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Revolution and Assimilation: Understanding the Evolving Identity of the Punjabi Sikh Diaspora in California during the Early Twentieth Century

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This paper examines the evolving identity of the Punjabi Sikh diaspora in California during the early twentieth century, focusing on the relatively neglected role of the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society and its interactions with the Ghadar Party. In doing so, the paper adds to previous global accounts of the Ghadar Party by examining the politics of identity construction at a micro-level. It also adds to previous work on the role of the Diwan Society, by arguing that, beyond just creating a safe space for the immigrant group, it actively campaigned to better the newcomers’ social status in the United States.

**Keywords:** Ghadar Party, Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan, Punjabi, Sikh, Diaspora

On April 24, 1918, Ram Singh and Ram Chandra entered a courtroom in San Francisco to be tried for their involvement in the Ghadar mutiny, a conflict that sought to overthrow colonial rule in India through violent means. Midway through the trial, Singh stood up, crept towards his co-conspirator, pulled a revolver from his coat pocket, and assassinated Chandra. Singh was quickly shot and killed by police in the courtroom. Chandra was assassinated because he was suspected of being a double-agent for the British. Singh died as an individual loyal to his revolutionary ideals.

In 1923, Bhagat Singh Thind marched into the United States Supreme Court in an attempt to gain American citizenship. Like many Asian immigrants at this time, Thind migrated to the United States with the hope of finding economic success. Whereas in Punjab his job prospects were slim, the United States offered

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1 This is a revised version of my Master’s Thesis at the University of California, Santa Cruz, completed in April 2015. I am grateful to my adviser, David Brundage, for his guidance, and two anonymous reviewers for suggestions.
2 Singh and Chandra were members of the Ghadar (Revolution) Party, which sought to overthrow colonial rule in India through violent means.
Thind (and other immigrants) many employment opportunities. Yet simple employment was not enough – Thind sought citizenship and the rights guaranteed by it. Challenging the racialized citizenship laws at the time, Thind sued the United States, arguing that due to Punjab’s genetic history he was actually white and therefore should be allowed to become an American citizen. Thind was unsuccessful in his efforts.

Singh and Thind represent alternate pathways of understanding identity and belonging for Punjabi-Sikh immigrants in the United States. Following their emigration from northern India, Sikhs faced severe discrimination in the United States. Bhagat Singh Thind and Ram Singh are representative of the alternative pathways taken by Punjabi-Sikh immigrants when negotiating identity in the face of discrimination. Their stories mirror two prominent California organizations that promoted their respective ideas. The Ghadar (translating to “revolution” in Punjabi) Party, founded in 1912, aimed to overthrow colonial rule in India by violent means. This group viewed the United States as a temporary home to gain capital and education. Immigrants who followed this path often expected to return home to Punjab to resist British colonization. Founded in 1912, the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society aimed to elevate the social status of Punjabi-Sikhs in California. This organization viewed the United States as a final home for the immigrant community and lobbied for better treatment of the newcomers. These two groups had starkly different goals regarding the United States and homeland politics. Though the exact amount of members in these two groups remain elusive to historians, their active nature illustrate a serious push to reconsider a Punjabi-Sikh consciousness in the United States.

Punjabi-Sikh immigrants first entered the racial hotbed of the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Tensions began when the group began finding industrial and agricultural work on the West Coast, as their presence created competition for white Americans. Such pressure is especially visible when looking at industrial labor newspapers, letters from workers, and local magazines. These economic strains culminated into the 1907 Bellingham riot. For example, Punjabi-Sikhs in Bellingham, Washington were forcibly herded to the town hall to be cast out of town. While Bellingham represented the boiling point for tensions, Punjabi-Sikhs would face similar discrimination across the United States. Out of this discrimination, two groups were created: the Ghadar Party – which favored a

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5 Letters from Thind to his father reveal that he left for the United States to find better employment opportunities. South Asian Digital Archive Bhagat Singh Thind. https://www.saadigitalarchive.org/collection/bhagat-singh-thind.
6 Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society, Articles of Incorporation. Alameda County, 1912. Stockton Sikh Temple, Ghadar Collection, Safe 1.
return to a Punjab homeland – and the Khalsa Diwan Society – which viewed the California community a new homeland, and saw no need to return to Punjab.

Tensions further increased after the 1914 Komagata Maru incident. This event arose when a group of Indian immigrants began a seaward move to Canada during the summer of 1914. Holding nearly 100 passengers, primarily of Sikh faith, the ship was blocked from docking in Canada. Immigration officials cited a lack of proper migration papers, and also believed the sudden increase in immigrant workers would disrupt the labor markets. The Maru was forced to turn around and return to India. After a tiring three-month journey, passengers returned to the soil of their homeland. However upon their return to India in 1914, the group was placed under guard by the British. A scuffle between soldiers and travelers quickly broke out, leaving 19 dead and many wounded.8

The Komagata Maru incident is one that represents a pivotal and traumatic shift in the Punjabi-Sikh timeline. Much like the Bellingham riots, it was a conflict that occurred due to exclusion and subjugation. The Ghadar Party and the Diwan Society responded to such conditions differently. The Bellingham riots, and other constant discrimination faced by Punjabi-Sikhs laborers, inspired the creation of the Diwan Society. It was this organization’s goal to advocate and protect their community across the United States. After the Komagata Maru incident, the Diwan Society rallied for Indians to be included as American citizens through a series of letters, petitions and proposed legislation; the violence of the Maru could be navigated through these various legal channels. In contrast, the 1907 Bellingham riots proved to the Ghadarites that the United States should only be seen as a temporary place to gain capital and education before a move back to Punjab should be made. The Komagata Maru incident further confirmed the group’s view of the West as a racially hostile place. The event inspired the group to launch their planned rebellion, leaving the United States to retake their home.

Whereas the Ghadar Party is often cited when considering immigrant nationalism or Punjabi-Sikh history, the importance of alternative organizations such as the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society is hardly explored. The work presented in this paper expands upon scholarship by Maia Ramnath’s Haj to Utopia (2011). Ramnath details the global workings of the party – focusing on the group’s organizational structure and global networks. Ramnath tracks how Punjabi-Sikhs became radicalized while working against a global colonial structure. While Ramnath presents the global party as a highly organized group, little is known about how this organization fostered identity among its constituents in California. I add to Ramnath’s global account by examining the politics of identity construction at a micro-level. From placing the Ghadar party in conversation with the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society, another large Punjabi-Sikh organization of the time, and

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viewing the revolutionaries under a local lens, one can see the Ghadar movement’s reach and effectiveness. Moreover, by comparing the two organizations one is able to understand the various articulations of identity and belonging for Punjabi-Sikhs in California.

My work also expands on scholarship presented by Joan Jensen in *Passage from India* (1988). *Passage from India* was one of the first works to look at the Punjabi-Sikh diaspora in the United States. Her work chronicles the immigrants’ initial move from Punjab to the United States, and how the group attempted to negotiate a radical identity in the face of colonial oppression. Jensen also presents one of the first in depth look at the Ghadar party in the United States, and though *Passage* covers the revolutionary group in detail, little attention is given to the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society. Jensen credits the Diwan Society with building California’s first Sikh Temple in 1915, and posited the act as important because it created a safe space for Punjabi-Sikh immigrants to practice their religion and cultural customs – an act integral to preserving Punjabi-Sikh identity. Jensen argues that the temple also served as a politicized meeting place for Sikhs to come together and discuss issues or problems they faced.9 While the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society should be recognized for the creation of this temple, there was more to the group than this construction. A closer look at the organization reveals the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society to have been a highly active and complex advocacy group for Punjabi-Sikhs in the United States. More than creating a safe space for the immigrant group, the Diwan Society actively campaigned to better the newcomers’ social status in the United States.

The work presented in this paper builds on the framework presented by Russell Kazal in “Revisiting Assimilation: The Rise, Fall, and Reappraisal of a Concept in American Ethnic History.” In this work, Kazal builds a framework where immigrant groups assimilate into the United States through a process of Americanization. As Kazal argues, Americanization is produced when the group adopts “something that sets one off from non-Americans.”10 The Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society adopted a political agenda that ran opposite to the Ghadar Party. By distancing itself from the Ghadarites, the assimilative Diwan Society hoped to fight against the radical stereotypes placed upon Punjabi-Sikhs from its revolutionary counterpart.

Though the Ghadar Party has dominated current scholarship on Punjabi-Sikhs, recently uncovered archives have revealed the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society to have been an equally important group when considering Punjabi-Sikh identity. Archival discoveries at the Stockton Sikh Temple in California present

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new documents regarding the Punjabi-Sikh diaspora in the United States and the Diwan Society. The documents shed light on how the latter group was founded, what its original aims were, and how it hoped to achieve its goals. These documents depict the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society as a contrast to the revolutionary Ghadar Party. Documents such as the Diwan Society’s Articles of Incorporation, pamphlets, ledgers and letters all point to an active interest in assimilation within the United States. By closely examining these new sources, I am able to articulate the group’s reach, effectiveness and importance within California. These documents are directly compared against Ghadar literature. Pamphlets, newspapers, letters, interviews and court testimonies from the early twentieth century all allow for one to gauge the goals and ideas of the revolutionaries.

**Emigration from India**

Yet before one can fully understand how these groups were different, one must first understand their shared history in India. The Punjab is a region in Northern India known for its lush and desirable farm land. Punjab translates to “The Land of Five Rivers.” Its name derives from having the five largest rivers in India flow through the region. The combination of wetlands and waterways allowed for an ideal agricultural scene. Though considered the agricultural heart of India, Punjab is best known as the birthplace of Sikhism. The creation and impact of Sikhism allowed many to embrace a physical and spiritual identity unique to anything in India at the time.

Sikhism itself represented a spiritual shift from the religious norms of India. Founded in 1469 by Guru Nanak Dev Ji as a response to the ceremonial intricacies of Islam and Hinduism, the conception of Sikhism represented a move away from the traditional religions of India. The very creation of Sikhism allowed for Sikhs to embrace a unique spiritual identity. This identity was intensified with the martial organization of Sikhs in 1699. The newly militarized community became known as the Khalsa, a term that translates in Punjabi to “free” or “self-sovereign.” If an individual is Sikh, he or she is a part of the Khalsa. It is a collective name that indicates the sense of community found within the religion.

The formation of the Khalsa not only brought Sikhs together through a shared community, but it also gave rise to a unique physical identity. Members of the Khalsa are expected to keep their hair uncut, but tied neatly in a turban. While the very creation of Sikhism allowed for many Punjabis to differentiate themselves spiritually from other religious groups, the establishment of the Khalsa marked these individuals as physically dissimilar. Their outward appearances created a specific physical identity different to their fellow Indians. Their unshorn beards and

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12 Ibid., 48.
turbaned hair allowed for a Sikh to be easily identified against their clean-shaven counterparts.13

The geographic location of Punjab also helped solidify a Punjabi-Sikh identity in India. As the northern most part of India, Punjab serves as a gateway into the region for foreign invaders. Sikh-Punjab remained independent from any foreign advances until the area fell under British control in 1849.14 The constant presence of a foreign Other that took the form of a Mughal or British state allowed for a Punjabi-Sikh identity to become better expressed.15 The religious, political, and physical differences between the foreign rulers and Punjabi-Sikhs only added to the latter groups’ formation of identity.

The promise of striking it rich as a successful farmer in the Punjab attracted many people from all across India, leading to great internal migration and eventual economic complications. Masses of individuals flocked to the area in hopes of becoming successful farmers. The population of Punjab increased 20% between 1855 and 1881, and 16% between 1881 and 1901.16 The addition of all the farm laborers increased the productivity of many farms, yet the influx of hopeful land owners disrupted the land market. Prime agricultural land was limited and highly coveted, driving up rent rates and land prices by 1,000% between 1870 and 1900.17

The economic competition was intensified by a series of droughts. Such conditions dried out local water supplies, leading to stagnating agricultural output. The Punjab was economically wrecked by the start of the 20th century, and its once bountiful lands had turned unfertile.18 The agricultural market was crippled, and the addition of laborers crowded the already impacted job market. Yet the recent inclusion into the colonial world offered opportunity for many in the area. With their history of resistance, Punjabi-Sikhs were seen as ideal soldiers who were often recruited into the British ranks as soldiers or policemen. Most soldiers were able to go abroad to other parts of the British Empire. The Punjabi-Sikh soldiers abroad allowed for a strong network to be created across the British Empire. Temples and

14 Sikh-Punjab remained independent from the Mughal Empire, and only fell to Colonialism after the Anglo-Sikh wars of 1839-1849.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
labor recruitment firms began to emerge in places like Hong Kong creating landing spaces for immigrants who wanted to leave Punjab.19

Turmoil and Transformation: Punjabi-Sikhs in the United States

The western United States offered Punjabi-Sikh immigrants economic opportunity that was absent in British-India, and the perception of the United States as a bountiful place for work became solidified after the 1882 Chinese Exclusion law. Word of a labor shortage along the Pacific Coast had reached hopeful North-Indian travelers, spurring a move to the United States.20 One such landing spot for many travelers was Bellingham, Washington.

Though job opportunities were plentiful, the increase of Punjabi-Sikhs in the Pacific North-West created competition between the newcomers and the local, white Americans. The newcomers were met with suspicion, and many feared that the group would slowly take over the area. This fear is best seen when looking at the 1906 article “Have We a Dusky Peril?” Published in The Puget Sound American, this article compares the growing Punjabi-Sikh population to the recently excluded Chinese. The author stated that the newcomers “will prove a worse menace to the working classes than the ‘Yellow Peril’ that [had] so long threatened the Pacific Coast.”21

The racial prejudices found in “Have We a Dusky Peril?” were acted upon in the 1907 Bellingham riot. On the night of September 6, 1907, 600 white workers took to the streets of Bellingham, Washington to violently round up Punjabi-Sikh immigrants.22 The angry mob entered into the living spaces of the migrant workers, beat the newcomers and in some cases stole their valuables. Police did little to suppress the violence, but managed to secure the majority of the Punjabi-Sikh population in town hall to be sheltered from the violence. By morning, a majority of these persecuted peoples left on train to either California or Canada.23

The Bellingham riot was not an isolated incident of racism between working white Americans and the “foreign” Punjabi-Sikhs, but instead representative of the larger public perception held toward the immigrant group. According to an investigation conducted by H.A. Millis, the head of the 1909 federal immigration commission, Sikh immigrants were seen as “the most undesirable of all the Asiatic immigrants”24 to come to the United States. This perception was widespread

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20 Ibid.
21 Perinet, “Have We a Dusky Peril?”.
23 Ibid.
24 H.A. Millis, “East Indian Immigration to the Pacific Coast” Survey 28, no. 9 (1912), 381, quoted in Franklin Ng, “The History and Immigration of Asian Americans,” 1, The History and
throughout the western United States. The casting out of Punjabi-Sikhs sent a clear message to the immigrant community: they were not wanted. Indians often worked for less than the average wage, resulting in easy employment in the manual labor field. Though employers welcomed the cheap labor, this did not mean the newcomers were accepted into American society.

The violence in Bellingham was but a symptom of the larger condition of racism in the United States and Canada. The suspicion many white workers held toward Punjabi-Sikh workers was also based on their mysterious and foreign appearance. The immigrants were seen as ethnically different. Their turbans and beards not only marked them off from white Americans, but from other immigrants group also in the United States during the early twentieth century. Violence toward Punjabi-Sikh newcomers grew as more anti-immigrant riots spread throughout the Pacific Northwest.

Reclaiming the Homeland: The Rise of the Ghadar Party

From this constant discrimination grew two distinct and influential organizations that aimed to elevate the social status of Punjabi-Sikhs in the United States – The Ghadar Party and the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society. By 1913 Punjabi-Sikh workers in the Northwest began to hold meetings discussing their mistreatment in the United States. Many of the newcomers began to lose hope in the United States as a place of viable settlement. Some pushed for a return to Punjab, though the oppressive colonial government found in the homeland still was not ideal. These anti-colonial sentiments were scattered throughout the Northwest without any meaningful direction until philosopher Har Dyal mobilized the immigrants to take action. In a 1914 speech to the Punjabi-Sikh laborers in the Northwest, Dyal laid out the basic tenets of the Indian revolution, including a boycott of English goods and a renouncement of the colonial government. However, the most important facet of this revolutionary movement was a return to India. Though an exact date was unclear, the Ghadarites had hoped to strike

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26 A.W. Mangum Jr to mother.
28 Ramnath, Haj to Utopia, 25.
30 Ibid.
England at its most vulnerable moment, and planned to return to India to fight against British while England was at war with Germany.\textsuperscript{31}

The Ghadar movement viewed the United States as a hostile and undesirable place. Though the group pushed for immigrants to return to India, the revolutionaries could not do so until the oppressive colonial regime was done away with. To the revolutionary group, the United States was seen as a temporary place to gain capital and education, they would eventually return to India to help liberate the country from British rule. In a 1957 letter, the former President of the Ghadar Party, Bhagwan Gyanee, reflected on the motivations for revolting against the British. “It was the general awakening of Indians due to the atmosphere of freedom in the USA & Canada that brought the Ghadar party forward.”\textsuperscript{32} The revolutionaries were inspired by America’s emphasis on economic freedom and individualism.\textsuperscript{33} However, this did not mean that newcomers viewed the United States as a desirable home. Instead, the Ghadarites hoped to implement such ideas in a liberated and unified India, free from racial hierarchy.

A return to India is apparent in Ghadar programs and literature. In 1912, Ghadarite Jawala Singh organized a scholarship for six Indian students to come to the United States to study at the University of California, Berkeley. The Ghadar Party covered “free board and lodging, all expenses for clothes, books, stationary, medicine, postage,” and anything else necessary for college (including tuition fees).\textsuperscript{34} Singh and other Ghadarites hoped to empower Indian youth by providing them a pathway to success through education. However, the end goal of such a project was that the students would return to India, enlightened by western education. Harnam Chima – one student who was received the scholarship – reasserted such a claim in his 1907 essay \textit{Why India Sends Students to America}. Chima posited that the purpose of the scholarship was to “imbibe free thoughts from free people and teach the same when [immigrants] go back to [India] to get rid of the tyranny” of the British.\textsuperscript{35}

For the Ghadarites and students like Chima, the United States represented a space where immigrants would gain education and capital before their eventual return to India. California was a training zone for these newcomers before they began on their quest of liberation. Both Jawala Singh and Harnam Chima understood the opportunities presented by UC Berkeley. Students could become educated while being immersed in a society founded on freedom and self-

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
determination. Enlightened students would then return to India to spread such ideals in their homeland.

Although the Ghadar Party is often cited when considering Punjabi-Sikh nationalism and identity, it was not the only prominent organization of its time. In 1912, a new group came into being that aimed to elevate the status of Punjabi-Sikh immigrants in California. Though originally conceived by revolutionary advocates, the society’s goals were strikingly different from the party. Whereas the Ghadarites urged Punjabi-Sikhs to return to India, the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society focused on improving the social status of the immigrants in the United States. Instead of revolution, the Diwan Society sought American citizenship and acceptance.

The goals of the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society were laid out explicitly in the group’s 1912 articles of incorporation. The first goal included offering the Punjabi-Sikh community a safe space to practice their religion. This was possible through supplying the group with religious “assistance, counsel, or encouragement.” This support was possible due to the group building the Stockton Sikh Temple in 1912. The second goal of the Diwan Society was to improve the overall quality of life for Punjabi-Sikh immigrants in the United States. “To initiate and carry out such measures as may ameliorate and improve the moral, social and religious conditions of the laboring classes of all nationalities, but particularly Sikhs.” This is the only time that the Articles of Incorporation mention the specific targeting of Punjabi-Sikhs from a certain occupational background. By centering their efforts around the laboring classes, the Diwan Society makes clear that their primary focus is on the worker, opposed to the Ghadarite focus on students. The other main goals of the society allowed the group to form as a church.

The foremost purpose of the Diwan Society was to aid Punjabi-Sikhs, and elevate the social status of immigrant group in the United States. Though the group was created during the time the Ghadar Party began gaining traction, it was explicitly stated in the Articles of Incorporation that the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society and its members had “not taken any part whatsoever in any political, sectarian, or independence movement.” The articles make clear that the Diwan Society was not focused on homeland politics, but instead focused on the domestic sphere of the United States. The Diwan Society and the Ghadar Party both begin with the similar goal of elevating the social status of Punjabi-Sikhs. However the two organizations’ way of achieving this goal was strikingly different. The Ghadar

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37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
Party’s aim was to remove the oppressive and foreign colonial rule in Punjab, arguing that self-sovereignty was what was needed. In contrast the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society acknowledged that the western United States served as a new home for many in the Punjabi-Sikh diaspora. While the organization did not explicitly renounce the revolutionary movement, the Diwan Society focused more on Punjabi-Sikh perception in the United States.

While the differences between these two groups can be seen in their conception, their ideological differences become even more clear after the 1914 Komagata Maru incident. In 1914, a group of hopeful Indian immigrants began their seaward journey from Hong Kong to Vancouver. Aboard a vessel named the Komagata Maru, 376 passengers – 24 Muslims, 12 Hindus, 340 Sikhs in total – had dreamt of moving to the west in hopes of starting anew. The journey was long and uncomfortable, as hopeful immigrants packed into the small hull for over a month at sea.

The voyage of the Komagata Maru was organized by the Ghadar party, and the passage of the ship was meant as a political statement that drew aim at the exclusionary nature of Canada and the United States. Those on board had many ties to the immigrants already in North America. Many had made plans to live or work with those who already gained entry. If accepted, the inclusion of these newcomers would only further strengthen the population of Indian immigrants. Most would have to thank the Ghadar Party for organizing their passage, creating new Ghadar sympathizers. However, if denied, the Ghadarites could point to this incident to showcase the cruel exclusionary attitudes of western governments – further cementing their claims that British rule did not belong in India. The Ghadarites had hoped to challenge the trend of Indian exclusion. As argued by Johnston, the group “saw it as an act of patriotism, which win or lose, would win” the Ghadars fame, or bring awareness to their cause of independence.

Upon reaching Canada, the Komagata Maru was told it could not dock. British officials had been tracking and keeping tabs on Ghadarite activity. The chartering of a ship was enough for British officials to tip off the Canadian border agents to the immigrants’ arrival. All on board were considered to be Ghadarites and extreme agitators. Though most of the travelers had proper paperwork, various reasons were given to deny their entry. The number of people aboard was considered to have been sizable enough to impact the local economy. While a multitude of excuses were given as to why these individuals could not enter Canada, the main justification was that their presence would disrupt the local job market.

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41 Johnston, The Voyage of the Komagata Maru, 33.
42 Ibid.
43 Johnston, The Voyage of the Komagata Maru, 25.
Canadian immigration officials were adamant on not allowing the immigrants entry, and the *Komagata Maru* was forced to return to India.\(^{45}\)

Such friction only multiplied upon the *Komagata Maru*’s return to India. After their homecoming nearly a year later, the passengers were met by British forces and placed under guard. The travelers were told that their participation in the voyage served as a confession to being affiliated with the Ghadar party, leaving the travelers with the title of political agitators. The passengers were told that their reentry would be considered on a case-by-case basis at a police station miles away. However, on their march a scuffle broke out between travelers and soldiers. What ensued was a chaotic scene of gunfire and fist fights. The conflict raged on into the night, leaving 12 Sikhs dead.\(^{46}\) Most of the other passengers managed to escape into the night, though 25 were arrested.

Such attitudes are most visible in (the later assassinated) Ghadarite Ram Chandra’s 1916 pamphlet, *Exclusion of Hindus from America Due to British Influence*. Chandra argues that the major motivations for Indian exclusion in the United States – such as color, lack of job opportunities and increased competition for American workers – were simply proxy reasons hiding the true intentions behind the exclusion. As argued by Chandra, “The British government itself does not want Hindu’s [sic] to come here [the United States]. They might be become imbued with pestiferous ideas of political freedom.”\(^{47}\) The move to the United States presented immigrants with new environments, language and social cues; however there seemed to be no sharper change than that of politics and government.

Though no official laws were set for Indian exclusion during the time of Chandra’s pamphlet, his suspicions were not unfounded. In 1911, 517 Indian immigrants were admitted into the United States, while 861 were debarred.\(^{48}\) These numbers are a great change from the 1,782 admitted just the year before. These numbers slimmed due to communication between Great Britain and the United States, as fears of anticolonialism and revolution fueled this decrease of admittance. Indian immigrants were seen as unruly, and their presence in the United States was perceived to pose a threat to the Anglo-hegemony found within U.S. culture.\(^{49}\) Such attitudes helped shape Ghadar rhetoric. The United States was not viewed as a welcoming place, but instead a temporary waystation where immigrants would eventually return home.

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\(^{45}\) Ibid.
\(^{46}\) Johnston, 104.
\(^{47}\) Ram Chandra, *Exclusion of Hindus from America Due to British Influence* (San Francisco, California, Hindustan Gadar, 1916), 1.
\(^{48}\) Franklin Ng, “The History and Immigration of Asian Americans,” 112.
Grouping Whites as a singular enemy was a major tactic employed by the Ghadar Party. Take for instance the 1914 Ghadar essay, *Zulam! Zulam! Gore Shahi Zulam!* The title of this work translates to “Tyranny! Tyranny! The Tyranny of the White Oppressors!”\(^{50}\) This essay was a response to the 1914 deportation of a Ghadar leader from Canada. The essay was printed in the widely circulated Ghadar newsletter, and called for Ghadarites in Canada and the United States to take up arms against a white enemy. Though no violence ever occurred, the essay represents how the Ghadar party rallied against a universal enemy. The Ghadarites folded the local white Canadian and American populations as an extension of the white colonial oppressor. Such rhetoric also promoted a return to Punjab, as the United States and Canada was seen as no home for the immigrant group.

Whereas the constant discrimination faced by the Punjabi-Sikhs allowed for the rise of a nationalist Punjabi-Sikh identity in the United States, the 1914 *Komagata Maru* incident served as a call to action for the Ghadar party. The *Komagata Maru* incident lit a fuse under the already motivated and insulted Ghadarites. After being excluded and now violently oppressed, the Ghadarites were only further motivated to attain independence. As Ramnath has noted, the “…already-primed West coast community, [sped up] the escalation of demands for armed action to avenge such a grievous insult.”\(^{51}\) The Ghadar party now had a singular event to point to when trying to unite the Punjabi-Sikh community in California.

The Ghadar Party was not alone in its efforts, as the group looked to Germany for support for their independence movement. On August 4, 1914, Great Britain declared war on Germany.\(^{52}\) The Ghadar Party and the German government became natural allies, creating a symbiotic relationship in which the Germans would fund Ghadarite’s revolution.\(^{53}\) The Germans created instability within the British Empire, and the Ghadarites received funding and the opportunity to attack a distracted colonial state. The Germans were seen as a friend, and sometimes held as a savior. The partnership between the Germans and the Ghadarites is telling as to how the immigrant group viewed their place in the United States. By fraternizing with a foe of both the British and the United States, the revolutionaries accepted these countries as their enemies.

Following the 1914 *Komagata Maru* incident, the Ghadar party set out to organize a return to India from the United States. Meetings were organized throughout California to spread the word of the imminent revolution. At one such meeting, Ram Chandra exclaimed “The ghosts of our ancestors are branding us a

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52 Ibid., 11.
53 Ibid.
shameless progeny. They… will never know rest until we cut down every Englishman. Our Motherland is summoning us to come and free her from the clutches of these tyrants!” Chandra’s statements reminded Punjabi-Sikhs of their shared history in India. Moreover, speakers at these meetings emphasized the support given by the German government. These meetings encapsulate years of Ghadar ideologies. While the Ghadar party always urged Punjabi-Sikhs to return to India, these wishes did not become reality until the mid-1910’s. Those who followed the Ghadar ideology sold their land to pay for their passage back to India. The selling off of their goods and land, as Ramnath has argued, is representative of Punjabi-Sikhs “sacrificing an American territorial future for an Indian one.” The purpose of the United States had thereby been fulfilled.

The Ghadar revolution ended up failing. By 1917 most of its leaders were captured in either India or the United States, and trials soon followed in the subsequent months. As previously noted, the trials ended in the assassination of Ram Chandra. The outcome of the trial had detrimental effects on the Punjabi-Sikh diaspora in California. The already persecuted group of immigrants was now further typecast as problematic. The court system represents the highest authority in America – it is where the government is able to impose their laws on rule-breakers. The Ghadarites who planned Chandra’s assassination showed disrespect to this institution. The assassination was more than the removal of a political opponent; it was a performance by the Ghadars. The killing reaffirmed that the revolutionaries did not care about the authority of the United States because their interest was to return to India. However, this painted the remaining community in a negative light. Stereotypes of Punjabi-Sikhs as disloyal, rowdy and undesirable were reinforced. Immigrants were then seen as a troublesome bunch that practiced anarchy and had no regard for American customs. It is through this negativity one sees the emergence of a counter to the Ghadarites – the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society – a group that viewed California as a final home for the immigrants instead of a midpoint.

From Indian to American: The Rise of the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society

Following the spectacular and public demise of the Ghadar party, the Diwan Society pushed to change the public stereotype of Indians in California. The dramatic conclusion of the Hindu-German conspiracy trial prompted many to view the foreigners as unruly, uncivilized and anarchist. The Diwan Society had set out

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54 Ibid., 33.
55 Ibid.
56 The revolutionaries were often painted in a negative light, as seen in French Strother, “Fighting Germany’s Spies IX: The Hindu German Conspiracy,” This World’s Work, vol. 13. September, 1918. South Asian Digital Archive, Freedom Movement Collection. https://www.saadigitalarchive.org/item/20111101-4468
on a community outreach effort that aimed to change the perception of Punjabi-Sikhs in the United States, specifically for those in California.

This effort first began when the Diwan Society sent a letter on December 2nd, 1918 to President Woodrow Wilson. The letter urged the President to support the Indian independence movement. Though the Diwan Society lobbied for Indian Independence, the group made sure to distance themselves from their revolutionary counterparts. As noted in the letter, the Diwan Society was made up of “those who once claimed India as their home and love her, yet and now belong to this great country [The United States].”⁵⁷ The line between revolutionary and loyal American become clearer when looking at the letter signature. The last line of the letter states the Diwan Society represented “the loyal Hindus of California.”⁵⁸ This signature was included as a political gesture that distanced the Diwan Society from the Ghadar party. Though the Diwan Society took an interest in homeland politics, this does not mean that the group wished to return to India. The group publicly made clear that the United States was their home. This approach to belonging is opposite to the one embodied by the Ghadarites.

The re-visioning of the Punjabi-Sikh image continued through 1919 with a more localized effort. The Diwan Society was able to obtain testimony from four public leaders in Stockton, California – from the Stockton mayor, Stockton police chief, Stockton Bank president and San Joaquin County District Attorney. These accounts were sent to California Governor William Stephens to depict Indian immigrants as outstanding American citizens. All four testimonies were from community leaders who represented different aspects of American society; the mayor for civic involvement, the banker to depict economic responsibility and the police chief and district attorney to represent the good behavior of the Punjabi-Sikhs.⁵⁹

The January 15, 1919 letter from Stockton Mayor A.C. Oullahan depicted the immigrant group as hard-working, loyal, and peaceful. Oullahan also mentions how Punjabi-Sikhs support various war-time industries such as liberty loans and the Red Cross.⁶⁰ The letter from the Stockton police chief echoed similar sentiments but mentioned that the immigrant group was “regarded as peace loving people.”⁶¹ The goal of the letters was to elevate the social status of Indian immigrants in California. While these individuals did not advocate for immigration reform, the writers did

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⁵⁷ Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society to Woodrow Wilson, December 2, 1918. Stockton Sikh Temple, Ghadar Collection, Safe 1.
⁵⁸ Ibid.
⁵⁹ These letters can be found in the Stockton Sikh Temple’s Ghadar Collection, Safe 1.
agree that the current Indian population in California is one that should be met with respect and acceptance.

All four letters present the Punjabi-Sikhs as ideal American citizens. They are presented as a group who worked hard, followed the law and supported the United States during World War I. The descriptions of this group run counter to the revolutionary image of the Ghadar Party. The very existence of such letters – and the portrayal of immigrants in the testimonies – runs counter to Ghadar ideologies. Instead of promoting a return to India and advocating for the violent overthrow of a western power, these letters show that many immigrants (especially those affiliated with the Diwan Society) cared about their long term image in California. According to the testimonies this group was not one that promoted anarchy and revolution, but instead supported their local communities and government.

The letters also bring to light the group’s support of the war against Germany. The letters note that the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society supported wartime efforts such as taking out liberty loans, donating to the Red Cross, and purchasing thrift/war stamps. These claims illustrate how the Diwan Society actively supported American war efforts during World War I – placing the group at odds with the Ghadar Party who partnered with the Germans to overthrow England. Instead of reaching for an opportunity to disrupt the British, the Diwan Society hoped to aid the United States and the allied powers. Their support for the American war effort represents how the Diwan’s viewed the United States as a home and nation, instead of a temporary waypoint. The collection of these letters was a calculated political move that aimed to elevate the status of Punjabi-Sikhs in the United States. The immigrants were tactfully portrayed as ideal citizens – supporting war efforts, following the law, and contributing to the local economy.

Though Punjabi-Sikhs were considered a desirable immigrant group, the newcomers still held the status of second-class citizens – it was clear more action was needed by the Diwan Society in order for the immigrants to become further accepted within society. These efforts culminated in the Diwan Society’s support for Bhagat Singh Thind in his 1924 case against the United States. Bhagat Singh Thind – a World War I veteran who fought for the British abroad – believed that his involvement in the war should allow him to naturalize as an American citizen.62 Fed up with his status as an alien ineligible for citizenship, Thind sued the United States government in 1924. While Thind emphasized his involvement in the Great War, the crux of his argument focused on the genealogical history of Punjabi-Sikhs. Thind presented Punjabis as Aryan, and therefor white and eligible for citizenship.63

63 Ibid.
As Thind’s court case unfolded, the Diwan Society viewed the case as an opportunity to forward their cause of social elevation. In 1922 a pamphlet was released by Punjabi academic Pardaman Singh. The document, titled *Ethnological Epitome of the Hindustanees of the Pacific Coast*, argued that Punjabi-Sikh’s were descendants of Aryans and those in California should be considered white. The essay was edited by Teja Singh and published by the Diwan Society. The pamphlet was written in response to the Bhagat Singh Thind court case, and aimed to elevate the status of Punjabi-Sikhs in the California by painting them as similar to whites.

The author of the pamphlet argued that India and Europe were both colonized by Aryan empires, and as a result the peoples of these two areas were more similar than previously thought. Singh begins his claims by recounting the history of Alexander the Great. “The Aryans…developed a great civilization in India.” After establishing a part of his empire in Northern India, Alexander left behind a community of Greco-Aryan-Punjabi people. “For nearly two centuries the Greek princes ruled the Punjab”, mixing and assimilating into Punjab. Singh spent the rest of the essay focusing on the physical similarities between Punjabis and Europeans, while contrasting both with other races of people.

Yet the physical and genealogical similarities between Punjabis and American whites were not the only focus of the Diwan Society, as the group also brought attention to the Sikh faith. The Diwan Society also produced *The Message of the Sikh Faith* – a pamphlet that aimed to educated white Americans on Sikhism and its similarities to other monotheistic western religions. The goal of this pamphlet was to make Sikhism seem less foreign to the average American. Due to many Indians being described as Hindoo, Punjabi-Sikhs were overwhelmingly mistaken for followers of Hinduism. The aim of this pamphlet was to introduce Americans to the ideals of Sikhism and dispel any notions of foreignness associated with the religion. The authors even compared Sikh hymns indirectly to the religious music of Martin Luther (a composer as well as theologian and reformer) when explaining the importance of song in Sikhism.

The campaign to reimage Punjabi-Sikhs as white Americans was a stark departure from the ethnocentric rhetoric of the Ghadar Party. Recall the speech made by Ram Chandra, who urged Punjabi-Sikhs to murder every Englishman, or *Zulam*, a call to arms that urged Punjabi-Sikhs to murder any white person they...

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65 Ibid., 5.
saw. The rhetoric employed by the Ghadar Party cast Punjabi-Sikhs as different from their white oppressors. This tactic allowed for a rise in anticolonial identity for the Punjabi-Sikhs. However, the efforts by the Diwan Society often presented Punjabi-Sikhs as ideal American citizens. Their literature presented the group as white, and as active members of their local communities. Such an effort showcases how the Diwan Society would have rather merged or assimilated into their surroundings. The presentation of Punjabi-Sikhs as Caucasian is a strikingly different view on identity than the one held by the Ghadar Party.

**Conclusion**

The Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society and the Ghadar Party offered Punjabi-Sikh immigrants alternate pathways to understanding identity and belonging. While they shared the goal of elevating the status of Punjabi Sikhs either abroad in California or in the Punjab homeland, their approaches to achieving this goal were strikingly different. Yet although the revolutionary Ghadarites and the assimilative Khalsa Diwans seem ideologically at odds with each other, their leadership and spaces used suggest a cross-pollination that has not yet been examined. Bhagat Singh Thind, for example, was active in the American Ghadarite scene (a fact that was used against him in trial). The founders of the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society, whose signatures are present on the group’s articles of incorporation, were active Ghadarites. The historical record does not give us a fully accurate picture of the complex, lived realities of these activists. One letter in particular does point to a divide between these groups. An August 19, 1956 letter between Ghadar revolutionaries speaks of past tension between the two groups. The Ghadarite mentions that before the group embarked on their revolutionary quest, the party “had an open skirmish with the Gurdwara Party in Stockton, who were openly hostile to the Gadar Party.” Though the extent or cause of this skirmish is never explained, it is interesting to note that groups were openly hostile with each other.

The Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society and the Ghadar Party understood that something needed to be done to elevate the status of Punjabi-Sikhs either in the homeland or abroad. As discrimination grew, so did their movements of empowerment. Though both parties ultimately failed with their efforts, their messages endured through time. The revolutionary ideals of Ghadar went on to inspire other revolutionary groups in India. The Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society is still around today, though it is not as active as it once was (other Sikh

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67 It is clear that the “Gurdwara Party in Stockton” is the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society, as the organization built the Stockton Sikh Temple in 1912.


advocacy groups such as the Sikh Coalition (2001) continue the Pacific Diwan’s assimilative approach.\textsuperscript{70} The Ghadar Party and the Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society shared a similar aim, and though the two groups had a strikingly different way of approaching their goal, their efforts made a large impact on the Punjabi-Sikh diaspora in the United States. Even with the organizations’ failed attempts to gain in independence or citizenship, their efforts defined Punjabi-Sikh identity in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century northwest.

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\textsuperscript{70} The Sikh Coalition and the Sikh American Legal Defense & Education Funds are Sikh advocacy groups who lobby for the rights of Punjabi-Sikhs in the United States. These groups became more active after 9/11, when a series of xenophobic events affected Sikhs in the United States.


Cultural Negotiation in Early Sikh Imagery: Portraiture of the Sikh Gurus to 1849*

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This paper argues that Guru Nanak came to be painted in Hindu-like frontal in single portrait, which implies the preexisting custom of the production and consumption of images of the Sikh Gurus. The idea that he is deified in these paintings is based on the theory that a frontal view is used for worshipping the sitter. Although Guru Nanak’s face was represented in three different modes, namely frontal, profile and three quarter face, in the late 17th and 18th centuries, a three-quarter view of the face has been dominant in his images since the 19th century, when his attire and accessories also changed from those of a Hindu ascetic or a Muslim saint to those of a Sikh Guru, exemplified by a turban. It is also noticeable that the later Gurus were painted primarily in portrait, a fact that may manifest their authoritative genealogy against other contemporary successors.

Keywords: Sikh art; portraiture; the Sikh Gurus: material religion

Introduction

In the study of South Asian art, portraiture is a topic of growing interest among art historians. One of the earliest scholarly analyses was done by Coomaraswamy in 1939, who classified portraiture of South Asia into two categories: the realistic and the idealistic. This idea underpins common genres of Mughal and Rajput painting. Goswamy (1986) surveyed depictions of portraiture in ancient literature and historical accounts. He noted that the Sanskrit word *lakshana* means ‘characteristic and cognitive attributes,’ which portraiture is expected to bear in Indian thought (Goswamy 1986, 193). Desai (1989; 1994; 1996) claimed that in South Asia, the concept of portraiture or the realistic depiction of individuals derives from Western art. Its use in Mughal painting began in the late 16th century. In contrast, Lefevre (2011) emphasised Spinicci’s definition of portraiture, which does not require likeness. He argued that portraiture in South Asia originates in the ancient sculpture and relief of

* I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers for suggestions.
Shiva and Buddha. For him, portraiture is not an artistic but a social category (Spinicci 2009, 50)

In South Asia, sculpture originally occupied a dominant place in the arts over painting, which relationship changed after Islamic conquests from the 12th century. The Islamic artistic tradition was introduced, which, it is often thought, strongly forbade rendering an image of the Prophet Muhammad and Ali; that is to say, it more or less deterred idolatry although the new artistic style created a strong demand across the Middle East for precious, brightly coloured minerals that could be ground into paint. It is remarkable that things were different in Persia, where theologians argued that figures in pictures or *tasvir* had no shadow of their own, and that pictorial representation of individuals such as Muhammad could therefore be accepted as long as the faces were veiled (Dehesia 1997, 309). Persian portraiture, which flourished in the Safavid period in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, is a direct antecedent to Mughal portraiture. Their depictions of human faces are very similar, although format and posture are often different (Desai and Leidy 1989, 22). The issue of profile vs. three quarter view for portraits in Indian painting has been discussed by the following: Losty (1990), Koch (1997), Necipoglu (2000), Wright (2008), Aitkin (2010) and Gonzales (2015).

With regard to portraits of the Sikh Gurus, we know of some examples produced in the 17th century. Goswamy and Smith (2006, 30) state, ‘A 19th-century text mentions that “Guru Har Gobind, the Sixth Guru, had his portrait drawn by an artist at village Sur Singh near Kiratpur on the request of his relations’ (as cited in Randhawa 1971: 20). Again, when the ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur (1621–1675), visited Dhaka (now the capital of Bangladesh), it is said the people welcomed him with great reverence; this was especially true of Bulaki, the mother of a local deputy. Since she respected the Guru, she asked him to stay there much longer than he had planned to. The Guru, however, said he had other things to attend to. Then, the old lady ‘sent for a painter, and had a picture of the Guru made. She hangs it over the couch on which he had sat. Thus, she was able to behold the Guru whenever her secular avocations admitted’ (Macauliffe 1963, 353). However, nothing is later heard of that portrait.

1 See also Singh (2017).
Goswamy and Smith continue:

Again, one comes upon a reference to a portrait of Guru Gobind Singh, having possibly been made by a Pahari painter, for it is said that the ruler of the hill state of Bilaspur, with whom the Guru had to deal on many occasions in the course of his tumultuous career, once dispatched a painter from his court to bring back a likeness of the Guru. Whether the painter did indeed make such a portrait is not recorded. All that one knows is that no such portrait has survived. A somewhat coarsely made portrait, in the style that obtained toward the end of the 17th century at the hill court of Mandi – a town that Guru Gobind Singh did certainly visit – is sometimes said to be that of the great Guru. But certainly eludes one even here. (2006, 30)

Intriguingly, Goswamy (2000, 31) also claims there were previously only a few portraits of Guru Nanak (1469-1539). The Sikh doctrine against idolatry prohibited creating images of Guru Nanak, since he was the closest to an absolute entity or God among the Gurus as the founder and first Guru of Sikhism. However, single images of the Sikh Gurus, particularly with regard to Guru Nanak, were produced and consumed earlier than the British colonial period of the late 19th century. This paper highlights the iconographical features of images of the Sikh Gurus with Guru Nanak centred. Specifically, I analyse portraiture of the Sikh Gurus: Guru Nanak, Guru Angad, Guru Amar Das, Guru Ram Das, Guru Arjan, Guru Hargobind, Guru Har Rai, Guru Har Krishan, Guru Tegh Bahadur, and Guru Gobind Singh, in chronological order. This paper consists of three sections: Mughal and Rajput Portraiture; portraiture of Guru Nanak; and portraiture of the later Gurus.

**Mughal and Rajput Portraiture**
Emperors Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan played a key role in the history of Mughal painting. Their new patronage of art did not only increase the number of artworks, but also brought about a radical change in the traditional style and attitude among painters in the Rajput states. Akbar’s imperial atelier included many Hindu and Muslim painters. His artistic taste was militant and dominant despite his political tolerance for other religions. For instance, he commissioned
the album of the Razmnama, the Persian translation of the Mahabharata. Another change in Akbar’s period is portraiture. According to an episode in the Akbarnama, he instructed his men to sit for portraits and stated, ‘so that those who have passed away have received new life, and those who are still alive have immortality promised them’ (Desai and Leidy 1989, 21). Early Mughal portraiture was normally compiled into an album and most of these portraits are single images of emperors, courtiers and visiting dignitaries; among these, Akbar is depicted differently from others (Desai and Leidy 1989, 21–22; Stronge 2002; Wright 2008).

In comparison with Akbar’s reign, in which Mughal portraiture still maintained the Persian influence in style and composition, Jahangir’s period saw a strong Western influence and the proliferation of portraiture due to regular contact with Christian missionaries from Europe. However, the Western influence on Mughal painting was evident earlier than their 1580 arrival (Desai and Leidy 1989, 22; Beach 1992, 55). Painters at Jahangir’s atelier portrayed him as the rightful successor of Akbar (Beach 1992, 55). In this period, Mughal painters began to depict the sitter with careful observation, in both the physical and the psychological senses. Many figures and objects were painted into the composition, on the basis of either observation or sketches (Desai 1996, 232). Desai and Leidy (1989, 22) argue that Jahangir preferred more intimate and personalised renditions, which led to the popularity of portraiture in his reign. They point out two more factors: first, ‘the gradual decrease in the production of large, illustrated narratives’; and second, ‘the increased presence of Europeans and European art at the Mughal court’ (Desai and Leidy 1989, 22). In Jahangir’s later reign, portraiture is inclined to symbolism and allegory. For example, the flying putti and halo manifest Jahangir’s holiness, which was a ‘clear statement of absolute power’ (Desai and Leidy 1989, 23).

Shah Jahan, the fifth emperor, had an interest in both Islamic and Hindu literature. He is known for having commissioned an illustrated manuscript of the Padshahnama. Beach points out, ‘…the text and illustrations of the first Akbarnama were a revelation of Akbar’s physical and intellectual vitality, and the Jahangirnama showed that emperor’s curiosity about the world and spiritual matters’ (1992, 130). As for portraiture, the 17th-century reigns of Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb were characterised with ‘formalised, public representations of
Mughal royal figures,’ the portrayal of the lesser courtiers and other noncourtly subjects (Desai and Leidy 1989, 23). Desai and Leidy maintain that these reflected ‘a degree of direct observation, psychological intensity, a sense of informality, and a greater absorption of the Western techniques of chiaroscuro and articulation of diminishing perspective’ (Desai and Leidy 1989, 23). They also state, ‘A similar kind of freedom of expression is also seen in the images of ascetics, teachers, and other nonroyal subjects in Mughal from the first half of the 17th century’ (Desai and Leidy 1989, 23–24).

In using new techniques such as three-quarter view, decorative expressions with vivid (often blue) colours, shading and perspective, painters of the Mughal empire enhanced the artistic milieu in local Islamic and Rajasthani workshops in the 17th and 18th centuries, prior to the Pahari and Punjab workshops of the 17th to the 19th centuries. In these circumstances, portraiture became an active domain where both Muslim and Hindu painters displayed their skill, intelligence and talent (Goswamy 1986, 193, 197). Desai states, ‘One of the most important cultural consequences of the interaction between the Mughal and Rajput courts was the development of Rajput portraiture in Rajasthan, beginning in the first half of the 17th century.’ (Desai 1994, 313). The following description refers primarily to Desai’s work in 1994.

First, Desai (1994, 313) points out that Rajput painting presumes ‘connections with the past and the eternal qualities of life.’ Tod (as cited in Desai 1994, 313–4) argues that Rajput portraiture aims to represent the king’s genealogy and munificence, for Rajput rulers were expected to protect their successive land and subjects. Desai reveals the characteristic, timeless virtue of kingship. Such an attitude among artists originates in ancient Hindu thought, which incurred the lack of both ‘a ruler’s absolute authority’ and ‘physiognomically specific royal portraiture’ (Desai 1994, 314).

At the same time, Desai classifies Rajput portraiture into three categories: 1) portraits rendered in the Mughal style with Mughal tastes; 2) portraits rendered in the Mughal style, but with Rajput tastes; and 3) portraits rendered in the Rajput style, but with Mughal tastes (Desai 1994, 315). In addition, she coined the term contextual portraits, in which ‘rulers are shown hunting, watching performances, sitting in a festival’ (Desai 1996, 232). In contextual portraits, painters aim to embody ‘conceptual rather than perceptual interest in
the subjects’, or ‘a sense of timelessness’ (Desai 1994, 338). Aitkin also states, ‘they (contextual portraits) depict the ruler and his courtiers as recognisable individuals’ as ‘documentary evidence’ (Aitkin 2010, 111). Moreover, she points out, ‘contextual portraits individualise places as accurately as people’ (Aitkin 2010, 123). However, Desai accepts the geographical and political reasons why Mughal influences vary in ateliers, and stresses a selective process by which Rajput painters can absorb Mughal conventions. It is seen as a sort of resistance to the new regulation, namely to ‘the temporal power and the historical position of rulers’ in the Mughal idiom (Desai 1994, 319–21).

However, there was a trend in the 18th century towards the purpose of recording. In both Rajput and Mughal portraiture, only the emperor is sitting and others are standing to exhibit their respect to him (Desai 1994, 322). This formula complements the traditional idiom of Rajput portraiture, in which the rulers were the ‘first among all’. Rajput painters strived to depict what they knew rather than what they saw, that is to say, they converted the latter to the former. Another purpose they had was to ‘to create a conceptual rather than a perceptual view of the world’, namely ‘universal’ rather than ‘temporal visual symbols’ (Desai 1994, 325). Goswamy also claims, ‘one senses that in rendering a moment the painter is not losing sight of the moments that have gone by and those that are yet to come’ (Desai 1994, 326). Their view of a sense of timelessness makes individual figures divine, for both are free from ‘historical or linear time’ or ‘ageless conventions’ out of ‘the harsh political realities of their times’ (Desai 1994, 326).

In contrast, another version of Rajput portraiture is evident in the Pahari painting produced in the hill area of the Punjab. Portraits in Mandi and Bilaspur are similar to those of Mughal ateliers. Instead, the local style is evident in Basohli, Mankot and Chamba, which shows ‘the ruler bursting with strength and vigour, set against strongly coloured backgrounds’ (Crill 2010, 34). Intriguingly, Goswamy claims that the image in Pahari painting seems to be bigger than as it is, despite its actual small format. The figure’s limbs, ornaments and instruments seem to penetrate the borders (Goswamy 1986, 197). Moreover, the figure is rendered realistically for his ‘spirit and memory’, as if he were alive, even if he had passed away (Goswamy 1986, 198). Crill claims that this expression is ‘to emphasise his uncontainable strength and presence’ (Crill 2010,
Goswamy regards those of Balwant Singh of Jasrota and Sansar Chand of Kangra as the best examples of Pahari portraiture (Goswamy 1986, 200). Moreover, Desai points out two characteristics of the portraits: 1) the flywhisk is most likely used; and 2) the absence of the halo (Desai 1994, 331). She also demonstrates that Pahari portraiture is closer in style to Mughal portraiture, although the Pahari area is further from Mughal power than the Rajasthan plain. She suggests that Rajasthani rulers under the critical political situation demanded their strong and determined authority, whereas Pahari rulers seem to have been relatively rural and flexible (Desai 1994, 332).

The Pahari style originated in Muhammad Shah’s atelier in the second half of the 18th century. This is particularly evident in the Seu-Nainsukh workshop of Guler. Khandalavala (1958, 117) points out that Guler painters travelled to the plain and learned from Mughal artists; Goswamy and Fischer (1992, 214-217) believe they collected Mughal paintings and developed their style for themselves. Nainsukh’s naturalistic and realistic technique is prominent in the Pahari region. His interest in portraits of ordinary people is unusual and its origin is unidentifiable (Desai 1996, 232). His portraits were often left as unfinished sketches, partly because they were ‘simply exercises in drawing, perhaps to be used in later compositions’ (Crill 2010, 38–39). He even produced some self-portraits (Crill 2010, 35–36). His closest patron, Balwant Singh of Jasrota, was an exception in that he was often depicted in informal situations in comparison with Mughal and most Rajput portraits, in which a royal figure was preferred in formal settings (Desai 1996, 232; Crill 2010, 36–37).

Given the above, this research scrutinises portraiture of religious persons that blur the boundaries of portraiture and idols. This paper studies portraits of the Sikh Gurus, who are perhaps one of the best-known subjects for portraiture in contemporary South Asia. Portraits of the Sikh Gurus are an overlooked field in the study of portraiture in South Asia, for it is contentious to regard them as portraiture. The Western concept of portraiture is most likely to represent secular people such as royalty, nobility and even ordinary people as subjects. Religious icons of the Christ are not called portraiture; rather, they are considered devotional images. In contrast, the Sikh Gurus are basically seen as holding attributes of both the worldly and the sacred. They are sometimes...
represented as a Hindu ascetic or a Muslim Sufi, in other cases as a king or a warrior. To examine them bridges the traditional distinction between the portrait and the devotional image.

**Portraiture of Guru Nanak**

Portraiture of Guru Nanak dates back to the late 17th century. The tradition of such portraiture differs from images of him in Janam-sakhi painting, which is reminiscent of the narrative painting produced in Rajput courts (for example, the Ramayana, the Gita Govinda and the Bhagavata Purana). Although he is rendered exclusively as a Muslim saint in Janam-sakhi painting, Guru Nanak is represented as either a Hindu ascetic or a Muslim saint (Sufi) in portraiture. On the basis of formal and stylistic analysis, it is argued that only Hindu painters at the Mankot court, a Rajput native state in the Pahari hills, depicted Guru Nanak as the representative of their faith (Figure 2). Other Hindu and Muslim painters were likely to depict him as a Muslim saint (Figure 3).

*Figure 1: Guru Nanak Seated in Meditation. Opaque watercolour on paper. Pahari, possibly from a Mankot workshop. Second quarter of the 18th century. 18×11.2cm. Acc.no. 248. Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh.*
Some paintings show Guru Nanak as a Hindu ascetic or siddha (Figure 1). The first painting portrays Guru Nanak, inscribed on verso in Devanagari, in frontal view. He is sitting cross-legged and putting his left hand on the left knee. His right hand is used for holding a manuscript that says ‘with the Grace of the True Guru’ in Takri. He has a white beard and mustache. His red cap is wound up with a white bandana. His body is thin and bare except the transparent white shawl that winds around, and a short orange lower garment. Both hands are equipped with a bracelet, but a rosary is rendered only in his right hand. Two necklaces in white and black drop from his neck. The ring on the left ear proves his holy status, according to Goswamy. The vessel is depicted on the pink carpet. The background is painted flat in grass colour, which is typical of Pahari painting. Goswamy attributes this painting to a Mankot workshop in the second quarter of the eighteenth century and indicates the proximity to the representation of Kabir.

Figure 2: Guru Nanak Reading from a Text. Folio, possibly from a series of portraits of religious men. Late Mughal. Last quarter of the 18th century. Opaque watercolor on paper. 16.7x15.5 cm. Collection of Satinder and Narinder Kapany. Copied from Goswamy 2006, plate 3.7.
One of the best examples that shows Guru Nanak as a Muslim Sufi is the following painting (Figure 2). This painting portrays Guru Nanak, inscribed above in Persian, alone in a vertical format. He faces right in three quarter view and has a white beard. He is wearing a red skull cap tied with a white bandana. He holds a red book in his left hand and bookmarks in right hand. He is leaning on a pink cushion and wearing a white garment with black dots. A long white stole from his neck to the floor is impressive. He seems to reside on the terrace where he sits. The background shows a landscape which has depth. Beyond the lake in the middle view, the lands are shown in the distance. The blue borders is well decorated with golden flowers. Goswamy points out that this painting is one of a series of religious figures. Nanak’s realistic face is unusual in the history of his representation. Perhaps, the artist was trained at the Mughal atelier, but it is possible that he learned from preexisting images, such as Figure 1, which is evident from the presence of a red book in Nanak’s left hand.

Figure 3: Guru Nanak. By Artist Jodh Singh. 1848. Shreesh pigment on canvas. Sonia Dhami’s Collection. Courtesy of the owner.
Near the end of the early nineteenth century, the image of Guru Nanak likely gained its characteristic iconography as the Sikh Guru, which shows his frontal view, which is easier to be use for the purpose of worship (Pinney 2004). In this painting (Figure 3), Guru Nanak faces front and has a white beard and moustache. He is staring straightforwardly at the viewers, with heavy eyes, sitting cross-legged and alone. His head is encircled by a golden halo. He is wearing a yellow turban and robe beneath a navy shawl, which includes shaded draping. He is also wearing a beaded necklace and is holding a rosary in his right hand. He is putting his left hand to the ground. A tree, the trunk of which is brown and includes highlighting, is rendered on the right side; its leaves drop towards Nanak’s head. Green mountains are seen in the distance, across a blue river. A bit of sky appears at the top left edge. The textures are unusual, and the brush is likely different from a traditional one. The model for this portrait is unknown; however, it could have been a Sikh teacher.

**Portraiture of the Later Gurus**

In comparison with Mughal and Rajput portraiture, portraiture of the Sikh Gurus has a religious connotation. This is because the term ‘Mughal’ or ‘Rajput’ depends on the painter and patron of artworks. In contrast, the term ‘Sikh’, or more clearly ‘the Sikh Gurus’, indicates the subject of artworks. This allowed the painters to depict the Sikh Gurus on the basis of their imagination. It is important to note that all portraits (with perhaps one or two exceptions) of the Sikh Gurus are not from life but painted in later times.
Guru Angad (1504–1552), the second guru, is also an important Sikh Guru because only he saw Guru Nanak in person during his lifetime and succeeded to the guruship directly from the first Guru. He is also the only Guru, other than Nanak, who is described in the Janam-sakhis, hagiographic accounts of Guru Nanak. Therefore, his images are included in some of their illustrations. The next painting shows Angad, inscribed in the top border, in the form of devotion, although Nanak is not rendered (Figure 4). He has a black beard and faces right in profile is sitting with his legs folded on the floral-patterned carpet in the terrace. He is holding his hands together. He is wearing a yellow turban tied with a brown bandana and a white robe tied with a red band around the waist. He is leaning a blue cushion which edges are painted in green. The background beyond the terrace is coloured in green. A black sky and white clouds are rendered on the top.
Guru Amar Das (1479–1574) is the third Guru and was inaugurated in 1552 at the age of 73. He is normally depicted as old as Guru Nanak. This portrait is a single portrait of Amar Das whose name is written on the top (Figure 5). He has a white beard and faces left in three quarter view is sitting with his legs folded. He is wearing a green turban tied with a red cloth and a white dotted dress with a red waistcloth including golden edges. He is lying on a pink pillow with the same dotted patterns while offering his right hand ahead. A white carpet is decorated with grey flowers and a background is painted in dark blue. The three-quarter view reminds us of Guru Nanak’s image that is usually represented in the mode of three quarter face.

Figure 5: Guru Amar Das. Artist Unknown. Pahari. Acc.no.1845b. Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh.
Guru Ram Das (1534–1581) is the fourth Guru of Sikhism. He is famous for founding Amritsar, formerly known as Ramdaspur, the Sikh holy city. He is usually painted as a holy man, like Guru Nanak, and is relatively identifiable from the other Gurus. In this painting (Figure 6), Guru Ram Das who has a black beard and faces left in three quarter view is sitting with one leg stood on the white carpet decorated finely with floral patterns. He is wearing a grey turban tied with a yellow bandana as well as a green dress under a purple shawl. He is leaning against a yellow cushion decorated with lattice-like patterns including red crosses. On the right-hand side, an attendant, who has no beard and faces left in three quarter view is sitting cross-legged next to Ram Das. He is wearing a red skull cap and an orange dress with yellow dots under a golden yellow coat. On the left-hand side, there are three musicians in the lower level. A musician who has a black beard and faces up in three quarter view is sitting cross-legged while playing a string instrument painted in light yellow and red.
He is wearing a light blue turban tied with a golden yellow bandana as well as a blue dress with yellow dots. Another musician who has a thin moustache and faces right in profile is sitting cross-legged while playing a string instrument painted in light yellow and red. He is wearing a white turban and a golden yellow dress with golden dots. The last musician who has a black beard and faces right in three quarter view is sitting cross-legged while playing a percussion instrument that is decorated colorfully. At the bottom right corner, three ascetics are depicted. One who has a black beard and faces left in profile is sitting while holding a long dark brown scripture in his right hand. He is wearing a brown cap, but nothing in the body. A white cloth is hung from his left shoulder. His forehead is tinted with ashes. Another ascetic who shows only the back of his head is wearing a brown cap and a pink waistcloth just like other two. His body is fully covered with grey ashes. The last ascetic who has a white beard and faces left in profile is leaning against the white latticework at the terrace. He is wearing a brown cap and holding a white scripture in his left hand.

*Figure 7: Guru Arjan. Artist unknown. Punjab. ca. 1800. Acc. no. 1846, Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh.*
Guru Arjan (1563-1606) is the fifth Guru of Sikhism and renowned as the commissioner of the Adi Granth, the basis of the Guru Granth Sahib. His iconography is one of the least characteristic and hardest to distinguish from other Gurus, for Guru Arjan is normally depicted as a nobleman. In this painting (Figure 7), Guru Arjan who has a black beard and faces right in profile is sitting cross-legged on the white carpet decorated with floral calligraphy. He is wearing a pink turban tied with a yellow bandana and a red dress tied with a yellow waistcloth decorated with floral patterns. He is leaning against a turquoise pillow, the edges of which are painted in red. Beyond the white terrace, the background is painted boldly in grey.

Figure 8: Guru Hargobind out riding. Leaf from a series of portraits of the Gurus. Artist unknown. Kashmir/Punjab; first quarter of the 19th century. 35(28.7)×27.5(22.5)cm. Shri Harish Chander, Chamba. Copied from Goswamy 2000, figure 26.

Guru Hargobind (1595–1644), the sixth Guru of Sikhism, is usually represented in a manner similar to Guru Gobind Singh. He is frequently holding a hawk and mounted on a horse. Sometimes he is armed with a sword and a shield, because he fought with Mughal emperors such as Jahangir and Shah Jahan over his lifetime. In this portrait (Figure 8), Guru Hargobind, who has a
black beard and faces left in profile, is mounted on a white horse. He is wearing a purple turban and a white garment tied with a red cloth including yellow edges, although many black dots are displayed around the shoulders. He wears white trousers with black stripes and a pair of grey shoes. He is holding a falcon in his right hand that sits on a green glove. A yellow string is hung from the neck. The horse holds his right leg up and carries an orange cloth as a saddle. Above a green field at the bottom, an orange background is painted under a light blue sky. Those borders are slightly curved to the edges.

![Guru Har Rai](image)


Guru Har Rai (1630–1661) is the seventh Guru of Sikhism and was crowned at the age of 14. The most notable episode in his life is that he allowed Dara Shikoh, brother and enemy of Aurangzeb, to pass through his territories, which left Aurangzeb outraged. Har Rai is usually painted as a youth with a black beard. In this painting (Figure 9), Guru Har Rai who has a black beard
and faces left in profile is standing on the green grass while holding a stick in his right hand. His head is encircled with a red halo in which the center is transparent. He is wearing a white turban and a white dress over a red trouser with green dots. A necklace is hung from his neck. On the right-hand side, an attendant who has a black beard and faces left in profile is standing on the grass while holding a parasol over Guru Har Rai in both hands. He is wearing a pink turban and an orange dress tied with a blue waistcloth. A white cloth is hung from his left shoulder. On the left-hand side, there are tall white blossoms and a white dog whose hands, feet, tail and ears are painted in orange. It is turning back its head to face Guru Har Rai. The sun is painted in the light blue sky over white clouds.

Guru Har Krishan (1656–1664), the eighth Guru, died at the age of seven. As he was a child, his is one of the most identifiable images among the ten
Gurus. This portrait was executed in the early eighteenth century according to the caption provided by the owner (Figure 10). On the left-hand side, Har Krishan, who faces left in profile and naturally has no beard, is standing in the terrace. He is wearing a purple turban tied with a gold bandana and equipped with a black feather. He is also wearing an orange garment decorated with golden drops under a golden cloak decorated with floral patterns. A pendant and a white rosary are shown between black collars of the garment. He is holding a flower in his right hand and wearing a trouser with white and pink stripes. On the right-hand side, an attendant who faces left in profile and has a light beard is standing and holding a black peacock feather fan above Har Krishan. He is wearing a white turban tied with a golden bandana and a yellow garment tied with a purple cloth around the waist. A pendant and a white rosary are hung from the neck. He is wearing the same type of trousers, with white and red stripes, as the Guru. A green carpet decorated with yellow drops and arabesque is on the floor, in the top and bottom edges of which fine lattice works are shown. The background is painted boldly in green although there is a big tear on the inscription. Blue waves are depicted in the white zone representing clouds under the blue zone on the top.
Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621–1675) is the ninth Guru of Sikhism and famous for his sacrifice and for the verses he wrote, which were added to what became the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy text. Like Guru Gobind Singh and Guru Hargobind, he is painted as a warrior, frequently holding a falcon and dressed in a sword and armour. In this painting (Figure 11), Tegh Bahadur, who has a black beard and faces left in profile, is standing in the center on the grass, while holding a hawk in his right hand. Interestingly, his head is encircled with a golden halo in which the center is transparent. He is wearing an orange turban and an orange dress. The background is painted in green, and purple and orange clouds are floating on the top.
Among the Gurus following Nanak, Guru Gobind Singh (1666–1708), the tenth and last human Guru, has been the most popular and the most frequently depicted in paintings. He sometimes appears next to Guru Nanak and sometimes pays homage to the first Guru. However, it is often difficult to identify Guru Gobind Singh accurately, for he is normally represented in the fashions of royalty and nobility. The following painting shows Guru Gobind Singh with that type of iconography (Figure 12). The words are inscribed on verso in Devanagari and Persian characters, saying ‘Sri Guru Gobind Singh 10’ and in a later hand ‘10 Guru Gobind Singh.’ (Goswamy 2006, 146) Gobind Singh, who has a black beard and faces left in profile, is riding a horse colored in white and black. His green turban is tied with a yellow bandana and decorated with a black feather. He is wearing a green robe tied with a black-and-white striped cloth with golden edges. He is armed with a sword in the pink sheath and arrows in the pink cylinder. He is holding a bow in his right hand and the
red reins in his left hand. A luxury carpet decorated with floral patterns and grey borders is put on the pink saddle. The background is painted in brown and the horizon is bending along the white sky. A few grasses are rendered at the bottom.

**Conclusion**

We can see deification of Guru Nanak in portraiture in the early 19th century. The idea that he is deified in these paintings is based on the theory that a frontal view is used for worshipping the sitter (Pinney 2004). Although Guru Nanak’s face was represented in three different modes, namely frontal, profile and three quarter face, in the late 17th and 18th centuries, a three-quarter view of the face has been dominant in his images since the 19th century, when his attire and accessories also changed from those of a Hindu ascetic or a Muslim saint to those of a Sikh Guru, exemplified by a turban. It is also noticeable that the later Gurus were painted primarily in portrait, a fact that may manifest their authoritative genealogy against other contemporary successors (Branfoot 2012).

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The Three Pillars of Sikhism: A Note on Origins*

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This paper considers a trio of moral precepts for Sikhs that have come to be known as the “three pillars of Sikhism,” (Naam japna, kirat karni, vand chhakna) and traces their origins to a specific work of Bhai Vir Singh, originally published in 1907. The paper also discusses some subsequent literary use of the triple, and relates the “three pillars” to the trio “Naam, daan, isnaan,” which appear in the writings of Guru Nanak in Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

**Keywords:** Three pillars of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, Bhai Gurdas, Bhai Vir Singh, Puran Singh

**Introduction**

The idea of “Three pillars of Sikhism” has become commonplace, if not ubiquitous, in presentations about the Sikh tradition. For example, a Wikipedia article (Wikipedia, 2019) with that title lists Naam Japo, Kirat Karo and Vand Chakko as these pillars. Paraphrasing the article slightly, these, respectively, refer to reciting or meditating on the Divine Name,1 earning honestly with hard work, and sharing and consuming together. This article asserts that these directives (they are presented in that form) were formalized by Guru Nanak. However, it is well known that this tripartite formulation does not appear anywhere in Sri Guru Granth Sahib, which is the Sikhs’ spiritual guide, and which contains all the authenticated canonical writings of Guru Nanak and his successors.

Variants of the above presentation can be found on numerous web sites devoted to Sikhism and Sikh teachings, and even in speeches by a British Prime Minister,2 but the origin of the “three pillars” is not explicitly given anywhere obvious, based on

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* I am grateful to Pritam Singh (Oxford University), for pushing to find the origins of the “three pillars,” and to Naindeep Singh Chann for helpful suggestions on an earlier draft. Remaining shortcomings are my sole responsibility.
1 “Name” in this context is a complex concept: briefly, it can be thought of as referring to the “presence” of the Divine.
2 In 2014, in a Vaisakhi speech at Downing Street, David Cameron (UKPOL, 2015) discussed at length “the 3 pillars of Sikhism,” described as Nam Japna, devotion to God; Kirat Karni, working hard; and Vand Chakna, commitment to community. He used a similar formulation the previous year (SikhNet, 2013). The spelling in the transliteration of the three pillars here follows the original speech as documented.
standard internet search efforts. The purpose of this note is to fill this gap, and to provide at least a partial account of the origins of the “three pillars.”

Many scholars and practicing Sikhs are aware that Guru Nanak’s actual triad of values is Naam, Daan, Isnaan, where Daan refers to charity, and Isnaan to purity. Harbans Lal offers an accessible account of these three principles (Lal, 2017). He notes that the same formulation is used by Bhai Gurdas (see also Gill, 2017, for definitive translations and analysis) and Bhai Nand Lal. Harbans Lal further argues that the “scriptural sanctity” of this latter trio needs to be preserved, and not “tainted” by non-canonical formulations such as the increasingly popular “three pillars.”

Lal also conjectures that the latter came to exist after the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. This note shows that the conjecture is not accurate. Our tracing of origins of the “three pillars” also suggests that there may be less cause for anxiety than some may express, although one cannot argue against giving primacy to Gurbani (the words of the Guru) over alternatives. However, we will suggest that the origins of the “three pillars,” once clearly identified and more widely known, will give Sikhs a more complete picture of these groupings of ethical principles, and show a clear connection between the two triples.

**Origin of the Three Pillars**

It appears that the formulation that has become known as the “Three pillars of Sikhism” first appears in print in a novel by Bhai Vir Singh. Vir Singh (the “Bhai” is a term of respect, literally meaning “brother”) was an important literary and

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3 In the page sequence of Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the first use by Guru Nanak is “Naam, daan, isnaan dhrih har bhagat su jaagey,” or “holding fast to Naam, daan, isnaan, [they] are awake to devotion to the Divine.” There are a handful of other examples of usage of the triple, by Guru Nanak and also by Guru Arjan.

4 Bhai Gurdas was a relative and contemporary of Guru Arjan, and the scribe of the first compilation of what became Sri Guru Granth Sahib: see Gill (2017) for details. In the first pauri (literally, step, meaning component verse in this context) of his first Vaar (a longer verse composition or ballad), Bhai Gurdas writes, “bhaau bhagat Gurapurab kar Naam daan isnaan dhrhaaiaa,” or “with loving devotion [they] celebrate the Gurus’ anniversaries and holding to Naam, daan, isnaan, inspiring others.”

5 Bhai Nand Lal was a poet and contemporary of Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and final human Guru of the Sikhs, and like Bhai Gurdas, his verses may be sung in gurdwaras, in addition to verses from Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

6 Lal associates the “three pillars” with attempts to counter the influence of communism among Sikh youth. This may be true in the later period he discusses, but this note demonstrates that the origins of the more modern triple were not determined by such motivations.
religious figure in the late 19th century and first half of the 20th century. His historical novels, especially Sundari (originally published in 1898), were written as part of a project of reviving the faith of the Sikh community in the face of colonial power and missionary activities by Christians and Hindus. In particular, valuing the Khalsa identity formulated by Guru Gobind Singh was an important part of this project, and novels such as Sundari, depicting a combination of virtue and valor among Khalsa Sikhs, became immensely popular reading at the time.7

The novel in which the “three pillars” appears, however, is Baba Naudh Singh, which began to be serialized in a periodical in 1907, and was published in book form in 1921.8 The full title of the novel gives some indication of its theme: Subhag ji da sudhaar, hathin Baba Naudh Singh, which has been translated as The reformation of Subhagji at the hands of Baba Naudh Singh.9 “Reformation” in this context refers to transformation of character, wherein the young widow, Subhag, is transformed from being weak and credulous to someone of strength who provides support and comfort to others. While Bhai Vir Singh’s first three novels were historically based and full of action, though not devoid of ideas (as already noted), Baba Naudh Singh has been described as a novel of ideas (Surjit Singh Chawla, see previous footnote), with a thin plot. Chawla describes the novel as a response to aggressive proselytization by other religions at the time of its writing, and the title character embodies high moral qualities, including moral rejection of such attempts at religious conversion.

All of the above is by way of providing the context for Bhai Vir Singh’s introduction of what has become the “three pillars.” This occurs in Chapter 8 of Part 1 of the novel. In the story, Subhag has come to stay with Baba Naudh Singh and his wife, Nand Kaur. They are looking after her and she is gaining spiritual strength and peace of mind. The narrative then shifts to a dialogue between Nand Kaur and Naudh Singh. Nand Kaur remarks that while the holy texts direct people toward Naam, Daan, Isnaan, they also give examples of where practicing charity

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7 An excellent account of the novel and its ethical message can be found in Nikky G.K. Singh (1993), Ch. 7.
8 A contemporary printing is Bhai Vir Singh (2010).
9 This is from the Introduction, by Surjit Singh Chawla, p. v, of the English translation of Baba Naudh Singh, Part 1, done by Gurbachan Singh Talib and revised by Surjit Singh Chawla, published in 1989. The second part is somewhat different in content, and moves early on in its narrative from the story of Subhag to a long account of episodes from the time of the Sikh Gurus. Its corresponding translation was published separately in 1991. What appears to be a facsimile of the 1921 publication of both parts in one single volume was published in 2010. All of these were publications of the Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan of New Delhi, India.
does not prevent suffering, and where bathing is useless. It is here that Naudh Singh responds, first to urge his wife not to entertain such doubts that take away happiness, but to remain imbued with Naam, and then to say (p. 21), “Asi taan thulhe te siddhe lok haan. Kirat karni, vand chhakna te naam japnaa, eh saadi varton hai.” In translation, “We are solid and straightforward people. Earnest effort, sharing with others, and minding the Naam, that is our way of being.”¹⁰ This appears to be the original occurrence of the “three pillars” formulation.¹¹¹²

However, it is important to realize that the trio as presented above is not the central thrust of this segment of the novel. Much of the rest of Chapter 8 continues with a discussion between Nand Kaur and Naudh Singh as to the true import of Naam, Daan, Isnaan. In a nutshell, the argument made is that Daan and Isnaan only have proper significance if guided by Naam. The original is more detailed and poetic than what is presented here. But the point to be made is that, barring Naam, the other components of the “three pillars” are not mentioned again in this chapter. Indeed, they are only brought up in passing, as a lead-in to the main discourse. One can speculate as to why they have become so popular (perhaps because of their association with the positive character traits of Naudh Singh and Nand Kaur), but they are not presented by Bhai Vir Singh as a substitute or alternative to Naam, Daan, Isnaan.

With respect to the fact that the “three pillars” are not in Gurbani, it is also useful to consider the heading of Chapter 8. Most of the chapters are headed by quotes from Sri Guru Granth Sahib, and the choice for this chapter is “Ghaal khaaye kichh[u] hathoh dei, Nanak raah pachhaaneh sei,” which translates to “Whoever works to earn and gives some to share, Nanak says they know the way.”¹³ The connection to “kirat karni, vand chhakna” is clear: it is a reasonable conjecture that

¹⁰ The translation provided by G.S. Talib is somewhat different in detail. See Baba Naudh Singh, Part 1 (1989), p. 32.
¹¹ The only explicit reference to this passage of which I am aware is in Dewan Singh (1973), p. 290, footnote 183. It was this reference that led me to this source. Dewan Singh credits Bhai Vir Singh only with popularizing the term “vand chhakna,” but I have not been able to find any earlier usages. He also references the Shabdarth of Teja Singh (Vol. 2, p. 596, footnote 6), where “vand chhakna” occurs, but the earliest publication date of that work is 1941, considerably later than the initial publication of Baba Naudh Singh.
¹² Interestingly, Nikky G.K. Singh (1993) uses the three pillars as a framework for discussing the moral and ethical guidance provided in the novel Sundari, although that work was written earlier than Baba Naudh Singh, and it does not appear to use “kirat karni” or “vand chhakna” anywhere.
¹³ The original lines are from Sri Guru Granth Sahib, p. 1245, Var Sarang.
Bhai Vir Singh chose this chapter heading to tie in Baba Naudh Singh’s plain words to the poetry of Gurbani, both expressing the same combination of moral guidance.

**Evolution of the Three Pillars**

While it is difficult to trace the spread of a popular expression, there are at least two important literary references that may have contributed to its prominence. Whereas the original usage in *Baba Naudh Singh* occurs almost in passing, within a broader discussion of the significance and interpretation of Naam, Daan, Isnaan, both the cases to be presented here highlight Bhai Vir Singh’s formulation, and expand on it. The author of both references is Professor Puran Singh, who was a contemporary of Bhai Vir Singh, and greatly influenced by him. Puran Singh was an academic, scientist, poet and mystic, who is well known for his writings in Punjabi and in English.\(^\text{14}\) Two English works of his are relevant here.

*Spirit of the Sikh* is a collection of essays by Puran Singh, written between 1927 and 1930 (shortly before he died, in 1931). The collection appears to have been first published in three parts (Part 1 in 1976, Part 2 Volume 1 in 1980, and Part 2 Volume 2 in 1981), by Punjabi University Patiala. The subtitle of the collection, *Meditations on Religion and the Spiritual Experience*, captures the broad theme of this particular work, although it might be appropriately applied to all of Puran Singh’s literary output. The relevant passage is in essay number 6 of Part 1, titled “The Disciple-Spirit.” The essay begins with work attributed to “Saint Shah Behlol of Iran,” but then, as it discourses on being a “Disciple” (capitalized in the original), shifts to Sikh thought. Puran Singh writes,\(^\text{15}\)

True Discipleship, as Bhai Vir Singh put it so pithily is:

1. *Kirat karni*
2. *Nam japna*
3. *Vand chhakna*

Puran Singh then provides an exposition of each concept: five lines on the first, a longer disquisition on *Nam japna*, and then an even longer (exceeding a page) discussion of *Vand chhakna*, with which the essay concludes. Puran Singh’s ordering of the three ethical guides is different from the order in the original of Bhai

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\(^{14}\) The Puran Singh discussed here is a completely different person than the later individual, known as Bhagat Puran Singh, who founded and ran the charitable organization Pingalwara. For an excellent overview of Puran Singh’s life and work, see Shackle (2017).

\(^{15}\) The italicization follows the original.
Vir Singh, and one can conjecture that it has something to do with the flow of exposition that Puran Singh chose to develop. It is significant that the verb forms are exactly the same, rather than the directive forms now more commonly found, such as in the reference with which this paper began.

While this particular presentation of Puran Singh may only have become widely known from the 1970s (but long enough ago to spread widely, especially in the internet age), another treatment by him was published in 1928, and is important in a different way as well. In *The Spirit Born People*, Puran Singh (1928) also connects the two triples in a plausible manner, reflecting to some extent Bhai Vir Singh’s original treatment. The presentation occurs in Chapter 13, which is titled, “The Brothers of the Tress-Knot of Guru Gobind Singh.” Although he does not use the term “Khalsa,” Puran Singh is clearly referring to that institution, and although he uses the word “Brothers,” later in the chapter he states that they are “a Sangha\(^{16}\) in which woman take free and equal membership.”

The chapter begins by extolling the virtues of this grouping, and stresses continuities of its values in Sikh tradition preceding Gur Gobind Singh. Then Puran Singh connects his discourse to Bhai Vir Singh’s presentation in *Baba Naudh Singh*, albeit without explicitly referencing that work:

> In the words of Bhai Vir Singh Ji, let me give the creed of this Brotherhood in five words, “*Nam, Dan, Snan, Kirt Karna* and *Wand Chhakna.*”

The spelling and verb forms are somewhat different here than in Puran Singh’s other treatment, but more significantly, he weaves together the two triples, with the overlap yielding five related moral precepts. He provides relatively brief discussions of each of the five, and then connects them to Guru Gobind Singh:

> Guru Gobind Singh is the Guru of the modern times. He is a Prophet who has reconstructed human society in this Brotherhood of *Nam, Dan, Snan, Kirt Karna* and *Wand Chhakna.*

Thus Puran Singh works Bhai Vir Singh’s discourse in *Baba Naudh Singh* into a single combination of five precepts. Interestingly, he distinguishes between *Dan*, which he interprets as giving deeply and without limit, and *Wand Chhakna*, which is described as equal distribution of the fruits of labor. One can offer alternative interpretations, and there is nothing inviolate about this grouping, but it is important

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\(^{16}\) The word denotes an association or community, especially in spiritual contexts. It is often used for Buddhist groupings, but has broader South Asian usages.
to mark it as a possible approach, and to note the acknowledged antecedents in a specific work of Bhai Vir Singh.

Conclusion

Of course there are many other spiritual, moral and ethical precepts in Sikh teachings, discussed or presented individually and in various combinations. This note has not sought to examine any of those other precepts, nor does it go into the deeper meanings and implications of even the two overlapping sets of three precepts considered here. Its limited goal has been to trace some origins of the three pillars, found in a specific work of Bhai Vir Singh, and offer some clues as to their popularity, through their highlighting in the work of Puran Singh. There is much scope for additional historical and sociological analysis with respect to how Sikhs and those who interpret, research or interact with the Sikh tradition approach the “three pillars.” More historical detail on the spread of this usage will be useful. Additional research can also include debates on the merits of a formulation that is somewhat extra-canonical, though this note has pointed out Bhai Vir Singh’s attempt to implicitly reconcile the words of Baba Naudh Singh in the narrative to a specific verse of Guru Nanak. Another issue is the origin of the term “pillars” (not used by Puran Singh) in this context, which is suggestive of the “five pillars of Islam.” The hope is that this note will provide a more accurate basis for any such debates or further research.

References


Singh, Bhai Vir (2010), *Subhag ji da sudhaar, hathin Baba Naudh Singh* [in Punjabi], New Delhi: Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan.


