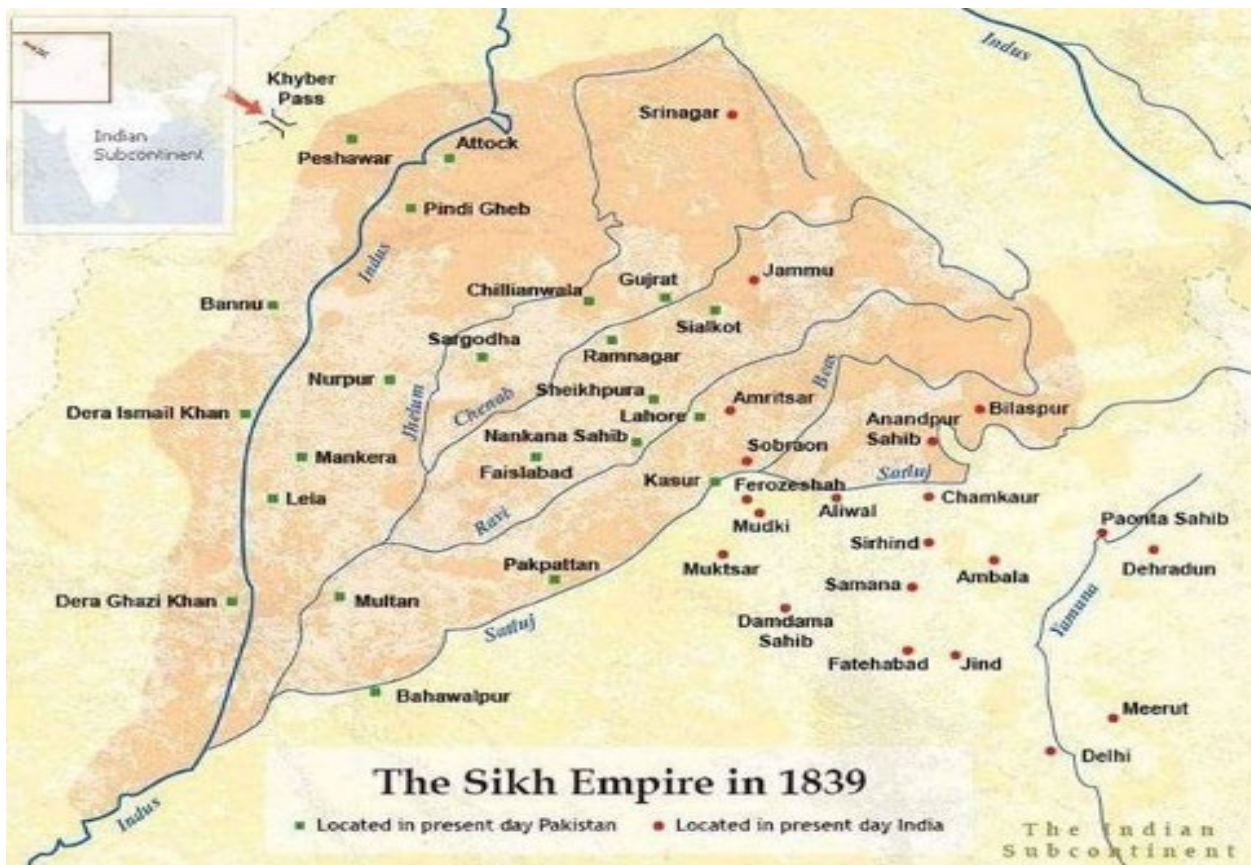


Fig. 7: Map of the Sikh Empire in 1839.

Setting the Stage

Situated just below Kashmir in northern India, Punjab is a region defined by five rivers, which endured intense conflict throughout the 18th century (fig. 7). It became a battleground for numerous powers and religious groups, including the Afghans, Mughals, Sikhs, Pathans, Marathas, Rohillas, and eventually the British, all vying for control over this strategically vital land, comparable in size to France. Amid this turbulence, the Sikhs emerged victorious under the leadership of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who annexed Kashmir in 1819.¹

During the early years of Sikh dominance, around 1820-1825, a significant transformation occurred in the Kashmir shawl industry. The design, once dominated by simple paisley motifs (*buta*) placed at either end of the long, twill-woven pashmina shawl, evolved into a far more intricate and dynamic style, one that extended across the entire surface of the tapestry.

This article explores the relationship between these evolving shawl designs and the artistic, religious, and military milieu fostered under Ranjit Singh's reign. For the first time, the previously fragmented and often warring Sikh *misls* [chiefdoms] were united under a central authority, whose military strength nearly rivaled that of British India. In this environment, a wave of artistic innovation flourished among Kashmiri, Sikh, and Pahari artisans, giving rise to a distinctive design language.

Shawls began to feature geometric forms, such as eight-pointed stars, circles, spear shapes, sweeping curves, and architectonic patterns, all merging together in a flowing, rhythmic fashion (figs. 8 right, 9, and 10). This stylistic energy might be likened to a form of music, or even to bursts of fireworks. New symbolic motifs, such as bows and arrows, quivers, boats, quoits, and the Sikh ceremonial dagger [*kirpan*]²—one of the five symbols of the Khalsa—became prominent (figs. 11 and 12). Another recurring motif may represent the *gurdwara* [Sikh temple], woven into the shawl's twill patterns (fig. 9). Shawl designs, previously restricted to the extreme ends [*pallu*] of the shawl, began to expand across the entire fabric, leaving almost no part of the shawl unadorned except for a small, plain center.³ The majestic, avant-garde pattern in fig. 13, evoking the *sarlah*³ patterns of illuminated manuscripts (see fig. 14)—challenges our very definition of the word 'shawl'. Its theatrical statement foreshadows, by nearly a century, the West's Art Deco period.

¹ V. A. Smith, *The Oxford History of India*, p. 548-594, Oxford Univ. Press, 1981

² Until the dawn of the 19th century, long shawls were wide swaths of plain pashmina with just the extremities embellished with a running pattern of botehs (paisleys). French soldiers returning from Napoléon's Egyptian campaigns with Kashmir shawl souvenirs stirred a craze for the article. The fashion was fueled by Imperatrice Josephine who is said to have over 400 of these extremely expensive shoulder mantles.

³ The term *sarlah* refers to Sikh illuminated manuscripts and normally denotes the opening illuminated page containing the Mul Mantar.

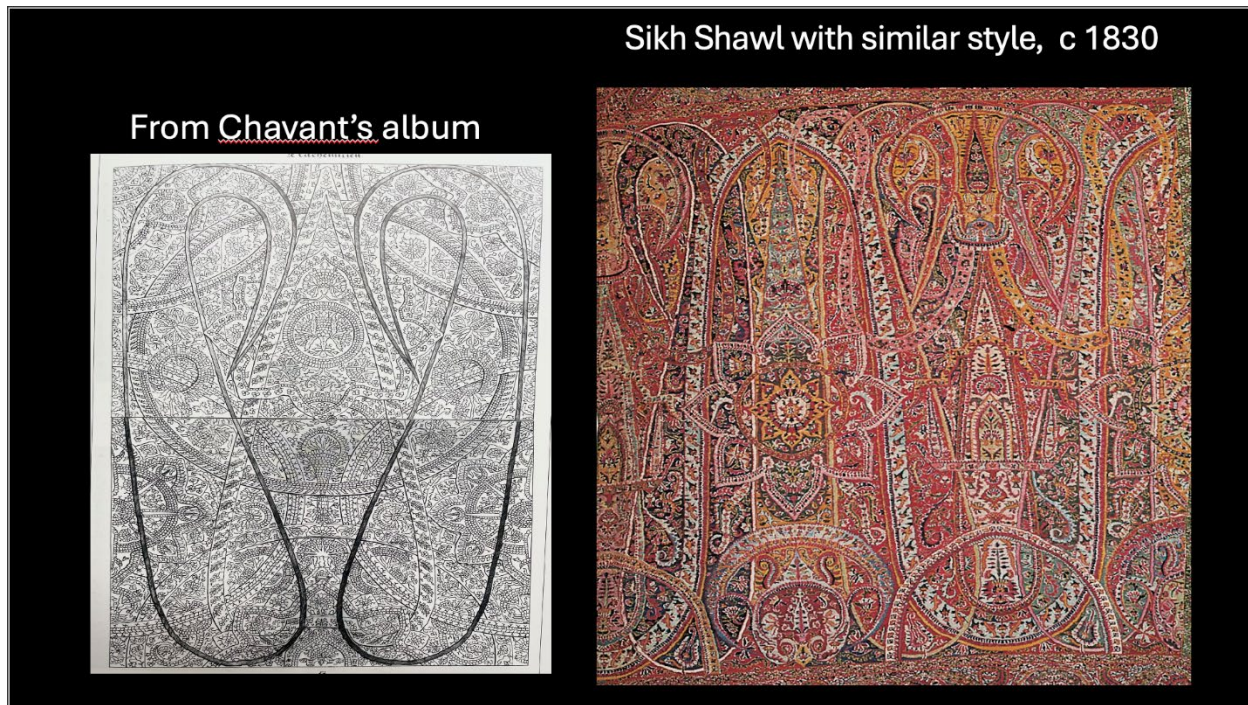


Fig. 8: Fleuri Chavant published albums for the French weaving industry based on Indian Kashmir shawls. In *Le Cachmirien*, (National Library, Paris) we see a pattern stylistically similar to the pallu detail on the right (Banaras Hindu University Art Museum). The lotus, quoit, obelisk, Ik Omkar flourish, star, cypress tree, and paisley all seem to vie for prominence.



Fig. 9: Colonnaded structure (pavilion or gurdwara?), pagoda-like roof (Himalayan influence), ogives, and heavy bracket. This enigmatic shawl's cryptic symbolism will likely puzzle scholars for years. Exceptionally rare and unique. Khanuja Coll.



Fig. 10: Pallu detail of a unique Kashmir shawl believed to depict the samadhi boat used to carry Maharaja Ranjit Singh's body. TAPI Coll. Kangra artists may have contributed to the weaving. (See Fig. 20 for boat detail. Color variation noted.)



Fig. 11: Detail of a recurve bow with its vibrating string and a downward-pointing arrow—possibly just released. An exceptionally rare and unique shawl. Khanuja Coll.

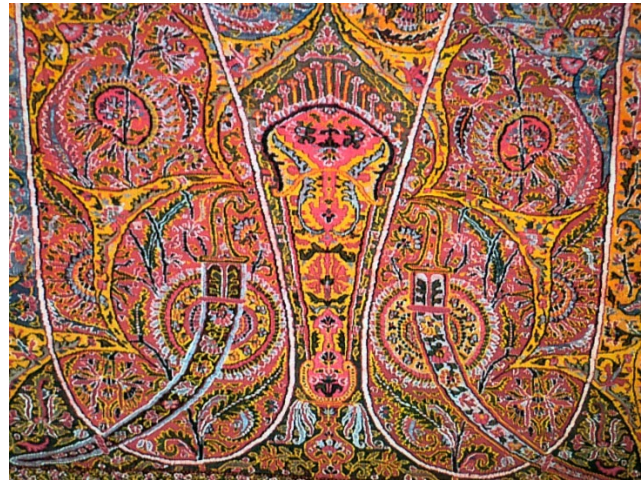


Fig. 12: Shawl detail showing two kirpans (possibly miri-piri) sheathed and facing one another. Between them a quiver - also flanked by shields-filled with seventeen arrows.



Fig. 13: This striking 1825 Kashmir shawl pattern not only anticipates Art Deco but, with its avant-garde graphic language, evokes sarlah motifs from illuminated Sikh or Islamic manuscripts. Crafts Museum, Delhi.



Fig. 14: Page from a Guru Granth Sahib manuscript illustrating the expansive cursive flourish above "Ik Onkar," melding into the sarloh illumination. (See Fig. 27.)

Artistic Influences in the Rise of the Sikh Shawl

What sparked this new artistic movement during the Sikh period? Could it have drawn inspiration from sacred Sikh texts like the *Janamsakhi* [biographies of Guru Nanak] or the *Sri Adi Granth* [Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh scripture]? Perhaps it was influenced by artists closely associated with Maharaja Ranjit Singh's court in Lahore. Was Imam Bakhsh Lahori, one of the most prominent Punjabi artists of the time, a key figure in this creative wave?⁴

Or did the influence trickle down from the Pahari princely states, following Raja Sansar Chand's submission to Ranjit Singh? Maybe it originated with the Pandit Seu family of artists from Guler, whose legacy shaped the work of numerous regional painters. Lahore itself housed many thriving workshops, including Muhammad Bakhsh Sahhaf's atelier, where these ideas could have blossomed. The foreign military commanders and mercenaries who trained Ranjit Singh's elite forces (*Fauj-i-Khas*) may also have played a role. Their distinctive battle gear (fig. 15), and the extravagant military style of Ranjit's Napoleonic generals, Allard and Ventura, who arrived between 1822 and 1827, could have left an impression.⁵ Was it due to commemorative designs inspired by the Sikh's major victory at the battle of Naushera in 1823? Undoubtedly, this vibrant and cosmopolitan environment stirred the imaginations of weavers and craftsmen, who eagerly incorporated bold and artistic influences into their designs.

⁴ Barbara Schmitz and Jean-Marie Lafont, "The Painter Imam Bakhsh of Lahore", pp. 74-99 in *After the Great Mughals: Painting in Delhi and the Regional Courts in the 18th and 19th Centuries*, Ed. By Schmitz, Marg Publications, June 2002

⁵ For details on foreign mercenaries working under Maharaja Ranjit Singh: *Jean-Marie Lafont Essays in Indo-French Relations 1630-1976* Indika, Manohar, 2000.

One traveler, William Moorcroft⁶, an early 19th-century British veterinarian and explorer, stands out for his detailed account of the Kashmir shawl industry. During his extended stay in Srinagar (a city in the Kashmir Valley) in 1822, just a few years after Ranjit Singh's annexation of the valley, Moorcroft observed a shawl with an unusual border known in Kashmiri as *hashiyadar kunguradar*. He described it as having a distinctive border with an inner design resembling the crenellations of Asiatic forts, complete with narrow embrasures for wall pieces or matchlocks, thus giving it its name.⁷

A surviving shawl corroborates Moorcroft's account, showcasing an early example of *kani* [twill tapestry] architecture and signaling a pivotal shift in shawl design trends (fig. 16).⁸ By 1830, the shawl had become a vibrant canvas for an eclectic mix of geometric, architectural, curved forms, oblongs, and strange, hybrid shapes, all intermingling in a visually enigmatic and intricate manner.



Fig. 15: Akali with dasta bunga, 19th c.

Left Variations of the quoit, a sharp war instrument. Khanuja Coll.

Right: A Sikh warrior's armament—including recurve bow, arrows, quiver, and shield—woven into Kashmir tapestry shawls. (See Figs. 11 & 12.)



Fig. 16: A detail of the hashiya (border) from a long Kashmir shawl. This kani weave (twill tapestry) is the earliest known example of architectural illustration on an Indian Kashmir shawl. While not matching Moorcroft's 1822 description, it reflects early use of architectural motifs in shawl design. Thakar Coll.

⁶ Moorcroft, W., (and Trebeck, G), *Travels in the Himalayan provinces of Hindustan and the Panjab; in Ladakh and Kashmir; in Peshawar, Kabul, Kunduz and Bokhara from 1819-1825*. London, 1841

⁷ John Irwin, *The Kashmir Shawl*, p. 28, V&A, 1973

⁸ See, for example, WMSH, p. 190

The Sikh Imprint on Shawl Design

The transformation of Kashmir shawl design in the early nineteenth century was not a coincidence, but the natural outgrowth of a new visual vitality sparked under Sikh rule. The quintessential Sikh-era shawl pattern is a mosaic of overlapping imagery, conveying a multitude of intricate relationships and potential metaphors, many of which remain open to interpretation. When we explore these designs within the framework of Euclidean spaces and isometries (where one form is embedded within another; motifs are mirrored, rotated, and arranged in layered symmetry), we encounter a pivotal moment for the Kashmiri shawl. At this crossroads, simplicity, order, and clarity of line converge with the layered complexity of a new pictorial language woven from symbolic motifs.

Earlier Kashmir shawl designs, particularly in the Mughal weavings, there was little to dissect intellectually—nothing to disturb the viewer’s sense of balance. These patterns, such as Mughal floral motifs (fig 1), evoked an immediate visual connection. The graceful movement of flowers and blossoms mirrored the iconic Mughal aesthetic, typified by the triple-bend [*tribhanga*] sway of floral motifs found on carpets, in miniatures, and even in architectural sculptures. This style was a creative fusion of Persian and European iconography with an indigenous Indian artistic heritage. During the Afghan period in Kashmir, the shawl retained its signature *boteh* motif (a teardrop, pinecone, or mango shape), with artists competing to see how creatively they could arrange flowers within the *boteh*’s distinctive curvilinear form (figs. 2 and 3).

In recent decades, interest in Sikh art has been reignited, beginning with William Archer’s landmark publication *Paintings of the Sikhs* (1953), followed by the pioneering research of B.N. Goswamy. Over the past two decades, three significant exhibitions on Sikh art have taken place, showcasing paintings, coins, textiles, metalwork, and armaments.⁹ While these exhibitions may not define a singular, unified “Sikh style,” they highlight what Barbara Schmitz has described as “a new function,” which, when considered alongside visual style, serves as a hallmark of the era’s art.¹⁰ Yet, in the absence of a cohesive Sikh artistic style, the extensive catalogues from these exhibitions tend to feature artifacts that, while ethnically and culturally significant, are often utilitarian objects typical of the Punjab region during that time, rather than definitive examples of Sikh art.

Understanding Sikh art requires familiarity with the Sikh sacred texts, primarily the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* and the *Janamsakhis*. The *Granth Sahib*, the central sacred scripture, comprises over 6,000 poetic hymns (*shabads*), each composed within specific raga styles. In contrast, the *Janamsakhis* recount the life stories of Guru Nanak, compiled by early followers and later Sikh scholars. In the late 18th and 19th centuries, both texts experienced a renaissance of artistic expression, making them rich sources of Sikh iconography. The illustrations and illuminations in these scriptures may also offer valuable insights into the artistic evolution of the Kashmir shawl.

⁹ Susan Stronge (ed.), *The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms*, V&A Museum, 1999; B. N. Goswamy, *Piety and Splendour: Sikh Heritage in Art*, 2000, exhibition held at the National Museum, Delhi and the Rubin Museum, NY.

¹⁰ Private email correspondence with Dr. Barbara Schmitz, June 2008

The *Granth Sahib* makes repeated references to dyeing, particularly in the color red, which serves as both simile and metaphor in Guru Nanak's teachings. "The Lord dyed in deep red; the Lord is an expert dyer; He who has been dyed in the red is of great good fortune; dyed in fast color, the color that never fades" is one example of how Nanak linked spiritual depth with the act of dyeing. Although red is frequently mentioned, it seems that green during this period emerged as one of the favored colors among Sikhs, (fig. 17) while saffron held sacred significance, especially for Hindus.¹¹

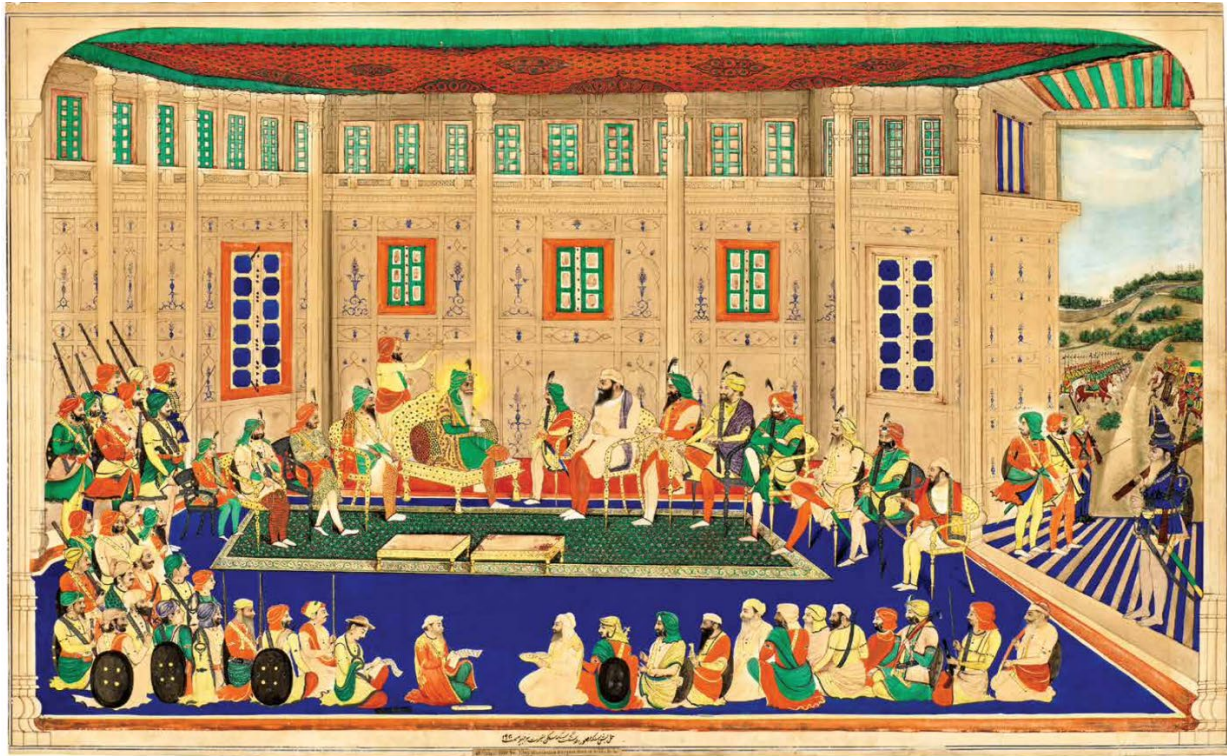


Fig. 17: Maharaja Ranjit Singh in Durbar, by Bishan Singh (1836–1900). Possibly Amritsar. Note the prominence of green in clothing and shawls. Khanuja Coll.

In Guru Nanak's moral teachings on clothing, we also find symbolic descriptions of attire: "Truth and charity are my white clothes; the blackness of sin is erased by my wearing of blue clothes, and meditation on the Lord's Lotus feet is my robe of honor; contentment is my cummerbund."¹² The metaphor extends further, suggesting that wearing virtuous attire leads to spiritual fulfillment: "O Baba, the pleasures of other clothes are false, wearing them, the body is ruined, and wickedness and corruption enter into the mind."

The *Granth* also draws on warrior imagery, likening spiritual understanding to the warrior's gear: "The understanding of Your Way, Lord, is horses, saddles, and bags of gold for me¹³; the pursuit of virtue is my

¹¹ Henry T Prinsep writes, "All dressed in yellow and light green being the favorite colour of his court, and called Basanti, or the colours of Spring". P129 of *Origins of the Sikh Power in the Punjab and Political life of Maharaja Runit Singh with and account of Religion, Laws and customs of the Sikh* (compiled by HTP) 1970 Language Department, Punjab, Patiala.

See also: Gurdeep Kaur & Rohita Sharma, *Interpretation of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in Portraiture: An Overview*. *Bharatiya Pragna*., Phagwara, Punjab, vol. 1, no. 3, Lovely Professional University, 2016

¹² Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji – Ang 16

¹³ From *Srigranth.org*: [Page 16, Line 17](#) [ਘੋੜੇ ਪਾਖਰ ਸੁਝਨੇ ਸਾਖਤਿ ਬੂਝਣੁ ਤੇਰੀ ਵਾਟ ॥ ਘੋੜੇ ਪਾਖਰ ਸੁਝਨੇ ਸਾਖਤਿ ਬੂਝਣੁ ਤੇਰੀ ਵਾਟ ॥]

bow and arrow, my quiver, sword and scabbard; to be distinguished with honor is my drum and banner (Ang 16, SGGS).” See figs. 11, 12, and 18.



Fig. 18: Full pallu (end panel) featuring bow, arrow, shield, and kirpan motifs. (See Figs. 11 & 12 for close-up details).
Khanuja Coll.

Despite these vivid references to dyes, garments, and warrior attire, there is a notable absence of any reference to shawls in the *Granth Sahib*, even though Guru Nanak was born near Lahore and married in Batala¹⁴, both towns situated on the main route connecting Punjab to Kashmir, a region synonymous with shawl-making.

In contrast, the *Janamsakhi* present vivid anecdotes about the life of Guru Nanak, many of which later entered the visual arts through miniature painting. Some of the most popular stories include Nanak’s wedding, his sleeping at Mecca with his feet pointed toward the Kaaba, and the famous tale of Nanak lying under a tree, with a snake’s hood providing him shade from the sun. Nanak’s loyal companions, Bhai Bala and Mardana, the rabab player, frequently appear alongside him in these paintings. However, beyond miniature art, the influence of *Janamsakhi* narratives appear limited in other crafts. This absence is notable when compared to some 19th-century *kani* shawl weavings, which feature Hindu devotional figures such as Krishna and Radha.

¹⁴ See *Guru Nanak’s Life and Thought*, M. Kaur & P. Singh, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, 2012

Key Players in the Punjab

During the early nineteenth century, Lahore thrived under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, becoming a vibrant center of building and artistic activity. Among the notable figures was Muhammed Bakhsh Sahhaf, the city's most prominent bookseller and an accomplished artist. He was a close associate—if not a relative—of the famous artist Imam Bakhsh Lahori¹⁵. Sahhaf's illustrated and calligraphic books were in high demand across India and Iran. The Ahluwalia, Majithia, and Sandhanwalia misls, long-time patrons of the arts, became even more prominent during Ranjit Singh's rule. His court, alongside European officers like Generals Allard and Ventura, frequently employed mural painters to decorate their palaces, gurdwaras, public buildings, and homes. Additionally, the influential Dogra Brothers—Gulab, Suchet, and Dhyan Singh—worked closely with Ranjit Singh, contributing to the flourishing artistic scene.

Many artists during this time hailed from Kangra, which had been ruled by Raja Sansar Chand, a serious art connoisseur and avid collector of miniature paintings. After Ranjit Singh annexed Kangra in 1809, many artists migrated¹⁶ to other hill regions and cities like Lahore and Amritsar, continuing their craft in these vibrant hubs and enriching the emerging Sikh visual culture. Indeed, the well-known shawl-motif paintings dispatched to England in 1822 were painted by Kangra artists engaged by Moorcroft (fig. 19).



Fig. 19: During his two-year sojourn in Kashmir, Moorcroft commissioned Kangra artists to create dozens of shawl sketches, which he sent to England in 1822. Shown at right is an actual example (MET Museum); on the left is a photocopy that highlights a barely visible hooked vine—a principal motif of the Sikh period and an early indicator of the Sikh school.

A particularly remarkable discovery linking Kangra artistry and shawl iconography comes from a Kangra miniature painting depicting the funeral of Maharaja Ranjit Singh¹⁷ (fig. 20 right). In this somber painting, the body of Maharaja Ranjit Singh is laid out on a bier, while seven of his slave girls prepare to commit sati on the pyre. In the corner of the

¹⁵ In a personal correspondence of 28 July 2010 Dr. Barbara Schmitz has stated "Only time will tell if M. B. Lahori and M. B. Sahhaf, the bookseller and bookbinder of Lahore are the same person or two different artists. There is an ambiguity here, true"

¹⁶ W. G. Archer, *Paintings of the Sikhs*, p. 25, V&A Museum, London, 1966

¹⁷ The Cremation of Maharaja Runjit Singh, gouache painting, Kangra, British Museum, c. 1840. For a detailed discussion, see WMSH, p. 112. The actual shawl is in the TAPI Coll. Surat

painting, a garland-draped boat with flags is depicted on a bier placed stern to bow. Some years ago, I identified an unusual motif on a *kani* shawl in my collection that closely corresponded to the garlanded boat depicted in the Kangra painting (fig. 10). This motif of the boat, along with the bow and arrow mentioned earlier, became popular symbols in Kashmir shawl designs.



Fig. 20: Left: Detail of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's 'Samadhi' Shawl. Note details of boat, bier, fluttering flags, and flames. Right: Kangra painting, c 1840. In the lower left corner of the painting is the boat used for Maharaja Ranjit Singh's samadhi procession. British Museum.

Although Ranjit Singh annexed Kashmir in 1819, the real artistic and cultural energy of the Sikh world remained firmly anchored in Punjab. The revival of Kashmir shawl design owes more to the fertile imagination of Punjab than to Srinagar, where Sikh presence was minimal beyond the Maharaja's military forces. The Sikh heartland was in Punjab, particularly in the area west of the Sutlej River, where twelve misls controlled the region, with Lahore as the political and cultural center.

French botanist Victor Jacquemont, who traveled through Punjab during Ranjit Singh's reign, observed that noble Sikh sardars maintained shawl workshops¹⁸ in Srinagar to ensure a steady supply of high-quality shawls. Furthermore, a series of Company style paintings produced for the 1867 Universal Exhibition in Paris¹⁹ (fig. 21) suggests that Lahore itself may have housed its own shawl ateliers perhaps even before Kashmir's annexation.

Studying textiles from this period, however, presents significant challenges. India's harsh climate, along with early neglect of preserving archival materials, means that many pieces of the puzzle have been lost. As Jeevan Singh Deol, an eminent scholar of Sikh studies, notes, that many illustrated texts depicting Sikh themes, or commissioned by Sikh patrons have been widely scattered across regions, making serious study difficult. In his seminal article, "Sikh Scriptural Manuscripts", Deol observes, "In a very real sense, illustrated and illuminated Adi Granth manuscripts are a window into a lost Sikh cultural universe. Their disappearance marks a major change in notions of cultural prestige and attitudes toward the

¹⁸ V. Jacquemont, *Voyage dans l'Inde*, vol. 3, p. 289, Paris, 1841

¹⁹ Exhibition Catalogue, *Kashmir Shawls; Woven Art & Cultural Document. A unique collection of Indian drawings illustrating the production of Kashmir shawls, commissioned for the 1867 Paris Exposition*. Kyburg Limited, London, 1988

physical form of scripture. At this stage of research, we know regrettably little about the geographical, temporal, and social distribution of adorned manuscripts, and even less about the patrons, scribes, and artists who created them.”²⁰ Until more of these fragmented records are recovered, it will remain somewhat difficult to understand the multiple meanings and intentions that lay behind the creation and use of the Sikh shawl.

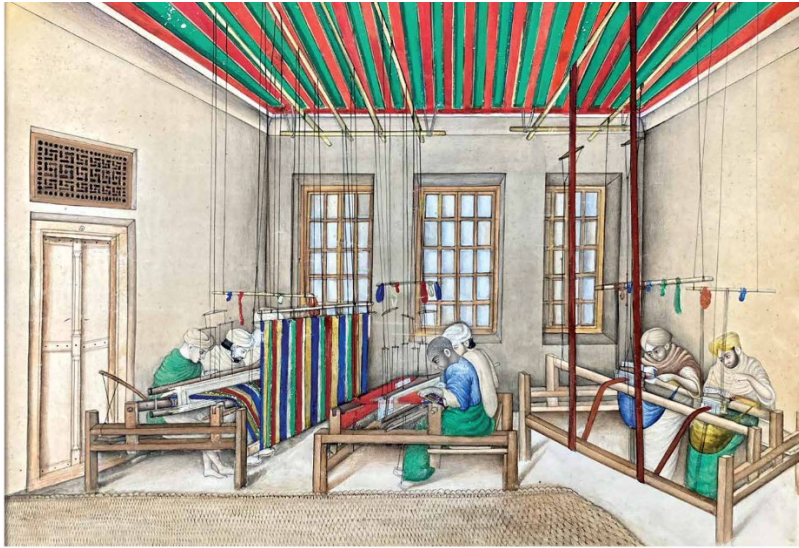


Fig. 21: A karkhandar (weaving workshop), likely in Amritsar, showing weavers managing tojis (bobbins) to insert tapestry wefts. Attributed to Bishan Singh. Likely commissioned by the French East India Company for the 1867 Paris Universal Exhibition. Khanuja Coll.

While initially skeptical about the Sikh authorship of shawl design, Professor Louis Fenech has also offered important insights into the possible symbolic meanings of the Sikh shawl. In an illuminating essay, he suggested a particularly intriguing idea: that the Sikh shawl may have symbolized a subtle defiance against the British, serving as a way of “contesting claims of authority put forward by British hegemony.”²¹ This interpretation would have been especially true of the richly detailed map shawls (shawls woven with cartographic imagery) of Srinagar (fig. 22). It also aligns with other Kashmir *rumals* [handkerchiefs or square cloths] that depict soldiers on parade, highlighting Sikh military strength, albeit more overtly than the classic Sikh shawls with geometric and architectural motifs that represent a unique artistic language.



Fig. 22: Map shawl (detail) of Srinagar, c. 1830s–1840s. V&A.

²⁰ Deol, Jeevan Singh, *Illustration and Illumination in Sikh Scriptural Manuscripts*, Marg, Mumbai, Vol. 54, No. 4, June 2003

²¹ Ranjit Singh, The Shawl, and the Kaub-I Iqbāl-I Punjāb, *Sikh Formations*, Volume 8, 2012 - Issue 2

Fenech averred that an opportunity was missed by not referencing the use of *rumals* covering the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, though no known examples in *kani* cloth exist. Traditionally, such covers were made of silk, satin or velvet. Since the average Kashmir *kani rumal* measures six feet, it would have been way too large and impracticable as a book covering.

Additionally, Fenech noted the absence of Persian poetry's association with flowers in Kashmir weavings²². This critique seemed misplaced, as WMSH includes a moving love poem by Emperor Jehangir, richly suffused with floral metaphors, which I directly compared to contemporaneous Kashmir shawl designs.

By the time we enter the Sikh period, however, floral motifs had become so highly stylized that botanical comparisons begin to lose their relevance. While Tikku's insightful *Persian Poetry in Kashmir*, may speak at length of flowers, it makes no direct reference to the shawls themselves. The Sikh Kashmir²³ shawl was in no way a floral device or a "vocal text" created to perform poetry. Its symbolic "performance" emerges through its graphic elements and patterns, in what Fenech insightfully describes as a "technology of rule". The notion of Kashmir shawl as a poetic text is, in my view, unfounded. Despite years of discussions with Persian scholars, no evidence has ever substantiated this connection—a paradox for a tradition so integral to an ancient culture's spiritual identity.

France's Imitation Kashmir shawl

At the outset of this article, I acknowledged that lingering doubts may persist about France's role in the evolutions of the designs of the Sikh Kashmir shawl. In the above analysis, we have explored the Indian context in which Sikh designs evolved, including Moorcroft's early observation of *kani* architectural motifs (fig. 16). To complete the picture, we now turn to contemporaneous events in France—the other side of the story. The comparison reveals not only France's lack of influence on Kashmir shawl design but also the lengths to which French manufacturers went to obtain the latest patterns from India, year after year. Together, these parallel histories make a compelling case against the notion of European artistic precedence in the evolution of the Sikh Kashmir shawl.

Of all European nations, France emerged as the undisputed leader in producing imitations of the Indian Kashmir shawl. After the French soldiers returned from Napoleon's Egyptian campaign in 1799, the first authentic Indian shawls began to circulate in France (figs. 2 and 3). Shawl manufacturers are awestruck by the complexity of the weave, the brilliance of the dyes, and, above all, the beauty and enigmatic symbolism of these seductive patterns.

For the French nobility, owning a Kashmir shawl became a symbol of refinement tantamount to *noblesse oblige*. Parisian weavers approached the task of replication with forensic determination, analyzing the technical and aesthetic aspects of the Indian originals. Within a few years, ateliers were established around Paris, employing the same labor-intensive tapestry techniques (*kani*)³⁵ used in Kashmir. The work required

²² Woven Masterpieces of Sikh Heritage: the stylistic development of the Kashmir shawl under Maharaja Ranjit Singh 1780–1839. Pp. 261–265 | Pub. online: 16 Oct 2012, Sikh Formations

²³ G.D. Tikku, *Persian Poetry in Kashmir, 1339–1846: An Introduction*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1971

³⁵ In *kani* weaving, as in tapestry, each color is inserted separately. In Jacquard weaving the weft is 'shot' clear across the full width of the fabric.

nimble fingers and remarkable dexterity, leading manufacturers to hire orphaned children to work the looms, a troubling but documented practice in early 19th-century European industry.³⁶

As demand for real Indian shawls grew, French weavers turned to the new mechanical loom of Joseph-Marie Jacquard, (fig. 23) which slowly began to replace traditional handlooms. Even so, by 1820, there were barely 80 Jacquard looms in operation in Paris.³⁷ Nevertheless, a bustling industry had been born, and by the end of the second decade, over 3,000 weavers were actively employed, with thousands more engaged in loom preparation and thread work.³⁸

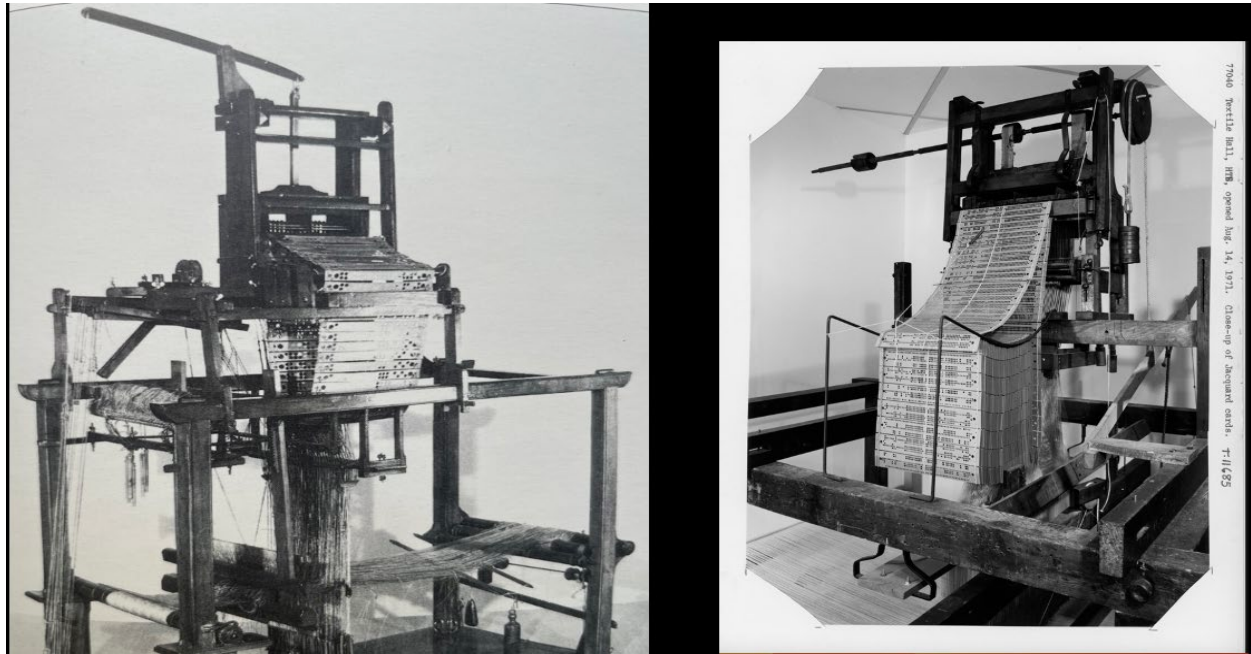


Fig. 23: Two early Jacquard looms with punch cards—an early form of programmable software—c. 1820s.

French manufacturers grew increasingly frustrated that aristocratic families were spending upwards of \$25,000³⁹ (in today's currency)⁴⁰ for imported Indian Kashmir shawls, while weaving companies struggle to create a domestic replacement. This pressure fueled the expansion of the industry.

³⁶ Picard, Charles, *"Saint-Quentin de son Commerce et de ses industries"* p. 136, vol. 2, 1867.

³⁷ The draw loom began being replaced by the Jacquard loom in 1818. P. 339 *Les Ouvriers des deux mondes : études sur les travaux, la vie domestique et la condition morale des populations ouvrières des diverses contrées et sur les rapports qui les unissent aux autres classes* Published by Société internationale des études pratiques d'économie sociale (dir. Frédéric Le Play, 1857

³⁸ Picard, p. 136: From 1804 to 1814 the shawl industry witnessed a big activity; in 1811 there were 3000 weavers, 6000 'dévideuses' (silk unwinders), and as many children working as 'tireurs' (thread pullers) and 'brocheteurs' (shuttle handlers).

³⁹ In 1812, the Parisian shawl dealer, Jean-Michel Soëhnée, was observed to have a shawl priced at 10,000 Francs. During this Napoleonic period, the franc was backed by gold and silver. ChatGPT calculates its today's value at \$36,000, based on the silver backing, alone. Jean-François Luneau, *L'affaire du Blanc-Misseron*, p. 8. (see also end note 14)

⁴⁰ Thirty years later, finely commissioned shawls still maintained a very high value. Ireland, a New York lawyer visiting Srinagar in 1853, witnessed the weaving of a special shawl for Empress Eugénie and noted in his diary, "The price, when finished, will be about 1300 rupees or \$650, and is such a shawl as would sell for about \$4000 [\$150,000 in today's currency!] in London or New York." John B. Ireland, *A Journal of Five Years in Asia, Africa, and Europe*, p. 409, New York, 1859

Napoléon's blockade of 1806 halted the legal importation of shawls from India, but the insatiable desire to own a genuine Kashmir shawl, along with the need to nurture a fledgling weaving industry remained powerful. Additional import restrictions followed, and it wasn't until 1836 that legal trade resumed. In the meantime, Parisian dealers devised creative means to smuggle the shawls into France.

During this prohibition period, shawl manufacturers lamented the lack of new Indian designs. When news circulated that Kashmir shawls had been confiscated by border customs, designers were quickly dispatched to sketch the pieces before they were auctioned (with proceeds going to the state) and legally re-exported.⁴¹

In 1820, architect and industrial designer Amedée Couder opened one of the first atelier dedicated to all types of industries, including shawls. For the 1823 *Exhibition of French Products* held in Paris, he displayed a full-length painting (fig. 24) of a Kashmir shawl design mimicking contemporary shawls arriving from Kashmir, India. But by the 1827 exhibition, not a single Jacquard shawl is mentioned by the exhibition commentators. It wasn't until 1834 that Couder succeeds with a Jacquard-woven square shawl, the *Isfahan*, illustrating an architectural pattern with pseudo-Islamic buildings (fig. 24). Notably, it contained not a single recognizably Indian element. Even Couder's final "Renaissance" shawl, *Nou-Rouz*, exhibited in 1839, illustrated a massive Gothic building and a parade of dignitaries on camels and elephants (fig. 25). Although visually elaborate, it had no discernible influence on Kashmir shawl production. By then, the new Sikh patterns are already well established.⁴²



Fig. 24: Amédée Couder created this shawl for the 1823 Paris Exhibition of French National Products. Reviewers said little about it except that it was offered to Queen Eugénie for a colossal sum. I found its original cartoon tucked behind a stairwell at the Musée des Arts et Métiers, Paris. It is a further testament to France's ongoing appropriation of imported Kashmir shawls, even as Sikh patterns were taking form on the subcontinent. On the right is a detail of Couder's Jacquard-loomed square shawl, integrally dated and signed within the weave. Hart Coll.

⁴¹ Jean-François Luneau, L'affaire du Blanc-Misseron, in *Jean-Baptiste Amédée Couder (1800-1864), Dessinateur pour manufactures*, pp 1-16. (PhD thesis to be published)

⁴² Fleury Chavant, in his *L'Album du Cachemirien* (1837) definitively establishes the existence of Sikh patterns long before the Paris' 1839 exhibition. This evidence is supported by the observations of Captain Wade and Alexander Burnes, on commerce in the Punjab.



Fig. 25: Couder's NouRouz (Islamic New Year) shawl, exhibited in 1839, highlights his architectural talents. A true tour-de-force requiring over 100,000 Jacquard cards. Four known examples exist. Like his Isfahan, it had no impact on Kashmir's weaving industry. After Lévi-Strauss, *Cachmire*, 2013.

One might ask how European shawls could have made their way to the remote, land-locked regions of Punjab and Kashmir in the early 19th century. Until 1849, the Punjab remained largely untouched by both the Industrial and Transport Revolutions. Claude-Martin Wade⁴³, a British political agent overseeing relations between Calcutta and Lahore, reported on the region's commerce and listed only calicoes and muslins, of both British and Indian origin, as the primary textiles in circulation. Meanwhile, France was preoccupied with developing its domestic shawl industry to meet a ravenous local demand. While English manufacturers produced excellent imitations using hand looms (before the adoption of the Jacquard loom), their patterns never strayed far from Indian originals. Shipping delays further complicated matters: it took four to six months for vessels to reach Mumbai and even longer to reach Calcutta, the two major ports for textile imports. On land, the Punjab, Jammu, and Kashmir regions were strategically and tightly controlled, and travel was dangerous – thieves and bandits pose a constant threat. In short, there was no viable market for European shawls in India.

Some prominent French shawl makers, such as Hérault & Léon, attempt to break away from the Indian model, but with little success. Frédéric Hébert, on the other hand, faithfully followed the latest Indian fashions, prompting at least one critic to write that Hébert maintained an “unerring sense of beauty in copying the Indian shawls” (fig. 26). Monique Lévi-Strauss, France's foremost expert on the French Jacquard shawl, observed that the Renaissance style “had only a very short longevity.”⁴⁴

⁴³ Indika, p. 353. Mountstuart Elphinstone points out in 1809 that “shawls exported to Persia are of a pattern entirely different from those seen in India or England.” *An account of the Kingdom of Caubul and its dependencies in Persia, Tartary and India comprising a view of the Afghaun Nation and a History of the Dooraunee Monarchy*, p. 290, London, 1815

⁴⁴ Monique Lévi-Strauss, *The Cachmere Shawl*, p. 42, 1986

The bans on imports under Napoleon, followed by further prohibitions specifically targeting Indian shawls, deprived French manufacturers of new sources of inspiration. This scarcity led figures like Moyse Fichel, a prominent shawl dealer, to assert, “In these [imported] shawls lies an inexhaustible source [of design] for French industry.”⁴⁵ A well-known political philosopher and activist, Auguste Blanqui, echoed the sentiment, saying, “The almighty Indian [shawl] model has the same effect on our weaver barons as a sojourn to Florence and Rome does on our painters and sculptors!”⁴⁶

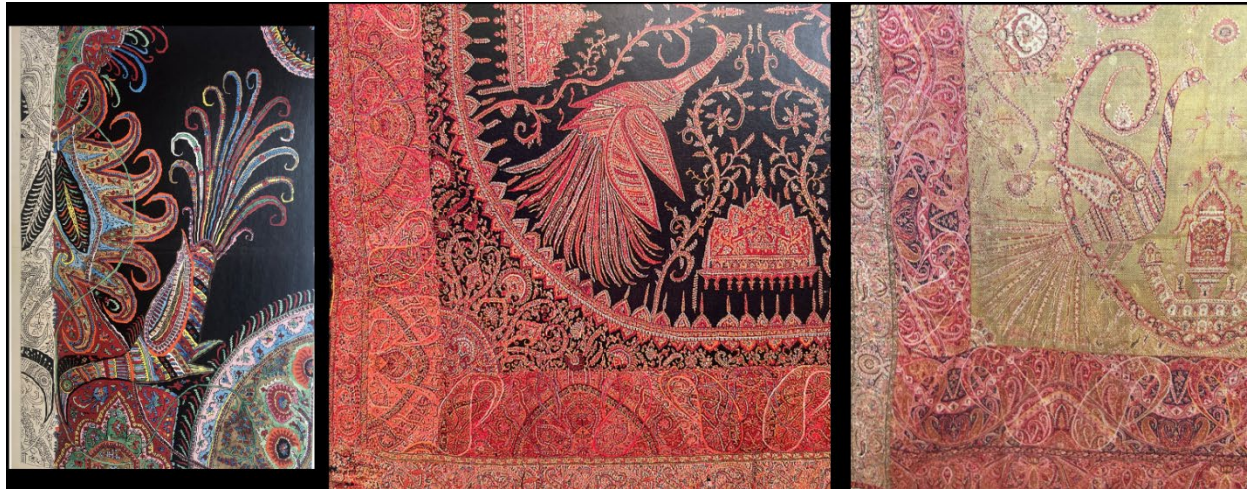


Fig. 26: Center and right: Indian Kashmir shawls with peacocks and early iconography, c. 1830. Stylistically similar to Chavant’s 1825 pattern (see Fig. 27).

Left: The French shawl manufacturer Hébert faithfully copied these designs from Indian shawls, using superior wool and dyes for high-quality Jacquard weavings.

The early 19th-century French archives are filled with critics praising Parisian manufacturers for their faithful copying of the Indian shawl.⁴⁷ Yet, despite their dependence on the Indian Kashmir shawl, the French never once directly acknowledged the brilliant creativity of Kashmir’s weavers.

During the 1820s and 1830s, French weavers adopted the peacock motif found on imported Indian shawls (fig. 26). Given their wealth of design vocabulary, one might wonder why they did not—if truly attempting to create original patterns—draw instead on national symbols like the Gallic rooster, eagle, or even the Napoleonic bee.

So now the question remains: do we have any concrete proof of what these early imported shawls looked like? Yes, we do. In 1837, Fleury Chavant published several sketch albums with dated patterns (fig. 8 left and 27). The earliest is from a shawl dated 1825, and another from 1831. In these designs, we can already

⁴⁵ Luneau, *L’affaire du Blanc-Misseron*, p. 11

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 11

⁴⁷ The reader is referred to the comprehensive list of French National and Universal Exhibitions in the bibliography of *The Kashmir Shawl* (Ames, 1986). It catalogues the jury reports for almost all the events. See also, Monique Lévi-Strauss’ *Cachemere*, 2013

see a mature Sikh design style. Considering that a fine shawl took two and three years to weave, and another six months to arrive in France, Chavant most likely copied these designs from contraband shawls.⁴⁸

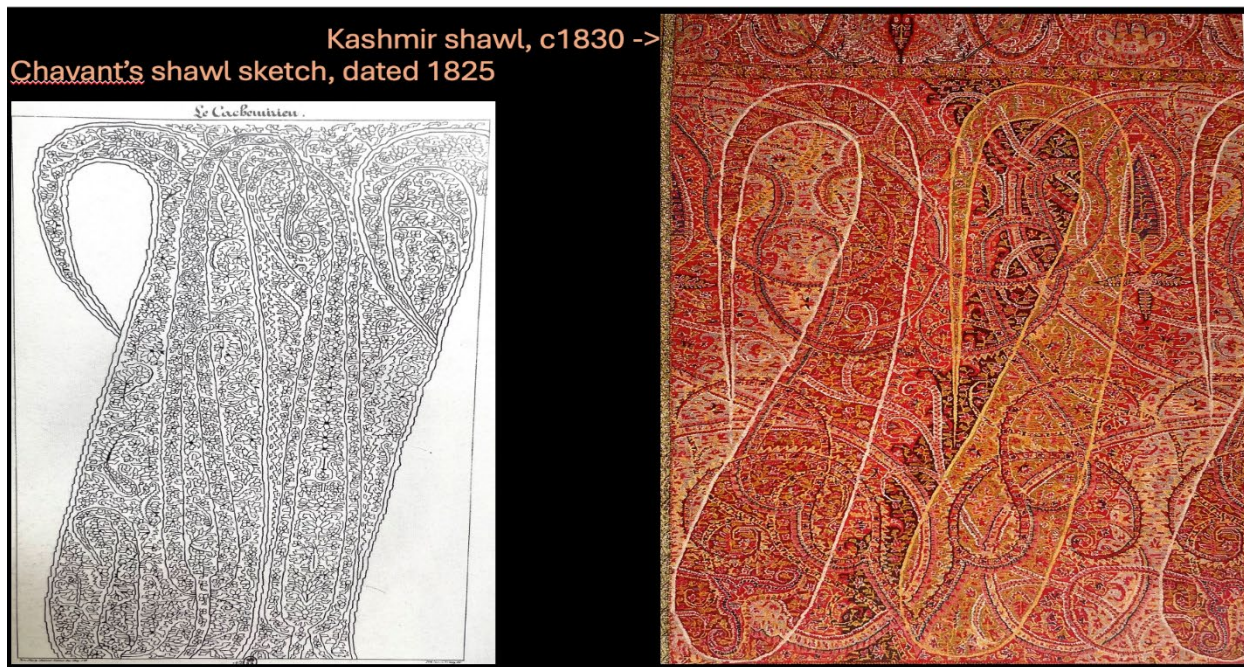


Fig. 27: Left: An 1825 sketch of a long shawl *Le Cachemirien* (National Library, Paris) showing an early iteration of the Sikh style—keeping in mind the shawl would have taken two years to weave, plus six months for shipping.

Right: While stylistically similar to the left, this example features elongated cursive motifs that echo the curve above the “Onkar” in older *Guru Granth Sahib* manuscripts. That curve is often seamlessly woven into the illuminated border, symbolizing the indivisible reality that pervades all. (See Fig. 14.)

Further evidence of the Sikh Kashmir shawl’s is fully development before any possible French influence comes from Claude-Martin Wade’s 1832 report on commerce in the Punjab and Kashmir. Regarding Kashmir shawls, Wade writes: “The most expensive shawls are sent to Persia, Turkey, and Bokhara, as their price cannot be obtained in the markets of Hindustan. Those made for Bokhara usually go by Peshour and Cabul, but the quantity is not great. They have large, heavy borders, richly embroidered. The open space in the center is left very small. Those for Persia and Turkey are of a more delicate nature.”⁴⁹

Wade clearly describes two distinct shawl types: one delicate, and one heavy and elaborately bordered. The latter can refer to the long Sikh shawls, with ends laden with large patterns, leaving only a small plain center. Nearly all extant shawl examples of this type, many bearing Russian customs stamps, prove to be of high caliber, finely woven, and rich in Sikh patterns.

⁴⁸ Fleury Chavant, *Album du Cachemirien*, *Reproduction exacte de tous les beaux châles des Indes et de la Perse fabriqués à Lahore, Ispahan, Teheran, Caboul, Kashmir, et Candahar qui arrivent en Europe calqués fidèlement et dessinés aux traits simples dans leurs grandeurs naturelles. Ouvrages précieux pour servir de matériaux aux dessinateurs.* Paris et Kashmir, 1837

⁴⁹ Lafont, Indika, *Essays in Indo-French Relations, 1630-1976*. P. 356. Manohar, 2000

Wade was not alone in his observations. Alexander Burnes, British explorer and political agent, also noted that Russian markets demanded only top-quality Kashmir shawls.⁵⁰ Bokhara and Peshawar served as the primary overland gateways to the destinations further north, toward Russia and Europe. The most expensive shawls, bore Sikh patterns featuring small centers surrounded by large elaborate patterns. Shawls of a more “delicate nature” were likely the classic long shawls with large fields of plain pashmina and narrow boteh or paisley-patterned ends.

The final piece of evidence comes from Moyse Fichel, the French shawl dealer mentioned above, who, in 1834, published a scathing ten-page critique of the French shawl industry⁵¹. He condemned its failure to acknowledge the superiority of Indian shawls and France’s inability to produce original designs. His reproach highlights the hypocrisy and unwarranted arrogance of French manufacturers. Fichel’s sharp criticism serves as compelling testimony, reaffirming what has already been established: up to that point, the French had contributed nothing new to shawl design.

Conclusion

There is no doubt about the Sikh shawl’s indigenous authenticity. In my forty years of dealing in and writing about the shawl, I have never encountered a Kashmir shawl pattern based on any of the architectonic Jacquard-loomed designs from France. Nor have I seen any nascent European development that could plausibly be considered a precursor to the Sikh style motifs. What I have seen, however, is the reverse: France’s manufacturers, especially Hébert, frequently borrow and blend Sikh motifs with European design conventions.

Herein lies the fallacy of the skeptic’s argument. Unless one is referring strictly to format, color palette, or dimensions, to label shawls woven in the first half of the nineteenth century as ‘export shawl’ is misleading. Their patterns do not conform to any known European model, stylistically. The Sikh shawl is purely Indian. The European shawl is modeled after the Indian one. It is only by mid-nineteenth century that a dramatic shift occurs, and one begins to see Indian shawls patterned after European designs.

Some Indian scholars may argue that it’s impossible to define Sikh art. For many years this was accepted as fact. The discovery and identification of Sikh patterns from the Ranjit Singh period, however, forces us to reconsider that view. These designs possess graphic power that must be recognized. They challenge us to understand a new artistic language. We know something is here, enigmatic, fascinating; secrets yet to be discovered.

⁵⁰ Alexander Burnes discusses the demand for high-quality Kashmir shawls in Russian markets in his work *Travels into Bokhara*, Vol. 3, 1835. Specifically, this discussion is found in Chapter I, titled *On the Commercial Relations of the Punjab, and the Advantages of Opening the Indus*, pp. 315-329. Burnes notes on page 318, that some shawls were specially prepared for the Russian and Persian courts at the substantial price of 30,000 rubles per pair costing approximately 12,000 rupees or about \$135,000 today! He also mentions that merchants complained about a decline in shawl quality, stating that good articles are now only obtainable by commissioning them directly from the valley of Kashmir. This confirms that Russian markets demanded only top-quality Kashmir shawls.

⁵¹ M. Fichel, *Un mot sur le cachemire des Indes e le cachemire français, Marchand de Cachemires des Indes*. 12 pages, L. E. Herhan (Publisher), Rue Saint-Denis 380, Paris, 1834

If the abrogation of Article 370⁵² signals a profound shift in Kashmir's future, that is one matter. But to compound this by threatening its cultural heritage—claiming that Sikh motifs originated from European designs—repudiates the extraordinary skills of the Kashmiri and Punjabi artists, whose remarkable talents, though often anonymous, are undeniable. The Sikh shawl must be recognized and celebrated for what it truly is, not undermined and discredited.

In the words of the eminent Professor and Indian scholar, Jean-Marie Lafont, “The Sikh school of design represents a major artistic expression of paramount importance to the Indian subcontinent.”⁵³

⁵² The government of India under Modi, on 5 August 2019, revoked the special status (autonomy), granted under Article 370 of the Indian constitution, to Jammu and Kashmir.

⁵³ Private correspondence with Professor Lafont, 5 Jan. 2014

References

- Ames, F., *The Kashmir Shawls and its Indo-French Influence*. United Kingdom: ACC, 1997.
- Ames, F., *Woven Masterpieces of Sikh Heritage: The Stylistic Development of the Kashmir Shawl under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, 1780-1830*. United Kingdom: ACC, 2010.
- Ames, F., 'Khalsa and Explosive Graphics in the Age of Maharaja Runjit Singh's Kashmir'. *Textiles Asia Journal*, May 2011, vol. 3, issue 1.
- Ames, F., 'A Kashmir Paradigm Shift: Qajar and Zand Paintings as Evidence for Shawl Dating'. *Hali*, 2005, issue 139, pp. 70–75.
- Ames, F., 'Woven Legends: Carpets and Shawls of Kashmir 1585-1870', *The Arts of Kashmir*, P. Pal (ed.) New York: Asia Society, 2007, pp. 192–209.
- Ames, F., 'A unique Mughal Kashmir Shawl at the Musée Guimet'. *Orientations*, October 2007, pp. 69–72.
- Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*, H. Blochmann (trans.). Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1873.
- Archer, W.C., *Paintings of the Sikhs*. London: HMSO, 1966.
- Bamzai, P.N.K., *A History of Kashmir*. New Delhi: Gulshan Press, 1973.
- Bernier, François, *Voyage dans les etats du Gran Mogol*. Paris : Fayard, Burnes, Alexander, Travels into Bukhara, 1834
- Chandra, Moti, 'Kashmir Shawls', *Bulletin of the Prince of Wales Museum*, vol. 3, 1954.
- Deol, Jeevan, 'Illustration and Illumination in Sikh Scriptural Manuscripts,' *Marg Magazine*, June 2003
- Fenech, Louis E., 'Ranjit Singh, The Shawl and the Kaukab-i Iqbal-i Punjab', *Sikh Formations*, 2015.
- Fichel, Moyse, *Un mot sur le Cachemire des Indes et le Cachemire français*. 1834, Paris
- Goswamy, B.N., *Piety and Splendour: Sikh Heritage in Art*. New Delhi: National Museum, 2000 (Ex. Cat.).
- Goswamy B.N. & C. Smith, *I See No Stranger: Early Sikh Art and Devotion*. New York: Rubin Museum, 2006 (Exh. Cat.).
- Irwin, John, *Shawls: A Study in Indo-European Influences*. London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1975.
- Jacquemont, V., *Correspondence de V. Jacquemont pendant son voyage dans l'Inde, 1828-1832*, 2 vols. Paris, 1841.
- Jacquemont, V., *Voyage dans l'Inde*, 4 vols. Paris 1841.
- Jacquemont, V., *Letters from India, 1829-1832*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1936.
- Khanuja, Dr. Parvinderjit Singh, *Splendors of Punjab Heritage*, with intro by Dr. Paul Michael Taylor (ed.). Delhi: Roli Books, 2022.
- Jahangir, *Tuzuk-i-jahangiri* (memoires), Henry Beveridge (ed.)
- Lafont, Jean-Marie, *La presence française dans le royaume Sikh du Penjab: 1822-1849*, Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient. Paris, 1992.
- Lafont, Jean-Marie, *Indika : Essays in Indo-French Relations, 1630–1976*. Pub'd: 2000 by Manohar Publishers in New Delhi.
- Lafont, Jean-Marie, *Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Lord of the Five Rivers*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Lévi-Strauss, Monique, *Cashmere: A French passion 1800-1880*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2013.
- Lévi-Strauss, Monique, *The Cashmere Shawl*. Rome: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1987.
- Moorcroft, William, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and Panjab; in Ladakh and Kashmir; in Peshawar, Kabut, Kunduz, and Bukhara*, by Mr. George Trebeck and William

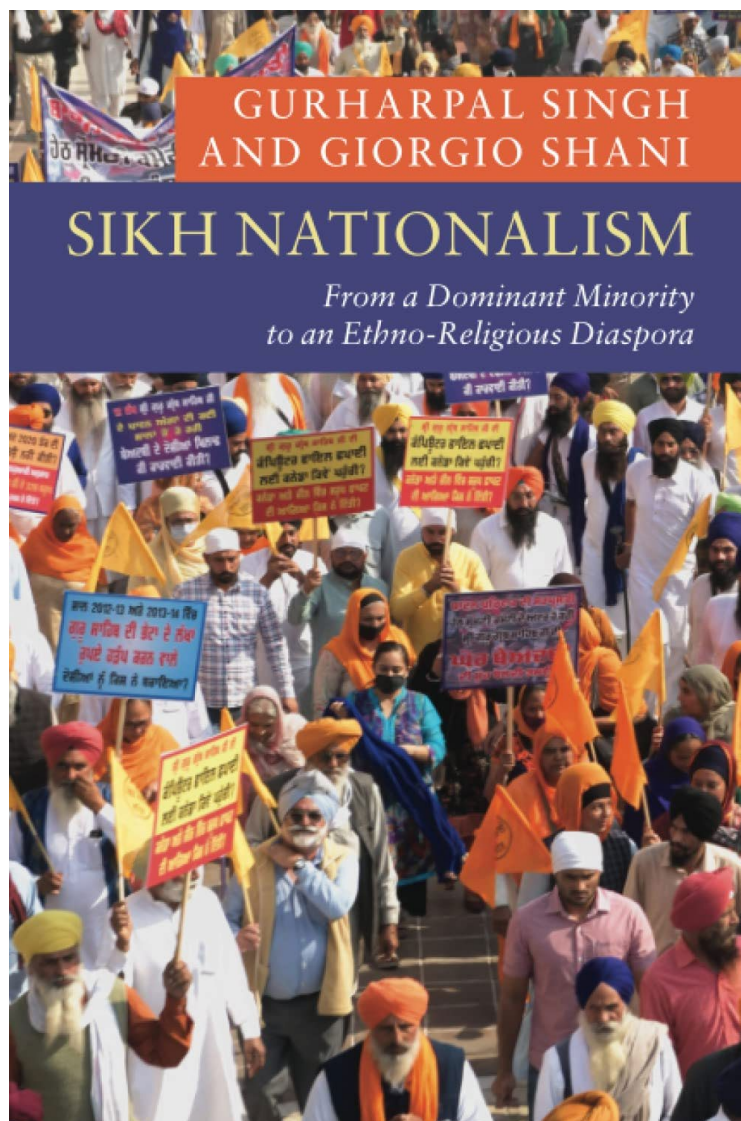
Moorcroft from 1819 to 1825. London, 1841, 2 vols.

Stronge, Susan (ed.), *The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms*. London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1999

Book review: Sikh Nationalism: From a Dominant Minority to an Ethno-Religious Diaspora by
Gurharpal Singh & Giorgio Shani

Review by: Dr. Sohini Saha

Assistant Professor, St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata



Sikh Nationalism: From a Dominant Minority to an Ethno-Religious Diaspora

Authors: Gurharpal Singh & Giorgio Shani

ISBN: 1316501884

The question of identity and nationalism occupies a historically significant position in India. While Hindu nationalism has been widely studied, especially within the context of the 19th- and 20th-century colonial period, there remains a dearth of detailed historical scholarship on Sikh nationalism. In *Sikh Nationalism: From a Dominant Minority to an Ethno-Religious Diaspora*, Gurharpal Singh and Giorgio Shani provide an extensive historical analysis of the development of Sikh identity and nationalism. The central argument of the book challenges simplistic tropes that rely solely on religion as a marker of Sikh identity. Although religion remains one of the significant aspects, the authors advocate an integrated approach to understanding Sikh identity, emphasizing the roles of minority religious identity, diaspora, and nationalism in shaping the modern Sikh identity. The authors employ Anthony D. Smith's (2001) ethno-symbolic approach to understand the "cultural roots" of Sikh nationalism through the concept of "ethnie." This approach moves away from locating nationalism only as an elite phenomenon or solely as a result of colonialism, instead concerning itself with people's self-identification with "historical symbols of ethnies." This Sikh ethnie according to the authors, lies at the heart of Sikh identity and nationalism, representing what they call a Sikh "*qaum*" (nation). However, the authors argue that this ethnie is not an essentialist identity; instead, they historicize the Sikh ethnie. They contend that a strong communal consciousness is also not enough to construct an identity. This is where the importance of a territory, namely Punjab, becomes essential for Sikh nationalism. The authors thus weave together the complex web of interconnected events and contexts to illustrate the construction of a non-essentialist Sikh identity.

The first three chapters sketch a historical trajectory of the Sikh identity and its transformation. The chapters begin with tracing three popular narratives of Sikh identity and nationalism: religion, nation with a territorial homeland, and the minority status of Sikhs. The authors emphasize the ethno-symbolic approach of A.D. Smith (2001) to explain how the primordial idea of an "ethnie" merges with a religious sect, giving rise to a cultural religious community possessing a territorial homeland and a vibrant diaspora. The authors analyze the transformation of Sikhism from a reformer sect to the institutionalized Sikh Panth and the rise of a militant Khalsa identity in the 18th century through a political revolution. They argue that the influence of colonial modernity led to a political transformation of the religion into an idea of a nation, further consolidating the Sikh militant and martial identities. The chapters follow the trajectory of the rise of modern Sikh nationalism and the formation of a separate reformed Sikh identity based on Tat Khalsa ideology of the Singh Sabha movement amidst growing Hindu and Muslim majoritarianism. The next part of the book, chapters four and five, discusses the history of Partition and its impact on Sikh nationalism. The compromise Sikh nationalism had to undergo led to an uneasy accommodation in the Indian state. The authors explore this tense relationship between the Indian state and Sikh nationalism through their study of Operation Bluestar and the Khalistan movement and militancy. Contrary to perspectives that blame the militancy for its failure, the authors argue that Sikh militant nationalism cannot be understood in isolation from the larger context of the state's hegemonic control and its role in managing ethnic conflict in Punjab.

The final sections of the book explore contemporary developments through Hindutva politics, globalization, and diaspora. The authors note Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's (RSS) attempt to depict Sikhs as part of militant Hinduism by the creation of Rashtriya Sikh Sangat and the Sangh Parivar's Ghar Vapsi campaign of 2014, as attempts to assimilate and Hinduize the Sikh identity. Interestingly, the authors note how the

militant characteristics of Sikh nationalism, particularly the hyper-masculinity of Khalsa identity, were recognized and promoted by the colonial regime, which was reflected in their mass recruitment into the Indian army (p. 48-49). The book further points towards the appropriation of this militancy by both the colonizers and Hindutva politics. The concluding chapter delves into the role of the diaspora and globalization, arguing for the emergence of a deterritorialized Sikh nationalism and a global Sikh qaum in a 'post-sovereignty era' (Shani, 2014). The authors identify an inherent tension within the contemporary Sikh agenda, between a politics of recognition and the politics of a homeland, between transnational aspirations on one hand and a firm hold on territorial nationalism on the other. This tension is further accentuated by the fading away of multiculturalism post 9/11. Yet as multiculturalism recedes, globalization has opened avenues, through television, radio, social media, websites, and more, to mobilize a community based on religion and ethnicity. This has facilitated a deterritorialized nationalism and the formation of a global Sikh qaum. Through an imagined homeland and the rise of diaspora politics, a new form of long-distance nationalism has emerged allowing individuals across territories to connect with a place they see as their 'homeland'.

Although the book provides a rich, detailed, and comprehensive historical account of Sikh nationalism and identity, it predominantly represents a masculine perspective of militancy and conflict. There are limited references to women's roles within Sikh nationalism. Women are mentioned primarily in the context of 18th-century codes of conduct restricting them with certain regulations, celebrating women for their moral strength, or instances of violence perpetrated against them during the Partition. In fact, the authors acknowledge that "Sikh nationalist narrative centred on the militarism of the Khalsa and marginalised the voice of women" (p. 40). Furthermore, while the book raises an interesting contradiction between deterritorialized nationalism and the concept of a global qaum, I question whether there can ever be a deterritorialized nationalism when a territorial homeland is the basis for this nationalism? Though unoccupied and imagined, this homeland remains materially and territorially connected to a community. Therefore, a "global" qaum is deeply rooted in a localized place. This 'deterritoriality' represents, in my view, a contradiction within Sikh nationalism and identity because it necessitates the requirement of a territory to imagine itself. At a time when we are witnessing Israel's violence on Palestine, the idea of ethnic nationalism based on a territorial homeland becomes a daunting and contested reality that needs further critical reflection.

Nonetheless, the strength of the book lies in its ability to provide a contextual historical understanding of nationalism rather than an essentialist one. The authors illuminate Sikh nationalism through its history of the political, cultural, social and economic events that have shaped it. *Sikh Nationalism: From a Dominant Minority to and Ethno-Religious Diaspora* will be significant for scholars invested in topics of nationalism, territoriality, diaspora, identity politics and conflict studies. It is also relevant to the fields of sociology, history, cultural studies, and the broader social sciences.

References

- Singh, G. Shani, G. (2022). *Sikh Nationalism: From a Dominant Minority to an Ethno-Religious Diaspora*. Cambridge University Press.
- Shani, G. Religion, Identity and Human Security. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014.
- Smith, A.D. *Nationalism. Theory, Ideology, History*. Cambridge: Polity, 2001.