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Five Classical Elements (panch tattva) of Creation - A Perspective from Sri Guru Granth Sahib

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Abstract

Various religious philosophies the world over, although differ in many details, yet they all emphasize the basic unity of the universe, through the recognition of panch tattva as the basis of creation. Most of these philosophies agree that a continuous exchange between these basic elements life and the creation, helps to balance the ever ongoing cycles of creation and destruction. The existence of panch tattva, with their extraordinary qualities, makes us aware of the unity and mutual interrelation of all things. They help us to transcend the notion of an isolated individual self and to identify ourselves with the ultimate reality. In this article on panch tattva, a perspective from Sri Guru Granth Sahib is outlined

Introduction

Ancient Greek and Indian philosophy describes four classical elements of creation and life. These elements are named as earth, water, air and fire. Empedocles (ca. 490–430 BC) called these the four “roots”. Plato (424 BC – 348 BC), was first to use the term “element” in reference to air, fire, earth, and water [1]. The Greek word for element, stoicheion meant "smallest division”, a smallest unit from which a word/thing is formed”. Aristotle added aether (quintessence) reasoning that the stars must be made of a different, unchangeable, heavenly substance [2].

In the European tradition the fifth element is referred as ‘aether’ while in Indian tradition, it is called as ‘akasha’ These basic elements of nature are also known as ‘the elements of life’ or ‘the elements of survival’. It is important to note that within these, and through these, life has prevailed and evolved. Without these elements life could not exist.

These five elements (panch tattva) of nature are basically classical in nature and are not resonant with the concept of element as referred to in modern science.
According to modern science, air is a mixture of several gaseous elements and compounds. Water is a compound. Earth or soil is a mixture of several solid compounds. Fire is electromagnetic energy. Aether or akasha is closest parallel to space-time continuum.

An element is made up of atoms. An atom is the smallest division of a substance to exist independently, and contains the characteristics of the substance. Scientists have discovered that there are 92 naturally occurring elements. For example, helium gas is an element. A compound is made up of two or more elements. For example, water is a compound of oxygen and hydrogen elements. Thus the classical elements cannot be treated as elements in the modern sense.

However, panch tattva is a classical concept to explain the phenomenon of the world and life. A brief introduction of these classical elements is as under;

**Air**

Air is of fundamental importance to life. It is provider of breath to living beings. Ancient Greeks called it ‘aer’ meaning the dim lower atmosphere [3]. It can’t be seen, held or captured or tamed, but can be felt. It influences the weather, the seasons and represents the essence of time. It can be destructive (as a howling tornado) as well as soothing (as a gentle breeze). It can be oppressive, hot and stifling (as in summer and rainy season). It can be cool and calming (as in spring and autumn). Air is resonant with the gaseous state of matter.

**Water**

To a large degree, plant, animal or sentient life in order to survive, depend on the water element. It is the most common liquid on earth. Water gives much, but takes as easy everything back. Water as the "primal liquid", appears in different shapes and forms. In its natural state water can be salty or fresh. Fresh water is found in wells or in rivers. Salt water is mostly found on seas. Water is an unpredictable element. It can cause death and destruction upon those living near open water, but it also grants life. It is a mysterious element; it can disappear in no time on a hot day in front of your eyes and nobody knows for sure where it has gone. In nature, water is resonant with the liquid state of matter.
Earth

Earth encompasses all the living and non-living substances, within the terrestrial environment. Its diversity is of extremely high order. Earth represents nourishment on all levels. It is an essential element of life and an element of survival. It represents the solid phase of matter.

Fire

The ancient name of this element of nature is ‘fire’ whereas the modern scientific name of it is electromagnetic energy. It has two types based on its origin; terrestrial fire (camp-fire, forest fire) and cosmic fire (sunshine, stars). It provides heat and light. It is prime-mover of the life sustaining water-cycle. It is also primary source of energy for photosynthesis. It is a creator as well as destroyer. It can heal or harm. It can bring about new life or destroy the old and worn.

Aether or Akasha

Between the four elements (air, earth, fire and water) is the finely dispersed fifth element called aether. The ethereal substance is so delicate that it is all permeating. Aether has no direction, yet it encompasses all directions. It is the center, the circumference, above and below. It is beyond seasons and time, yet is all seasons and time. In Hindu philosophy [4], akasha or aether is the one, eternal, all pervading and imperceptible physical substance. It is the substratum of the quality of sound. Akasha is actually an East Indian word meaning inner-space, reflecting our belief that the universe is both within and without ourselves. Aether is in many ways the strongest element. It is the scaffolding of reality, it holds it up, it is the adhesive of reality, it holds it together. Though aether mostly follows time’s steady flow, it also seems to exist with some degree of independence.

In Sikhism, the number five has a special significance as it is associated with several important aspects of the religion e.g. five takhats, five banis of nitnem, five beloved ones, five sacred Sikh Symbols - panj kakars e.g. kesh (unshorn hair), kangha (the comb), kara (the steel bracelet), kachhehra (the soldiers’ shorts) and kirpan (the sword). Five virtues e.g. sat (truth), santokh (contentment), daya (compassion), nimrata (humility) and pyare (love)). Five evils (vikaar) e.g. kaam (lust), krodh (anger), lobh (greed), moh (attachment), and hankaar (ego). So the
five elements of nature also have a special place of significance in Sikhism. These basic elements are described as *panch tattva* in *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* [5-7].

In Sikh’s holy scripture, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, *panch tattva* are named as **ap** (water), **tej** (fire), **vaaye** (air), **pirthmi** (earth) and **akash** (aether). Gurbani describes that all these elements were created from the primal void by the creator. All the creation (including human being) is made up of these five basic elements. Upon death, the human body dissolves into these elements, balancing the cycle of nature.

> "ਅਪੁ ਤੇਜੁ ਵਾਇ ਪ੍ਪਿਥਮੀ ਆਕਾਸਾ ॥ ਪ੍ਤਨ ਮਪ੍ਿ ਪੰਚ ਤਤੁ ਵਾਸਾ ॥ (Mehl 1, p 1031)
> Water, fire, air, earth and aether, in that house of the five elements, they dwell. (Mehl 1, p 1031)

In *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* (SGGS) [5-7], the origin of these elements is described as;

> "ਪੰਚ ਤਤੁ ਸੁ ਰਨਿੁ ਪਿਗਾਸਾ ॥ (Mehl 1, p 1038)
> From the Primal Void, the five elements became manifest. (Mehl 1, p 1038)

It is enunciated in Gurbani that the whole creation was created, from these five elements by the creator.

> "ਪੰਚ ਤਤੁ ਕਿਪ੍ਿਚਾਨਾ ॥ (Mehl 4, p 736)
> You created the entire Universe out of the five elements; (Mehl 4, p 736)

> "ਪੰਚ ਤਤੁ ਕਲ ਜਗਧਤ ਜਗਧਤ ॥ (Mehl 5, p 1073)
> The creation was created of the five elements. (Mehl 5, p 1073)

Describing the evolution of the world Guru Ram Das, the fourth Sikh Guru, expressed;

> "ਕਲ ਅਤੇ ਪੰਚ ਉਤ ਵਿਸ਼ੇਰਾ ਵਿਚਿ ਪਤ੍ਤ ਪੰਚ ਅਧਿ ਵਾਲੇ ॥ (Mehl 4, p 720)
> The Lord Himself directs the evolution of the world of the five elements; He Himself infuses the five senses into it. (Mehl 4, p 720)

It is pointed out explicitly that human body is made of these basic elements of nature;
The five elements join together, to make up the form of the human body.

The body is formed from the union of the five elements. (Mehl 1, p 1030)

From the union of the five elements, this body was made. (Mehl 1, p 1039)

From the five elements, the puppet was created with its actions. (Mehl 5, p 884)

The human mind which includes all mental faculties, thought, volition, feeling and memory is described by Guru Nanak Dev, first Sikh Guru, as made up of these basic elements.

This mind is born of the five elements. (Mehl 1, p 415)

Bhagat Kabir described the mind (consciousness) as the inherit quality of these elements.

This mind is the life of the five elements. (Bhagat Kabir Ji, p 342)

Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Sikh Guru, elaborated that the light (essence) of the creator is infused into His creation.

From the five elements, He formed it, and infused His Light within it. (Mehl 5, p 1337)

Guru Nanak Dev described that the Earth has been established as the abode of Dharma, in the midst of these basic elements e.g. wind (air), water, fire and nether region (space or akasha).
Nights, days, weeks and seasons; wind, water, fire and the nether regions – in the midst of these, He established the earth as a home for Dharma. (Mehl 1, p 7)

Guru Nanak explained the importance of these basic elements, for the well being of the creation, in his Bani ‘Japu Ji’ as;

Air is the Guru, Water is the Father, and Earth is the Great Mother of all. Day and night are the two nurses, in whose lap all the world is at play. (Mehl 1, p 8)

Here day can be seen as representing the element fire (in the form of Sun) and the night can be seen as representing the element akasha (in the form of night sky with its millions of stars or worlds). Thus all the five basic elements are crucial for the well-being and prosperity of the whole creation.

Describing the essential nature of the basic elements for life, Bhagat Kabir advises the Sikhs to follow the Guru’s path.

Making the five elements his deer skin to sit on, he (gurmukh) walks on the Guru's Path. (Bhagat Kabir Ji, p 477)

Bhagat Kabir warns us that we shouldn’t be engrossed in the worldly illusion of these elements.

Enshrine the five tattvas - the five elements, within your heart; let your deep meditative trance be undisturbed. (Bhagat Kabir Ji, p 970)

Describing the phenomenon of death, Bhagat Kabir enunciated that at the time of one’s death, these elements, which have been basic constituents of one’s body are returned to their primal source.
The five elements join together and divide up their loot. This is how our herd is disposed of! (Bhagat Kabir Ji, p 333)

The bani of Bhagat Kabir makes us aware that these basic elements of nature will also perish with time.

Where something existed, now there is nothing. The five elements are no longer there. (Bhagat Kabir Ji, p 334)

From the above discussion it is obvious that gurbani enunciates that *panch tattva* (the five basic elements) were created from the primal void. These elements are the basis of creation and there is a continuous exchange between these and the creation. These elements are perishable. The contemplation of *panch tattva* of nature, makes us realize that as these are perishable so is a human being, which is composed of these elements. It is emphasized in gurbani that although one should enshrine the *panch tattva*, within one’s heart, thus living a life of joy and bliss, yet one shouldn’t be engrossed in the worldly illusion created by these. It is further advised that one should follow the Gurmat marg to attain salvation from worldly entanglements.

References

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Life at the Lahore Darbār: 1799-1839

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Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839) occupied Lahore in 1799 and ruled the Punjab from that city for forty years. He chose to live at the Lahore fort built by the Mughal emperors and to some extent, brought back the grandeur and magnificence it knew in Mughal times. This article is an attempt to describe the glamorous life at the Lahore darbār (Sikh court) based on contemporary sources, majesty that was lost forever after annexation by the British in 1849.

Ranjit Singh selected the Musamman Burj in the Lahore fort for both his private and official use and chose the sheesh mahal chambers or mirror pavilions within the Musamman Burj, built by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1628-1658), as his residence\(^1\). Alexander Burnes visited the Maharaja’s private quarters in the fort in 1831, and noted that the passages were decorated with “waxen tapers” and that “bottles filled with different coloured water were placed near the lights, and increased the splendor” (Burnes, 1992: 29). He sat with some of his companions in silver chairs in Ranjit Singh’s bedroom in the Musamman Burj and describes it in the following words:

In one end of the room stood a camp bedstead, which merits a description. Its frame-work, posts, and legs were entirely covered with gold, and the canopy was one massy sheet of the same precious metal. It stood on footstools raised about ten inches from the ground, and which were also of gold. The curtains were of Cashmeer shawls. Near it stood a round chair of gold; and in one of the upper rooms of the palace we saw the counterpart of these costly ornaments. The candles that lighted up the apartment were held in branch sticks of gold. The little room in which we sat was superbly gilded; and the side which was next the court was closed by a screen of yellow silk (Ibid: 30).

The account of entertainment offered at the Musamman Burj to a group of British officers including Captain Wade, Alexander Burnes and Doctor Murray, in February 1832, gives a glimpse of how these pavilions looked like during the Sikh
After the inspection of troops of the Campoo-i-Muallā (Maharaja’s special guards) that included a performance by the dancing girls in male attires, a grand reception was arranged for the guests. The arrangements included illuminations with camphor candles fitted in candle stands that were hung all over the place. The outer and inner walls of the Musamman Burj were covered with fine fabric, exquisite gold-embroidered and gold-threaded curtains hung on all windows and gold-woven carpets were laid in the corridors. Tents with silver and gold plated poles were fixed in the open space in front of the Musamman Burj. A gold-canopied charpoy and gold utensils were displayed and an abundant supply of food and drink was available for the guests. A dance and music performance was presented and according to Sohan Lal Suri, the sahibs thoroughly enjoyed the entertainment (Suri, 2002, 3(i):157-59). The illuminations and extravagant decorations arranged by Khalifa Nuruddin (Maharaja’s court physician) were meant to leave a lasting impression on the visitors and the Maharaja personally asked them towards the end of the evening, if they had ever experienced something similar in Hindustan (Ibid).

All contemporary historical sources talk about the grandeur of the Lahore darbār and have recorded countless occasions where Ranjit Singh emphatically ordered his courtiers and troops to pay special attention to their attire. He wanted to build the morale of his own men with uniforms and discipline in military exercises comparable to the British and impress everyone with the grandeur and riches of his court. The chieftains and troops accompanying Ranjit Singh’s eldest son Kharak Singh’s wedding procession in 1811 were ordered to present themselves in richly decorated clothes and plumes on their headgear (Ibid, 2:114). They were directed to be magnificently dressed in order to "...strike surprise among the onlookers and create wonder among the spectators...." (Ibid:116). This exercise was especially for the benefit of the British officer Colonel Ochterlony and the Hill Rajas invited for the ceremony.

A similar display of magnificence mesmerized the European visitors when Lord William Bentick, the Governor General of India visited the Maharaja at Ropar in 1831. Raja Dhyan Singh, the Prime Minister was asked to make arrangements that included decorating the camp with velvet and brocade tents, huge canopies of brocade, satin, gold-threaded fabric and tūs (or shahtoosh, top quality fine wool), as well as excellent floorings. Misr Beli Ram was ordered to get fine gifts and rare object, with seventy-one garments bound in pashmīna (costly hand-woven woolen fabric) wrappers, ready to be presented to the honorable guest. The platoons and horsemen were all asked to be dressed in brocade suits and ornaments, and to stand in a row from the portico to the bridge for firing a salute upon the chief guest's arrival. The chiefs at Sikh court were also required to wear fabulous clothes and jewelry and were arranged to stand near the Maharaja's canopy according to their ranks (Op.cit, 3(i):112).
G. T. Vigne (2004), the famous English traveler, visited Lahore in 1837. He found the gold and jewels on the Sikh sardārs tempting enough to note in his memoirs that “There were scarcely any of the Sirdars around him [Ranjit Singh], whom one would not have been glad to have pillaged in the dark; so bedizened were they generally with gold and jewels, pearls, emeralds, and the rubies of Budukshan” (274-5).

A meeting between the Maharaja and Lord Auckland took place at Ferozepur on November 29, 1838. Describing the magnificence of the Maharaja’s darbār, Stienbach who accompanied the British Governor General, notes that the “…Sikh chieftains, all clinquant, all in gold, or clothed in every diversity of colour, and every imaginable variety of picturesque costume, armed to the teeth with spears, saber, shield and lighted matchlock, - scrambled onwards….” (Steinbach, 2005: 140-42). The colonel was mesmerized by the opulence and magnificence of the Indian troops and his awe is evident from his statement that “the scene which now presented itself is utterly beyond description. All that the imagination can conceive of human grandeur – all that the most exuberant fancy can devise in its endeavour to portray the acme of royal splendour – was here embodied forth” (Ibid: 148).

Maharaja Ranjit Singh, in later years of his life is recorded to have worn a simple dress with few pieces of jewelry but during his early reign he also used to bedeck himself with fancy clothes and jewels to impress the visitors. In December 1813, for example, he ordered the vakīls of Hyderabad to appear in the court before granting them leave and had a very fine carpet laid, and wore a green dress and turban and "ornaments and armlets be set with jewels"(Op.cit, 2:152). Before granting audience to Dewān Gudar Mal, the vakīl or representative of Alijah Fateh Khan Barakzai in 1811, the Maharaja made sure that the guests were impressed with the riches of the Lahore darbār as he put on elaborate clothes and fine jewelry, ordered a superior quality carpet to be laid out and sat in a gold chair (Ibid:111).

The magnificence of the Sikh court was echoed by a silver bungalow Ranjit Singh had ordered for holding court away from the pavilions of Musamman Burj. It was set up for the first time near a “northward garden” near the Lahore fort and he entered it at an auspicious moment calculated by the court astrologers (Ibid: 289). In 1826 or 1827, while the Maharaja was in Amritsar due to ill health, he ordered the silver bungalow to be brought to Amritsar for the Dussehra celebrations. It was fixed on the bank of the stream in the village Tang. That the bungalow was double-storied is evident because on October 29, 1831, during the display of Maharaja's military drills at the meeting with Lord William Bentick at Ropar, the Governor General was taken to the “upper storey” of the silver bungalow. It is a probable that the “bungalow on wheels” described by Fakir Waheeduddin refers to the same one. He writes that it had silver walls, a shawl canopy and was furnished with carpets, cushions, curtains and chandeliers and was pulled by eight elephants (Waheeduddin, 1965: 159). Another novelty recorded by
Suri is a boat that Ranjit Singh ordered that was shaped like a peacock (Op.cit, 2:427). Other curiosities patronized by the Lahore darbār are briefly described; Kharak Singh’s wedding procession had a moving throne and a model of the Shalimar Gardens that was carried on the shoulders of about one hundred men and Rani Nakain, the groom's mother sat in a chariot that was set with jewels and had a crown over it (Ibid:117). At the time of Kharak Singh’s son Naunehal Singh’s wedding in February 1837, Henry Fane noted with approval the trees at the fort of Bhangian (Amritsar) bearing “fruit covered with gold and silver leaves” hanging from the branches (Op.cit, 3(iii):440). Most of the novelties created for the Maharaja and the elite Sikh courtiers are not extant and can only be reconstructed through their accounts in contemporary historical sources.

The lists of items given away as offerings and presents inform us of the riches that circulated in Sikh society. Luxury items made of silver and gold including utensils, beds and chairs, votive objects, picture frames used for sacred images, gold-threaded horse saddles, silver and gold howdās or elephant seats are mentioned. Pashmīna and gold woven fabrics appear to have been a great favorite along with different kinds of cottons and silks. Jewelry was worn extravagantly by both men and women and names of a few pieces are mentioned by Suri like the chaura pāṁ, ponchiān, bāzooband, qashaqa, damnī and mālā (Ibid: 432). Contemporary jewelry pieces are shown in nineteenth century illustrations for the copies of Ain-i-Akbari (figure 1).

![Ain-i-Akbari](image)

**Fig.1:**  *Ain-i-Akbari* (The Chronicles of Emperor Akbar), Lahore, Pakistan. Ink, pigment, gold leaf paper, c. 1822. Collection of Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada. (2006.70.1_16_page09_det)

The frescoes in the interior of Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s Samadhī in Lahore, built around the middle of the nineteenth century, present excellent examples of the ambience of the Lahore darbār. Here the mythological scenes are illustrated
with a firsthand knowledge of opulence and grandeur, showing even the shepherds, ascetics and maidservants laden with jewelry and wearing richly embellished dresses.

The pomp and pageantry of the Lahore darbār was fully displayed during popular Hindu religious festivals. Dussehrā is celebrated in memory of the Hindu god Rama's victory over Ravanna; an occasion that reinforces the triumph of virtue over evil. Maharaja Ranjit Singh celebrated the event every year with great festivity and ordered his courtiers to participate with equal fervor. He began the celebrations with the worship of the horse and the sword (Op.cit, 2:495). An explanation of this act is found in H. T. Princep’s statement: “Guru Govind [the tenth Sikh guru] devoted his followers to steel, and hence the worship of the sword, as well as its employment against both Mahomedans (sic) and Hindus” (Princep, 1846, 1:122). James Tod notes that “Karga Shapna” or worship of the sword is a Rajput tradition and is “essentially martial” (Tod, 1877, 1:458). Other activities during the Sikh period included putting up effigies of the characters of the epic Ramayana and a discharge of the topkhanā (canons). In 1811, the festivities included a mock battle of the conquest of Lanka by the Maharaja’s armed troops that resulted in a great confusion leaving countless injured and many dead (Op.cit, 2:109).

Dussehrā in V. S. Sambat 1883/1826 A. D. was celebrated at the village Tang, near Amritsar where the Maharaja’s silver bungalow was set up after being brought from Lahore (Ibid: 408). Prince Sher Singh, one of Ranjit Singh's sons, “got a hint from the Maharaj” to erect the symbolic “Lanka" in a "graceful and stylish manner". The carpet-layers were ordered to spread fine floorings and to affix tents without poles, woven with gold and silver threads and brocade and gold threaded canopies with golden poles, near the Maharaja’s silver bungalow. The daroghā or in-charge of the stables was ordered to present the best horses decorated with gold and bejeweled harnesses and the in-charge of elephants was similarly ordered to bring fully decorated huge elephants. Prince Sher Singh, the chieftains and the troops were directed to put on fine clothes and appear for inspection before the Maharaja (Ibid: 409). During the Dussehrā festivities, the chieftains along with their troops of horsemen wore steel armors inlaid with gold and enameled golden that was highly polished. Their bright dresses were made of gold-threaded cloth, brocades and satins of various colors (Ibid: 455).

In March 1832, preparations were made for a grand Holī festival. Holī is a Hindu spring festival celebrated by throwing colored dyes on each other. Misr Beli Ram was ordered to give Rs. 500/- every day to Raja Hira Singh (Raja Dhyan Singh's son and a favorite of the Maharaja) for the preparations of the event and the staff responsible for floorings was instructed to make arrangements in the garden of Shah Balāwal. The merriment went on for three days; March 15 to 17, 1832. The Singhs (Sikh sardārs) and the troops of Campo-o-i muallā (According to Lafont, name given to the regular units which did not belong to the Fauj-i khās or
to another French brigade) were made to stand opposite each other to playfully fight with the lac dye in sprinklers while the dancing girls presented their dance and songs. The Maharaja later held a darbār at the garden of Chota Ram where all the vakils, nawābs and chieftains were invited for the celebrations. They played with the lac dye, sprinkled rose water and saffron. At the end of the celebrations, the dignitaries were awarded robes of honor (Op.cit, 3(ii):170-71).

Basant is another Hindu spring festival, dedicated to the goddess Sarasvati. During Ranjit Singh’s times, celebrations usually took place at the mausoleum of Madho Lal Husain, at Lahore. For Basant in 1825, the Maharaja ordered all horsemen and platoons to wear yellow costumes and to form lines all the way from the Delhi Gate to the mausoleum. The Maharaja came out of the fort, performed suchetā (ablutions) and inspected the parade of the troops. He then went to the mausoleum and sat under a high yellow canopy and enjoyed watching the fair for two to three hours before returning to the fort (Ibid, 2:388). A couple of years later on Basant day at the same venue, tents, screens and canopies of yellow color, beautifully woven in wool, were set up which the Maharaja had recently received from Kashmir. Chieftains, platoons and the horsemen were all ordered to wear yellow costumes and to stand in rows from the Delhi Gate to the tomb for inspection. After his usual inspection, the Maharaja took his seat in the gold chair in his tent at the tomb (Ibid: 438).

These festivities and royal entertainments also included dance performances by the dancing girls frequently mentioned by contemporary sources. Especially noteworthy is Ranjit Singh's troop of female “Amazons” or the zenanā platoon. Each one of these “soldiers” carried a bow and arrow in hand and had a sword by her waist during performance (Ibid, 3(i):114-15). The band consisted of thirty or forty singing and dancing girls chosen for their "beauty of face and figure, playfulness and agility" (Op.cit, 1965: 178). The Real Ranjit Singh gives their description in the following words:

A lemon-yellow banarsi turban with a bejeweled crest; a dark green jumper over a blue satin gown, fastened with a gold belt; deep crimson skin-tight pyjamas of gulbadan silk; and a pair of pointed golden shoes. As for jewelry, they wore a pair of gold earrings set with stones, a diamond nose stud, a pair of gold bracelets and a ruby ring on the middle finger (Ibid).

The Maharaja was very fond of watching dance performances and sometimes spent all day or most of the night in such entertainments, if we are to believe the newsletters published as Events at the Court of Ranjit Singh, 1810-1817 (Garrette and Chopra, 1986: 11-12, 26, 53, 56, 74 etc). But these sources also record some of his rare solitary moments away from merriment and expeditions that were spent in listening to one Attar Khan playing the flute, especially on rainy evenings (Ibid: 70, 96, 101, 186, 189 etc). He is also noted to have pleased himself with a ramble in heavy rainfall in summers while enjoying the sight of fountains (Ibid: 83).
Ranjit Singh’s martial impression is further softened by his fondness for gardens. Although the outer precincts of Lahore still displayed ruins with abandoned mosques and mausoleums in the nineteenth century as stated by various European travelers and visitors, the main city boasted many gardens (Barr, 1844: 66). The Shalimar Gardens in the outskirts of nineteenth century Lahore was not only visited for enjoying the remarkable beauty but it also offered a place for journey-break on the Maharaja's frequent visits to Amritsar. He used to put up at the Gardens for days while proceeding towards the Holy City or upon entering Lahore on his way back. The pleasure the Maharaja derived from the Gardens is evident from Suri's account of September 1818, given below:

The Maharaja ordered the march of his royal standards from the village of Sourian, and, by way of the bridge of Kakargill boarded the boats and came over to Shalabagh. As the said garden brightened the eyes of every body on account of its abundant trees, plenty of roses, fruit bearing trees and water channels, the Maharaja was pleased and liked to stay there for a few days (Op. cit, 2:265).

Sohan Lal Suri mentions the Garden in different names; Shalamār, Shalabāgh or Shehla Bāgh and also as Shualā-i-māh or the "spark of the moon" (Ibid: 54). An explanation for this variety of names is found in Sita Ram Kohli's account where he refers to Dewan Amar Nath's Zafarnama-i-Ranjit Singh, and notes that in 1803, the Maharaja while strolling in the Gardens with his companions argued about the meaning of the name “Shalamār”. According to the Maharaja, the literal meaning of the word in Punjabi was "God's strike" and therefore it was unsuitable for a garden. The courtiers tried to make him understand that this was a Turkish word that meant "farhat bakhsh" or refreshing, but Ranjit Singh dismissed them saying that the Punjab was not inhabited by Turks, therefore a name understandable in the local language needed to be adopted and that was to be Shalā Bāgh (Kohli, 2004: 77).

Captain Wade, the British political agent at Ludhiana, visited Lahore in June 1838 prior to the Governor General Lord Auckland's visit in January 1839. The Captain appreciated the delightful Shalimar Gardens but pointed out that dilapidation marred its beauty. He suggested that repairs be made before the Governor General's forthcoming visit, to which the Maharaja readily agreed and ordered Khalifa Nuruddin to immediately visit the Gardens and submit a report (Op.cit, 3(iv):195-96).

Besides the Shalimar Gardens, Umdat-ut-Tawarikh frequently mentions the Hazuri Bāgh that lies between the Badshahi Mosque and the Alamgirī Gate of the Lahore fort. Sohan Lal Suri records that this garden was laid out at the orders of the Maharaja at the beginning of the new Bikrami year 1870 (April 1813), and expert gardeners were engaged for the purpose (Ibid, 2:136). Following the
Mughal tradition, a marble *baradarī* was constructed in the centre of the garden (figure 2).

Fig. 2: Hazuri Bagh Pavilion, Lahore, Pakistan. (Photo: 2006)

An Englishman, Lieut. William Barr visited Lahore in February 1839. His detailed account of the Hazuri Bāgh *baradarī* given below helps reconstruct the original structure:

In the center of this square [Hazuri Bāgh], which is laid out in gardens and terraces, is an elegant little building, erected by the Maharaja, with marble pilfered from the tombs of Jahangir and his wazir [Empress Nurjahan's brother Asif Jah], where he transacts business in the hot season. The lower apartment is fourteen feet square, ornamented with looking-glass, gilding, and colours, most harmoniously blended, and extremely rich. Light is admitted through Saracenic arches on pillars, and a verandah, eight feet broad, with a ceiling embellished in the same style of profusion, encompasses the whole, which is built on a chabootra some four of five feet above the ground. We ascended to an upper room of similar size and shape, but even more beautifully and gorgeously ornamented; the four doors being decorated with ivory, inlaid in various devices, each being different from the other, and all arranged with much taste. There is also an apartment under-ground, where the Maharaja takes refuge from the hot winds, and during the hours of recreation admits a few of his most intimate friends (Op.cit, 1844: 98).

Suri's accounts mention that the Maharaja used the *baradarī* not only for recreational purposes but also to celebrate various festivals (op cit, 2:441). The pavilion lost its upper storey on July 19, 1932 and the damaged portion was removed to the fort (Aijazuddin, 2004: 74). Presently, the *baradarī* is a single-storied structure and is in a fairly good condition.

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Contemporary sources also record several occasions when the Maharaja ordered the laying out of gardens and construction of baradarīs. In November 1819, the Maharaja ordered Fakir Imamuddin, thanedār (in-charge) of Gobindgarh fort at Amritsar, to lay out a garden (Rambāgh) outside the katrā (or the locality generally occupied) of Jai Singh Kanhaya, and that it should be similar to the Shalimar Gardens (Op.cit, 2:312). The garden complex has a double-storied red sandstone gateway and buildings laid out in the chaupāṛ (four sections) pattern (Khanna, 2001: 116). Ranjit Singh’s summer palace stands in the center of the garden with four ancillary buildings on the cardinal axes. The Garden still exists but is now called the Company Bāgh and the buildings are used for different purposes. The Summer Palace is now used as Maharaja Ranjit Singh Museum (figure 3).

![Fig. 3: Rāmbāgh Palace, Amritsar, India. (Photo: 2006)](image)

There are quite a few references in the chronicles of private gardens laid out and owned by the sardārs and the elite. The Maharaja frequently visited these gardens (bāghs) and occasionally celebrated festivals or held court. Suri states that "he indulged in walks and strolls there among the blossoms and rosebuds which had been set in graceful order by the gardeners" (op cit, 2:415). Among the most frequently mentioned besides Shalimar Gardens are the gardens of Chota Ram, Jamadar Khushal Singh, Amb Dhoorewalā and Anguri Bāgh. These gardens also had small pavilions in them. In September 1827, ahalkārs or the officers of the concerned department were issued orders to "get ready a newly founded Baradari in perfect strength together with a fine garden on the bank of river [Ravi]" (Ibid: 430).

The chronicles of 1832 shed interesting light on the architectural activities that prevailed during the Sikh rule over the Punjab. Suri records:

As the Maharaja always had a great liking for building lovely new buildings, he proposed the building of a Baradari at Kaulsar [Amritsar] during these days. He, therefore, appointed Fateh Khan, son of Mian Elahi Bakhsh, for fetching stone from Lahore. Rs. 50 were given to him for his personal use,
Rs. 10 were given to his Munshi and Rs. 20 for cartage (Ibid, 3(ii):176).

Suri recounts in 1826 that the Maharaja ordered bungalows to be built "all along the way from Adinanagar to Amritsar" in all probability as halting places for himself (Ibid, 2:406). Shortly before passing these orders, he is reported to have fallen ill after his visit to the Jawalamukhi Temple in the Hills and had to rush back to Adinanagar, and from there to Amritsar (Ibid: 405). Henry Fane also notes in his memoirs that since the Maharaja is constantly on the move, he has built single rooms along the great roads to seek a cool shelter when the heat becomes unbearable in a tent (Fane, 1842, 1:150). One of the few extant baradarīs built by Ranjit Singh is in the Shalimar Gardens. It was occupied by William Moorcroft for some time who mentions it in his memoirs⁴. He stayed at the small baradarī that was furnished with a cooling device and describes it in the following words:

May 6. I started at three, and at nine reached Shahlimar, the large garden laid out by order of Shah Jehan, where I took up my abode in a chamber erected by the Raja close to a well, and a reservoir which it supplies, and from which jets d' eau are made to play so near to the apartment as to cool the air at its entrance (Moorcroft and Trebeck, 2004, 1:91).

The building and its cooling well are visible today but in need of repair (figure 4).

In addition to laying out gardens with baradarīs, the Sikh monarch and his sardārs also built large mansions or havelīs in Lahore. Sections of two large havelī complexes, Jamadar Khushal Singh's havelī in Chūna Mandī and Naunehal Singh's havelī inside the Mori Gate survive in their original form and are used today as a girls’ college and a girls’ school, respectively.

Jamadar Khushal Singh's havelī was a part of a triangular site occupying 2.7 hectares, inside the Masīfī Gate. Today the site includes three main structures, two
of the Sikh period and the third dateable to the British. The largest of the three structures, the havelī itself, covered almost one hectare and the construction was probably started in 1817 (PEPA, 1993: 69-83). A contemporary record indicates that Maharaja Ranjit Singh gave five hundred wooden beams to the Jamadar in August of that year for the construction of a mansion (Op.cit, 1986: 275). The large havelī is a huge rectangle measuring almost a hectare, and a portal that faces east. A square garden behind the portal was surrounded by chambers and subterranean rooms (used during the summers). The women's quarters or zenanā were situated on the southern and south-eastern sides of the courtyard. The northern side held the baths or hammâms as well as the elephant stables or feelkhanā (op cit, 1993: 78). Kanhaya Lal describes the lofty southern and western walls of the havelī as almost equal in height to the walls of the Lahore fort - giving the havelī the appearance of a second fort (Lal, 2006: 308).

Kanhaya Lal also writes of a havelī built for Naunehal Singh in 1837. It was one of the grandest edifices of Lahore with countless courtyards, subterranean rooms and buildings sumptuously decorated with gold-work on the ceilings. He also refers to “a towering building of glass” that neither survives, nor mentioned in other accounts (Ibid, 306). Including the subterranean floor, it is a five-storied building, 124 feet long, 97.5 feet wide and 51 feet high (Khokhar, 1999: 77). A square courtyard in the centre is surrounded by three floors of rooms. The first floor has eleven rooms, thirteen on the second and nine on the third (Ibid). Above the third floor of Naunehal Singh’s havelī, a single small oblong room is built on the north-western corner as a barsātī and is decorated with frescoes. The east and west facades of the havelī are decorated in different materials: the east facade boasts of tastefully executed monochrome cut-brick and masonry as well as relief work whereas the west side shows colorful frescoes (figures 5 - 6).

Fig. 5: East façade, havelī Naunehal Singh, Lahore. (Photo: 2006)
Like the above mentioned havelī of Jamadar Khushal Singh, it is also built as a fortress, apparently a common feature of housing of the nobility of this period; similar features are found for Ranjit Singh’s Rambāgh Summer Palace, Amritsar.

Another Sikh pavilion is the Ath-Dara (eight doorways) at the Lahore fort (figure 7). Maharaja Ranjit Singh, with all his riches and resources, chose to build this simple pavilion outside the Musamman Burj for holding court. According to Fakir Waheeduddin (1965), he turned down all suggestions to use the marble throne of Diwan-i Aam or other Mughal enclosures within the fort for the purpose (op cit: 25). Instead of a traditional throne, he used to sit in chairs of gold and silver, either cross legged or with one leg tucked under him in an informal manner as portrayed by Emily Eden (Aijazuddin, 1979: 31). Ranjit Singh's gold-plated throne, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, is one of his chair-like thrones (figure 8).
An unusual metal chair in the Lahore Museum dated to the Sikh period, probably used by the Maharaja as a camp chair has lions cast in metal under its arm-rests and decorative motifs etched on the seat and the back rest (figure 9).

A wooden throne in the same collection is somewhat similar in structure to the Victoria and Albert gold throne. The motifs painted on it are similar to the ones found on the doors of the gateway apartments of Shalimar Gardens (figure 10).
In spite of his power, success and control over a vast empire for forty years, Ranjit Singh struck all coins in the name of the Khalsā. None state his own sovereignty - a proof of his deep reverence for his religion and especially for the tenth Guru Gobind Singh, who formed the Khalsā. There is one exception, a coin he struck in the name of his beloved Muslim wife Moran in the early years of his reign as mentioned by several historians. He used to call his court the Khalsā darbār, his army the Khalsā, and himself a humble servant of the Guru. A plaque commemorating his additions to the Golden Temple at Amritsar reads as follows:

The Great Guru in His wisdom looked upon Maharaja Ranjit Singh as his chief servitor and Sikh, in His benevolence, bestowed on him the privilege of serving the Temple (Arshi, 1986: 126).

According to Fakir Waheeduddin, the Maharaja used to explain that his name Ranjit (victorious) was taken from the name of Guru Gobind Singh’s drum, and that both were meant to announce the Guru’s victory (Op.cit, 1965: 29). The phenomenon of a ruler assuming a secondary role of in a state - and proclaiming a divinity to be the actual sovereign - is not exclusive to Ranjit Singh. The Rajput rulers of southern Rajasthan, notably, the maharaos of Kota paid special homage to images of Krishna as Brijnathji for almost a hundred years, or later, as Brijrajji. Icons of Krishna were propitiated and treated as the "true ruler of the state" (Cummins, 2006: 162). Joan Cummins states that “By having a powerful icon in the palace, and by treating it as the true king, the Kota maharaos sought to protect their state and to exhibit their own humility before God” (Ibid).

Ranjit Singh's deep reverence for his religion is also apparent from the veneration he accorded to Granth Sahib, the Sikh Holy Book. Maharaja Ranjit Singh is noted to have regularly listened to the chanting of the scriptures. At about the third quarter of the day while he was encamped at Ropar for his meeting with Lord William Bentick in October 1831, Suri records that the Maharaja "secured the pride of both the worlds by listening to the Granth Sahib" (Op cit, (3i):116). G. T. Vigne (2004) notes that when encamped away from his capital, the Granth used to arrive on the next day and in order to show his reverence for it, Ranjit Singh used to ride out of the camp to receive it (245). The Maharaja is also recorded to have turned to the Holy Granth for divine guidance in times of trouble. For example, in 1805, Raja Jaswant Singh Holkar of Bharatpur attacked the British and after his defeat, he crossed the Sutlej and came to Amritsar asking Ranjit Singh for help against the foreign invaders. Suri records that the Maharaja finally made the difficult decision of refusing Holkar and winning the goodwill of the British, by randomly placing two slips of papers in the Granth and extracting one that indicated an alliance with the British (Op.cit, 2:50).

W. G. Osborne too writes that the Maharaja regularly consulted the Holy Book before undertaking important expeditions. He also talks of the Maharaja’s method of placing two slips of paper in the leaves of the Granth; one with his wish
and the other with the reverse, and faithfully accepting whatever is indicated on the one he draws out (Osborne, 1840: 122). The practice of deriving divine interpretations from Holy Books was a common practice that still prevails in some areas of the subcontinent irrespective of religious beliefs. In another instance M. Macauliffe (1995) relates that a pious Sikh of Lahore, Bhai Harbhagat Singh was unable to decide whether Guru Nanak's was born in the month of Kattak or Baisakh (names of Indian months). He wrote each month separately on slips of paper, placed them in front of the Holy Book and asked a boy who had performed ablutions in the sacred tank, to pick one. The boy picked up the one that had Kattak written on it, henceforth, this month was accepted as the month of Nanak's birth (181).

Ranjit Singh's religiosity is often tainted with superstition. A renowned twentieth century Sikh scholar Khushwant Singh calls him "superstitious Brahmin-ridden" and complains that he patronized a society that practiced Hindu rites and rituals that were against the teachings of the Gurus. An analysis on the other hand by Harjot Oberoi, of the religious beliefs and practices of the Sikhs in general in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reveals that what the Maharaja observed and exercised was common practice. Explaining his point Oberoi writes:

There was no stigma attached to worshipping before a variety of deities, visiting the shrines of a pir, asking for the intercession of a holy man to solve mundane problems, consulting astrologers, necromancers and magicians, or undertaking ritual fasting (Oberoi, 1995: 394).

Umdat-ut-Tawarikh and the collection of newsletters edited by H. L. O. Garrette and G. L. Chopra have recorded countless instances where Ranjit Singh gave away generous amounts in charity especially to the Brahmins. The role of the Brahmins and the sway they held in society is apparent from fact that the Maharaja drank the water used for washing the big toe of many Brahmins. This was advised by one "curd-eating Brahmin" in May 1836, as a cure for paralysis. Suri writes that this particular Brahmin told the other Brahmins who were asked to let their big toes washed, "that they were giving the benefit of all their good deeds including their prayers and penances, religious recitations and pilgrimages to the Maharaja, whose recovery to health would thereby be secured" (Op.cit, (3iii): 378-79). On the other hand Suri states that the Maharaja once asked him to explain why he learnt astrology when he was a vakil by profession. Upon Suri's simple reply, that he was interested in the subject, Ranjit Singh told him that he expected him to say that he did so to be of service to the Maharaja "unlike the Brahmins, who had no other business than filling their stomachs" (Ibid: 395).

One of the religious rites Ranjit Singh unfailingly observed was frequent visits for sacred baths, to Harmandar, Taran Taran - another sacred Sikh site a few miles from Amritsar - and several other holy places. These visits reflect the general practices of baths at sacred sites that are still observed by Hindus and
Sikhs and are believed to cleanse the person of both spiritual and bodily sins and ailments. After establishing himself at Lahore, most of Ranjit Singh's early years were spent in conquests. He is recorded at times to perform his sacred rites and military operations simultaneously. One such instance is when he went to bathe in the holy tank of Katas, on the banks of the River Indus, in April 1806 and "reduced the zemindárs [landlords] in the vicinity of that river to subjection" (Latif, 1997: 364). During the campaign against Ludhiana and its surrounding areas, he performed his ablutions in the sacred tank at Thanesar (Ibid, 366). Suri writes that in the middle of his conquests of 1807, the Maharaja went to River Jamuna for a scared bath on Bhai Dooj, a day thought to be propitious for the removal of ailments (op cit, 2: 67-68). On January 8, 1813, he went to Amritsar for a sacred bath on the day of Maghi and distributed alms. Later he went to Taran Tāran, and donated a few thousand rupees for the construction of stairs for the sacred pool (Ibid: 132-33). While in the Kangra Valley in October 1813, Ranjit Singh got up early in the morning on the 11th, took a sacred bath and changed his clothes and later paid a visit to the temple of Devi Nagarkot (op cit, 1986: 102). In January 1816, he went to Amritsar for his bath on the Sankrant Day and offered charities (Ibid, 227). During the last few years of his life, his visits to Amritsar for sacred baths increased and the third volume of *Umdat-ut-Tawarikh* records him leaving Lahore frequently for baths on auspicious days.

With an increase in age as well as the riches of his state and his power, the charities and alms Ranjit Singh offered on his visits to holy sites and on auspicious days also increased. Most of the time, the donations included articles that were meant for personal use of only the elite. A study of these items reveals that such expensive objects were not confined to the use of the royalty and that the magnificence trickled down to the common man as well – mostly Brahmins. The *Punjab Akhbar* reported on June 13, 1839 that on Sankrant Day, when the Maharaja was gravely ill, he gave away eleven cows with their horns covered with gold, two horses, an elephant, two diamond rings, ten golden and silver images, five golden deer and as many of silver, eleven coral things and two thousand rupees to the Brahmins (Ganda Singh, 1952: 45). *Misr* Ram Kishan reported on June 24, that he had prepared a golden chair, a bedstead, plates and many other items amounting to twenty one lakhs of rupees to be given as alms (Ibid, 59). A day before his death, the Maharaja also tried to give away the famous Koh-i-noor diamond to the Jagannath Temple in South India dedicated to the worship of Vishnu and Krishna, but *Misr* Beli Ram declined the Maharaja’s orders stating that all assets now belonged to Kharak Singh. As compensation for Koh-i-noor, two armlets with diamonds, worth two lakh rupees, several other jewelry pieces, eight Persian-style top-hats, two elephants with gold howdās and five lakh rupees in cash were given away in sankalāp (charity). After that the Maharaja put on all his jewels and took them off one by one, and having lost his speech, made a sign that he had done it for the last time (Op.cit, 3(v):482). Similar amounts of alms were
given in charities almost every day till the Maharaja passed away on June 27, 1839.

The magnificent life at the Lahore *darbār*, so painstakingly introduced and maintained by Maharaja Ranjit Singh did not come to a halt at his death. His cremation ceremonies were celebrated with equal fervor and majesty. His final conveyance to the funeral pyre and the pyre itself made of sandalwood was elaborately decorated with *pashminā* shawls and silks. His ashes were collected in gold vessels and dispatched to Hardwar for immersion in grandeur, with all pomp and ceremony and protocol offered to him while he was alive, living up to the magnificent standards he had set during his lifetime.

**Notes**

1. There were at least two separate sets of sleeping chambers known as *barī khwabgāh* or the large sleeping chambers built by Jahangir (r. 1605-1627), and the *choti khwabgāh* or the small sleeping chambers, by Shah Jahan (r. 1628-1656).
2. A Hindu festival celebrating their god Rama’s victory over Ravanna, who had abducted Rama’s wife Sita.
3. The property belonged to Ranjit Singh’s mother-in-law, Sadda Kaur who was the daughter-in-law of the Kanhaya chief and after the death of her husband and father-in-law, headed the *misl*.
4. Moorcroft was a surgeon by profession who visited Punjab on his way to Turkistan in May 1820, to procure stallions for the East India Company’s military stud at Bengal, where he was engaged as the Superintendent.
5. A top storey above the main portal was added by Khushal Singh's nephew Raja Teja Singh, who inherited the *haveli* in 1844. Pakistan Environmental Planning & Architectural Consultants.
6. *Barsāt* is the monsoon season and a room built at the top floor of a house in the Punjab was usually used to catch the breeze and enjoy the rain.
7. The pavilion is a rectangle with eight archways in an inverted L-shape, five in its longer side and three in the other. *Ath* means eight in Punjabi and *darā* is a distortion of the Persian word *dar*, meaning door. The pavilion was built by Ranjit Singh adjacent to the Musamman Burj or the Octagonal Tower’s interior boundary wall in the Lahore fort. He used it to hold his court and is depicted by August Scheofft in one of his famous paintings.
8. *Lit.* “Pure.” A name given by the tenth Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708) to his disciples who were given an initiation after the “Amrit Sanchar” ceremony.
9. The highest among the four Hindu castes.
10. In memory of forty Sikh martyrs who sacrificed their lives to save Guru Gobind Singh.
11. A Hindu festival celebrating the solar movement towards the northern hemisphere, a time considered auspicious.
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Posthumous Homage Paid to Maharaja Ranjit Singh

Nadhra S. N. Khan

Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s Samadhi in Lahore is the funerary monument built by his successors after his death in 1839. All nineteenth century and later historians writing on Lahore and its historical monuments mention the Samadhi but none of them refer to the death rituals that took place on that spot before the building was commenced. An examination of these gives an insight into numerous nineteenth century social and religious practices of the Sikhs that have since been largely abandoned. These events were recorded in detail by the court chronicler Sohan Lal Suri in Umdat-ul Tawarikh, were reported by the newsletters called the Punjabi Akhbar and the Lahore Akhbar, and have been discussed in accounts by foreigners who were either present at the funeral or communicated details to each other in letters and reports. Based on contemporary texts and a few paintings on this subject, this paper attempts to narrate the last moments of the Maharaja, the final respects and stately farewell accorded to him not only by his successors and his people but also by the British army while the caravan accompanying the ashes travelled to Hardwar en route Hindustan (the name given to British occupied India). The symbolic presence of the ashes in the Samadhi and their removal in recent times is also discussed briefly.

Suri’s eye-witness account of the Maharaja’s last moments tells us that Bhai Gobind Ram urged the dying man to utter Rama (the name of one of the Hindu gods) thrice, and that Ranjit Singh could only say it twice before he finally ceased to exist, with his gaze fixed on “the picture of Lachhmi and Narain” (Hindu goddess and god, Lakshmi and Vishnu). People in general spent the night crying, while the Brahmins kept reading their holy book Gita and Bishen Sahasarnam (Hindu sacred texts), and the bhais (Sikh holy men) remained busy in reciting Guru Granth (Sikh Holy Book).2 Maharaja Ranjit Singh died on Thursday, June 27, 1839, and Suri records that shortly after his death Raja Dhyan Singh ordered a gold and silver bier along with other objects required for the ceremony. The next day, the Maharaja’s body was bathed with Ganges water and dressed, complete with a turban and jewels. Ranjit Singh’s four Hindu wives and seven slave-girls adorned themselves and got ready to perform the sati or immolation ritual in high spirits, “laughing and dancing like intoxicated elephants”.3 At the pyre his most senior wife Rani Katochan, the

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1 Bhai Vasti Ram was a pious Hindu man with medical training that the Maharaja held in great esteem. He built the Bhai’s Samadhi adjacent to the northern boundary wall of the Lahore Fort after his death in 1802 and employed his two sons Bhai Gobind Ram and Bhai Ram Singh as court priests.
3 Ibid., 3:486.
daughter of the Hill raja Sansar Chand, placed Ranjit Singh's head on her thighs while the others sat in a circle round him ready to be immolated. Suri further narrates that during the cremation, two pairs of pigeons sacrificed themselves under the order of the Almighty God, as they came out of nowhere and fell into the fire.\footnote{Ibid., 3(3):489.}

Contemporary European sources also give details of the last rites for Ranjit Singh. W. G. Osborne visited the Lahore darbār in 1838, a few months prior to the Maharaja's death, and in his memoirs, published in 1840, gives an account of the death rituals according to the information he gathered from European officers present at the event. He writes that although Ranjit Singh's physical being gradually gave way during the last few days of his life, his mental faculties were unimpaired to the last. Osborne writes that four of Ranjit Singh's wives and five Kashmiri slave girls, all extremely beautiful, performed sati on his pyre.\footnote{W. G. Osborne, The Court and Camp of Runjeet Sing (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1973), 223-24.}

John Martin Honigberger, a Romanian homeopathic doctor, was one of the Maharaja's court physicians between 1829 and 1849. In his memoirs, published in 1852, he also gives a first-hand account of the rituals. He writes that the dead body of the Maharaja was placed on a board and was carried on a bier designed like a ship with sails and flags made of rich silken fabric, woven with gold and of Kashmiri shawls. The ship-like bier was carried by countless people from the inner fort to the cremation site in a small garden where the Samadhi now stands. After reaching the site, the Maharaja's body was taken out of the bier and placed on the ground and the costly ornaments and material used for the bier was distributed among the people. The Brahmans and the Sikh priests chanted their sacred scriptures from their respective holy books while the Muslims who were present kept invoking God by repeating Ya Allah (O' Allah). All this was accompanied by a slow beating of drums in the background. The funeral pyre was a square almost six feet high and was made of dry wood with pieces of aloe in it. The body of the Maharaja was placed on it in the centre. The ranis or queens ascended the platform and sat at the head of the body while the slave girls, near the feet. They were all covered with reeds and after pouring large quantities of oil on it, the pyre was set to fire on all four sides.\footnote{John Martin Honigberger, Thirty-Five Years In The East: Adventures, Discoveries, Experiments, and Historical Sketches, relating to the Punjab and Cashmere; in connection with Medicine, Botany, Pharmacy, & Co., together with an original Materia Medica, and a Medical Vocabulary, in four European and five Eastern Languages (London: H. Baillière, 1852), 1:99-100.}

On the third day after cremation, the ashes and bones were collected and were placed in urns. Preparations were then made for the ashes to be sent to the banks of the Ganges for immersion. They were conveyed in richly caparisoned palanquins (a point discussed further below).

Two miniature paintings are known that illustrate Maharaja Ranjit Singh's cremation rituals. Each displays some elements recorded or narrated by witnesses. A Kangra painting of ca. 1840, first published by W. G. Archer, shows the pyre with
the queens and the slave girls willingly adjusting themselves next to the dead body of the monarch while the men in the immediate foreground are shown in great distress (figure 1). The empty boat-shaped bier in the left foreground is adorned with garlands and flags. According to Honigberger, it was decorated with gold woven flags and Kashmir shawls and that after the ceremony was over, “the costly ornaments of the richly decorated bier were given to the mob”. All male figures painted here are clad in white, the color of mourning in the subcontinent, while all seven females wear their best outfits bright in color and highly ornamented as they prepare to join their beloved husband and master respectively in his last journey. A chauri or fly whisk-bearer at the head of the deceased monarch shows the respect accorded to Ranjit Singh till his very end. Out of the two pairs of pigeons mentioned by Suri, only one bird can be seen here in the smoke above the canopy.

Next to the bier, a man stops Raja Dhyan Singh from ascending the pyre, a historical fact, while a younger person next to him is presumably Hira Singh, Dhyan Singh’s son. Naunehal Singh, the Maharaja’s grandson was at Peshawar at the time of Maharaja’s death and this figure with his shorn hair is not a Sikh. Moreover, Hira Singh was a great favorite of the Maharaja and it was only natural

8 Honigberger, *Thirty-Five Years In The East*, 1:102
to show him next to his father mourning the death of his supporter and admirer. Kharak Singh, the Maharaja's eldest son and heir, is shown lamenting with his hand raised to his head, while another man offers solace. Archer suggests that the Kangra artist based his information on stories that travelled from Lahore to the Hills after the Maharaja's cremation. He also states that some of it would have been "...hearsay for while certain details are correct, others do not tally" (not mentioning which are authentic).\textsuperscript{9}

Another painting from the collection of the Central Sikh Museum, Amritsar, published by Jean-Marie Lafont, is divided into four registers (figure 2).\textsuperscript{10} In the upper register the Maharaja in his lifetime sits in a palanquin accompanied by musicians and dancing girls. The second one shows the scene of the cremation. The funeral pyre encircled by flames in the centre has seven females instead of eleven out of which three richly clad ones appear to be the wives and the rest slave girls. The pyre is surrounded by Hindu celestial figures wearing their five-pointed crowns as well as the Maharaja's courtiers including the Akalis in their blue pointed turbans. Here the pigeons mentioned by Suri, who flew into the flames at the time of cremation, are painted quite large in blue. The lower two registers display Ranjit Singh's army, elephants and horses.

Cremation is an ancient Hindu ritual also followed by Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs. Jagdish Narain Tiwari recounts the ritual of cremation taken from the Mahabhārata:

\begin{quote}
Cremation was the standard practice of disposal of the dead body ... The different elements of the rite of cremation included the preliminary preparation of the dead body by formally dressing and anointing it, draping and decorating it with silk cloth, flowers and garlands, carrying it on the shoulders of men in some kind of a palanquin or in a carriage (śibikā, yāna) in an impressive procession, joined by bereaved relatives, ... in a grove or forest by the river bank.\textsuperscript{11}
\end{quote}

Tiwari notes that in very early times, the Hindus practiced erecting memorials

\textsuperscript{9} Archer, Paintings of the Sikhs, 30.
\textsuperscript{10} Jean-Marie Lafont, Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Lord of the Five Rivers (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), figure 266.
\textsuperscript{11} Jagdish Narain Tiwari, Disposal of the Dead in the Mahabhārata: A Study in the Funeral Customs in Ancient India (Varanasi: Kishor Vidyai Niketan, 1979), 21-22.
around the pits where the charred bones of the cremated bodies were buried but
this practice was gradually superceded by casting of the ashes into the Holy River.
He refers to a chapter in the praise of the River Ganges in the Anusāna-parvan
[Mahabharata 13.27.27.31], where it is stated that persons whose bones are laid in
the holy river shall never fall from the heaven and that the stay in heaven would be
granted for as long as his bones remained in the waters of the Ganges. 12

According to Sohan Lal Suri, Kharak Singh went to the cremation quarters
on June 30, 1839, three days after the cremation, and picked up the ashes of
Maharaja Ranjit Singh with his own hands and put them in gold vessels. The ashes
of the Maharaja’s queens and the maidservants were picked up by the sardars
and preserved separately. 13 This event is also mentioned by Honigberger who says
that the collection of ashes was done in the presence of a select few courtiers. 14
Punjab Akhbar, another valuable source of information, reports that the thirteenth
day after the Maharaja’s demise was observed as the last mourning day and that
Maharaja Kharak Singh observed the necessary rituals and generously gave away
valuable gifts to the Brahmans of Amritsar, Lahore and Gujranwala as charity.
The articles given away are enumerated: a silver and gold bed, 4 jewels, 25 silk
suits, a silver chair, 2 silver bowls, plates of gold and silver, shawl quilts, 101 cows,
1 elephant, 2 horses with golden saddles, Rs. 5000 and 2000 maunds of grain.
Kharak Singh also gave memorial gifts for the Ranees consisting of 4 silver beds,
suits of female apparel, ornaments and jewels, plates, and 2 splendid carriages
(ruth). 15 Similar instances of charitable activities are also recorded by Suri and in
other contemporary documents.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s ashes were sent off to Hardwar or Haridwar (a sacred
Hindu city on the Ganges) for immersion along with the ashes of his wives and
slave girls — as the contemporary sources relate. On the other hand, later historians
mentioning the Maharaja’s Samadhi give no reference of it. For example Syed
Muhammad Latif writing in 1892, a source used by many later historians, gives
us an understanding that the marble urns or knobs placed on a platform in the
Samadhi actually contained ashes. He states:

The carved marble lotus flower in the central vault, set beneath a canopy, covers
the ashes of the great Mahārāja, and the smaller flowers of the same description
around are in memory of his four wives and seven slave girls, who immolated
themselves on the funeral pyre of their deceased lord. The knobs representing the
queens, are crowned, while plain knobs mark the sacrifices of the equally devoted
but less legal wives, the slave girls. 16

Two other nineteenth century historians, Noor Ahmad Chisti (1867) and
Kanhaya Lal (1884), do not mention the knobs while describing the Maharaja’s
Samadhi. Chishti omits them totally and simply states that the square marble

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12 Ibid., 24.
13 Suri, 44.
14 Honigberger, 1:100.
15 Ganda Singh, ed., The Punjab in 1839-40: Selections from the Punjab Akhbars, Punjab Intelligence, etc.
   Preserved in the National Archives of India, New Delhi (Patiala: New Age Press, 1952), 79.
16 Syed Muhammad Latif, Lahore: Its Historical, Architectural Remains and Antiquities, with an Account of its
   Modern Institutions, Inhabitants, their Trade, Customs, etc. (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2005), 129.
platform at the Samadhi is two-and-a-half feet in height and is always covered with a *doshala* or *kimkhab* (a shawl or a piece of fabric woven with gold and silk).\(^{17}\) Kanhaya Lal, on the other hand, refers to the knobs in the following words:

...the square marble platform has the Maharaja’s Samadhi made of stone in the centre and eleven Samadhs of the queens who performed sati, and two Samadhs of the two pigeons who flew into the pyre while it was being set alight and were burnt with the body of the Maharaja.\(^{18}\)

Following these sources many later historians and the general public at large remain ignorant of the actual facts and commonly believed that the ashes of the Maharaja and his harem were gathered after cremation and placed in the urns. Account of the magnificent farewell given to the ashes at Lahore with salutes of canons and the majestic receptions of the grand procession that took them in all magnificence to Hardwar for immersion have generally been forgotten.

The *Umdat-ul-Tawarikh* establishes that the departure of the ashes from Lahore was a grand event and all measures were taken by Raja Dhyan Singh and others to give the dead monarch a suitable farewell. On July 2, 1839, all chieftains prostrated themselves in front of the Maharaja’s ashes and they were placed in a special *sawari* or conveyance and covered with *doshalas*. The *sawari* carrying the ashes of the Maharaja’s queens and slave girls accompanied his body and, according to Honigberger, were on “five richly caparisoned palanquins”.\(^{19}\) The troops of the regiments and the orderlies marched ahead of these palanquins, as they used to do during the Maharaja’s lifetime, marching out of the gate of the Badshahi Mosque.\(^ {20}\) Suri states that Dhyan Singh ordered two platoons along with *topkhana* (artillery) and troops of horsemen drawn in lines, well dressed and well equipped, to gather outside Delhi Gate near Kirpa Ram’s and Tej Singh’s gardens and to discharge a salute of eleven balls per canon upon the arrival of the ashes at each point. He also instructed that the superintendents of the horses and elephants should also be present with their horses decorated with gold and bejeweled saddles and the elephants adorned with seats upon them.\(^ {21}\) An amount of rupees 10,000 were given to Bhai Gurmukh Singh for the expense of the funeral caravan.

Around July 10, 1839, a letter from Bhai Gurmukh Singh informed the Lahore court that the caravan of the ashes “had crossed from the ferry of Kakriwal”, adding that Sardar Nihal Singh Ahluwalia fired canons as a salute and out of respect dismounted his horse to receive the caravan, wept uncontrollably and threw gold over it. Some other sardars including Sher Singh (one of Ranjit Singh’s twin sons with his first wife Mehtab Kaur, daughter of Sadda Kaur) also sent their offerings at this stage. The Bhai further stated that the British officers stationed at Ludhiana had one platoon of soldiers and the *topkhana* (canons) drawn up

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18 Kanhaya Lal, *Tarih-e Lahore*, 193. (Translated from Urdu by the author of this article).
19 Honigberger, 1:100.
20 Suri, 4:6-7.
21 Suri, 4:6.
in equal lines and offered a “salute of 60 balls per canon.”

A letter from Rai Gobind Jassa elucidated the sorrow felt by Clerk Sahib (Sir George Russell Clerk, GCSI, KCB, political agent appointed by the British at Ludhiana in 1839) upon learning of the Maharaja’s demise. Rai’s letter stressed the fact that it was the British authorities that had asked the administrator of Ludhiana to offer reception to the ashes upon their arrival with a salute by firing canons. It further stated that the British officers were instructed to offer reception to the caravan all the way as it passed Ambala, Jagadhari and Saharanpur up to the River Ganges and to put doshalas upon the urns as a mark of respect according to the local custom.

Another letter from Rai Gobind Jassa to the Lahore darbār informed them about the progress of the caravan. He stated that the English Governor General (Lord Auckland) had expressed sorrow at the Maharaja’s death in a letter to Mr. Clerk. To show his respects for the deceased monarch, he proposed that fifty horsemen of Alexander’s Regiment accompany the Maharaja’s ashes.

In a letter dated July 17, 1839, Bhai Gurmukh Singh informed the Sikh court that the ashes had reached Patiala where Raja Karam Singh with his sardars had paid respects and the Raja showered gold coins over the palanquin and gave away many valuable articles in charity. The letter further stated that Raja Saroop Singh of Jind had acted in the same manner and gave away four horses, four pairs of doshalas and one elephant with a silver seat upon it. A letter from Fakir Shah Din reiterated the fact that the Nawab Sahib (English Governor-General Lord Auckland) had issued instructions to the British officers to offer respects to the ashes at every stage of their journey and to discharge sixty canons according to the British custom of firing as many canons as the age of the deceased (Ranjit Singh died when he was almost sixty).

Almost two months after the Maharaja’s cremation, on September 5, 1839, Kharak Singh asked Bhai Gurmukh Singh to give an account of the progress of the caravan carrying the ashes in the presence of the British officers visiting the

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22 Ibid., 4:17.
23 Suri, 4:18-19.
24 Ibid., 4:16-19.
25 Ibid., 4:22.
Lahore darbār, and thanked them for their assistance. The Bhai eulogized Mr. Collin, a British officer who had accompanied the caravan under the orders of the Governor-General and other officers of Saharanpur (a city in British India en route Hardwar) who had provided protection and guard at every stage of the journey and for offering all required support. The expense borne by the British Government to facilitate the caravan and to show respects by offering nazrana is documented in the register of Fort William, listed in the catalogues pertaining to the records of the Foreign Department of the British Government, dated: April 6, 1840, at the National Archives, Delhi, India.

Presently, the commemorative marble knobs mentioned by both Kanhaya Lal and Latif, are not on the platform of the square marble chhatrī in the interior of the Samadhi (figure 3). Originally fourteen in number; these knobs represented the Maharaja, his four queens, seven slave girls and two pigeons who were cremated on June 28, 1839, in the royal funeral pyre. Presently, the largest and the most elaborately decorated knob, signifying the Maharaja, is missing and only twelve out of the thirteen smaller ones are in a storeroom at the Dera Sahib complex, Lahore.

They were removed from the chhatrī in recent times for religious reasons. The Evacuee Trust Board of Pakistan (ETBP), responsible for the upkeep of the Samadhi and other property of religious significance evacuated at the time of partition of Pakistan and India in 1947 has no documented record of the removal of these commemorative knobs. According to the caretakers of the Samadhi and the Dera Sahib complex the removal of the knobs took place after a Khalsa group from India visited the Samadhi and objected to the placement of the ashes of a

Figure 4: Commemorative knobs on the platform of the chhatri. Photograph courtesy of Dr. Shaukat Mahmood, 1960s.

25 Ibid., 4:22.
mortal on a higher plinth than the Holy Granth in the Dera Sahib Gurudwara (although, in truth, there were no ashes in the knobs). After the incident, to this date, the ETPB has never replaced the knobs on the chhatri in order to avoid further religious controversies.

Besides historical accounts by Kanhaya Lal and Syad Muhammad Latif, there is visual evidence that the knobs were once displayed on the platform of the chhatri in the Samadhi. An engraving by W. J. Palmer based upon a sketch by J. Duguid of about 1874, shows the knobs placed on the chhatri in the Samadhi interior. More importantly, photographs taken in the 1960's by Dr. Shaukat Mahmood, a professor at the University of the Punjab, show all fourteen knobs with the largest one with the most elaborate carving, placed in the center (figure 4).

Latif calls them “carved marble lotus flowers” and mentions that the ones signifying the four queens “are crowned”. Only five out of the present twelve feature lotus leaves carved in concentric layers but each has a different diameter at the base as well as at the neck and the lotus petals are of different styles and sizes. The rest of the seven knobs are faceted but have no carving and according to Latif,

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26 Suri, 4:49.
27 Vide, ref. No. 246-248 and 248-250 respectively.
28 A significant building of the complex is the fifth Sikh Guru Arjun's Shaheed Asthan or the spot of martyrdom where a Gurudwara commemorates the event.
30 Latif, Lahore, 129.
these plain ones possibly “mark the sacrifices of the equally devoted but less legal wives, the slave girls” (figure 5). Difference of design suggests different hands working on the knobs.

An interesting feature was that one of the five carved knobs has a hole at its base, fitted with a copper plate and a small pipe; it is currently empty (figure 6). This suggests three possibilities: the initial plan was to fill the knobs with part of the ashes of the Maharaja and the members of his household; the existing knobs are non-functional replicas of original ones (except for the one with a hollow space in it); or the marble lotus bud knobs were created only with a symbolic meaning.

The events that took place at the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s death and the ceremonial trip to the Ganges with his ashes shed light on the religious beliefs of the Maharaja and the important people around him. It emphasizes the importance of Brahmins in Sikh society at this time and specifically the attention paid to them by the court. It also explains the use of Hindu religious iconography as subject matter of the majority of frescoes in the Maharaja’s Samadhi. The accounts of the cremation ceremony give evidence that the populace of Lahore, Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims, along with foreigners associated with the Lahore darbār, all participated and offered their prayers. This helps understand the Maharaja’s role as a sovereign who offered peace and protection to all.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh ruled the Punjab at a time when most of India had gradually come under the British occupation. The Maharaja signed treaties with the British ensuring noninterference in his territory and adopted the policy of display of his friendship with them. He hosted grand ceremonies and orchestrated religious and social events to impress his fellowmen as well as the foreign visitors and took pride in flaunting his opulence and majesty. The ceremonial culture Maharaja Ranjit Singh had introduced and established at the Lahore Darbār continued after his death as his last rites were carried out with great fervor and majestic pomp. The ashes were sent off to Hardwar for immersion in a grand caravan complete with gold embroidered canopies held over gold vessels containing the ashes under the occasional showers of gold coins. Available sources tell us that shortly after the cremation ceremonies the successors busied themselves with plans of erecting a majestic memorial for the deceased Maharaja.
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Sikh Material Heritage and Sikh Social Practice in a Museum-Community Partnership: The Smithsonian’s Sikh Heritage Project

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Abstract. Focusing on aspects of community involvement in the Smithsonian’s Sikh Heritage Project, which since its founding in 2000 has included an exhibition and many other public activities, this paper considers some differences in the conceptualization of what constitutes “heritage” as perceived by Sikh community members, museum staff, and the broader museum public. It also considers the negotiations that took place about how Sikh heritage should be represented, because at each venue, the exhibition provided an important space for local Sikh communities to debate and celebrate their traditions, and to introduce a broad non-Sikh public to a culture that many perceived as exotic and little-known. In this interaction, Sikh communities actively tried to learn from the “culture” of museums as well, especially in two areas: The first is finding effective methods for helping a broad public better understand the Sikhs who live among them. The second is the growing acceptance of museum approaches to care of valued objects. For this, communities helped send museum staff and conservators to India and into Sikh communities, advising on the many differences between traditional Sikh social practice in treatment of “heritage” objects, and museum methods that would ensure their physical survival for much longer.

A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded... A beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colors and lines, without rhyme or reason...

- Pierre Bourdieu (1984:2-3)

Much of contemporary ethnographic museum exhibition-making requires an attempt to convey some of the “cultural competence” or “codes” needed to render unfamiliar objects of material culture intelligible and meaningful to new audiences. However aesthetically pleasing or visually compelling objects may be, conveying their meaningfulness and cultural contexts to a broad public remains a fundamental museum challenge.
This paper\(^1\) describes aspects of community involvement in the Smithsonian’s Sikh Heritage Project, which includes an exhibition and many other public activities. Within the long-term, evolving set of activities that has taken place since the founding of the Project in 2000, this paper briefly summarizes differences between conceptualizations of “heritage” considered worthy of museum exhibition for Sikh community members, museum staff, and the broader museum public; and it describes some of the negotiations that took place about how Sikh “heritage” came to be represented. Sikhs in the U.S.A. as elsewhere bear a rich cultural capital allowing them to recognize the meaningfulness of Sikh artworks and material objects, in a way that needed to be decoded for non-Sikh museum visitors to attain the broader public understanding which was our shared goal.

The Sikh Heritage Project has always sought to integrate community involvement in novel ways, both to effectively inform the general public about a culture and religion they may be unfamiliar with, as well as to involve Sikhs in decisions about how their heritage can be meaningfully and productively represented. The Project’s flagship exhibition, called *Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab*, was initially on long-term display at the National Museum of Natural History from 2004-2007, and since that time has evolved and expanded as it travelled to other venues (Santa Barbara, California, in 2009; Fresno, California, in 2012; San Antonio, Texas, in 2015-2016), largely through the continued efforts of many members of the Sikh community (Taylor and Pontsioen 2014).

Even though, as noted below, this Project has produced many other positive outcomes besides that exhibition, *Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab* is surely the most visible of them. The mode in which this exhibition was developed, within a larger framework of community involvement, reflects a changing view of the nature of museum curatorship as a social practice. Building on Christina Kreps’s (2003) understanding of curatorship as a social practice, the Sikh Heritage Project is overall a powerful example of how heritage projects can be carried out as museum-community partnerships to provide a space for communities to debate and celebrate their shared heritage. At the same time, these projects provide museum professionals with the opportunity to draw on research and collaboration with source communities to more accurately interpret and present objects in exhibitions and in other media.

\(^{1}\) Drawing partly on Taylor 2004, and Taylor and Pontsioen 2014, for its description of the Sikh Heritage project and exhibition content, this paper presents new examples of museum-community partnership from the subsequent venue in San Antonio, Texas, and more importantly explores for the first time aspects of the partners’ differing conceptualizations of what constitutes “heritage” and how Sikh materiality in relation to historic objects is being transformed by the importation of museum conservation concepts.
stages of this project allowed Sikh-Americans to participate in the development of the exhibition in ways that departed significantly from traditional museum development practices. This view places museum exhibitions within a more holistic, integrated, and culturally relative approach to curatorial work that explores and includes the relationships among museum objects, people, and society in social and cultural contexts beyond the museum collection or exhibition.

The place of an exhibition within a range of Sikh heritage activities

At its founding in 2000, the Smithsonian’s Sikh Heritage Project was defined in its founding document as an “integrated program of exhibitions, research, collection improvement, and public programs”; thus any exhibition envisioned was only one component of the Project’s potential scope. In fact, the first community donations to establish this locus of Sikh heritage activities were for a broad range of activities and did not require any resulting exhibition. Yet by 2004, the very effective series of lectures, performances, and targeted research trips had grown into a successful new exhibition which benefitted from the involvement and suggestions of many participants who had watched the project grow from its inception. Stepping back from the process to observe it, the frequent successful events, and highly visible public activities, served as a good example of how museums (like universities and other components of contemporary public culture) do produce events that are “rituals” in the anthropological sense. That is, they serve to assert the importance of the shared values of a community that gathers for these events. However, the goals of these events and of this exhibition included a strong component of educational outreach to the large non-Sikh population, who would come to understand Sikh identity better through a prominent and visually compelling, highly public exhibition about Sikh heritage.

The activities of this project show how a very active South Asian American community became involved in a unique collaboration that produced several positive results (including this exhibition) at relatively modest cost and within a comparatively short period of time. In this case, museum and other institutional goals came over time to coincide in part with community goals, and with the research interests of scholars based at the Museum and elsewhere. In this way, the exhibition described here has integrated community involvement in ways well beyond the norm in contemporary museum work. For example, an active group of community members became involved even in the early decision of whether to focus our collective effort toward exhibition or toward other potential goals of the Project. Since the exhibition closed at the Smithsonian, the further travel, development, substitute object selections, and associated outreach programs have been community efforts, working with the Smithsonian curator but in the absence of any professional traveling exhibition service.

Yet at the outset, that decision to focus a “heritage” project on an exhibition was far from unanimous. Some felt that the Smithsonian should prioritize other goals such as preservation of artifacts that were already on exhibition or in museum collections in India, but which badly needed specialized conservation work for their preservation. Others pointed to the potential for new publications, or assistance with other forms of education such as public lectures. Indeed through the years since its founding in 2000, the Sikh Heritage Project has addressed in part all these goals, through a series of annual lectures and through efforts to assist conservation of artifacts as well as major structures such as the Qila Mubarak in Patiala, India. In 2006 the Sikh Heritage Project cohosted, in conjunction with the Anandpur Sahib Foundation and the government of the Punjab, a conference on the application of new technologies in the field of cultural heritage preservation for the Punjab. Supported in part by the Indo-US Science and Technology Commission, our conference was memorable partly for bringing together scholars from both Pakistan and India, from Western and Eastern Punjab, to jointly address issues of heritage preservation. More recently, the Sikh Heritage Project and the (independent) Sikh Heritage Foundation (based in Weirton, West Virginia) contributed toward the production of Sikh Heritage: Ethos & Relics (Sikhandar Singh and Roopinder Singh 2012), a uniquely important volume of perspectives on the material heritage of the Sikhs in the Punjab today (cf. Taylor 2012). So undoubtedly there was much else to do in the name of Sikh Heritage, besides an exhibition.
Many community members also suggested recording key aspects of the exhibition *Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab* within a book which included information about the first three venues (Smithsonian, Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, and Fresno Art Museum), and that book (Taylor and Ponsioen 2014) became available in time for the fourth venue (University of Texas - San Antonio), with financial support for its design and printing in India, from many Sikh supporters of this Project.

At this writing (2015), the Smithsonian’s Sikh Heritage Project is working with the Sikh Foundation (Palo Alto, California) to prepare a major edited volume about the Kapany Collection of Sikh Art, which was a lender to the Smithsonian’s exhibition at every venue, and to many other exhibitions at other museums. So a broad range of activities has been undertaken under this rubric.

However, considering that the broad Sikh Heritage Project was first founded in February 2000, it seems that a very public direction for its activities coalesced quickly after the events of September 11, 2001, when misunderstanding and mis-identification was rife in America, and the need for greater awareness and understanding about Sikhs became much more acute than previously (Alag 2005; Yeager 2007). This was also recognized by the Sikh community, which threw its support behind the idea of a major exhibition on the Sikhs at the Smithsonian; and recognized also within the Smithsonian, which moved the production of this exhibition onto a fast track (by the normal standards of exhibition production). The misunderstanding that followed “9/11” resulted in many forms of discrimination against or targeting of Sikhs in the U.S.A., and undoubtedly also contributed to the interest on the part of Sikh communities in reaching out for new methods of gaining public understanding and acceptance. The newly founded Smithsonian Sikh Heritage Project effectively provided a means to accomplish that for many Sikh community members; while the partnership assisted the museum’s mission (within its Department of Anthropology) of more inclusively representing the world’s cultures.

When one considers the wide range of standard curatorial tasks and responsibilities, including such didactic or educational functions of curatorial work as the selection of themes and objects, or the choice of appropriate modes of interpretation, this project encompassed many examples of co-curatorship with a large community that arrived at and presented decisions in a process quite separate from a traditional museum-based development process. This involvement of an active Sikh community of supporters, scholars, and interested observers has, somewhat inadvertently, helped to turn a Museum space into a public, multi-generational gathering space for a broad and diverse Sikh or Punjabi-American community.

Each museum hosting this exhibition became a place where inspiring Sikh events also regularly occurred, and a place of national public recognition for Sikhs at a time of perceived threats and hardship resulting from public misunderstanding in the post-September 11th period.

**Differing conceptualizations of Sikh “heritage”**

Murphy’s (2012) excellent study of Sikh materiality of the past was unavailable when the Sikh Heritage Project first began attempting to develop an exhibition about the Sikhs, but its description of the importance of “relics” or materials associated with the original ten Sikh Gurus was quite well foreseen from the earliest attempts to develop the idea of a Smithsonian exhibition. As recounted by Taylor (2004), a single vitrine (glass display case) in the Hall of Asian Peoples became available in mid-2000 when it was determined that the objects in a vitrine about Tibetan culture were too fragile and light-sensitive to continue to be displayed.

In October 2000, organized a first, informal Sikh Heritage Advisory Group meeting of Smithsonian staff, Sikh scholars, and Sikh Heritage Fund donors and supporters. The group of about 50 people walked together to view the empty display case, then covered with brown paper, whose glass front measured 71 3/8 inches high and 77 ½ inches wide, which would be seen by many millions of visitors each year.
It was very revealing to listen to ideas proffered at this Advisory Group meeting about how “Sikh heritage” might be represented to both a Sikh and non-Sikh audience, in a space of that size – a task made more difficult by the fact that we would still need to locate collections. It is interesting that a consensus emerged that the most important “heritage” objects must be obtained from India. Consistent with Murphy’s observations about materiality and its associations in Sikh history, particular sought-after were any objects associated with the Sikh Gurus, which might be available for loan through the help of appropriate government officials in India. There was, at this stage, little interest in exhibiting everyday objects or even contemporary artworks by Sikh artists – none of which seemed to have the high iconic value of objects associated with the Gurus that might be borrowed from India. In fact, a trip to the Punjab was soon organized for the purpose of surveying collections that might be available for loan. In December 2000 a delegation from the Smithsonian along with supporters and donors to the Sikh Heritage Fund, who by then had separately organized their own Foundation, traveled to New Delhi and Chandigarh, where we assembled a list of proposed objects for loan, to use in the proposed vitrine.

A portion of the Punjab government loan was approved in late 2001, but for only two years and with many stipulations on the loan. Almost all the objects approved for loan were in fact weapons, from the Arms and Armour Gallery at Qila Mubarak, Patiala. The preponderance of metal objects among the items approved, rather than fragile manuscripts, textiles, or paintings, may largely reflect the sturdiness or durability of the medium, since these might well be considered more able to travel. However, this also undoubtedly reflected an
“indigenous” concept of iconicity and value as well as curation, since historic weapons are often treasured Sikh artifacts. Working with what was available and approved for loan (that is, entirely weapons), the Smithsonian team proceeded to develop a theme for the vitrine, whose goal was to introduce Sikhs and Sikhism to the museum’s visitors, and also to recognize the importance of heritage preservation by highlighting on-going preservation work at Qila Mubarak, which in turn provided another connection to the weapons seen on display. The main title proposed was: “Armed with Tradition: The Heritage of the Sikhs”

The exhibition provided an important social space for Sikhs themselves, who could take pride in seeing their traditions among those represented at America’s “national museum.” Museum staff members found themselves “translating” Sikh self-representations for a wider audience and, like all translators, modifying the content in the process. Sikh meta-narratives of Sikh history became incorporated into the exhibition; but so did other aspects of Sikh “heritage,” including everyday secular music and contemporary celebrations.

Thus for Sikh-Americans participating in the process, this led to a transformation or expansion of the range of objects thought to represent Sikh “heritage,” as it became clear that – in contravention of their conceptualization of this term – even family albums, mementos, and everyday household objects might be included. By 2002, though the original “vitrine” plan had been approved inside the Smithsonian, several events led to its cancellation and the substitution of a completely different plan. Most importantly, in the difficult post-September 11th environment, it was inappropriate that the actual objects used to represent Sikh heritage were almost entirely weapons, which were so important to community members because of their association with localities in the Punjab of importance to Sikh Gurus and to their faith. No matter how much this might be softened with explanatory text and photographs or images of the Guru and of Punjab, this could still leave an audience unfamiliar with the topic with an impression that associates Sikhism with religiously motivated violence (weapons). The importance of the Gurus, the Punjab, and the martial tradition within Sikhism would be maintained; but the exhibition needed more context.

In the post-“9/11” environment, both the Museum administration and the Sikh community agreed to allow the preparation of an expanded exhibition, and support within the Sikh community for the Sikh Heritage Project grew rapidly. A series of annual Sikh Heritage Lectures, and many other events, not only helped to build community support but also elicited many suggestions about how Sikh heritage should be represented, including by objects in everyday use in Sikh households today. This process, and the resulting exhibition, are described in Taylor and Pontsioen’s (2014) catalog of the exhibition, which also includes objects that were shown only at subsequent venues in California, where community members again worked with museum staff to make local substitutions.

Prior to the opening of the first venue in Washington, exhibition staff suggested including some welcoming images of local Sikhs at one entrance to the exhibition. The result, from a Smithsonian trip to a local Gurdwara, was a composite photo montage at the entrance (Figure 3), very well-received by visitors, Sikh and non-Sikh, though perhaps the furthest idea from any set out at initial community meetings regarding what kinds of Sikh “heritage” should be included in a display. The exhibition text associated with these photo panels has the title: “The Sikhs: A People of Today and Tomorrow” The label asks and answers a question: “Who are the modern Sikhs? Once it was easy to describe Sikhs as a people primarily from the Punjab region. As Sikhs emigrated around the world and Sikhism continued to attract new followers, Sikhs became an increasingly diverse group.” This idea of using images of local Sikhs in the exhibition was adapted at each venue. For example, community members and museum staff at the Fresno Art Museum developed and placed at the museum’s main entrance a comparable panel (Figure 4) featuring portraits of Sikhs from the Fresno area, with a simple welcoming message encouraging visitors to view this exhibition about their Sikh friends and neighbors.
From the perspective of museum practice, it is interesting to note the extent to which Sikh community values affected normal museum practices. For example, the idea of organizing anything like a “V.I.P. reception” in conjunction with the Washington opening for this exhibition seems to have clashed with the strong Sikh ethos of egalitarianism. In addition, though there were individual Sikh donors who may have been financially able to support the entire exhibition, or its catalog, or other entire components of the Sikh Heritage Project’s activities, this was never the preferred method of funding any such activity. Such tasks were always best accomplished through bringing together a larger number of people who would function like a community, all willingly and jointly contributing to the same cause, in a way consistent with each person’s abilities.

Thus through the numerous gatherings and meetings for the development of this exhibition and all its associated lectures, events, or performances, we have observed the Sikh community’s frequently expressed attempts to make sure that everyone who wished to do so could find a way to contribute something. As museum or exhibition curators we also observed that many of the best ideas for potential exhibit themes, or for the objects and images that could illustrate such themes, came from these meetings. In this way the story this exhibition and book tells to introduce the Sikhs emerges out of the collaborative effort of many narrators working together.
There were many examples of museum practice accommodating Sikh traditions. The section describing the sacred book of Sikhism, the Guru Granth Sahib, provides one example. It was important for visitors to understand the book’s importance in Sikh life, and there are many beautifully illustrated examples of this book which might have been put on exhibition. However in accordance with Sikh practice, visitors would have had to take off their shoes and cover their heads, as a sign of respect for the sacred book, if they were in the same room. After much discussion, a prop was used in place of the sacred book, complete covered with a *rumala* (the cloth that covers this book when not in use), with the same cushions, *chouri* (fly-whisk), and tables that would normally be near it, under a canopy as would have graced the real book. A disclaimer label at that part of the exhibition reads “Sikh tradition requires covering the head and removing shoes when in the company of the holy book. Because it is not possible to comply with these practices in a Museum environment, this display substitutes a prop for the holy book.”

Another example is that while for non-Sikhs it may well make sense to have a section of the exhibition about “music,” Sikhs themselves felt it completely inappropriate to mix secular and sacred sound forms, so what is considered sacred “music” could be heard with a speaker system having a restricted projection, in the section of the exhibition about how Sikhs practice their faith; meanwhile in a very different part of the exhibition there was a large graphic panel with push-button options to play various kinds of secular music in a different space.

This subject-matter of sacred and secular music were also treated separately in other examples of public outreach, performances of bhangra at opening events, as well as detailed treatment of topics of Sikh and Punjabi music within the annual Sikh Heritage Lectures, including a presentation by Alka Pande, discussing her research on musical instruments in the Punjab (Pande 1999). As commonly occurs in museum exhibitions provided another area for museum-community partnerships.
Figure 5. The Guru Granth Sahib display from the exhibition Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab, at the Institute of Texan Cultures in San Antonio (February 2015). The label explains that a prop is used, instead of the actual Guru Granth Sahib, for the exhibition. (Photo courtesy of UTSA Institute of Texan Cultures)

Figure 6. Portable palki, displayed in Washington at the exhibition Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab. (Silver, 13.3 x 6.4 x 6.7 cm., c. 1914-18) Courtesy of the Kapani Collection of Sikh Art. Palki are used to “house” the Guru Granth Sahib. This portable palki normally contains a miniature holy book and was carried by a soldier during World War I. In the museum environment, the book was removed. Photo by Chip Clark.
Objects, Outreach, and Sikh Social Practice: Introducing Museum Practices in Sikh Communities

There are two areas in which Sikh community members have actively sought from the Sikh Heritage Project (of which this exhibition was only one part) a much better introduction to the “culture” (or even “heritage”) of American museums. The first of these is the manner in which museums are effective methods for “public outreach” -- helping a broad public better understand the Sikhs who live among them. As mentioned above, this involved for some community members an expansion of their conceptualization of Sikh “heritage.” As Sikhs worked closely with museum staff to develop the exhibition and its associated public programs, they increasingly recognized that many of their everyday objects and activities also serve well for introducing Sikhs and Sikhism to a broad public. The second area in which Sikhs actively sought assistance from museums is the more complex area of museum practice vs. Sikh social practice in handling objects.

The experience and abilities of Sikh community groups to develop their own public outreach programs, and “staff” them as volunteers for the host museums, grew at each subsequent venue. Examples seen in the illustrations here include bhangra dancing classes (Figure 8), a demonstration for a local girl scoute troupe on how to find Punjab on a map and how to identify Punjabi images (Figure 9), and the very popular turban-tying workshop offered to visitors (Figure 10) – all examples from the Institute of Texan Cultures, a museum of Texas history and culture at the University of Texas – San Antonio.
Figure 8. Sikhs in traditional dress provide a tutorial on Bhangra dancing for visitors to the Institute of Texan Cultures in San Antonio as one aspect of public engagement enacted at the museum following the opening of Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab in February 2015. (Photo courtesy of UTSA Institute of Texan Cultures)

Figure 9. Sikh volunteers teaching Girl Scouts at the Institute of Texan Cultures, San Antonio, how to find Punjab on a map. (Photo courtesy of UTSA Institute of Texan Cultures)
These are examples of museum activities of the kind educational outreach offices frequently try to do, and the Sikh community enthusiastically embraced these. These fit well within the Sikh ideal of sewa, or service to community, one of the key components of Sikh social practice.

However there is another area of “museum culture” which often seemed directly at variance with Sikh social practice, and the Sikh Heritage Project fundamentally represents a case in which Sikh community has sought out museum expertise in changing some aspects of Sikh practice, frequently requesting that museum staff provide lectures on museum conservation and “proper” care of objects at Gurdwaras and Sikh community events. Each of the annual Sikh Heritage lectures included this topic, from the founding of the project to the exhibition’s opening events. In 2006, largely with the support of Sikh community members (along with major support from the Indo-US Science and Technology Forum), the Smithsonian co-organized, with the Andandpur Sahib Foundation (Chandigarh, Punjab) an international conference on applications of new technologies for preservation and documentation of museums and historic sites. Overall, this is an area in which museum practice has directly confronted Sikh social practice in many areas, just as traditional European and American methods of storing and handling and displaying objects often caused some deterioration. These include traditional methods of displaying portraits on ivory, which were glued to velvet though that practice causes long-term damage (examples in the exhibition were treated to remove adhesive, see Taylor and Pontsioen 2014:52-53); or old methods of drilling into armor to hang it on walls for display (vs. today’s museum mounts); and other practices which have simply needed to be updated as a result of new information showing that there are now much better methods of caring for the physical care and preservation of these objects.

A very different kind of example is the treatment of old manuscripts, especially pages (often beautifully illuminated) of the sacred book, the Guru Granth Sahib, which as Myrvold (2010) notes are sometimes burned, as a form of devotion, once they are no longer used for reading and religious worship. Sikh practice essentially treats the book “Guru” as if it were a human Guru (though of course not alive in any biological sense, but treated as if it were an exalted person). Polishing the throne on which the Guru (book) “sits,” organizing the

Figure 10. This turban-tying demonstration at the Institute of Texan Cultures in San Antonio was one of many ways in which volunteers from the local Sikh community engaged with museum visitors. (Photo courtesy of UTSA Institute of Texan Cultures)
processions that carry it, and other forms of “service to the Guru” can be “transformed into religious acts by means of the actor’s subjective experience of devotion and surrender.” Unlike the examples above, this is not an arena into which one can simply introduce a method of handling objects that will preserve them longer, but in fact the Sikh Heritage Project has had the effect of increasingly offering conservation as a new and alternative mode of “service.”

We have witnessed much Sikh community support for our museum conservation lectures, including paper conservation, at Gurdwaras and in India. One reason for this is that contemporary Sikhs, aware of the potential for paper conservation and preservation, have sought out Smithsonian and other museum professionals to raise awareness of this alternative means of service to the book “Guru” (i.e. conservation of the old and worn pages, rather than their cremation), as well as other texts on religious topics, such as the Janamsakhi or stories of the life of the first Guru, often having old painted illustrations. They essentially hope to revise the conceptualization of service to the Guru such that paper conservation is an alternative to “cremation” of old manuscripts. (See Figure 11.)

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 11.**
This beautiful illustrated Janamsakhi, or book that describes the life of the first Sikh Guru, is from the Kapany Collection of Sikh Art. It probably dates from the mid-19th century. The painters chose verdigris to produce a bright green color, without realizing that the pigment chosen would progressively damage the substrate paper, causing the old gap seen in the palting, which required stabilization to preserve it. Museum-quality object conservation is increasingly supported as a form of sewa, or “service to community,” or even Gursewa or “service to the Guru,” thus increasingly an alternative to more traditional forms of Sikh social practice toward objects. Photo by John Steiner.

In conclusion, the Sikh Heritage Project and its flagship exhibition, *Sikhs: Legacy of the Punjab*, presented an opportunity for museum-community partnership that is well beyond the norm in museum work. Community members were even involved in the initial decision whether the project should include an exhibition as part of its activities. Museums modified their practices to accommodate Sikh values and cultural traditions. Sikh community members actively sought out museum assistance in making their community better understood by a broad public, and in introducing alternatives (e.g. paper conservation) to some widespread Sikh practices toward objects (including burning of old manuscripts), by encouraging the reconceptualization of museum conservation methods as a form of Sikh *sewa* or service.
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